

Original Article

A Phenomenological Exploration of Parental Struggles with Children's School Absenteeism

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Abstract. The Philippine education system has been grappling with student absenteeism, which negatively affects academic achievement and future success. Student absenteeism remains a persistent concern in Philippine elementary schools, particularly among learners from low-income communities. While existing studies primarily emphasize student-centered causes of absenteeism, they have paid limited attention to the lived experiences of parents who directly manage and respond to their children's frequent absences. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences, challenges, and motivations of parents of elementary-aged learners who exhibited frequent school absenteeism during the 2025-2026 school year. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen parents. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Creswell's qualitative framework. Findings revealed that parental struggles with absenteeism are shaped by interconnected factors, including children's health conditions, economic hardship, peer-related concerns, and reduced learner motivation. Despite these challenges, parents demonstrated sustained guidance through supportive and disciplinary strategies rooted in their firm belief that education offers a pathway to a better future. The study contributes to existing literature by highlighting parental perspectives on absenteeism. It underscores the importance of strengthening school-family partnerships and context-responsive interventions that address both learner and family needs.

Keywords: Absenteeism; Children's school absenteeism; Parental struggles; Parents; Qualitative phenomenology.

Parenting is a complex and continuous process that requires balancing the child's needs with the responsibilities of providing guidance, care, and emotional support. Among the most challenging concerns parents face is when their children frequently miss school, which disrupts learning, causes emotional stress, and necessitates additional household adjustments. Chronic absenteeism not only affects students' academic performance but also creates emotional and logistical burdens for parents, who must reorganize their routines, work schedules, and caregiving roles. Understanding these parental experiences is crucial, as absenteeism impacts not only the learner but the entire family system. International research indicates that parental stress associated with absenteeism is a global concern. Similarly, studies in the United States indicate that chronic absenteeism is

closely related to parental anxiety, family stress, and strained parent-child relationships, particularly when absences become habitual and unmanaged (Van Poortvliet, 2025). These observations demonstrate that school absenteeism is embedded within broader family dynamics, making parental experiences an essential but often overlooked aspect of the problem.

In the Philippine context, absenteeism remains a persistent issue, particularly in rural and low-income communities where children face barriers such as financial hardship, illness, lack of transportation, and inconsistent parental availability. Grepon and Cepada (2020) reported that parental involvement significantly influences student attendance; however, many Filipino parents juggle multiple responsibilities that limit their capacity to monitor and support their children's daily schooling. Recent studies also highlight that Filipino learners often miss classes due to caregiving duties, food insecurity, and unstable family situations (Cabrera et al., 2025). Despite these findings, existing literature in the Philippines continues to focus primarily on student-centered factors—such as motivation, behavior, or learning difficulties—rather than on the lived realities of parents.

There is, therefore, a clear gap in research: few qualitative studies examine absenteeism from parents' perspectives, particularly among parents in low-income and rural communities. While quantitative and school-based data exist, they do not fully capture the emotional, social, and daily struggles that Filipino parents experience when addressing their children's chronic absences. Understanding these lived experiences is essential because parents are the primary influencers of children's attendance behavior and are directly affected by the consequences. Thus, this study explores the experiences, challenges, and motivations of Filipino parents who deal with their children's frequent absenteeism. By highlighting their perspectives, the research aims to contribute deeper insights for educators, policymakers, and schools, enabling them to design more responsive interventions that acknowledge both the child's needs and the parents' realities.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative-phenomenological research design. This design enabled an in-depth exploration of parents' subjective experiences of children's school absenteeism. According to Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022), the qualitative method of phenomenology provides a theoretical tool for educational research, as it enables researchers to engage in flexible activities that describe and help to understand complex phenomena.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The population of this study consisted of parents or primary guardians of elementary-aged learners enrolled in a public school who had documented records of frequent school absenteeism. From this population, a purposive sample of fifteen (15) parents was selected. Purposive sampling was employed because it enabled the selection of participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) parents or primary guardians of elementary learners who had experienced frequent or prolonged absences during the current or previous school year; (2) parents who had actively addressed their child's attendance concerns through communication with teachers, school administrators, or school-based interventions; and (3) individuals who voluntarily consented to participate and share their experiences. Parents who did not have direct involvement in addressing attendance concerns were excluded. These criteria ensured that participants could provide relevant, in-depth descriptions of their lived experiences of school absenteeism.

Research Instrument

This study utilized a semi-structured interview guide as the sole research instrument. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed accounts of parents' experiences, challenges, parenting approaches, and motivations related to their children's frequent school absenteeism. The interviews were conducted in the participants' local Cebuano dialect to ensure comfort and promote authentic responses. The recorded interview responses, not the interview questions, were translated into English during transcription. To ensure accuracy, the researchers carefully reviewed translations by comparing Cebuano transcripts with English versions to preserve the original meanings of participants' statements.

Data Gathering Procedure

Before conducting the study, the researcher obtained permission from the school principal to conduct interviews with selected parent participants. Upon approval, coordination with the class advisers was initiated to identify

parents of students with a history of frequent absenteeism. Once the parents gave their consent, the researcher conducted one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with all fifteen (15) participants. Using a semi-structured interview guide with three open-ended questions, the interviews encouraged parents to speak openly and share their experiences in detail. Lastly, a thematic analysis approach was employed; the findings were then organized and interpreted to provide a clear understanding of the parental struggles, coping mechanisms, and motivations related to school absenteeism.

Data Analysis Procedure

The qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following Creswell's qualitative procedures. The researchers transcribed the interviews, reread the transcripts, and coded the meaningful statements. Similar codes were grouped into themes representing parents' experiences and struggles related to absenteeism. To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was maintained through member checking by returning summarized interpretations to participants, allowing them to verify the accuracy of the findings and ensure that their experiences were correctly represented. Dependability and confirmability were supported by an audit trail comprising transcripts, codes, and notes that documented how decisions were made during the analysis. Transferability was addressed by providing sufficient contextual detail for others to determine whether the findings may apply to similar settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research, which was designed to safeguard participants' safety, privacy, and dignity. Before data collection, the researcher obtained formal permission from the school principal and informed participants about the study's objectives, methods, and purpose. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality, all names were replaced with pseudonyms (e.g., A1, A2, and A3). All research materials, including audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes, were securely stored and accessible only to the researchers.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings derived from the thematic analysis of the interview data. The results reflect the shared experiences of parents in managing their children's frequent school absenteeism and are organized according to the major themes that emerged from the analysis. Each theme is discussed in relation to existing literature to contextualize the findings.

Socio-Domestic Factor

This theme captures the parents' accounts of how overlapping health, financial, and socio-emotional challenges shape their children's school attendance. Parents consistently described their children's physical conditions—such as recurring fever, headaches, asthma, and fatigue—as primary reasons for missing school.

A12: *"There are times when he gets headaches because of his previous condition. He often gets sick and can't go to school."*

A4: *"There are times when we don't have rice or money to give him. I feel sorry when he can't attend class."*

The findings reveal that children's school absenteeism is closely linked to a combination of health-related concerns, economic hardship, motivational issues, and family responsibilities, all of which significantly affect parents' ability to ensure regular attendance. Parents shared that recurring illnesses such as fever, cough, headaches, asthma, and complications from previous medical conditions frequently prevent their children from attending school. These health concerns often cause parents emotional distress, as they are torn between prioritizing their child's well-being and worrying about the academic consequences of repeated absences.

Economic difficulties further intensify parental struggles. Many parents explained that the lack of food, school allowance, or transportation resources discourages children from attending school, particularly when long walking distances are involved. In such situations, parents reported feelings of guilt and helplessness when they could not provide necessities, which led to interrupted school attendance. These findings are consistent with those of Akkuş and Çinkır (2022), who emphasized that poverty-related factors, such as food insecurity and limited resources, contribute significantly to chronic absenteeism. Similarly, Cabrera et al. (2025) highlighted that health-related challenges remain a significant determinant of absenteeism, especially in communities with limited access

to medical support.

In addition to health and financial constraints, bullying and peer conflicts emerged as notable contributors to absenteeism. Parents reported that negative peer interactions reduce children's motivation to attend school and create emotional distress, which parents struggle to address due to limited school engagement. This supports the findings of Grepon and Cepada (2020), who noted that limited parental involvement in school settings may increase children's vulnerability to adverse peer experiences. Overall, these findings suggest that absenteeism is not merely a child-related issue but also reflects broader parental struggles shaped by health, economic, and social pressures.

Sustained Parental Guidance Amid Absences

The necessity of consistent parental assistance, even when parents are not physically present, is underscored by sustained guidance during periods of absence. Through consistent communication, emotional support, and appropriate monitoring, parents can remain involved in their child's development despite work commitments, personal responsibilities, or other unavoidable circumstances. This helps children feel safe, valued, and supported even when their parents are absent. The responses indicate that parents employ both supportive and disciplinary strategies to promote their children's school attendance.

A1: *"We take care of him when he gets sick and make his health a priority."*

A2: *"We encourage him to go to school because it is the key to success."*

The results indicate that parents employ a combination of supportive and disciplinary strategies to manage their children's frequent absences. Parents emphasized providing care and attention when children were ill, thereby demonstrating emotional support and reassurance to ensure that children felt valued and protected. Alongside this, parents consistently reminded their children of the importance of education, reinforcing schooling as essential for future success. Disciplinary practices were also evident, including monitoring attendance, regulating the use of electronic devices, and establishing household rules regarding school responsibilities. These approaches reflect parents' attempts to balance warmth with structure in guiding their children's behavior. Such findings align with Bender (2020), who found that authoritative parenting—characterized by emotional support combined with reasonable discipline—is associated with improved school attendance and academic outcomes. Dorgbetor (2022) similarly reported that children raised in supportive yet structured environments are more likely to maintain regular school attendance compared to those exposed to overly strict or neglectful parenting styles.

Falayi (2023) further emphasized that parenting approaches that integrate care, communication, and discipline positively contribute to children's engagement in school. The present study supports this perspective, as parents demonstrated that managing absenteeism involves not only enforcing rules but also nurturing motivation and understanding. These findings highlight that balanced parenting practices play a critical role in encouraging consistent attendance among elementary learners.

Purpose-Driven Parental Motivation

Purpose-driven parental motivation refers to the conscious and ethically based attempts of parents to raise and help their children. This method, which rests on deep convictions and clearly articulated goals, helps parents remain loyal, loving, and attentive to their child's development and overall achievement. Across participants, the belief that education is the only stable pathway to a better life consistently emerged.

A9: *"I encourage him to study so he can finish school because that's for his future."*

A4: *"I tell him to take school seriously because we struggled for not finishing school."*

Parental motivation to prevent absenteeism is firmly rooted in aspirations for their children's educational attainment and future economic stability. Parents reported that their encouragement is shaped by personal experiences of poverty and incomplete education, motivating them to ensure that their children do not repeat these hardships. Education was consistently viewed as the primary pathway to a better life and long-term security. Parents also used simple material rewards, such as shoes or bicycles, to reinforce regular attendance. Although modest, these incentives reflect parents' active efforts to support schooling despite limited financial means. These findings are consistent with Buchmann et al. (2021), who found that parental educational aspirations significantly influence children's academic motivation and persistence. Similarly, Garcia and de Guzman (2020) noted that low-

income Filipino parents often perceive education as the only inheritance they can provide for their children, thereby reinforcing a substantial emotional investment in schooling.

However, parental motivation alone may not be sufficient to address absenteeism without institutional support. Pendijito et al. (2025) emphasized the importance of collaboration between schools and families to translate parental aspirations into improved attendance outcomes. In addition, Iballa et al. (2025) highlighted the role of responsive teaching practices in supporting learners from challenging backgrounds. These findings suggest that, while parents remain deeply motivated, effective interventions must involve both parents and school systems to sustainably reduce absenteeism.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that multiple and interconnected parental struggles, including recurring health concerns, financial hardship, limited resources, and competing family responsibilities, shape children's school absenteeism. These challenges indicate that absenteeism should not be viewed solely as a student-related concern but rather as a reflection of the broader conditions that families navigate daily. Parents often balance employment, caregiving, and household demands while attempting to support their children's education, which can result in inconsistent school attendance despite their strong intentions. Nevertheless, parents remain actively involved through emotional support, supervision, and reinforcement of the value of education, highlighting their crucial role in addressing absenteeism at the family level.

The study further reveals that parents' motivation to reduce absenteeism is deeply rooted in their lived experiences, particularly poverty and incomplete schooling, which lead them to view education as the most meaningful legacy they can offer their children. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening school-home partnerships to address absenteeism more effectively. In educational practice, schools should implement parent-responsive strategies that acknowledge health and economic barriers and foster open communication. At the policy level, interventions that integrate family support services, health care services, and attendance monitoring are necessary, particularly in low-income communities. Future research may explore collaborative models between schools and families and examine how context-sensitive interventions can further empower parents and promote sustained school attendance among elementary learners.

Contributions of Authors

This case study is the result of a collaborative effort by all the authors. Each author contributed equally to the conception, design, analysis, interpretation, and writing of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this case study. This includes, but is not limited to, financial interests, personal relationships, institutional affiliations, and any other factors that could be perceived as influencing the study's content or outcomes.

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