

Unveiling Student Lived Experiences and Perceptions on the K-12 Education Program in the Philippines

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Abstract. The K-12 education program in the Philippines, introduced in 2012, represents a significant reform aimed at enhancing educational quality, equipping students with critical life skills, and preparing them for higher education and employment by extending basic education from 10 to 12 years. This extension aligns the country with global educational standards and addresses previous systemic gaps. However, while much of the policy discourse centers on curricular goals, the lived experiences of senior high school students, especially in socio-economically challenged areas like BARMM and Region 12, remain underexplored. Through a qualitative phenomenological study involving six senior high school students from diverse strands and schools, the research uncovered two primary challenges faced by students: managing financial hardships and coping with academic stress during the transition to the K-12 curriculum. The extended program increased educational expenses, placing significant financial strain on families and intensifying academic pressures. This dual burden affected students' ability to balance their educational demands with economic realities. Despite these challenges, students exhibited notable resilience and adaptability. Their lived experiences revealed themes of academic preparedness, personal growth, and socio-economic development. Many students adopted creative coping mechanisms, such as engaging in small-scale entrepreneurship and seeking support from teachers, peers, and the community. These strategies not only helped them manage stress but also fostered leadership, independence, and adaptability. Furthermore, the K-12 program opened avenues for scholarships and skill development, enhancing students' prospects. This narrative highlights the complex interplay between the pressures of the K-12 reform and the opportunities it presents. It stresses the urgent need for enhanced financial assistance, targeted support networks, and entrepreneurship programs tailored to help students navigate these pressures effectively. For policymakers and educators, prioritizing holistic, student-centered support systems is crucial to fully realize the benefits of the K-12 program, particularly in disadvantaged regions where socio-economic challenges are more pronounced.

Keywords: Colazzi's thematic analysis; K-12 educational program; Lived experiences.

1.0 Introduction

Education is a powerful tool for enhancing one's life, fundamentally shaping an individual's quality of life. It begins at home and is a lifelong journey that continues until the end of life. The K-12 education program has become a crucial reform effort aimed at enhancing the quality and accessibility of education worldwide. This program was launched in the Philippines in 2012, marking a significant shift from the previous 10-year basic education curriculum to a more comprehensive 12-year system. The reform aims to equip students with vital life

skills, promote critical thinking, and prepare them for both higher education and future employment. The K-12 program is designed to create a functional basic education system that cultivates productive and responsible individuals equipped with lifelong learning and employment skills. This initiative aims to enhance basic education to better address the needs of students (Cabali et al., 2015). Quality education is constitutionally guaranteed (Article XIV, Section 1). The practical implementation of the K-12 program is just as crucial as its curriculum. Regardless of how advanced the curriculum may be, the educational objectives cannot be realized if it is not executed effectively (Anderson, 2020).

Students engage with the curriculum content under the guidance of their teachers to gain the desired knowledge, attitudes, abilities, and skills (Quijano, 2021). Through planned experiences, learners acquire the necessary information, skills, concepts, and attitudes that enable them to function effectively and responsibly in society (Munna & Kalam, 2021). According to Barcelo (2019), the objective of implementing the K-12 Basic Education Program is to establish a functional education system that cultivates productive and responsible citizens equipped with essential learning and employment skills. This initiative aligns with President Aquino's vision of quality education as a sustainable solution to poverty. In addition, Ammar et al. (2024) emphasize that the K-12 Education vision assures that every graduate of the Enhanced K-12 Basic Education Program becomes an empowered individual, having engaged in a curriculum based on solid principles and aimed at excellence.

As the Philippine government strives to achieve its educational goals, the Basic Education Act of 2013 (Republic Act 10533), commonly known as the K-12 Program, was introduced and implemented nationwide (Violon and Violon, 2024). Moreover, Marin and Natividad (2025) state that this educational initiative offers numerous advantages for students, particularly as they prepare to become future leaders. It encompasses improved experiences in senior high school that can better equip them for local and international job opportunities. However, while the program has received praise for its implementation, it has also faced considerable criticism from those directly affected, including parents and students in the Philippines (Jeynes, 2022). Many parents express concerns about the financial burden associated with the K-12 program, which challenges its implementation. Additionally, Gurobat and Lumbu-an (2022) emphasize that some students are hesitant, citing feelings of added responsibility and difficulties they encounter during their educational journey.

Although numerous studies have examined the implementation of the K-12 program in the Philippines, much of the existing literature primarily focuses on policy analysis, curricular design, and the perspectives of teachers and parents. While these works provide valuable insights into systemic challenges, such as infrastructure and teacher preparedness, they often lack an in-depth exploration of students' personal experiences, particularly in socioeconomically disadvantaged regions. Moreover, research addressing academic pressures and social issues faced by senior high school students tends to rely on quantitative data or broad surveys, leaving a gap in qualitative understanding of how students cope with the increased workload, financial burdens, and social challenges introduced by the K-12 reform. This lack of phenomenological studies focusing on students' lived experiences in marginalized areas such as BARMM and Region 12 limits the ability of educators and policymakers to develop targeted support systems that address the unique needs of these vulnerable populations.

The shift to the K-12 education system has significantly altered the academic environment, especially for senior high school students. Although the K-12 curriculum is designed to improve educational quality and equip students for college and career pathways, it has also created numerous challenges. These obstacles can impact students' academic achievements, mental well-being, and their overall high school experience (Adarlo & Jackson, 2016). According to Antipolo et al. (2024), Senior high school students often grapple with significant academic pressure due to the K-12 curriculum. The heavier workload, which consists of more assignments, projects, and tests, can lead to overwhelming stress. Striving to meet demanding academic standards contributes to anxiety and burnout.

Additionally, the need to prepare for college entrance exams and achieve high grades further intensifies this pressure, sometimes negatively impacting students' mental health. Beyond academic challenges, senior high school students also face significant social issues. Factors such as bullying, peer pressure, and social anxiety can create an unwelcoming atmosphere that negatively impacts their education. The pressure to fit in and uphold social relationships often takes precedence over academic responsibilities, leading to emotional distress. This can result in lower academic performance and, in some cases, lasting psychological consequences. As a result of the conflicts arising from the implementation of the K-12 Program, the researchers were motivated to explore the lived

experiences of senior high school students, particularly at the different secondary schools in BARMM and Region 12.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This qualitative research utilized a phenomenological approach to collect data and explore the lived experiences of senior high school students participating in the K-12 education program. This method is particularly beneficial in educational settings, where understanding the nuances of personal experiences can provide rich insights into effective practices. Moreover, this approach aligns well with the goals of qualitative research, which seeks to explore complex social phenomena and understand the depth of individuals' experiences (Creswell, 2013)a.

2.2 Participants and Sampling Technique

This study involved six (6) senior high school students from various strands of the senior high school curriculum in the Philippines. Five participants were selected from secondary schools across different divisions of the BARMM, while one was selected from the Sultan Kudarat division. The sample size is informed by Creswell's (2013) recommendation for the phenomenological method, which suggests a range of 5 to 25 participants. The six students were purposefully selected with assistance from their class advisers. The inclusion criteria for participants are that they must be able to provide detailed insights into the phenomenon, be senior high school students, and be officially enrolled in their respective schools for the 2024-2025 academic year.

Additionally, the study included two debriefers to validate the data analysis and ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. The debriefer's task is to review the data analysis process and provide feedback to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflect the participants' experiences and perspectives. The criteria for selecting the De-briefer are as follows: first, the De-briefer should have expertise in qualitative research methods and data analysis. Second, the debriefer should not be directly involved in the study to maintain objectivity. Lastly, the debriefer should be familiar with the context of the K-12 program and the challenges faced by the students. According to Creswell (2013)c, it is recommended to have at least one debriefer for qualitative studies. However, considering the complexity of this study and the need to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, it would be beneficial to have two debriefers. Having two debriefers can provide a more comprehensive review of the data analysis and enhance the credibility of the study's conclusions.

2.3 Research Instrument

The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview guide to explore the lived experiences of senior high school students within the K-12 education program. This guide includes primary questions and probing follow-ups to extract the necessary information. A research advisory panel validated it. With the participants' consent, interviews will be recorded.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Permission to conduct the study and obtain participants' consent was sought correctly. Each student undergoes a single, in-depth interview in a suitable location on their school campus. Subsequently, the collected data were manually transcribed for analysis and interpretation. Thematic analysis was conducted using Colaizzi's (1978) model, employing a seven-step strategy that starts with verbatim transcription and thorough reading of the transcripts to become familiar with the participants' experiences. Significant statements were then identified, and their meanings were assigned. These meanings were grouped into themes, which evolved into emergent themes. A comprehensive description of the students' experiences was developed based on these themes. Once completed, this description was shared with participants for their feedback and approval of the narratives they provided.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The research employed thematic analysis using Colaizzi's model as its qualitative method to examine the students' lived experiences and perceptions on the K-12 education program in the Philippines, and employed a seven-step strategy that starts with verbatim transcription and thorough reading of the transcripts to become familiar with the participants' experiences. Significant statements were then identified, and their meanings were assigned. These meanings were grouped into themes, which evolved into emergent themes. A comprehensive description of the students' experiences was developed based on these themes. Once completed, this description was shared with participants for their feedback and approval of the narratives they provided.

Multiple validity and trustworthiness strategies were implemented to support the study. The research credibility improved through member checking, which allowed participants to verify the accuracy of the interpretation findings. Two external debriefers with expertise in qualitative research reviewed the analysis process independently to provide feedback. The study supports transferability through detailed descriptions of the research settings and participants, as well as findings that enable readers to evaluate the applicability of the results in different contexts. The research maintained dependability through complete documentation of procedures from data collection to analysis, while using an interview guide validated by experts. The study maintained confirmability through documentation of research activities and reflexive practices, which allowed the researcher to recognize personal biases while maintaining a focus on data-based interpretations.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

In this phenomenological study, which explores students' lived experiences and perceptions of the K-12 education program in the Philippines, ethical safeguards were prioritized. First, informed consent was obtained by clearly explaining the research purpose, participation requirements, and potential implications before securing signed agreements (Creswell, 2013). Second, confidentiality protocols ensured anonymity through pseudonyms and aggregated reporting of sensitive discussions about pedagogical challenges (Subedi, 2025). Finally, voluntary participation was emphasized, allowing advisors to withdraw without consequence given the study's focus on deeply personal professional narratives (Ederio et al., 2023).

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Problems and Concerns Encountered by SHS Students

Two emerging themes were identified through thorough data analysis and interpretation, synthesized from 18 initial and six clustered themes. The following emerging themes are as follows: *managing the pressures of balancing financial hardships and academic stress during the transition to the K-12 curriculum*. This theme highlights the various difficulties students experience in the K-12 education system in the Philippines. Many families face financial challenges due to rising expenses for school supplies, extracurricular activities, and other educational resources, which can put a strain on family budgets. These economic pressures are further intensified by academic stress, as students must adjust to a more demanding curriculum that is both rigorous and comprehensive.

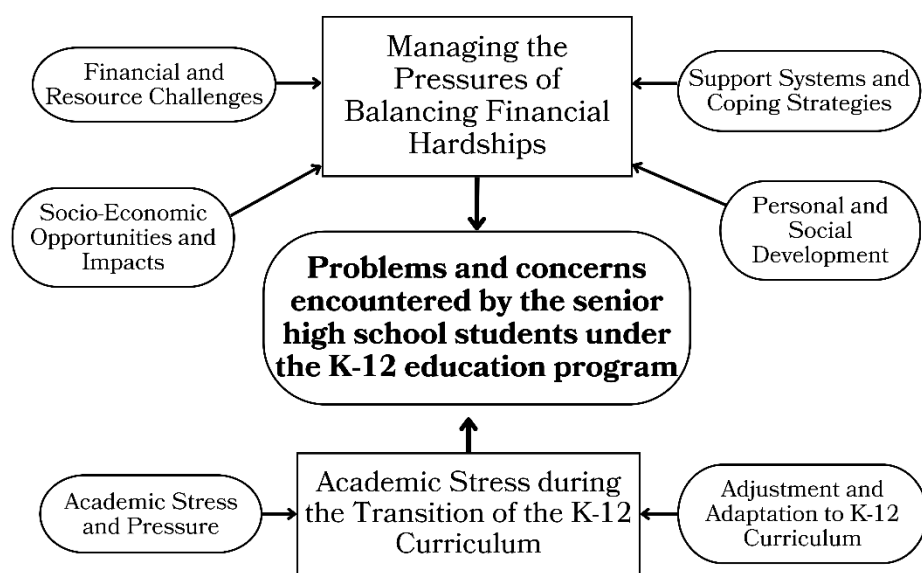


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram on the problems and concerns encountered by the senior high school students under the K-12 education program

Managing the Pressures of Balancing Financial Hardships

This emerging theme highlights how senior high school students under the K-12 program navigate significant financial challenges while striving to complete their education. It is organized into four clustered themes: financial and resource challenges, socio-economic opportunities and impacts, support systems and coping strategies,

and personal and social development, each drawn from the students' lived experiences. Participants consistently described the burden of increased educational expenses. Participants emphasized:

"There are also a lot of projects to buy. Aside from the additional two years of studying, there are many things to prepare for, such as finances. We have already developed products that we can sell, such as banana chips, Vicks, and soap for itchiness, which we offer at an affordable price. (P1)

"The K-12 program has significantly impacted my socio-economic situation and opportunities. Firstly, it helps me access better education, increasing my chances of graduating from college and securing good employment. Secondly, K-12 provided skills and knowledge for new jobs and business opportunities..." (P4)

"The K-12 program opened doors to scholarships, academic opportunities, and career paths. My family's economic situation improved slightly due to reduced educational expenses." (P5)

The accounts from the participants reveal that managing financial hardships is a complex, multifaceted journey for K-12 students. While the added costs and resource limitations are significant stressors, students respond with resilience-seeking support, developing practical skills, and even finding ways to generate income. The K-12 program, despite its challenges, is also seen as a gateway to better socio-economic opportunities. These findings align with research indicating that financial stress is a significant concern for Filipino students (Ancho et al., 2024). However, they also suggest that with the right support systems and opportunities, students can transform adversity into personal and professional growth. Schools and policymakers should thus consider strengthening financial assistance, entrepreneurship programs, and support networks to help students manage these pressures more effectively and ensure that the promise of the K-12 program is fully realized. Managing the pressures of balancing financial hardships is a defining feature of the K-12 experience for many students. Their stories highlight both the real burdens and the remarkable resilience that shape their educational journeys.

Adjustment and adaptation to K-12 Curriculum

This emerging theme highlights how senior high school students experience, navigate, and adapt to the academic demands and new learning environments introduced by the K-12 curriculum. It is organized into two clustered themes: academic stress and pressure, and adjustment and adaptation to the K-12 curriculum. Participants described the significant stress associated with the K-12 program's educational demands. Participants expressed:

"My overall experience in the K-12 program was not easy... You experience stress, especially if you want to get high grades... Most of the time, it's stressful." (P2)

"The K-12 curriculum is very heavy, and there are a lot of assignments. Sometimes, I don't know how to balance all the tasks my teachers give me. Also, exams and social pressure are stressful, too." (P4)

"One major challenge was adapting to the new curriculum, especially the senior high school tracks. Balancing academic pressure and extracurricular activities was tough." (P5)

"Now, I can already stand in front of many people because of the K-12 program, which is full of student activities where teachers allow you to discover and express your ideas." (P1)

These responses reveal that adjustment and adaptation to the K-12 curriculum is a multifaceted journey marked by both significant stress and meaningful growth. The initial themes, ranging from heavy workloads and pressure to excel to the development of independence, critical skills, and confidence, demonstrate the challenges and opportunities faced by students. These findings are consistent with research showing that curriculum reforms often require considerable adjustment from students but can ultimately foster resilience, adaptability, and a broader set of competencies. Campos (2023) found that Filipino students in the K-12 system reported high levels of academic stress but also noted improvements in critical thinking and self-management skills. Similarly, Ignacio & Bajet (2025) emphasized that the K-12 curriculum's focus on research, communication, and problem-solving prepares students for higher education and the workforce. Chiu (2021) also highlighted that the K-12 program's emphasis on holistic development and student engagement contributes to greater self-confidence and adaptability, despite initial adjustment difficulties. While the transition to the K-12 curriculum presents substantial academic and emotional challenges, it also provides students with opportunities to develop essential

skills and adapt to new learning environments. Continued support from teachers, effective curriculum delivery, and opportunities for active student participation are vital to help students thrive during this period of adjustment and adaptation.

3.2 Lived Experiences of Students Under the K-12 Education Program

Three (3) emerging themes were identified through thorough data analysis and interpretation, synthesized from 40 initial and 14 clustered themes. These emerging themes are as follows: *academic preparedness, personal growth and socio-economic development*. This theme highlights the various difficulties students experience in the K-12 education system in the Philippines. Many families face financial challenges due to rising expenses for school supplies, extracurricular activities, and other educational resources, which can put a strain on family budgets. These economic pressures are further intensified by academic stress, as students must adjust to a more demanding curriculum that is both rigorous and comprehensive.

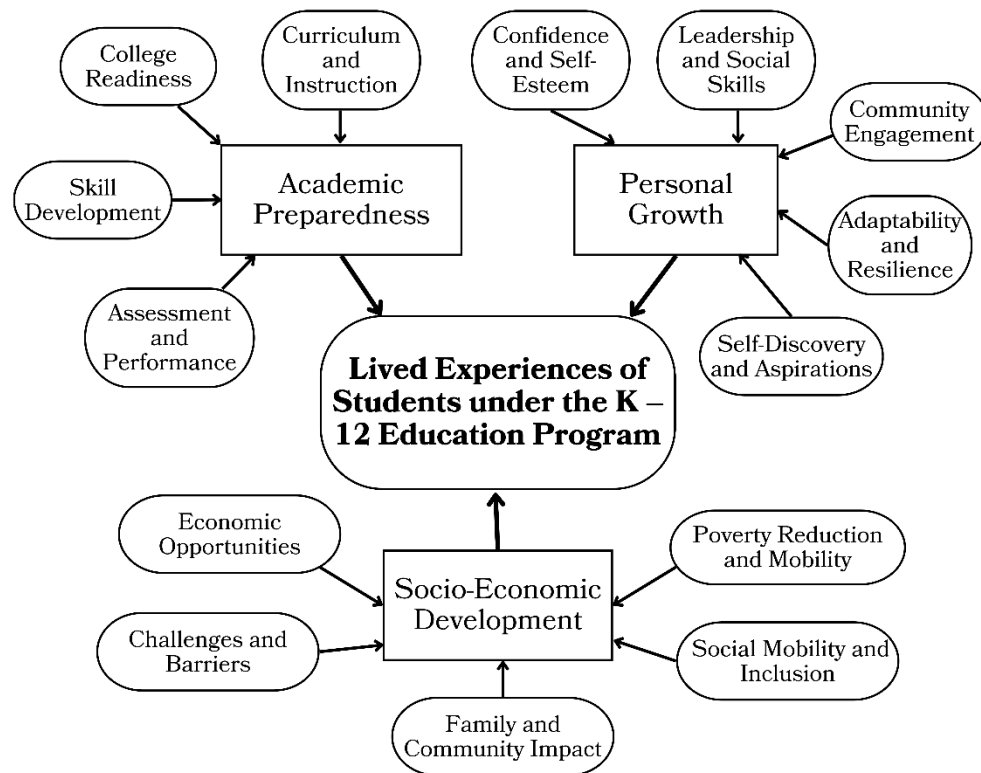


Figure 2. Schematic Diagram on the lived experiences of students under the K-12 Education Program

Academic Preparedness

This emerging theme highlights how senior high school students experience, navigate, and adapt to the academic demands and new learning environments introduced by the K-12 curriculum. It is organized into four clustered themes: curriculum and instruction, college readiness, skill development, and assessment and performance. Participants described the significant stress and growth associated with the K-12 program's academic demands. Students recognized the breadth and depth of the K-12 curriculum as an important factor in their educational development. The participants asserted that:

"I enjoyed subjects like Political Science, Philosophy, etc., which showcase my creativity and political awareness. K-12 helped me become more resilient and responsible. It gave me knowledge and skills for my future." (P4)

"The comprehensive curriculum, engaging teachers, and resources helped me grow academically and personally." (P5)

"Through these well-equipped teachers, we learned to be independent in everything because we were allowed to express what we have learned, which I am sure we can use as we go to college." (P1)

These accounts highlight the double-edged nature of academic preparedness under K-12: while students gain valuable skills, they also face increased stress and workload. The lived experiences of students indicate that academic preparedness in the K-12 program is both a challenge and an opportunity. The comprehensive curriculum focuses on college readiness, emphasizing skill development to prepare students for higher education and future careers. However, these benefits come with increased academic demands and stress. This is supported by the work of Conway (2024), who found that Filipino K-12 students reported improved readiness for college but also experienced heightened academic stress due to increased curriculum rigor. Ignacio & Bajet (2025)^b emphasized that the K-12 program's emphasis on research, communication, and independent learning fosters essential skills for higher education.

Furthermore, Barrot (2021) highlighted that while K-12 reforms in the Philippines have enhanced students' self-confidence and adaptability, they also necessitate robust support systems to help learners manage academic pressures and workload. Academic preparedness under the K-12 curriculum is a dynamic process. Students must manage significant academic stress and adapt to new learning structures, but these experiences ultimately contribute to their growth, skill development, and confidence as they move toward higher education.

Personal Growth

This emerging theme highlights how senior high school students experience personal transformation and self-development as a result of their participation in the K-12 curriculum. It is organized into five clustered themes: confidence and self-esteem, leadership and social skills, community engagement, adaptability and resilience, and self-discovery and aspirations. Participants described how the K-12 program provided opportunities and challenges that shaped their character, interpersonal relationships, and future goals. Students consistently shared that the K-12 program helped them become more confident. Participants shared that:

"I used to be quiet... Now, I can stand in front of many people because of the K to 12 program, which is full of student activities where teachers encourage you to discover and express your ideas."(P1)

"I'm a student who overcame my stage fright because of the opportunities that it opened, most especially in nurturing the talent of the students by events K-12 created." (P3)

"It helps me to be a responsible leader because most of the time I am a leader, and that's where my leadership skills were built, where I learned how to communicate with others... how to interact with them. So it's part of my personal development as a student." (P2)

The lived experiences of students reveal that the K-12 program makes a significant contribution to their personal growth, not only by fostering academic skills but also by building confidence, leadership, resilience, and a sense of purpose. These findings are echoed in the work of Malbas et al. (2023), who found that Filipino students in the K-12 system reported enhanced self-esteem, leadership, and adaptability through active participation in school and community activities. Antipolo & Rogayan (2021) highlight that K-12 reforms in the Philippines promote holistic development by encouraging student engagement and self-discovery, which are crucial for setting future aspirations. Lapez & Guhao (2024) further observed that exposure to diverse experiences and challenges in the K-12 curriculum cultivates resilience and a growth mindset among learners, preparing them for both academic and life transitions. The K-12 program catalyzes personal transformation among Filipino senior high school students. It empowers them to overcome personal limitations, discover their strengths, and set meaningful goals for the future. The holistic approach of the K-12 curriculum not only prepares students academically but also nurtures well-rounded individuals capable of adapting, leading, and thriving in diverse contexts.

Socio-Economic Development

This emerging theme highlights how the K-12 program influences the socio-economic realities of senior high school students, shaping both their immediate circumstances and prospects. It is organized into five clustered themes: economic opportunities, challenges and barriers, family and community impact, social mobility and inclusion, and poverty reduction and mobility. Participants described both the doors opened by the K-12 curriculum and the persistent hurdles they face. Students recognized that the K-12 program provided practical skills and opened new avenues for economic advancement. Participants emphasized:

"This K to 12 program, since I am a STEM student, not to brag, we have already made products that we can sell, such as

banana chips, Vicks, and soap for itchiness, which we sell at affordable prices... This program is beneficial.”(P1)

“The K-12 program opened doors to scholarships, academic opportunities, and career paths. My family’s economic situation improved slightly due to reduced educational expenses.” (P6)

“There are also many projects to buy. Aside from the additional 2 years of studying, there are many things to prepare for, like finances.” (P1)

The K-12 program has the potential to be a powerful driver of socio-economic development. It equips students with practical skills for employment and entrepreneurship, opens access to scholarships and higher education, and helps families aspire to greater economic stability. However, these benefits are tempered by persistent challenges such as additional educational expenses, limited resources, and the need for stronger support systems. These findings are supported by Nazareno et al. (2021), who found that the Philippine K-12 program enhances employability and income potential, especially for students from lower-income backgrounds. Orbeta and Campos (2023)^b noted that K-12 reforms have expanded social mobility by providing more equitable access to education, though financial and infrastructural barriers remain. Violon & Violon (2024)^b further observed that while K-12 can contribute to poverty reduction, its full impact depends on addressing systemic challenges and ensuring that marginalized communities are not left behind. The K-12 program serves as both a ladder and a safety net for Filipino youth, offering new economic and educational opportunities while also exposing ongoing inequalities. The K-12 curriculum’s socio-economic impact is significant but uneven; maximizing its benefits requires sustained investment in resources, targeted support for disadvantaged students, and continued efforts to bridge gaps in access and quality.

4.0 Conclusion

This research has given essential knowledge about the life experiences of senior high school students who are in the K-12 education program in the Philippines, particularly in the BARMM and Region 12 divisions. This research used a phenomenological approach to understand the real-life experiences of students and the opportunities and challenges that this major educational reform has brought. This study has found that students are under two types of pressure, namely financial and academic. The findings show that the K-12 program has provided students with more socio-economic opportunities, scholarships, and skills; however, it has also imposed a significant financial burden on students and their families. The research also highlights the resilience and adaptability of the students who often rely on support systems, community involvement, and personal resourcefulness to overcome these challenges. The study also highlights the importance of support networks, such as teachers, peers, and communities, in helping students navigate the complexities of the K-12 curriculum. These findings are crucial in the broader discussion on educational reform, as they place students at the center, give them a voice, share their experiences, and offer a balanced view of the program’s strengths and weaknesses.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The principal author contributes to the study’s writing and implementation. The co-author edits and supervises the data.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The authors assert no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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