



KEEPING THE FLOCK: A HERMENEUTIC STUDY ON PARENTS WITH CHILDREN AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT

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ABSTRACT

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of parents of Learners at Risk of Dropping Out (LARDO) at Gabas Integrated School and surrounding barangays in Baybay City Division. Guided by Martin Heidegger's philosophy, in-depth interviews with six purposively selected parents were conducted to understand the complex factors influencing their ability to support their children's education. The analysis reveals that these parents face severe challenges, including financial instability, lack of resources, and difficulties navigating the educational system. These struggles are encapsulated in two prominent themes: "Parenting in a Storm Without an Anchor," highlighting profound feelings of isolation and helplessness, and "Tending a Flickering Flame in the Wind," illustrating their persistent efforts to keep their children academically engaged despite overwhelming hardships. Underscoring the critical role of parental involvement in mitigating dropout rates, the study emphasizes the urgent need for targeted interventions, including enhanced school-parent communication, expanded resource access, collaborative partnerships, and supportive policy changes to empower vulnerable families and foster a more inclusive educational environment.

Keywords: *Parental Involvement, At-Risk Learners, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Heidegger, Lived Experience, Dropout Prevention*

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of students leaving school prematurely continues to be a significant issue both globally and within national educational systems. According to recent data from UNESCO (2023), approximately 250 million children worldwide were not attending school, representing an increase of six million since 2021. This alarming trend points to widespread disengagement and heightened vulnerability among students. In the Philippine context, this concern is similarly acute, with dropout rates estimated at 35.15% for the 2023-2024 academic year (Sarao, 2023). These statistics highlight an urgent need to explore and to develop effective strategies to keep the, engaged.

Central to reducing the risk of students dropping out is the active participation of parents in their children's education. Schmid (2021) stresses that when parents are involved through actions like overseeing their child's school task, staying in contact with educators, and offering consistent emotional support, students are more likely to succeed academically and remain in school. Similarly, Cepada et al., (2020) argued that strong home-school collaboration reduces absenteeism and reinforces students' commitment to schooling. Evidence from international programs, such as UNICEF's Early Warning Systems and the Early Truancy Prevention Project (Cook et al., 2017), shows that prompt and clear communication between home and school can play a crucial role in decreasing absenteeism and dropout rates.

Within the Philippines, the Department of Education has responded by launching initiatives aimed at dropout mitigation, such as the Dropout Reduction Program (DORP), established under the DepEd Order No. 74, s. 2010. This program offers adaptive learning solutions to assist students who encounter obstacles within conventional schooling environments. Furthermore, community-based efforts like the Saving Angels Project (Yocampo, 2021) exemplify the significant impact that parental involvement has in tackling dropout issues at the grassroots level.

Nevertheless, dropout challenges persist, especially in rural areas where families face economic hardships and limited educational resources. It becomes essential to gain a deeper understanding of how parents in these communities' experience and address the risks faced by their children. This study aims to shed light on the realities of these parents, exploring how they perceive, manage, and strive to overcome the difficulties surrounding their children's educational retention.

Research Questions

This study aimed to interpret the lived experiences of parents whose children were identified as LARDOs. Specifically, it sought to answer:

1. What are the lived experiences of parents with learners at risk of dropping out?
2. What meanings do parents derive from these experiences?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research utilized **Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology** as its foundational methodology, a qualitative approach centered on exploring and interpreting the meanings individuals assign to their lived experiences. According to Martin Heidegger's philosophy, human beings exist as Dasein entities embedded within a specific world that fundamentally shapes their understanding through modes such as care, thrownness (being cast into situations beyond one's choosing), and the condition of being-in-the-world. This philosophical stance enables the study to move beyond surface-level accounts, delving deeply into how parents interpret their duties, face challenges, and hold aspirations regarding their children's education.

Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to describe phenomena as they appear, hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes the inseparability of the researcher's perspective and the participants' experiences during the interpretive process. Researchers actively engage through reflexive journaling, memo writing, and ongoing dialogue with the data, which collectively shape a nuanced interpretive stance, ensuring that emerging insights are co-constructed rather than merely reported.

Study Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in Gabas Integrated School and the neighboring barangays of Gabas, Kilim, Patag, and Guadalupe in Baybay City, Leyte. These rural communities largely depend on agricultural work, fishing, and construction, contexts that significantly influence the lived realities of the parents involved.

Six participants were selected using purposive and convenience sampling based on the following criteria:

- (a) parent/guardian of a child classified as LARDO,
- (b) residence in the study area, and
- (c) willingness to participate.

The final cohort included six parents aged 29 to 54, reflecting a diversity of family dynamics, occupations such as farming, construction work, and vending, and varying numbers of school-aged children. The adequacy of this sample was validated through the achievement of data saturation, where successive interviews yielded no new thematic information, consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology's focus on depth rather than breadth, supported by frameworks like the information power model (Smith et al.; Malterud et al.).

Data Collection

Data were primarily gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in the comfort of participants' homes to foster openness and trust. Each session lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior consent. Complementary data were captured via detailed field notes and reflexive memos, which documented nonverbal cues, emotional tones, and early analytic reflections. Participants engaged in member checking by reviewing and validating transcripts, a crucial step to strengthen the study's authenticity and reliability.

Data Analysis: Braun and Clarke (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis

A six-phase framework guided the interpretive process:

1. **Familiarization** – Repeated reading of transcripts; initial impression notes; reflection on forestructures of understanding.
2. **Generating Codes** – Line-by-line coding of meaning units, focusing on emotional expressions, challenges, and sense-making.
3. **Constructing Themes** – Grouping related codes into broader meaning clusters.
4. **Reviewing Themes** – Refining themes by checking coherence with data; discarding or merging overlapping codes.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes** – Capturing the essence of each theme using metaphors grounded in participants’ lived worlds.
6. **Producing the Report** – Integrating themes with Heideggerian interpretation and relevant literature.

Trustworthiness

- **Credibility:** member checking, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, triangulation of interviews and field notes.
- **Dependability:** detailed audit trail, documentation of coding decisions, and thematic revisions.
- **Confirmability:** reflexive journaling to monitor biases; transparency in interpretive decisions.
- **Transferability:** thick description of context, participant characteristics, and lived situations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two major themes emerged, each anchored in metaphor to represent the parents’ existential realities.

Theme 1: Parenting in a Storm Without an Anchor

(The struggle of being-thrown into challenging circumstances)

Parents described their experiences as a series of overwhelming pressures, uncertainty, and isolation. Their accounts reflect Heidegger’s notion of **thrownness (Geworfenheit)** being cast into circumstances not of their choosing, yet compelled to respond through **care (Sorge)**.

Sub-theme 1: Navigating from Afar

Parents working in distant cities struggled to monitor children’s attendance and behavior. *“Di man ko pirmi makabantay kay naa ko sa Cebu. Usahay dili ko kabalo nga dili na diay nisulod.”*

The physical distance constrained their **being-with (Mitsein)** their relational existence as parents resulting in guilt and anxiety. Mao et al. (2020) similarly found that parental absence complicates children’s academic responsibilities.

Sub-theme 2: Capsizing Under Pressure

Financial strain, emotional exhaustion, and guilt were recurring realities.



“Ang gasto, ang trabaho, ang bata... mura’g tanan giako.”

Parents’ narratives reflect *care* as both burden and commitment. They experienced parenthood as a **weight they cannot set aside**, consistent with Ballentine et al. (2020) and studies linking financial hardship to diminished parental well-being (Marcil et al., 2020).

Sub-theme 3: Battling the Current

Despite hardships, parents persisted in guiding their children.

This sub-theme reflects **existential resolve**, aligning with Heidegger’s idea of moving toward possibilities despite constraints. Parents demonstrated agency, echoing Donkor et al. (2024) on parental perseverance as critical for academic retention.

Sub-theme 4: Sending S.O.S.

Parents expressed the need for support from teachers, barangay officials, and schools.

Their “call for help” symbolizes a search for **co-being**, a community that shares responsibility. When schools do not respond, parents feel adrift, reinforcing Schmid’s (2021) assertion that strong parent–school relationships mitigate disengagement risks.

Theme 2: Tending a Flickering Flame in the Wind

(Parents’ acts of care as ongoing efforts to sustain hope)

Despite being thrown into hardship, parents acted with **care**, striving to keep their children’s motivation alive.

Sub-theme 1: Guardians of Hope

Parents shielded their children from discouragement.

“Maski kapoy ko, ginadasig nako siya kay basin motugpa nalang.”

Hope becomes a mode of **authentic care**, grounding parents in their responsibility.

Sub-theme 2: Lighting the Way

Parents guided children through reminders, conversations, and discipline.

Their actions mirror Epstein’s (2019) model of parental involvement as foundational to school success.

Sub-theme 3: Faith as Fuel

Parents relied on prayer and spiritual beliefs.

Faith provided meaning within hardship—an ontological anchor that allowed them to withstand adversity, consistent with Juguilon (2023) on spirituality and resilience.

Interpreting the Lived Meaning (Hermeneutic Synthesis)

Parents exist **within a world shaped by poverty, labor migration, cultural expectations, and educational demands**. Their narratives reveal that:

Being a parent of a LARDO means *being-in-the-world as struggle and responsibility*.

Their *throwness* shapes the limits and possibilities of their involvement.

Their *care* manifests as persistence, faith, sacrifice, and hope.

Their meaning-making reflects existential resilience despite structural inequalities.

CONCLUSION

Parents of children identified as at-risk for leaving school face strong emotional stress, money problems, and troubled family ties. They often handle these issues alone without much help from others. But they find power in their deep love for their children and strong hope. They keep helping with school using simple ways that fit their situation, like daily talks of support or basic home study areas.

Their stories show a mix of weakness from unsteady jobs like farming in seasons or distant labor. Poor contact from schools makes them feel lost. Still, their strong will shows in small helpful steps telling kids about future gains, using faith for strength, or asking local leaders for help. This matches common ways in rural Philippines where family links protect against leaving school.

We need full help plans that respect local ways, join community tools, and treat families as key partners to stop kids from dropping out. Ideas include village classes on handling money, faith-based talk sessions, and school visits to homes to build trust. These create lasting paths for at-risk kids to do well in school.

Recommendations

1. Flexible, Inclusive Communication Channels
→ Addresses Navigating from Afar
Improve school–parent communication through SMS updates, messenger groups, and proactive teacher outreach.
2. Parent Support Groups
→ Addresses Capsizing Under Pressure and Sending S.O.S.
Provide safe spaces for mutual support and shared coping strategies.
3. School-based Family Counseling Services
→ Supports Teaching Parents to Battle the Current
Offer mental health and family guidance programs in partnership with local agencies.
4. Financial Literacy and Assistance Initiatives
→ Responds to parents' financial *thrownness*
Help families navigate economic stress affecting schooling.
5. Teacher Capacity Building on Family Engagement
→ Supports Lighting the Way
Equip educators to understand family contexts and build trust-based relationships.
6. Recognition Programs for Parental Resilience
→ Reinforces Guardians of Hope
Celebrate parental efforts to strengthen school–home partnerships.

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