

Navigating the Path of Exceptional Parenting: An Exploration of Experiences among Parents of Para-Athletes

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of parents raising para-athletes, highlighting their challenges, coping mechanisms, and societal interactions. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with six parents from the 1st District of Capiz, Philippines. Findings reveal that while parents encounter financial, emotional, and social struggles, they employ various coping strategies, including advocacy, community support, and resilience. The study underscores the need for improved governmental and institutional support systems to enhance the quality of life for para-athletes and their families.

Keywords: Para-athlete, parental experiences, coping strategies, societal treatment

INTRODUCTION

Raising a child with disabilities presents unique challenges that require financial, emotional, and psychological resilience. Parents of para-athletes navigate a complex journey that involves overcoming societal biases, ensuring access to education, and advocating for their children's rights (Smith, 2020). Despite these difficulties, parental support is integral to the holistic development and athletic success of para-athletes (Purcell et al., 2018). This study aims to explore the lived experiences of parents raising para-athletes, focusing on their struggles, adaptive strategies, and interactions with social and institutional frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, particularly Husserlian phenomenology, to describe the essential meanings and structures of parental experiences without imposing preconceived notions. Phenomenology was chosen as it allows for an in-depth understanding of how parents interpret and navigate their unique circumstances (Moustakas, 1994). This research design enabled the study to capture rich, descriptive data, emphasizing the perspectives and emotions of the participants as they recounted their experiences. By utilizing a phenomenological approach, this study highlights the personal and subjective experiences of parents and provides a deeper understanding of how they make sense of their challenges and successes.

Participants and Sampling. Six parents from the 1st District of Capiz were selected using mixed chain and criterion sampling. Participants were required to have been actively raising a para-athlete for at least two years. This sampling method ensured diverse perspectives while maintaining coherence in lived experiences (Mertens, 2015). The sample size was deemed sufficient to provide meaningful insights while ensuring that data saturation was achieved, allowing for a well-rounded understanding of parental experiences. The participants reflected a range of backgrounds, including parents from different socioeconomic statuses, which contributed to the depth and richness of the collected data.

Data Collection. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, allowing participants to freely express their experiences and challenges. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using bracketing, horizontalization, clustering, and textualization (Husserl, 1931). The use of open-ended questions facilitated a detailed exploration of their perspectives, capturing the nuances of their daily lives

and the support structures they relied upon. The interviews also provided an opportunity to identify common themes that emerged across participants, helping to create a clearer picture of the overall experience of parenting a para-athlete. These themes were carefully analyzed to identify patterns and recurring experiences, ensuring that the findings were well-supported by the data.

Ethical Considerations. Ethical protocols were strictly followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation. Anonymity was maintained throughout the study, and all data were stored securely to protect confidentiality. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Moreover, steps were taken to ensure that the research process remained sensitive to the emotional and psychological well-being of the participants, recognizing the personal and sometimes distressing nature of their experiences. This ethical approach fostered trust between the researcher and participants, encouraging open and honest sharing of experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Parental Challenges. Parents of para-athletes encountered various challenges that tested their emotional, financial, and social resilience. Emotionally, parents experienced stress and anxiety, especially concerning their child's future opportunities and well-being. Many parents initially struggled with feelings of guilt, helplessness, and uncertainty regarding their child's disability. The constant need to provide emotional support while managing their personal well-being led to increased stress levels, as also reported in studies by Beresford et al. (2015).

Financially, parents faced immense burdens due to the high costs associated with medical care, assistive devices, and specialized training for their children. The financial strain often resulted in parents working multiple jobs or seeking external funding sources, highlighting the economic challenges that come with raising a para-athlete (Purcell et al., 2018). Furthermore, limited access to government subsidies and inadequate financial assistance programs exacerbated these financial difficulties.

Socially, parents encountered stigma and discrimination from their communities. Many expressed frustration with societal misconceptions about disability, which created barriers to acceptance and inclusion. Parents frequently had to advocate for their children, ensuring they received equal opportunities in education and sports. Shields and Synnot (2019) noted similar challenges, emphasizing the lack of public awareness and accessibility measures in various institutions.

Coping Strategies. Parents employed various coping mechanisms to navigate the unique challenges associated with raising para-athletes. Many sought emotional and psychological support from family, peers, and organized support groups, which provided a sense of belonging and reduced feelings of isolation (Jenkins & Lafontaine, 2016). Some parents became strong advocates for disability rights, actively participating in policy discussions and seeking systemic reforms to improve the lives of para-athletes (Shields & Synnot, 2019).

Additionally, financial coping strategies varied, with some families seeking sponsorships, government grants, or crowdfunding opportunities to sustain their child's training and medical needs (Beresford et al., 2015). Religious faith also played a significant role in providing emotional resilience, helping parents find strength and purpose in their journey (Purcell et al., 2018). By combining these strategies, parents were able to build a supportive environment that not only benefited their children but also allowed them to develop personal resilience in the face of adversity.

Institutional and Societal Interactions. Parents encountered various institutional and societal barriers while advocating for their children's needs. One of the most significant institutional challenges was the lack of accessibility in educational settings, as many schools were not equipped with inclusive infrastructure or trained personnel to support para-athletes effectively (Shields & Synnot, 2019). Parents had to engage in persistent advocacy efforts to secure accommodations and ensure that their children received equal opportunities in academic and extracurricular activities.

Furthermore, financial assistance programs were often inconsistent and insufficient, forcing parents to explore alternative funding sources such as nonprofit organizations, private donors, and sports foundations (Beresford et

al., 2015). Societal perceptions of disability also remained a critical challenge, as stigma and misconceptions limited the opportunities available to para-athletes. Many parents took it upon themselves to raise awareness about the abilities and achievements of para-athletes, using social media, community events, and advocacy campaigns to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusion (Smith, 2020). By actively engaging with both institutional frameworks and societal structures, parents played a crucial role in shaping a more inclusive environment for their children.

CONCLUSION

Parents of para-athletes demonstrate exceptional resilience as they confront financial, emotional, and societal challenges in supporting their children's athletic endeavors. Their lived experiences underscore the critical need for stronger institutional frameworks, more comprehensive financial assistance programs, and heightened societal awareness to foster inclusive and equitable environments. Policy initiatives that enhance accessibility, expand funding opportunities, and promote understanding and advocacy can substantially mitigate the burdens encountered by these families.

Future research should prioritize the evaluation of long-term policy interventions and the development of structured, sustainable programs designed to support para-athletes and their parents, thereby ensuring their continued well-being and success. Employing a mixed-methods approach could strengthen current findings by complementing qualitative insights with quantitative assessments of parental stress, well-being, and financial strain. Moreover, a deeper examination of institutional and policy frameworks may yield evidence-based recommendations for educational institutions, sports federations, and governmental agencies. Finally, longitudinal investigations following parents over time would provide valuable insight into the evolution of coping strategies and their long-term effects on both parental well-being and para-athletes' development.

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