

Between Work and Study: A Phenomenological Study on the Lived Experiences of Working Students

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of working students enrolled in the College of Teacher Education at Negros Oriental State University. It aimed to understand how students manage the demands of balancing academic responsibilities and employment, the challenges they encounter, the coping strategies they use, and the personal meanings they develop from these experiences. The study used a qualitative phenomenological approach guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflective narratives from selected working students who were actively employed while studying.

The findings revealed four major themes. First, *Temporal Strain and Role Conflict* showed that students often struggled with time pressure, exhaustion, overlapping responsibilities, and academic stress. Second, *Adaptive Coping and Survival Strategies* highlighted how participants relied on time management, prioritization, self-discipline, and positive thinking to handle their daily responsibilities. Third, *Relational Support and Social Anchoring* emphasized the importance of support from family, friends, classmates, teachers, and romantic partners in helping students remain motivated and emotionally stable. Lastly, *Transformative Growth and Meaning-Making* reflected how participants developed resilience, maturity, responsibility, and a stronger sense of self through their experiences.

The study concluded that the experiences of working students go beyond financial survival. Despite the difficulties they face, working students continue to persevere, adapt, and find meaning in their journey toward achieving their educational goals. Their experiences reflect strength, sacrifice, resilience, and personal growth within the realities of higher education.

Keywords: Working Students; Phenomenology; Role Conflict; Resilience; Coping Strategies

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Philippine higher education, the phenomenon of students simultaneously engaging in academic study and paid employment has become increasingly prevalent and complex. Driven by financial necessity, rising educational costs, limited scholarship opportunities, and family obligations, many students assume dual roles as learners and workers. Within provincial contexts such as Negros Oriental State University (NORSU), this reality is intensified by limited institutional resources, unstable employment opportunities, and socio-economic pressures.

The lived experiences of working students reveal not merely economic survival but a continuous process of negotiation between academic responsibilities and work obligations. Through Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, the experiences of working students in the College of Teacher Education (CTED) reveal recurring patterns centered on temporal strain and role conflict, adaptive coping strategies, relational support systems, and transformative personal growth.

Participants described their daily lives as highly compressed and demanding, where work schedules, academic tasks, and personal responsibilities overlap continuously. Many experienced fatigue, reduced academic

engagement, and emotional exhaustion due to persistent time constraints. However, despite these structural pressures, students demonstrated resilience through adaptive coping behaviors such as time management, prioritization, emotional regulation, and positive reframing.

The findings further indicate that social relationships serve as important stabilizing mechanisms in the working-student experience. Emotional support from family members, peers, romantic partners, and mentors significantly contributed to participants' persistence and psychological well-being. More importantly, participants viewed their experiences not solely as hardship, but also as a process of transformation that cultivated discipline, independence, resilience, and meaning making.

This study therefore adopts a phenomenological orientation supported by Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis to explore how working students interpret, negotiate, and make meaning of balancing academic and employment responsibilities. By foregrounding the voices of working students in CTED, the research contributes to a more contextually grounded understanding of student resilience, role conflict, and adaptive development within Philippine higher education.

RATIONALE

The increasing number of students who simultaneously pursue higher education and employment reflects a growing socio-economic reality in Philippine universities. In provincial institutions such as Negros Oriental State University, many students engage in part-time, full-time, freelance, or informal work to sustain educational expenses and support family needs. While employment enables financial survival and skill development, it also exposes students to competing demands that affect their academic performance, emotional well-being, and overall student experience.

The findings generated through Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis reveal that working students experience persistent temporal strain and role conflict. Participants described overlapping responsibilities, schedule conflicts, exhaustion, and reduced academic motivation caused by limited time and energy. These experiences demonstrate how the dual roles of student and worker produce continuous pressure and imbalance.

Despite these constraints, the analysis also revealed that working students actively develop adaptive coping and survival strategies. Students employed time management techniques, scheduling tools, prioritization strategies, emotional regulation, and self-care practices to maintain balance between work and academic obligations. Such responses reflect resilience and self-regulation despite structural limitations.

Another important insight emerging from the analysis is the significance of relational support and social anchoring. Participants consistently emphasized the role of family members, romantic partners, peers, and mentors in helping them endure stress and sustain motivation. These relationships function as emotional and psychological resources that stabilize students amid demanding conditions.

Most importantly, participants framed their experiences as transformative. Thematic findings showed that students interpreted hardship as a source of personal growth, resilience, maturity, discipline, and meaning making. Rather than viewing themselves solely as burdened individuals, many participants described themselves as survivors and resilient learners capable of overcoming adversity.

Although existing literature discusses the academic effects of student employment, many studies remain quantitative and metropolitan-centered. Limited qualitative research has explored the lived experiences of working students within provincial state universities such as NORSU. This gap highlights the need for context-specific phenomenological inquiry grounded in thematic analysis that captures how working students construct meaning from their experiences.

The study is therefore significant because it contributes theoretically, methodologically, and institutionally to understanding the realities of working students. Through Braun and Clarke's thematic framework, the research generates deeper insight into how working students negotiate time pressures, develop coping mechanisms, rely on support systems, and experience personal transformation.

Statement of the Problem

Many students pursue academic studies while simultaneously engaging in part-time, full-time, or informal employment to support educational and personal needs. Although employment provides opportunities for financial independence, skill development, and personal growth, it also generates competing responsibilities that may affect academic engagement, emotional well-being, and social functioning.

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, this study seeks to explore and interpret the lived experiences of working students enrolled in the College of Teacher Education at Negros Oriental State University.

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do working students experience temporal strain and role conflict while balancing academic and employment responsibilities?
2. What adaptive coping and survival strategies do working students employ in managing academic, emotional, and work-related pressures?
3. How do relational support systems such as family, peers, romantic partners, teachers, and workplaces influence the experiences of working students?
4. How do working students describe the transformative effects and meaning-making processes that emerge from their dual roles as students and workers?

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it provides theoretical, methodological, institutional, and policy-oriented insights into the lived experiences of working students in the College of Teacher Education. By employing Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, the study offers a deeper understanding of how working students interpret and negotiate their dual responsibilities.

Theoretical Significance

The study contributes to the broader discourse on Role Strain Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Resilience Theory by illustrating how working students navigate competing demands while sustaining motivation and personal growth. The thematic findings on temporal strain and role conflict support the assumptions of Role Strain Theory, which explains how overlapping responsibilities generate stress and conflict.

The theme on adaptive coping and survival strategies aligns with Resilience Theory, demonstrating how students develop self-regulation, endurance, and adaptive behaviors despite adversity. Meanwhile, the theme on relational support and social anchoring reflects Self-Determination Theory, particularly the importance of relatedness and social connectedness in sustaining persistence and well-being.

Finally, the theme on transformative growth and meaning making extends existing literature by showing that working students perceive their experiences not only as struggles but also as opportunities for self-development, identity formation, and resilience.

Methodological Significance

Methodologically, the study contributes to qualitative educational research by utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework. The study demonstrates how thematic analysis can systematically identify patterns of meaning from participants' narratives while preserving the depth and authenticity of lived experiences. The use of coding, theme generation, thematic mapping, and meaning synthesis enhances the rigor, transparency, and credibility of qualitative analysis.

Institutional and Practical Significance

The findings provide valuable insights for universities and educators regarding the realities of working students. Understanding students' experiences of time pressure, fatigue, and role conflict can guide institutions in

developing more responsive policies such as:

- flexible learning schedules,
- student-centered academic accommodations,
- counseling and mental health support,
- expanded student assistantship opportunities, and
- financial aid programs.

The findings also highlight the importance of social support systems in sustaining student persistence and well-being.

Policy and Social Significance.

The study contributes to discussions on educational equity and inclusive higher education by emphasizing the structural realities faced by working students in provincial state universities. Insights from the thematic findings may assist policymakers, local government units, and educational agencies in designing programs that better support economically vulnerable students.

Ultimately, the study promotes greater institutional awareness of the lived realities of working students and underscores the need for educational systems that are flexible, humane, and responsive.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY AND LIMITATIONS

This study focuses on the lived experiences of undergraduate working students enrolled in the College of Teacher Education at Negros Oriental State University during Academic Year 2025–2026. Specifically, the study explores how students balance academic responsibilities and employment obligations while navigating the challenges associated with their dual roles. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the study examines four central thematic dimensions: (1) temporal strain and role conflict, (2) adaptive coping and survival strategies, (3) relational support and social anchoring, and (4) transformative growth and meaning-making. The participants included students who were actively employed in part-time, full-time, freelance, contractual, family-based, or informal work arrangements while pursuing their studies. The study prioritizes depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflective narratives, then analyzed through coding, theme development, thematic review, and interpretation consistent with Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework.

The study is limited to undergraduate students of the College of Teacher Education who are currently employed while studying; students who are not employed were excluded from the investigation. Furthermore, the study is confined to Negros Oriental State University and therefore does not seek statistical generalization to all higher education institutions. As a qualitative inquiry, the findings rely on participants' self-reported narratives and the interpretive processes of thematic analysis. Consequently, the results reflect subjective meanings and contextual experiences rather than measurable causal relationships. Although Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis allows for the systematic identification of themes, interpretation remains influenced by participant narratives and researcher reflexivity. Despite these limitations, the study provides rich and contextually grounded insights into the realities of working students within a provincial university setting.

Contextualized Reflections and Directions for Future Research

While this qualitative study provides an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of working students at Negros Oriental State University, its scope remains bounded by its focus on actively employed individuals within the College of Teacher Education. A critical avenue for expanding the transferability and explanatory scope of higher education research lies in developing comparative frameworks that include non-working students.

Contrasting the lived realities of working students against their non-working counterparts would help contextualize the unique challenges and developmental advantages inherent in balancing employment and study. For instance, while non-working students operate within a standard academic timeline—allowing them to focus

on learning without the severe temporal strain, physical exhaustion, or class tardiness highlighted under Theme 1 (Temporal Strain and Role Conflict) —working students demonstrate a distinct acceleration in non-cognitive development. As seen in Theme 2 (Adaptive Coping and Survival Strategies) and Theme 4 (Transformative Growth and Meaning-Making), working students are forced to cultivate specialized time-management tracking, strict boundary-setting, and early professional adaptability. This structural necessity fosters an early transition into emerging adulthood, self-reliance, and personal maturity that non-working students might not encounter until after graduation.

Conversely, exploring how non-working students allocate their uncompressed time could clarify how institutional constraints affect student retention and academic performance differently. Future research should leverage comparative cohorts to examine how institutional support systems, flexible class scheduling, and academic deadlines can be redesigned equitably to protect vulnerable working students without reducing the rigor expected of traditional university paths.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of the study is informed by the thematic findings generated through Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis. At the center of the framework is the lived experience of working students balancing academic responsibilities and employment obligations.

The analysis revealed four interconnected themes:

1. Temporal Strain and Role Conflict

This theme represents the pressures associated with overlapping academic and work responsibilities, including time constraints, fatigue, schedule conflicts, and academic strain.

2. Adaptive Coping and Survival Strategies

This theme reflects the coping behaviors employed by students to manage competing demands, including time management, prioritization, emotional regulation, self-care, and positive reframing.

3. Relational Support and Social Anchoring

This theme highlights the importance of interpersonal support systems such as family, peers, romantic partners, teachers, and mentors in sustaining students' emotional well-being and persistence.

4. Transformative Growth and Meaning-Making

This theme illustrates how students interpret their experiences as opportunities for resilience, self-development, discipline, and personal transformation.

The framework demonstrates a dynamic process in which students experience temporal strain, respond through adaptive coping mechanisms, rely on social support systems, and ultimately construct meaning from their experiences.

The framework is grounded in:

- Role Strain Theory,
- Self-Determination Theory, and
- Resilience Theory.

These theories collectively explain how working students negotiate competing demands, sustain motivation, and develop resilience within the context of higher education.

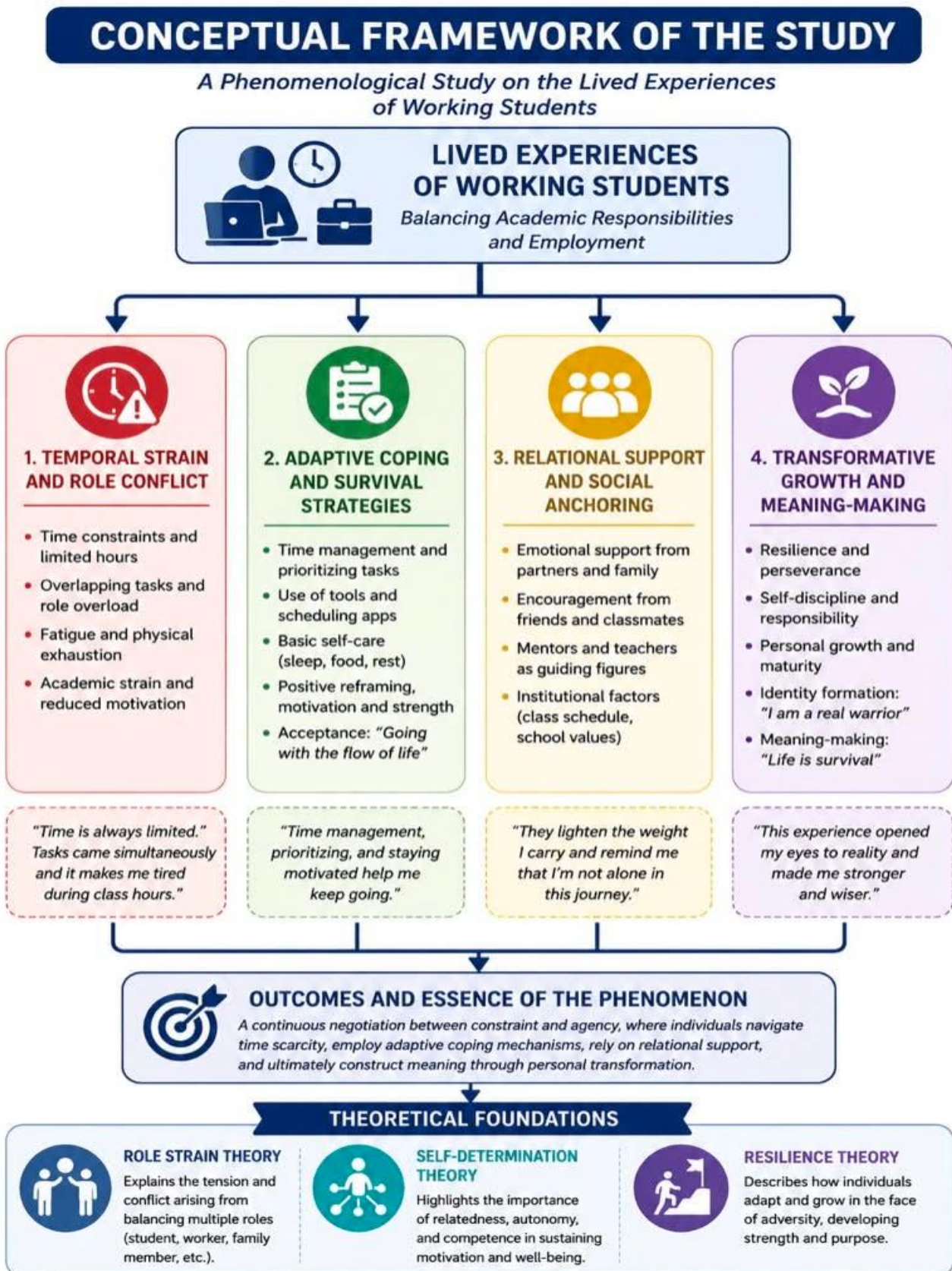


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of working students enrolled in the College of Teacher Education at Negros Oriental State University during Academic Year 2025–2026. The phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to capture the participants' personal experiences, perceptions, struggles, coping mechanisms, and

meanings regarding the challenges of balancing academic responsibilities and employment obligations. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the study systematically identified and interpreted patterns of meaning emerging from participants' narratives through the phases of familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and final write-up. The research was conducted at the College of Teacher Education (CTED) of Negros Oriental State University, Main Campus I and II, located in Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental, which served as an appropriate setting because many students are engaged in part-time, full-time, freelance, contractual, and informal employment while pursuing their studies.

The participants of the study consisted of seven (7) undergraduate working students who were purposively selected based on the following criteria: currently enrolled in CTED, actively employed while studying, with at least one semester of work-study experience, capable of communicating in English, Filipino, or Cebuano, and willing to participate voluntarily in the study. The primary research instrument used was a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide composed of open-ended questions designed to gather rich and detailed descriptions of participants' experiences as working students, including the challenges they encountered, coping strategies, support systems, personal growth, and realizations. To ensure validity, the interview guide was reviewed by research experts prior to data gathering. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective narratives conducted either face-to-face or through online platforms depending on the participants' availability and convenience.

With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to member checking to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the gathered data. Field notes and reflective memos were likewise documented throughout the research process to capture contextual observations and emerging insights. The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Reflexive Thematic Analysis, which resulted in the emergence of four major themes: Temporal Strain and Role Conflict, Adaptive Coping and Survival Strategies, Relational Support and Social Anchoring, and Transformative Growth and Meaning-Making. Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, their voluntary participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms and participant codes such as P1, P2, and P3 were used in presenting the findings, while all recordings, transcripts, and documents were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. Through these procedures, the study ensured the credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical integrity of the research while providing a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of working students within the context of higher education.

Thematic analysis

This study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework to examine the lived experiences of working students. Rather than a linear task, the analysis was operationalized as an organic, recursive process involving continuous movement back and forth between the raw narratives and the emerging codes, conducted through the following six structured phases:

Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data. The analysis began with the verbatim orthographic transcription of the audio-recorded interviews. The research team repeatedly read the complete transcripts and cross-referenced them with field notes taken during data collection to submerge themselves deeply within the structural nuances of the participants' narratives.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes. Open, line-by-line coding was conducted manually across all transcripts to capture features of the text describing student constraints or personal agency. Semantic and latent descriptions were assigned initial codes; for instance, statements highlighting morning class tardiness due to late shifts were coded as "Sleep deprivation impact" or "Role displacement", while mentions of tracking schedules were coded as "Strategic time allocation".

Phase 3: Searching for Themes. The initial codes generated across the dataset were organized, clustered, and mapped visually into broader candidate code groups. Codes detailing rigid work shifts, overlapping responsibilities, and school fatigue were compiled under a single candidate concept representing structural pressures.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes. The candidate themes were subjected to rigorous refinement by checking them against the exact coded extracts and the entire raw dataset. This ensured strong internal homogeneity (meaning the data within each theme hung together meaningfully) and external heterogeneity (meaning clear and distinct boundaries separated each theme).

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes. The conceptual boundaries of each theme were finalized, establishing clear names and precise operational definitions. This phase solidified the final four-part thematic architecture: Temporal Strain and Role Conflict, Adaptive Coping and Survival Strategies, Relational Support and Social Anchoring, and Transformative Growth and Meaning-Making.

Phase 6: Producing the Report. The final themes were synthesized, interpreted, and woven together with selected key verbatim quotes to construct an empirical narrative that accurately reflects the essence of the working-student experience in the College of Teacher Education at Negros Oriental State University.

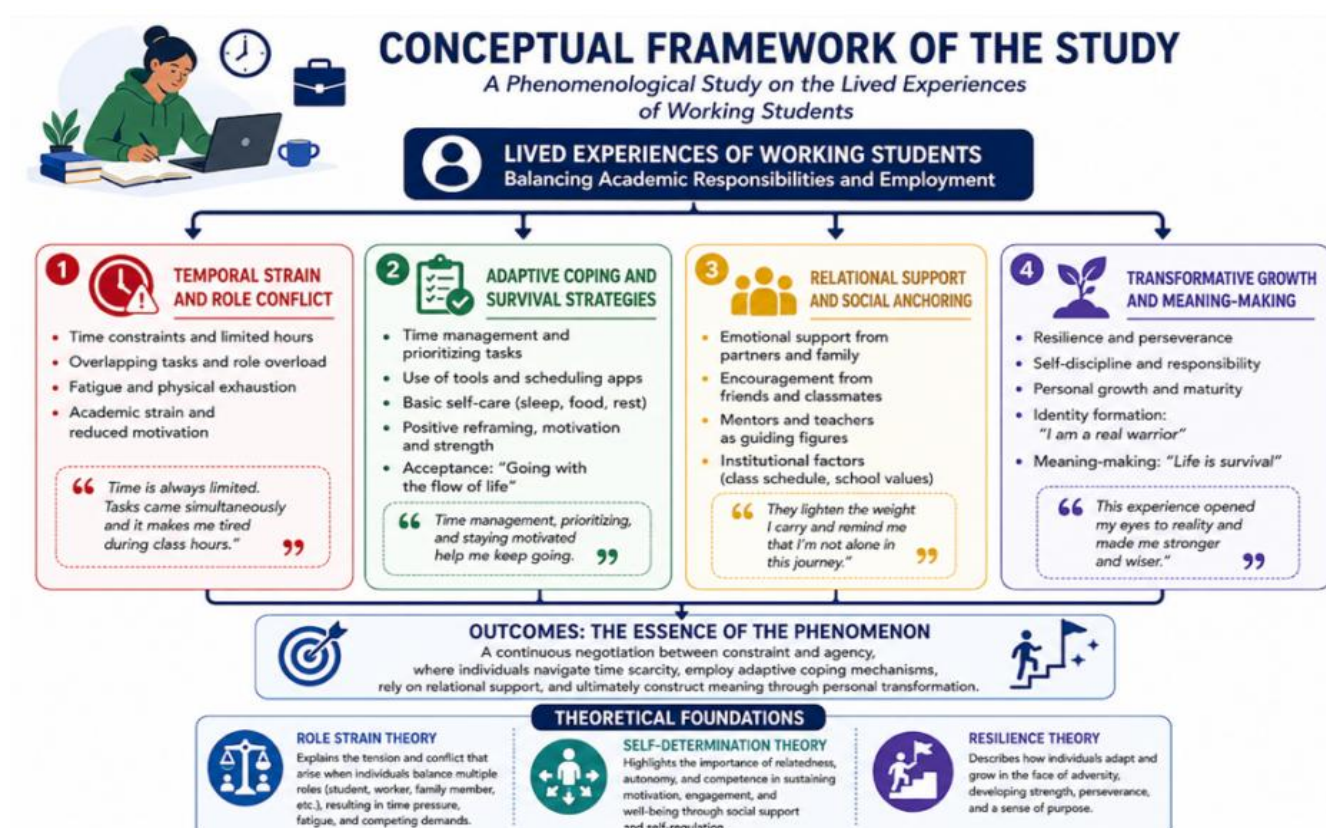
Strategies for Ensuring Trustworthiness

To establish qualitative rigor, transparency, and transferability, multiple validation strategies were systematically implemented:

Member Checking (Respondent Validation): Following transcription, the complete verbatim transcripts and synthesized experiential summaries were returned to the participants. The respondents reviewed the texts to confirm that their voices, unique situations, and underlying meanings were accurately captured without researcher distortion, thereby bolstering descriptive credibility.

Data Source Triangulation: The study maximized structural convergence by triangulating two distinct qualitative data-gathering instruments: in-depth semi-structured oral interviews and written reflective narratives. Cross-verifying oral testimonies with written expressions minimized individual response bias and offered a multi-layered exploration of the work-study phenomenon.

Reflexive Memoing & Audit Trail: The research team maintained detailed field notes and reflective journals throughout data collection and coding. This preserved a clear audit trail documenting the evolution of codes and interpretive decisions, ensuring complete transparency regarding the researcher's role in knowledge production.



Alignment of Theoretical Framework with Thematic Findings

The thematic findings of the study are supported by three major theoretical perspectives:

Role Strain Theory

The theme on temporal strain and role conflict supports Role Strain Theory by illustrating how competing academic and work demands create stress, fatigue, and conflict among working students.

Self-Determination Theory

The theme on relational support and social anchoring reflects the importance of relatedness, belongingness, and social connection in sustaining students' motivation and engagement.

Resilience Theory

The themes on adaptive coping and transformative growth demonstrate how working students develop resilience, persistence, and adaptive behaviors in response to adversity.

Collectively, these theories explain how working students experience pressure, sustain motivation, adapt to challenges, and construct meaning from their experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of the lived experiences of working students enrolled in the College of Teacher Education at Negros Oriental State University. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the narratives gathered through semi-structured interviews were systematically coded, categorized, and interpreted to identify recurring patterns of meaning.

The analysis generated four major themes:

1. Temporal Strain and Role Conflict
2. Adaptive Coping and Survival Strategies
3. Relational Support and Social Anchoring
4. Transformative Growth and Meaning-Making

These themes collectively describe the lived realities of working students as they balance academic responsibilities and employment obligations.

Theme 1: Temporal Strain and Role Conflict

One of the major themes that emerged from the analysis was *Temporal Strain and Role Conflict*. Participants consistently described the challenges of balancing academic responsibilities and employment obligations due to overlapping schedules, limited time, exhaustion, and competing expectations. These experiences reveal the constant pressure faced by working students as they attempt to fulfill both academic and occupational roles simultaneously.

Several participants expressed how time constraints negatively affected their academic engagement and daily functioning. Participant 1 shared, *"Always have time constraints in everything I do"* (P1). Similarly, Participant 2 stated, *"Tasks came simultaneously and I always have a busy schedule"* (P2). Participant 3 described having *"a very hectic schedule and sometimes I arrive late because of work"* (P3), while Participant 4 admitted that balancing work and study *"makes me less motivated and tired sometimes during class hours"* (P4).

These verbatim statements demonstrate how working students continuously experience fatigue, reduced concentration, emotional exhaustion, and limited opportunities for rest. The findings support Goode's (1960) Role Strain Theory, which explains that individuals occupying multiple social roles often experience stress and conflict when role expectations become incompatible or overwhelming. Likewise, Keller et al. (2022)

emphasized that role conflict among working students contributes to emotional exhaustion and academic disengagement. Within the context of Negros Oriental State University, the findings suggest that working students constantly negotiate limited time and energy resources while striving to meet both academic and employment demands.

Theme 2: Adaptive Coping and Survival Strategies

Another major theme generated from the analysis was *Adaptive Coping and Survival Strategies*. Despite the challenges associated with balancing work and academics, participants demonstrated resilience by employing practical and emotional coping mechanisms that enabled them to continue functioning effectively in their dual roles.

Time management emerged as one of the most significant coping strategies identified in the participants' narratives. Participant 5 explained, "*Time management and prioritizing tasks help me survive my daily responsibilities*" (P5). In a similar manner, Participant 2 stated, "*I use apps and schedule organizers to manage my tasks*" (P2). These responses suggest that working students actively organize and prioritize responsibilities to maintain balance between school and work obligations.

Participants also emphasized the importance of emotional regulation and self-care. Participant 6 shared, "*Sleep and food are important because they help me continue despite stress*" (P6), while Participant 7 remarked, "*I make difficulties my motivation and strength*" (P7). Interestingly, Participant 3 expressed a mindset of acceptance by stating, "*Sometimes I just go with the flow of life*" (P3).

These findings demonstrate that working students are not passive recipients of stress; rather, they actively develop adaptive responses to survive demanding conditions. The theme strongly aligns with Resilience Theory (Masten, 2021), which emphasizes the ability of individuals to adapt positively despite adversity. Participants' narratives illustrate resilience through self-regulation, emotional endurance, strategic planning, and positive reframing. Similarly, Pedroso et al. (2023) found that working students in the Philippines commonly rely on time management and emotional coping strategies to balance competing responsibilities. The findings therefore suggest that adaptive coping mechanisms play a critical role in sustaining students' persistence and academic survival despite structural constraints.

Theme 3: Relational Support and Social Anchoring

The theme *Relational Support and Social Anchoring* highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships and support systems in sustaining the motivation, emotional well-being, and persistence of working students. Participants consistently identified family members, romantic partners, friends, classmates, teachers, and mentors as important sources of encouragement and emotional support.

Participant 1 stated, "*My partner is my biggest support system*" (P1). Likewise, Participant 4 shared, "*My girlfriend always reminds me to continue despite the hardships*" (P4). Participant 6 expressed that supportive people "*lighten the weight I carry*" (P6), while Participant 5 stated, "*My teachers and friends guide me and give advice*" (P5).

These narratives reveal that emotional support significantly reduces stress and provides students with motivation to continue despite fatigue and pressure. The findings align with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), particularly the concept of relatedness, which highlights the importance of social connection in sustaining motivation and psychological well-being. Furthermore, Ungar and Theron (2020) emphasized that resilience is strengthened through social and relational support systems. Within the context of working students, interpersonal relationships function not only as emotional anchors but also as protective mechanisms that buffer the negative effects of role strain and stress. The findings therefore underscore the importance of strengthening institutional and social support systems for working students in higher education.

Theme 4: Transformative Growth and Meaning-Making

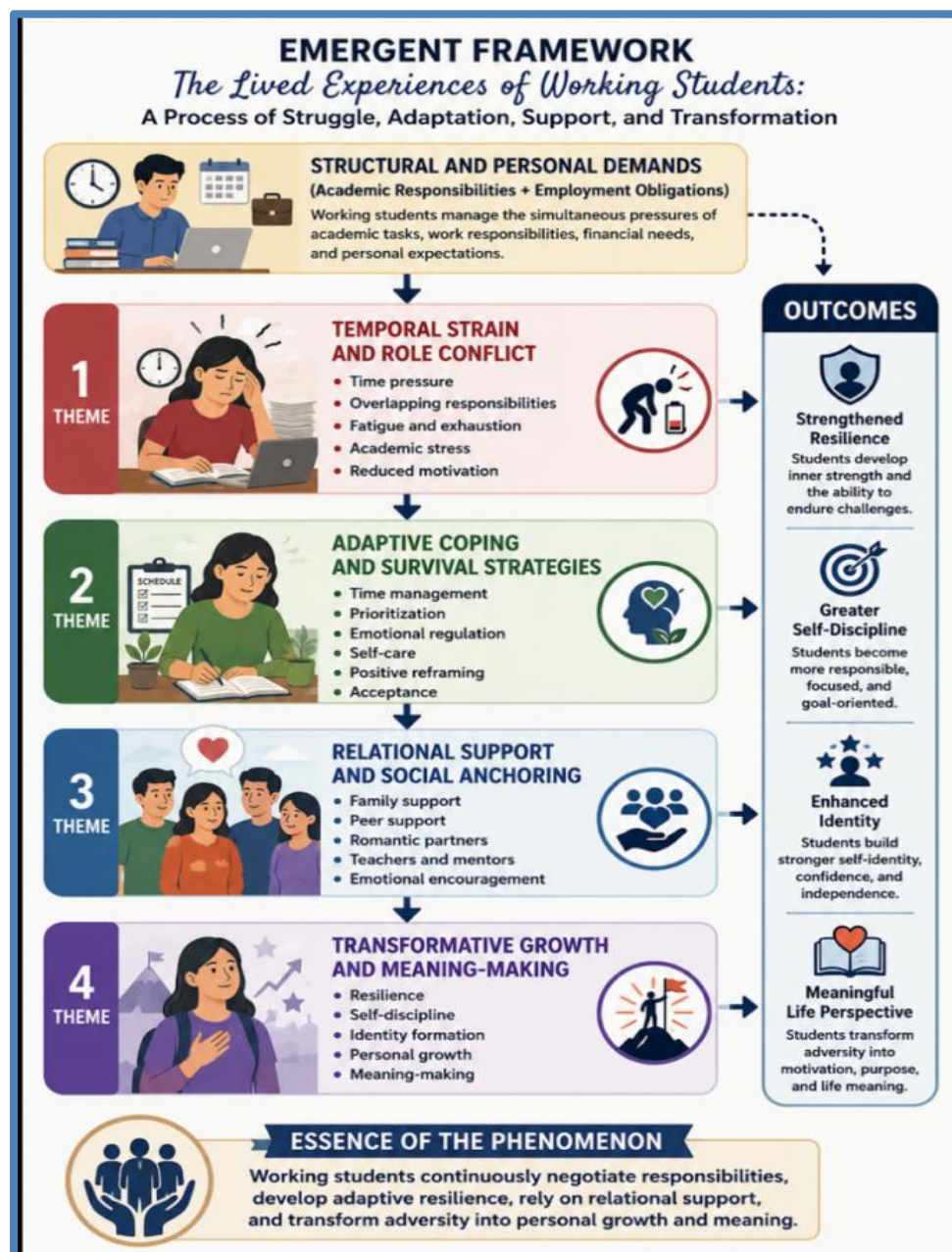
Beyond hardship and survival, participants also described their experiences as opportunities for personal

transformation, resilience development, and meaning-making. This final theme, *Transformative Growth and Meaning-Making*, reflects how participants interpreted their experiences as sources of maturity, self-understanding, and personal growth.

Several participants framed their experiences in reflective and philosophical ways. Participant 2 stated, “*Life is survival*” (P2), while Participant 7 explained, “*This experience opened my eyes to the reality of the world*” (P7). Participant 3 described themselves as “*a real warrior*” (P3), whereas Participant 5 reflected, “*You can gain nothing without doing something*” (P5).

These verbatim statements reveal that participants interpreted their experiences not merely as burdens, but also as formative experiences that contributed to discipline, resilience, responsibility, and self-identity. The findings align with Resilience Theory, which explains how adversity may contribute to positive adaptation and psychological growth. Likewise, Datu and King (2021) emphasized that hardship may foster resilience, meaning, and perseverance among Filipino students. Within the conceptual framework of the study, transformative growth emerged as the outcome of students’ continuous negotiation between structural challenges and personal agency. The findings therefore indicate that being a working student becomes not only a condition of survival but also a meaningful developmental experience that shapes identity, purpose, and perspective in life.

Emergent Framework



The emergent framework begins with the structural and personal demands experienced by working students, particularly the simultaneous pressures arising from academic responsibilities and employment obligations. These demands create experiences of temporal strain and role conflict, characterized by time pressure, exhaustion, overlapping responsibilities, academic stress, and reduced motivation. In response to these pressures, working students develop adaptive coping and survival strategies. Participants described using time management, prioritization, emotional regulation, self-care practices, and positive reframing to maintain balance and continue functioning effectively despite demanding circumstances.

The framework further highlights the role of relational support and social anchoring in sustaining students' emotional well-being and persistence. Support from family members, peers, romantic partners, teachers, and mentors served as important stabilizing mechanisms that reduced stress and strengthened motivation. As students continuously negotiate these experiences, they eventually undergo transformative growth and meaning-making. Through adversity, participants developed resilience, discipline, maturity, stronger self-identity, and deeper appreciation of their educational journey and life realities.

Ultimately, the framework demonstrates that the lived experiences of working students are not solely defined by hardship and survival. Rather, they represent a continuous process of adaptation, relational support, resilience development, and personal transformation within the context of higher education.

SYNTHESIS

The findings of the thematic analysis reveal that the lived experience of working students is characterized by a continuous negotiation between constraint and agency.

Working students experience temporal strain and competing demands arising from academic and employment responsibilities. In response, they employ adaptive coping mechanisms and rely heavily on interpersonal support systems to sustain balance and persistence. Through these experiences, students develop resilience, self-discipline, personal growth, and deeper understanding of themselves and their realities.

The study therefore concludes that the working-student experience is not solely defined by hardship, but also by adaptation, meaning-making, and transformation.

This synthesis reflects the essence of the phenomenon and demonstrates how working students in the College of Teacher Education negotiate the realities of balancing work and study within a provincial university context.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of working students enrolled in the College of Teacher Education at Negros Oriental State University. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the study sought to understand how working students balance academic responsibilities and employment obligations, the challenges they encounter, the coping mechanisms they employ, the support systems they rely on, and the meanings they construct from their experiences.

The findings revealed that the experiences of working students are deeply characterized by continuous negotiation between academic demands and employment responsibilities. Participants consistently described experiences of temporal strain and role conflict, where overlapping schedules, academic workloads, physical exhaustion, and emotional stress created persistent pressures in their daily lives. The dual role of being both a student and a worker required participants to constantly manage limited time, energy, and emotional resources. These findings strongly support Role Strain Theory, which explains how competing social roles generate conflict and psychological strain.

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience through various coping and survival strategies. Working students actively developed mechanisms such as time management, prioritization, self-regulation, emotional endurance, self-care practices, and positive reframing in order to sustain their dual responsibilities. Their narratives showed that resilience is not merely an individual trait but an ongoing process of adaptation to difficult circumstances. The findings therefore affirm Resilience Theory, emphasizing

how individuals respond constructively to adversity and develop strength through challenging experiences.

The study also revealed the crucial importance of relational support and social anchoring in the lives of working students. Participants consistently identified family members, romantic partners, classmates, friends, teachers, and mentors as important sources of emotional encouragement, guidance, motivation, and psychological stability. These interpersonal relationships helped reduce emotional burdens and strengthened participants' ability to persist despite fatigue and stress. The findings align with Self-Determination Theory, particularly the importance of relatedness and social connectedness in sustaining motivation, engagement, and well-being.

Beyond hardship and survival, the findings further demonstrated that the experiences of working students became avenues for transformative growth and meaning-making. Participants described how balancing work and academics shaped their identity, maturity, discipline, resilience, and perspective in life. Many participants interpreted their experiences as opportunities for personal growth, stronger self-understanding, and realization of life's realities. Their narratives revealed that adversity became a source of meaning, purpose, and self-transformation rather than merely a condition of struggle.

The thematic analysis therefore suggests that the lived experiences of working students extend far beyond financial necessity. Their experiences reflect broader realities of sacrifice, perseverance, adaptation, and identity formation within the context of higher education. Working students are not simply individuals managing economic difficulties; they are active agents who continuously negotiate structural constraints while striving to achieve educational aspirations and personal growth.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to recognize the realities faced by working students and to provide more responsive and inclusive support systems. Flexible academic arrangements, mental health services, student-centered policies, financial assistance programs, and supportive learning environments are essential in promoting the well-being and academic persistence of working students.

Ultimately, this study concludes that the essence of the working-student experience lies in the continuous balancing of responsibility, sacrifice, resilience, and hope. Through their experiences, working students develop the capacity to endure challenges, construct meaning from adversity, and transform hardship into personal growth and determination. Their narratives reflect not only struggle, but also strength, agency, and the enduring pursuit of educational aspirations despite difficult circumstances.

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