



BOOKS AND BURDENS: EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN AT WORK

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of working children who simultaneously navigate formal education and labor responsibilities. Anchored in a constructionist epistemology and guided by Symbolic Interactionism, the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, and the Expectancy-Value Theory, the research investigated how working children interpret their realities, manage dual burdens, and sustain future aspirations. Conducted at Ardemil Elementary School, a rural, mountainous, corn-farming community in Sara, Iloilo, Philippines, the study addressed the local manifestation of a broader socio-economic crisis that affects millions of Filipino children under Republic Act 9231. Using purposive sampling based on strict inclusion criteria, the researcher selected four primary child-informants: Nene Tel, Boyboy, Nonoy Noel, and Bonbon. Four elementary school teachers served as secondary informants. Data were gathered through a comprehensive triangulation design consisting of individual semi-structured in-depth interviews, a focus group discussion (FGD), non-participant observation, and field notes. To evaluate institutional impact, the study incorporated official academic documents, including attendance sheets (SF1) and report cards (SF10). The primary instrument was a researcher-developed interview protocol that underwent rigorous expert

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content validation and pilot testing to establish qualitative dependability and cultural appropriateness. Data analysis involved within-case and cross-case analyses to extract recurring themes regarding educational disruptions, psychosocial pressures, physical challenges, coping mechanisms, and future goals. Ultimately, this multiple-case design provided deep, contextually rich insights into the structural realities and personal persistence of working children striving for academic success.

Keywords: *Children at work, experience, challenges and education*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of children at work remains a critical focal point in global research, as investigators seek to understand how various forms of labor intersect with children’s rights to education, protection, and holistic development. In academic and institutional literature, children at work are conceptualized along a broad continuum, ranging from benign, developmental activities to exploitative conditions that deprive them of their childhood, potential, and dignity, while actively harming their physical and mental development (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017; United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2021). In many developing communities, including rural areas in the Philippines, children at work are often driven into the labor force by systemic pressures such as poverty, deep-seated family obligations, and limited access to resources (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). This intersection of work and development is central to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, which emphasizes promoting

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sustained, inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all (United Nations, 2015). To operationally measure and address this population, Target 8.7 calls for immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labor, end modern slavery and human trafficking, and eliminate the most hazardous conditions experienced by children at work, underscoring a global commitment that highlights the urgency of examining children at work as both a structural barrier to universal education and a primary challenge to long-term socio-economic development (United Nations, 2015).

In the context of significant global and local concern children at work remains that directly undermines children's rights to education, protection, and holistic development. In academic and institutional literature, the presence of children at work becomes a critical issue when the nature of the labor deprives them of their childhood, potential, and dignity while actively interfering with their schooling (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2021). In many developing communities, including rural areas in the Philippines, children at work are often driven into the labor force by systemic pressures such as poverty, economic necessity, and deep-seated family responsibilities (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). This intersection of work and development is central to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth emphasizes the urgency of protecting vulnerable children at work through Target 8.7, which calls for immediate and effective measures to end all exploitative and hazardous forms of labor (United Nations, 2015). This objective is deeply interconnected with SDG 4: Quality Education, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United

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Nations, 2015). The persistence of exploitative conditions among children at work directly hinders the achievement of SDG 4, as children engaged in demanding agricultural or intensive household tasks often experience physical fatigue, chronic absenteeism, limited study time, and reduced classroom participation. Consequently, these factors negatively affect their primary learning outcomes, including reading comprehension, academic performance, and overall achievement. Within the localized context of an elementary school in Sara, Iloilo Province, these accumulated challenges place working learners at a significantly higher risk of academic underachievement and school dropout, underscoring that managing the structural conditions of children at work (SDG 8.7) is a vital prerequisite to improving educational outcomes, achieving the targets of SDG 4, and ensuring all children have access to a better future.

The government of the Philippines has implemented various policies and programs designed to manage the phenomenon of children at work and improve educational outcomes, directly aligning local initiatives with the targets of SDG 8.7 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). To address the exploitative conditions that children at work often face, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) leads initiatives such as the Child Labor Prevention and Elimination Program (CLPEP), while the Philippine Program Against Child Labor coordinates nationwide efforts involving government agencies and local stakeholders to reduce and eventually eliminate hazardous labor practices (DOLE, 2020). Concurrently, poverty-reduction strategies like the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program provide conditional cash transfers to low-income families, with financial support contingent

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upon regular school attendance, thereby minimizing the economic pressures that push children at work into full-time or exhausting labor forces (Department of Social Welfare and Development [DSWD], 2019). Complementing these socioeconomic safety nets, the Department of Education (DepEd) has strengthened access to institutionalized learning through the K to 12 curriculum, the Alternative Learning System (ALS) for out-of-school youth, school feeding initiatives, and inclusive education policies (DepEd, 2016). DepEd also enforces robust, school-based child protection measures specifically designed to safeguard learners from institutional abuse and economic exploitation (DepEd, 2012). Collectively, these state-led interventions demonstrate a multi-sectoral commitment to regulating the conditions of children at work and enhancing national educational outcomes, underscoring that achieving SDG 8.7 and SDG 4 are structurally interconnected goals essential for ensuring that every child has the opportunity to learn, develop, and thrive (United Nations, 2015).

Despite the Philippine government’s structural interventions to address exploitative labor through programs such as the Child Labor Prevention and Elimination Program (CLPEP), the Philippine Program Against Child Labor, and social support frameworks like the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), the reality of vulnerable children at work remains a persistent challenge in many rural communities (International Labour Organization [ILO] & United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2021). Similarly, despite institutional expansions in educational access through the Department of Education’s (DepEd) K to 12 curriculum, the Alternative Learning System (ALS), and school-based child protection measures, many learners continue to experience chronic absenteeism, poor academic performance, and limited

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classroom participation due to conflicting work-related obligations (UNICEF, 2021; ILO, 2017).

While previous studies have documented the broad prevalence of economic exploitation and its negative impact on schooling, there remains a critical gap in research specifically examining how the responsibilities of children at work continue to affect learning outcomes within the specific rural context of elementary schools in Sara, Iloilo Province, where economic pressures and family obligations are disproportionately high. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the relationship between the labor burdens of children at work and their educational outcomes, providing localized empirical evidence to guide interventions that align with SDG 8.7 and SDG 4 (United Nations, 2015). Understanding the lived experiences of these young learners is essential for several reasons. First, it illuminates the often-invisible struggles that affect academic performance, attendance metrics, and overall psychosocial well-being. Second, it reveals the resilience and aspirations of working children who, despite overwhelming structural challenges, continue to pursue education as a vital pathway to socio-economic mobility. Third, it provides crucial insights for educators, regional policymakers, and local community stakeholders seeking to develop targeted interventions that address both the immediate symptoms and the systemic root causes affecting children at work.

This study provides valuable insights into the persistent challenges faced by children at work and their direct impact on educational inequality, as consistently documented in global evidence (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2021). By examining how work-related responsibilities affect learners' attendance, engagement, and academic performance, the research highlights the precise ways in which

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the demands on children at work perpetuate gaps in access to quality education, a core concern emphasized under SDG 4: Quality Education (United Nations, 2015). Vulnerable children at work often face severe physical fatigue, limited study time, and an increased risk of school dropout, which not only hampers individual learning outcomes but also reinforces systemic educational disparities, particularly in rural and low-income communities (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). These dynamics allows policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders to identify targeted interventions—such as school-based support programs, conditional financial assistance, and robust child protection measures—that align with national efforts led by agencies such as the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). Ultimately, the study underscores that addressing the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of children at work is not only a matter of social protection but also a critical step toward reducing educational inequality and ensuring that all children have equitable opportunities to learn, develop, and succeed.

The issue of children balancing work and schooling is not new but it remains to be examine in a broader context within the legal landscape of these children. This is to appreciate the urgency and complexity of this phenomenon and to help these children and to lessen this situation especially in the rural areas.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Methodology

This chapter describes the Research Design, methodological perspective, the context of the study, the procedures, and the ethical consideration. The purpose of this study is to

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know the challenges that working children of Ardemil Elementary School experience as they balance school and work.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to explore and understand the experiences of children at work who simultaneously engage in schooling and labor-related activities. A case study design is particularly appropriate when the researcher seeks to obtain an in-depth and holistic understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). Rather than focusing on the measurement of variables or testing causal relationships, case study research emphasizes understanding the complexity, uniqueness, and contextual realities of individuals, groups, or situations through detailed investigation and rich description.

A case study is defined as an empirical inquiry that investigates a bounded system or case through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, such as interviews, observations, and documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further explained that case studies are particularly useful for understanding how individuals interpret their experiences and construct meaning within specific social contexts. In qualitative inquiry, the case itself becomes the primary unit of analysis, allowing the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

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Specifically, this study adopted a multiple-case study design, which involves the examination of several cases within a single study to identify both common patterns and unique variations across cases (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). Unlike a single-case study that focuses on one bounded system, a multiple-case study allows the researcher to compare and contrast experiences across different participants while preserving the contextual richness of each individual case. According to Yin (2018), multiple-case studies strengthen the robustness and credibility of findings because patterns that emerge across several cases are more compelling than those derived from a single case alone. Similarly, Stake (2006) emphasized that collective examination of multiple cases enables researchers to develop broader understandings of a phenomenon while appreciating the uniqueness of individual experiences.

In this study, the cases consisted of four children who were actively engaged in work while pursuing formal education: Nene Tel, Boyboy, Nonoy Noel, and Bonbon. Each participant represented a distinct case bounded by his or her individual experiences as a child worker and learner. Although all participants shared the common characteristic of balancing schooling and labor responsibilities, their personal circumstances, family backgrounds, work experiences, coping mechanisms, and aspirations varied considerably. For instance, some participants primarily assisted their parents in corn farming during planting and harvesting seasons, while others carried substantial household responsibilities in addition to agricultural work. Likewise, the nature and severity of their educational, psychosocial, and physical challenges differed across cases. These similarities and variations provided rich opportunities for within-case and cross-case analyses.

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The use of a multiple-case study design was particularly appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation—the experiences of children at work—is inherently contextual and multifaceted. Children's experiences of work cannot be fully understood apart from the social, familial, educational, and economic environments in which they occur. A case study approach enabled the researcher to examine how each participant interpreted and navigated these realities within his or her specific context. By focusing on individual cases, the study captured the nuanced ways in which children experienced challenges, developed coping strategies, and formed aspirations despite facing similar structural conditions.

Furthermore, the study sought not only to describe the experiences of individual participants but also to identify recurring themes and patterns across cases. The multiple-case design allowed the researcher to conduct both within-case analysis, which examined the unique experiences of each participant, and cross-case analysis, which identified commonalities and differences among the cases (Stake, 2006). Through this process, broader insights were generated regarding the educational disruptions, psychosocial pressures, physical challenges, coping mechanisms, and future aspirations of children at work. The design therefore facilitated a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon than would have been possible through the examination of a single participant.

The selection of a multiple-case study design also aligns closely with the study's constructionist epistemological perspective. Constructionism assumes that reality is socially constructed and that individuals develop meanings through their interactions and experiences (Crotty, 1998). By exploring multiple cases, the researcher was able to examine how each

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child constructed meanings around work, education, family responsibilities, and future aspirations. The design provided opportunities to understand how similar circumstances could be interpreted differently by different individuals and how these interpretations influenced their actions, coping behaviors, and educational engagement.

Moreover, the design was consistent with the study's theoretical foundations. Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes how individuals assign meaning to their experiences through social interaction (Blumer, 1969); the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping explains how individuals appraise and respond to challenges (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); and the Expectancy-Value Theory focuses on how beliefs about success and the value of future goals influence motivation and persistence (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). The multiple-case study design enabled the researcher to examine these processes in depth by investigating how each participant interpreted challenges, utilized coping strategies, and developed aspirations within their unique life circumstances.

Ultimately, the multiple-case study design was the most suitable methodological approach for this investigation because it facilitated a rich, contextualized, and comparative understanding of the lives of children at work. Through the examination of four individual cases and the identification of cross-case patterns, the design provided comprehensive insights into the realities faced by working children while preserving the distinctiveness of each participant's lived experience. Consequently, it allowed the researcher to generate meaningful findings that contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges, coping

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strategies, and aspirations of children who strive to balance education and labor responsibilities.

Context of the Study

This research is within the persistent challenge of the working children in elementary school, where economic necessity compels children to balance work responsibilities with educational aspirations. Despite the Philippines' legal frameworks protecting children's rights including Republic Act 9231 (Anti-Child Labor Law) and the Enhanced Basic Education Act, approximately 3.1 million Filipino children aged 5-17 remain engaged in child labor (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2011), with significant concentrations in rural agricultural communities.

Ardemil Elementary School is located in the mountainous barangay about 12 kilometers from the town proper of Sara, Iloilo, where families primarily depend on corn farming as their main livelihood. The agricultural cycle dictates daily life, with children actively participating in planting, weeding, and harvesting alongside their families. Learners navigate demanding realities like working in cornfields before and after school. Attending classes while exhausted from manual labor, and missing school during the peak of the harvest season. This dual burden of farm work and school compromises learners' attendance, academic performance, and well-being. Despite of this, many maintain dreams of educational success and futures beyond subsistence farming. The research will examine how working children at Ardemil Elementary School experience this tension between "books and burdens" pursuing education while shouldering agricultural responsibilities and their dreams sustaining their persistence.

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This sources of data of this study will come from the working children of Ardemil Elementary School as well as from the teachers handling this learners. Multiple data sources will ensure triangulation, providing comprehensive and credible understanding of working children’s experiences at Ardemil Elementary School.

The primary source of data are the learners currently enrolled in Grades 4-6 at Ardemil Elementary School who are engaged in work activities that interfere with their education. Approximately 4-5 children will undergo individual interviews and focus group discussions. The secondary source of data are the teachers at Ardemil Elementary School who currently teach or have recently taught Grades 4-6, particularly those working children or learners. As the record, there are 4 teachers who currently teaching or recently taught Grades 4-6 and have direct experience with this population and are willing to participate and share observation.

To know the impact of a working child to the academic performance, the researcher will request the access to the official school records and documents of the learners with appropriate permissions and confidentiality protections. The following records will be requested: Attendance records for participating learners (SF1), Academic performance records (SF10, report cards, grades, test scores), Guidance/counseling records (if available), Incident reports or disciplinary records (if available), and the retention (grade repetition) and dropout data.

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Key Informants

The key informants of this study were **four children at work who were enrolled in Ardemil Elementary School and were simultaneously engaged in schooling and labor-related activities**. These children served as the primary sources of information because they possessed firsthand knowledge and direct experiences regarding the phenomenon under investigation. As individuals who balanced educational responsibilities with work-related obligations, they were uniquely positioned to provide rich and detailed accounts of the challenges they encountered, the coping strategies they employed, and the aspirations they developed while navigating their dual roles as learners and workers.

The participants consisted of **Nene Tel, Boyboy, Nonoy Noel, and Bonbon**, each representing an individual case within the multiple-case study. Although they shared the common experience of working while attending school, each participant came from a distinct family and socioeconomic background and engaged in different forms and intensities of labor. Their experiences varied in terms of the nature of their work, frequency of participation in labor activities, family responsibilities, educational experiences, coping mechanisms, and future aspirations. These similarities and differences provided a rich source of information that enabled both within-case and cross-case analyses.

The participants were primarily involved in agricultural work, particularly corn planting and harvesting, and household responsibilities within their respective families and communities. Their involvement in labor activities stemmed largely from economic necessity and family circumstances. Despite these responsibilities, all participants remained enrolled in

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formal schooling and continued pursuing their education. As children who directly experienced the realities of balancing work and education, they were able to articulate the meanings they attached to their experiences and provide valuable insights into the phenomenon being explored.

Purposive sampling was employed in selecting the participants. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify information-rich participants who possess direct experience and knowledge of the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). The selection of participants was guided by predetermined inclusion criteria to ensure that those chosen could provide relevant, meaningful, and comprehensive information regarding the experiences of children at work.

Inclusion Criteria

To qualify as a participant in the study, an individual had to meet the following criteria:

1. Must be currently enrolled in Ardemil Elementary School during the conduct of the study.
2. Must be classified as a child at work, meaning that he or she regularly engaged in income-generating activities, agricultural labor, household economic activities, or other forms of work that contributed to family livelihood while attending school.
3. Must be within the school-age population, specifically learners enrolled in the upper elementary grades who could adequately communicate and reflect on their experiences.

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4. Must have been engaged in work activities for at least one year, thereby ensuring sufficient experience in balancing work and educational responsibilities.
5. Must be willing to participate voluntarily in the study and provide informed assent.
6. Must have obtained written informed consent from a parent or legal guardian prior to participation.
7. Must be capable of communicating his or her experiences during an in-depth interview, either in Hiligaynon or another language familiar to the participant.

Exclusion Criteria

Participants were excluded from the study if they:

1. Were not actively engaged in any form of work while attending school;
2. Were unable to participate in an interview due to health, communication, or other limitations that could affect the quality of the data;
3. Declined participation or withdrew assent during the research process; or
4. Did not obtain parental or guardian consent.

The use of these criteria ensured that the selected participants possessed substantial experience relevant to the purpose of the study and could provide detailed narratives concerning their challenges, coping strategies, and aspirations. Furthermore, the inclusion of multiple participants with varied backgrounds enabled the researcher to examine both shared and unique experiences among children at work, thereby enriching the depth and credibility of the findings.

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Data Sources

This study utilized multiple sources of data to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the experiences of children at work. The use of multiple data sources is consistent with qualitative case study research, which emphasizes the collection of rich and contextualized information from various sources to enhance the credibility, depth, and trustworthiness of the findings (Yin, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), employing multiple sources of evidence enables researchers to develop a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under investigation through data triangulation and corroboration of emerging themes.

Specifically, the study utilized individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observation as the primary sources of data. These sources provided complementary perspectives that allowed the researcher to explore the participants' experiences, validate emerging interpretations, and capture contextual details that may not have been fully expressed through verbal narratives alone.

Individual In-Depth Interview

The primary source of data for this study was the individual in-depth interview. An in-depth interview is a qualitative data collection method that seeks to obtain detailed descriptions of participants' experiences, perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and meanings regarding a particular phenomenon (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This method is particularly appropriate when the objective is to understand how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences.

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In this study, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with each participant to explore their experiences as children who simultaneously engaged in schooling and work. The interviews focused on three major areas: (1) the challenges they encountered while balancing educational and labor responsibilities, (2) the coping strategies they employed in managing these challenges, and (3) their aspirations regarding education, future careers, family welfare, and life goals. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to narrate their experiences freely and provide rich descriptions of their personal realities.

The individual interview format enabled the participants to share sensitive experiences in a private and supportive environment. It also allowed the researcher to probe responses, seek clarifications, and explore emerging issues in greater depth. As the primary data source, the interviews generated detailed narratives that formed the basis for the within-case and cross-case analyses.

Focus Group Discussion

To complement the individual interviews, a focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with the participants. A focus group discussion is a qualitative data collection technique in which a small group of individuals engages in a guided conversation about shared experiences or issues of interest (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The interaction among participants often stimulates deeper reflection, clarification of viewpoints, and generation of additional insights that may not emerge during individual interviews.

In the context of this study, the focus group discussion provided an opportunity for participants to collectively discuss their experiences as children at work. Through group

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interaction, participants were able to compare experiences, affirm common challenges, elaborate on coping mechanisms, and reflect on shared aspirations. The discussion also served as a means of validating and enriching the themes that emerged from the individual interviews.

Furthermore, the focus group discussion enabled the researcher to observe how participants collectively constructed meanings regarding work, education, family responsibilities, and future goals. The interaction among participants generated valuable contextual information that contributed to a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Data gathered through the focus group discussion served as an important source of triangulation to support and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Observation

Another important source of data in this study was observation. Observation is a qualitative method that involves systematically watching, listening to, and documenting behaviors, interactions, activities, and environmental conditions relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Observation enables researchers to gather firsthand information about participants and their contexts, providing insights that may not be fully captured through interviews alone.

In this study, non-participant observation was conducted during interviews, focus group discussions, and selected school and community interactions involving the participants. The researcher observed participants' verbal and nonverbal behaviors, emotional expressions, interpersonal interactions, and reactions while discussing their experiences. Observations also

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included relevant environmental and contextual conditions that characterized the participants' educational and social settings.

Field notes were maintained to document observations regarding participants' demeanor, expressions of emotion, interactions with peers and family members, and observable indicators of their working and schooling conditions. These observations provided contextual evidence that complemented interview data and assisted in the interpretation of participants' narratives. Observation also enabled the researcher to verify and enrich information obtained from interviews by comparing participants' statements with observed behaviors and circumstances.

Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview protocol designed to gather rich and detailed information regarding the experiences of children at work. The interview protocol served as a guide during the conduct of the individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and was developed in alignment with the study's objectives, research questions, epistemological perspective, and theoretical foundations. Specifically, the instrument was designed to elicit participants' narratives regarding the challenges they encountered while balancing work and schooling, the coping strategies they employed to manage these challenges, and their aspirations concerning education, future careers, family welfare, and life goals.

A semi-structured interview protocol is a qualitative data collection instrument consisting of predetermined open-ended questions accompanied by flexible probing questions

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that allow participants to elaborate on their responses and share their experiences in their own words (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike highly structured interviews, semi-structured interviews provide sufficient flexibility for the researcher to explore emerging ideas, seek clarifications, and pursue issues that arise naturally during the conversation (Kallio et al., 2016). This flexibility was particularly important for the present study because it enabled the participants to freely describe their lived experiences while ensuring that all relevant topics were addressed during the interview process.

The interview protocol consisted of four major sections. The first section focused on establishing rapport and obtaining background information about the participants, including their age, grade level, family circumstances, nature of work, duration of work engagement, and reasons for working. The second section explored the challenges they experienced while simultaneously attending school and engaging in labor activities. The third section examined the coping strategies they employed in responding to academic, emotional, social, and physical difficulties. The final section investigated their educational, occupational, familial, and personal aspirations. Open-ended questions and follow-up probes were included to encourage detailed narratives and facilitate deeper exploration of participants' perspectives.

Content Validation of the Instrument

To ensure the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the interview questions, the semi-structured interview protocol underwent content validation prior to data collection. Content validation is a process through which experts evaluate whether the items included in an instrument adequately represent the concepts and objectives being investigated (Polit &

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Beck, 2006). This process helps establish the extent to which the instrument measures or explores the intended domains.

The interview protocol was reviewed by a panel of experts with backgrounds in qualitative research, educational research, child development, and related fields. The validators examined the interview questions for clarity of language, appropriateness for the participants' age and developmental level, alignment with the research questions, and adequacy in eliciting information related to the challenges, coping strategies, and aspirations of children at work. Suggestions and recommendations provided by the validators were carefully considered and incorporated into the final version of the instrument. Revisions included the refinement of question wording, improvement of sequence and flow, simplification of language, and inclusion of additional probing questions to facilitate richer responses.

The content validation process ensured that the interview protocol was understandable, culturally appropriate, and capable of generating meaningful data relevant to the objectives of the study.

Following content validation, the interview protocol was subjected to pilot testing to assess its effectiveness and establish its reliability as a qualitative data collection instrument. Pilot testing involves administering the instrument to individuals who possess characteristics similar to those of the intended participants but who are not included in the actual study (Majid et al., 2017). The purpose of pilot testing is to identify potential problems in question

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wording, sequence, comprehension, and administration procedures before conducting the actual data collection.

For this study, the interview protocol was piloted with children who shared characteristics similar to the target participants, particularly those who balanced educational responsibilities with work-related activities. The pilot interviews enabled the researcher to evaluate whether the participants clearly understood the questions, whether the questions generated rich and relevant responses, and whether any modifications were necessary to improve the quality of the instrument.

Feedback obtained during the pilot testing revealed areas requiring refinement, including adjustments in language complexity, clarification of certain questions, and enhancement of probing techniques. Based on these observations, minor revisions were made to improve the clarity, comprehensibility, and flow of the interview guide. The pilot testing also allowed the researcher to gain familiarity with the interview process and strengthen interviewing skills, thereby improving consistency during the actual data collection.

Although reliability in qualitative research differs from the concept commonly used in quantitative studies, efforts were undertaken to ensure the consistency, dependability, and trustworthiness of the interview protocol. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), reliability in qualitative inquiry is reflected through dependability, which refers to the stability and consistency of the research process over time.

The content validation and pilot testing procedures contributed significantly to establishing the dependability of the instrument. Content validation ensured that the interview

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questions consistently addressed the intended domains of inquiry, while pilot testing confirmed that participants interpreted the questions as intended and were able to provide meaningful responses. The use of a semi-structured interview protocol further enhanced consistency by providing a common set of guiding questions for all participants while allowing flexibility to explore individual experiences in greater depth.

In addition, interview procedures were standardized through the use of the validated interview guide, systematic documentation of responses, audio recording of interviews with participants' permission, and maintenance of field notes. These procedures promoted consistency in data collection and strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings.

Overall, the researcher-developed semi-structured interview protocol, strengthened through expert content validation and pilot testing, served as a reliable and appropriate instrument for exploring the lived experiences of children at work. Its design facilitated the collection of rich, detailed, and contextually grounded narratives that enabled a comprehensive examination of the participants' challenges, coping strategies, and aspirations.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering process was conducted systematically and ethically to ensure the collection of rich, credible, and trustworthy information regarding the experiences of children at work. The procedure involved securing the necessary permissions, identifying qualified participants, conducting individual in-depth interviews, carrying out focus group discussions, undertaking observations, and validating the findings through member checking. Throughout

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the process, ethical principles concerning voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and the welfare of child participants were strictly observed.

Prior to data collection, the researcher secured approval from the appropriate authorities to conduct the study. Permission was obtained from the school head and other relevant educational authorities to facilitate access to potential participants. Because the study involved minors, written informed consent was secured from the parents or legal guardians of the participants, while informed assent was obtained from the children themselves. The purpose of the study, data collection procedures, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and participants' right to withdraw at any stage without penalty were thoroughly explained before participation.

The researcher also ensured that all interviews and discussions were conducted in a safe, respectful, and child-friendly environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms and removing identifying information from transcripts and reports.

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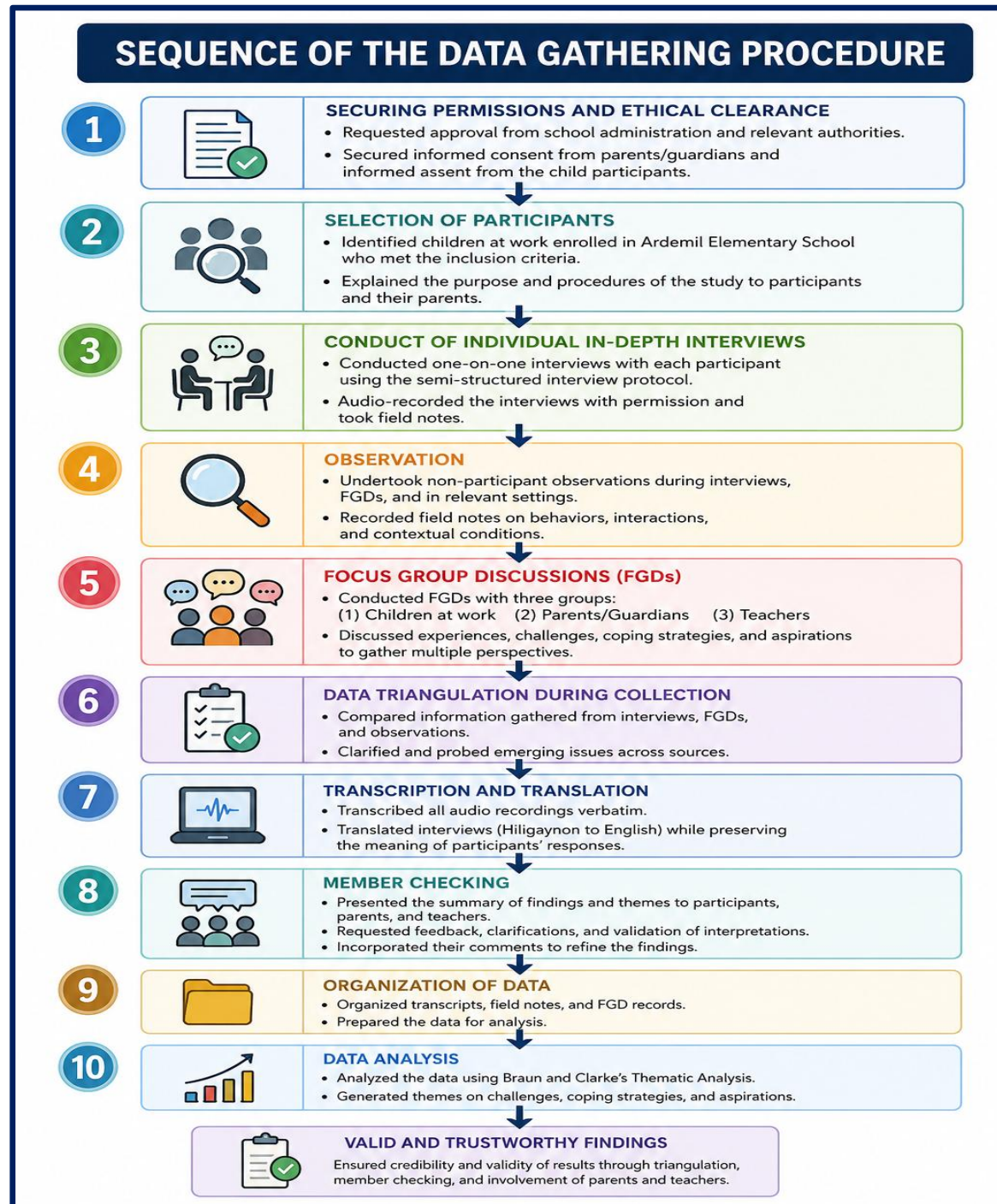


Fig 1. Data gathering procedure employed in the study

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Following the approval process, participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the predetermined inclusion criteria. The researcher identified children who were currently enrolled in Ardemil Elementary School and who were actively engaged in work-related activities while pursuing their education. These participants possessed firsthand experiences relevant to the objectives of the study and were therefore considered information-rich cases capable of providing detailed accounts of the phenomenon under investigation.

The primary data collection activity involved the conduct of individual in-depth interviews with each participant. Using the validated semi-structured interview protocol, the researcher individually interviewed the participants to explore their experiences as children who simultaneously balanced schooling and work responsibilities.

The interviews focused on three major areas: (1) the challenges encountered while balancing school and work, (2) the coping strategies employed to manage these challenges, and (3) the participants' educational, occupational, and life aspirations. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to narrate their experiences freely and in their own words. Follow-up probing questions were employed whenever clarification, elaboration, or additional details were needed.

The interviews were conducted in a language familiar and comfortable to the participants, primarily Hiligaynon. With participants' permission and parental consent, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation of responses. The researcher also maintained field notes to document observations, nonverbal expressions, emotional reactions, and contextual information that could aid in data interpretation.

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In addition to the interviews, the researcher conducted non-participant observations throughout the data collection process. Observations were undertaken during interviews, focus group discussions, and selected interactions involving the participants. Particular attention was given to participants' verbal and nonverbal behaviors, emotional expressions, interactions with peers and adults, and contextual conditions relevant to their educational and work experiences.

Observation notes were recorded in a field journal and later used to supplement and corroborate information obtained from interviews and discussions. These observations provided contextual insights that enriched the understanding of participants lived experiences.

To further enrich the data and validate emerging findings, the researcher conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) after the completion of the individual interviews. The FGDs served as an additional source of information and provided opportunities for participants and significant individuals in their lives to collectively discuss issues related to children's experiences of balancing work and education.

Three focus group discussions were conducted involving different groups of participants:

1. Children at work (primary participants);
2. Parents or guardians of the participating children; and
3. Teachers who had direct knowledge and interaction with the participating learners.

The inclusion of parents and teachers in the FGDs enabled the researcher to obtain multiple perspectives regarding the children's experiences, educational challenges, coping

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mechanisms, and aspirations. Parents provided insights into family circumstances, work responsibilities, and support systems, while teachers contributed observations regarding learners' attendance, academic performance, classroom participation, and behavioral characteristics.

During the discussions, participants were encouraged to share their observations, experiences, and reflections regarding the realities faced by children who work while attending school. The interaction among participants facilitated deeper exploration of issues and generated additional insights that complemented the information obtained from the individual interviews.

The focus group discussions also served as a form of data triangulation, allowing the researcher to compare and corroborate information gathered from different sources. Convergences and divergences among the perspectives of children, parents, and teachers were carefully examined and incorporated into the analysis to enhance the depth and credibility of the findings.

Member Checking

To further ensure the validity and credibility of the study, the researcher employed member checking, which is widely recognized as one of the most important techniques for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Following the transcription, translation, preliminary coding, and thematic analysis of the interview data, the researcher returned to the participants to present summaries of the interpreted findings, emerging themes, and selected narratives. Participants were invited to

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review whether the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences, meanings, and perspectives. They were encouraged to clarify statements, provide additional explanations, correct inaccuracies, or elaborate on previously discussed experiences.

Member checking was likewise conducted with selected parents and teachers who participated in the focus group discussions to verify whether the emerging interpretations were consistent with their observations and understanding of the children's experiences.

The member-checking process enhanced the credibility of the findings by ensuring that the interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived realities rather than solely reflecting the researcher's assumptions. Feedback obtained during this process was incorporated into the refinement of themes and final interpretation of results.

Upon completion of the interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and member-checking activities, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted in Hiligaynon were translated into English while preserving the original meanings and intent of participants' responses. Observation notes, field notes, and focus group discussion transcripts were organized and integrated with the interview data.

The resulting dataset was subsequently subjected to Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning across cases concerning the challenges, coping strategies, and aspirations of children at work.

The validity and trustworthiness of the findings were strengthened through several procedures, including the use of multiple data sources, focus group discussions, observation, and member checking. Information obtained from individual interviews was compared with

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data gathered from parents, teachers, and observations to verify consistency and identify recurring patterns. The integration of these multiple sources of evidence enhanced the credibility, confirmability, and dependability of the findings and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of children at work.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data gathered from the individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observations were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analytic method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning or themes within a dataset. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis provides a systematic yet flexible approach for examining qualitative data and generating rich and detailed descriptions of participants’ experiences. The method is particularly appropriate for studies grounded in a constructionist epistemology because it recognizes that meanings and realities are socially constructed through participants’ experiences and the researcher’s interpretive engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The use of Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis was deemed appropriate for this study because it enabled the researcher to explore the experiences of children at work in a systematic and rigorous manner while preserving the richness and contextual depth of participants’ narratives. Through thematic analysis, recurring patterns related to the challenges faced by children at work, their coping strategies, and their aspirations were

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identified and interpreted across individual cases and subsequently synthesized through cross-case analysis.

Prior to analysis, all interview and focus group discussion recordings were transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted in Hiligaynon were translated into English while preserving the intended meanings of participants' responses. The transcripts were repeatedly reviewed alongside field notes and observation records to ensure accuracy and completeness. Thereafter, the researcher followed the six phases of Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis as outlined below.

Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data

The first phase involved immersing oneself in the dataset to develop a thorough understanding of the participants' narratives. The researcher repeatedly read and reread the interview transcripts, focus group discussion transcripts, and observation notes while listening to audio recordings to verify accuracy and capture nuances in participants' responses. During this stage, preliminary observations, reflections, and analytic insights were recorded through memos and annotations. Familiarization enabled the researcher to gain a holistic appreciation of each participant's experiences before beginning the coding process.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

The second phase involved systematically identifying and labeling meaningful segments of data relevant to the research questions. Coding refers to the process of assigning concise labels to portions of text that capture important features or meanings contained within participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher carefully examined each

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transcript line by line and assigned initial codes to statements describing experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and aspirations.

Phase 3: Constructing Initial Themes

The third phase involved reviewing and organizing related codes into broader patterns of shared meaning. Codes that reflected similar concepts or experiences were clustered together to form potential themes. During this process, the researcher examined relationships among codes and considered how they collectively addressed the research questions.

For example, codes such as *frequent absenteeism*, *missed lessons*, *difficulty understanding lessons*, and *poor reading ability* were grouped under broader thematic patterns related to educational disruption and learning difficulties. Similarly, codes involving *peer teasing*, *embarrassment*, and *anxiety* were organized into themes associated with psychosocial and emotional challenges. This stage resulted in a preliminary thematic structure that captured recurring patterns across participants' narratives.

Phase 4: Reviewing and Refining Themes

In the fourth phase, the preliminary themes were reviewed, compared against the coded data, and refined to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. The researcher revisited the original transcripts to determine whether the themes accurately represented participants' experiences and whether sufficient evidence existed to support each theme. Some themes were merged, reorganized, or renamed when overlapping meanings were identified, while others were discarded if they lacked adequate supporting data.

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For instance, themes initially labeled as *physically demanding labor* and *adaptation to difficult work conditions* were reviewed and integrated into a broader theme concerning *physical strain associated with agricultural work*. This iterative process enhanced the internal consistency of each theme and ensured clear distinctions among thematic categories.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Once the thematic structure was finalized, the researcher clearly defined the essence and scope of each theme. This phase involved identifying the central organizing concept underlying each theme and determining how it contributed to understanding the experiences of children at work. Concise and meaningful theme names were developed to accurately reflect the participants' narratives.

Themes generated for the challenges faced by the participants included categories such as Educational Disruptions and Learning Difficulties, Emotional Burdens and Psychosocial Pressures, and Physical Strain Associated with Labor. Themes related to coping strategies included Drawing Strength from Family, Peers, and Teachers and Demonstrating Persistence and Strategic Management of Educational Responsibilities, while themes concerning aspirations included Pursuing Education to Improve Family Life, Valuing Education as a Route to Future Success, and Aspiring to Serve and Help Others. Detailed thematic descriptions were subsequently developed and supported by direct quotations from participants.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The final phase involved integrating the themes into a coherent and meaningful narrative that addressed the research questions and objectives of the study. The researcher

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interpreted the significance of each theme in relation to the participants' lived experiences and linked the findings to the theoretical perspectives underpinning the study. Representative excerpts from participants' narratives were incorporated to illustrate and support thematic interpretations.

Following the within-case analyses, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify common patterns and variations across the four cases. Themes emerging from individual participants were compared, synthesized, and categorized into higher-order thematic structures that reflected the collective experiences of children at work. This process enabled the researcher to generate broader insights regarding the challenges, coping strategies, and aspirations of children who simultaneously engage in schooling and labor.

Ensuring Rigor in Data Analysis

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis, the researcher maintained an audit trail of coding decisions, analytic memos, thematic development, and reflective notes throughout the research process. Data triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources, including interviews, focus group discussions, and observations. Emerging interpretations were continuously compared across data sources to ensure consistency and depth of understanding. The iterative and reflexive nature of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis further strengthened the rigor of the study by encouraging continuous engagement with the data and critical reflection on the researcher's interpretive role in theme development.

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Overall, Braun and Clarke’s Reflexive Thematic Analysis provided a systematic, flexible, and theoretically congruent approach for examining the experiences of children at work. Through its six-phase process, the method facilitated the identification of meaningful patterns within participants’ narratives and enabled the development of rich and contextually grounded insights into the challenges they faced, the coping strategies they employed, and the aspirations that shaped their educational and life trajectories.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered strictly to established ethical principles and standards in the conduct of qualitative research involving children. Recognizing that the participants were minors and belonged to a potentially vulnerable population due to their involvement in work while attending school, special attention was given to protecting their rights, dignity, welfare, safety, and well-being throughout all stages of the research process.

The study was guided by the fundamental ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice as articulated in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) and consistent with the ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

The principle of respect for persons recognizes the autonomy and dignity of every individual and requires that participation in research be voluntary and informed (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). In accordance with this principle, participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Prior to data collection, the researcher explained the purpose, objectives, procedures, potential

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benefits, and possible risks of the study in language that was appropriate and understandable to both the participants and their parents or guardians.

Because the participants were minors, written informed consent was obtained from their parents or legal guardians before their inclusion in the study. In addition, informed assent was secured from the child participants themselves. The researcher ensured that the children clearly understood the nature of their participation and that they had the freedom to decide whether or not to participate. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question, discontinue the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, consequences, or loss of benefits.

The researcher further emphasized that participation would not influence the participants' academic standing, grades, school privileges, or relationship with teachers and school personnel. This measure was intended to eliminate any perception of coercion or undue influence arising from the researcher's position within the school.

The principles of beneficence and non-maleficence require researchers to maximize potential benefits while minimizing or preventing possible harm to participants (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). Throughout the study, the researcher carefully considered the welfare of the participants and implemented measures to reduce psychological, emotional, social, and educational risks.

The interviews and discussions focused primarily on participants' experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and aspirations. Although some questions involved discussing difficult experiences related to work, poverty, absenteeism, or emotional distress, the

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researcher conducted all interviews in a supportive, respectful, and child-friendly manner.

Participants were never pressured to discuss topics that made them uncomfortable. If any participant exhibited signs of distress, discomfort, anxiety, or emotional uneasiness, the interview was temporarily paused or terminated according to the participant's wishes.

The study involved minimal risk because no invasive procedures, experimental treatments, or potentially harmful interventions were involved. Nonetheless, the researcher remained attentive to participants' emotional well-being and ensured that discussions were conducted sensitively and respectfully.

Protecting the privacy of participants was a major ethical consideration throughout the study. The researcher assured participants and their parents that all information provided would be treated with strict confidentiality. To safeguard participants' identities, **pseudonyms** were used in all transcripts, reports, discussions, and presentations of findings. Real names and any identifying information were removed from research records and replaced with codes or aliases.

All interview recordings, transcripts, observation notes, focus group discussion records, and related research documents were securely stored in password-protected electronic files and locked storage accessible only to the researcher. Audio recordings were used solely for transcription and analysis purposes and were not shared with unauthorized individuals.

The findings were reported in aggregate and thematic form to prevent identification of individual participants. Direct quotations included in the study were carefully reviewed to ensure that no information could reveal participants' identities or compromise their privacy.

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The researcher respected the participants' right to privacy throughout the data collection process. Individual interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting within the school or another mutually agreed location where participants could speak freely without fear of judgment, interruption, or exposure of sensitive information.

Focus group discussions were likewise conducted in a secure and respectful environment. Prior to the discussions, participants were reminded to respect the privacy of fellow participants and refrain from disclosing information shared during the session outside the discussion group. Although complete confidentiality among focus group participants cannot be guaranteed, efforts were made to establish mutual respect and trust throughout the discussions.

Given that the study involved children, particular attention was devoted to child protection principles. The researcher complied with school policies and applicable laws concerning the protection of children's rights and welfare. All interactions with participants were conducted in a professional, respectful, and developmentally appropriate manner.

The interview questions were carefully reviewed during content validation to ensure that they were age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and unlikely to expose participants to harm. Questions were designed to explore experiences without placing children in situations that could cause embarrassment, intimidation, or emotional distress.

Furthermore, should any disclosure during the interviews indicate the possibility of abuse, exploitation, neglect, or situations that pose serious risks to the child's safety, the

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researcher would follow established child protection protocols and coordinate with appropriate authorities and school officials while maintaining the child’s best interests and welfare.

The principle of justice requires that the selection of participants be fair and equitable and that no individual or group be unfairly burdened or excluded from the benefits of research (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Participants in this study were selected through purposive sampling based on clearly established inclusion criteria related to the objectives of the study.

Selection was based solely on participants’ experiences as children who simultaneously engaged in schooling and work-related activities. No participant was favored or excluded based on gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, academic performance, or other unrelated characteristics. All participants were treated with equal respect, dignity, and consideration throughout the research process.

The researcher employed several strategies to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observations were utilized to facilitate data triangulation. Member checking was likewise conducted by presenting summaries of interpretations and emerging themes to participants for verification and confirmation. Parents and teachers who participated in the focus group discussions also assisted in validating the interpretations derived from the data.

The researcher-maintained honesty, transparency, and reflexivity throughout the research process. Findings were reported accurately and faithfully without fabrication, falsification, manipulation, or selective omission of information. Participants’ narratives were

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represented authentically and interpreted within their proper contexts to ensure that their voices remained central to the study.

Research records, interview transcripts, recordings, field notes, and related documents were securely stored throughout the duration of the study. Electronic files were protected through password encryption, while printed documents were kept in secure storage. Data were retained only for the period necessary to complete the research and comply with institutional requirements.

Upon completion of the study and the expiration of the prescribed retention period, audio recordings and other identifying materials will be permanently deleted or destroyed through secure disposal procedures to protect participants' confidentiality and privacy.

The findings of the study were utilized exclusively for academic, scholarly, and educational purposes. The information gathered from participants was not used for any commercial, political, or personal purposes. Results were presented in a manner that respected participants' dignity and avoided reinforcing negative stereotypes or stigmatizing children who engage in work while attending school.

Ultimately, the researcher remained committed to upholding the highest standards of ethical conduct throughout the study. By ensuring voluntary participation, protecting confidentiality, minimizing risks, respecting participants' rights, and maintaining the integrity of the research process, the study sought to generate meaningful knowledge while safeguarding the welfare and dignity of the children whose experiences formed the foundation of the inquiry.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study explored the experiences of children at work by examining the challenges they encountered, the coping strategies they employed, and the aspirations that guided their lives and educational pursuits. Through a cross-case analysis of the narratives of Nene Tel, Boyboy, Nonoy Noel, and Bonbon, the findings revealed that the experiences of working children were characterized by a complex interplay of educational, psychosocial, and physical challenges. Despite these difficulties, the participants demonstrated remarkable resilience through adaptive coping strategies and maintained hopeful aspirations centered on education, family welfare, and future careers.

The findings showed that the challenges experienced by the participants were predominantly educational in nature. Their involvement in agricultural labor and household responsibilities frequently disrupted school attendance and participation, resulting in missed lessons, learning gaps, poor comprehension, and difficulties in foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Frequent absenteeism emerged as a common experience across cases, although the extent varied among participants. For some children, work obligations occasionally interfered with school attendance, while for others, labor demands became so extensive that schooling was substantially compromised. These educational disruptions hindered their ability to keep pace with classroom instruction and contributed to feelings of academic inadequacy and difficulty understanding lessons. The findings suggest that child labor creates barriers to educational engagement not only through physical absence from school but also through the cumulative effects of interrupted learning experiences.

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Beyond academic difficulties, the participants experienced psychosocial and emotional challenges associated with balancing school and work responsibilities. Feelings of embarrassment, anxiety, emotional distress, and vulnerability emerged from their narratives. Some participants described being teased or stigmatized by classmates because of frequent absences, while others expressed anxiety regarding examinations, classroom participation, and understanding new lessons. These experiences demonstrate that the consequences of child labor extend beyond educational outcomes and affect children's emotional well-being and social experiences within the school environment. The findings indicate that working children often face an invisible emotional burden as they navigate competing expectations from school, family, and work.

The study also revealed that agricultural labor exposed participants to physical strain and bodily discomfort. Although severe injuries were not reported, the children described experiencing muscle pain, body aches, and physical exhaustion resulting from planting, harvesting, and other labor-intensive activities. Interestingly, many participants appeared to normalize these experiences, viewing physical discomfort as an ordinary consequence of work. This normalization reflects early adaptation to hardship and illustrates how prolonged exposure to labor can shape children's perceptions of physical well-being. The findings suggest that even when work is perceived as manageable, it may still impose physical demands that exceed what is developmentally appropriate for children.

Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated resilience through various coping strategies that enabled them to remain engaged in education while fulfilling work-

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related responsibilities. A major coping mechanism involved seeking support from significant individuals within their social networks. Family members, siblings, classmates, and teachers served as important sources of academic assistance, encouragement, and guidance. The participants actively sought help in understanding lessons, improving reading skills, clarifying difficult concepts, and completing missed assessments. These supportive relationships functioned as protective factors that helped mitigate the negative effects of educational disruption and strengthened the children’s capacity to persist in school despite adversity.

In addition to relying on social support, the participants displayed self-regulated and adaptive behaviors that reflected personal agency and determination. They employed strategies such as listening attentively during lessons, taking special examinations for missed assessments, asking questions when they encountered difficulties, and deliberately managing their schedules to balance school and work responsibilities. Some consciously restricted work activities to weekends and holidays in order to prioritize education. These actions demonstrate that the participants were not passive recipients of hardship but active agents who sought practical solutions to the challenges they faced. Their efforts illustrate how working children exercise resilience through persistence, strategic decision-making, and commitment to educational participation.

The aspirations expressed by the participants revealed a strong future orientation despite the adversities they experienced. Education emerged as a central aspiration and was consistently viewed as the primary pathway toward a better life. The participants demonstrated a deep appreciation for the value of schooling and expressed a commitment to

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completing their education. They recognized that academic achievement could provide opportunities for personal growth, economic mobility, and improved living conditions. Their aspirations suggest that education remained a source of hope and possibility even when current circumstances made educational participation difficult.

A related finding was the participants' desire to improve the welfare of their families through educational and occupational success. Many viewed educational attainment not solely as a personal achievement but as a means of helping their parents and alleviating family hardship. Their aspirations reflected gratitude toward family members and a strong sense of responsibility to contribute to the household's future well-being. This orientation underscores the collectivist nature of their aspirations, wherein personal success was closely linked to family advancement and support.

The participants also articulated career aspirations that reflected both economic ambitions and a desire to serve others. Several aspired to become professionals engaged in public service, such as police officers, military personnel, and doctors, because they wanted to help, protect, and serve people. Another participant envisioned becoming a seaman as a means of securing stable employment and achieving economic security. These aspirations reveal that the children maintained optimistic views of their futures and continued to envision meaningful roles within society despite their present hardships. Their career goals demonstrate a combination of altruism, responsibility, and hope for upward social mobility.

Taken together, the findings portray the lives of children at work as characterized by both vulnerability and resilience. Their experiences were shaped by educational disruptions,

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emotional burdens, and physical demands associated with labor, yet these challenges did not extinguish their commitment to learning or diminish their hopes for the future. Instead, the participants responded through supportive relationships, adaptive coping strategies, and sustained educational aspirations. The cross-case analysis highlights that while child labor creates substantial obstacles to children's development and educational participation, working children possess significant agency, determination, and optimism that enable them to navigate adversity while continuing to pursue meaningful goals for themselves, their families, and their communities. This synthesis underscores the need for interventions that address not only the economic conditions that contribute to the child to work but also the educational, psychosocial, and developmental needs of children who continue to balance work and schooling

Conclusion

This study sought to uncover the experiences of children who simultaneously bear the weight of schooling and work. Through the narratives gathered, it becomes evident that these children navigate a complex and more often exhausting reality. The findings reveal that working children do not simply struggle academically but they carry the burdens that affect their physical well-being emotional health, social relationships and overall their childhood. Despite these hardships, they still demonstrate remarkable resilience, determinations and value of education as their pathway out of poverty. Their stories are not merely of hardship but also a testament of courage and hope. However resilience alone is not enough because

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current educational system is not fully equipped to meet the needs of working children pushing them closer to the edge of dropping out.

It is therefore concluded that:

1. working children and schooling are not mutually exclusive in many Filipino households, and the educational system must acknowledge this truth and the schools must become responsive and recognize the existence of this reality.
2. Policy interventions must go beyond legislation and translate into school level actions that protect working children’s right to quality education.

Ultimately, this study affirms that every child regardless of the burdens they carry, deserves a chance at education. Addressing the challenges faced by the working children is not merely an educational concern but it is a matter of social justice. The school, the community and the state must collectively act to ensure that no child is forced to choose between books and survival.

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