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Resilience in the Margins: An In-Depth Qualitative Case Study of a Filipino Youth Navigating Family Separation and Economic Hardship

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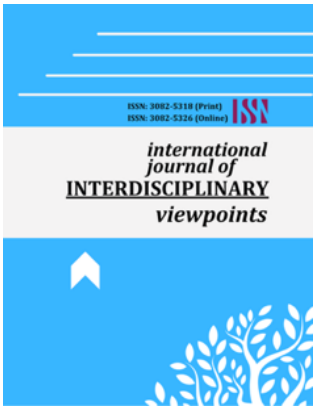

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ABSTRACT

This intrinsic qualitative case study looks at how resilience is created by the environment and limited by structure in the life of a rural Filipino teen who has to deal with a long-term father absence and unstable finances while still going to school. In a bioecological and socioecological framework, resilience is seen not as a personal trait but as an adaptive process that happens at the system level when family changes, school environments, and larger structural inequalities combine in new and changing ways. Three in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis were used over the course of one academic month to collect data, which was then analyzed using reflexive theme analysis. Aspirational schooling under material constraint, negotiated role compression between labor and learning, relational buffering within informal school ecologies, and temporally structured hope as regulatory projection were the five processes that were found to work together. The ability to adapt was spread across institutional and relational systems, and it was mediated by culturally embedded moral duty. In this case, responsibility was seen as limited agency rather than unhealthy role reversal. Educational ambition worked as a relationally grounded mobility project, and focusing on the future kept people going even when things got tough. To emphasize that endurance does not mean that a system is adequate, resilience coexisted with fatigue and structural injustice. The study adds to socioecological resilience theory by focusing on moral economy as a way to help people who are structurally limited in their ability to act in a rural area of the Global South. It also shows how this theory can be used to improve multisystemic educational change and relationally responsive schooling.

Keywords
socioecological resilience; bioecological systems theory; rural poverty; parentification; educational persistence; Global South youth

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INTRODUCTION

In many rural communities in the Philippines, family life takes place in an agrarian precarious environment where survival is based on shared work, moral duty, and the dependence of generations on each other. When unstable income and the lack of a father make a family less stable, developmental pathways don't just break; they reorganize. This kind of restructuring is systemic, not episodic. It is caused by interactions between different levels of the environment, such as changing caregiving roles in the microsystem, school relationships in the mesosystem, working conditions in the exosystem, and long-lasting patterns of social stratification in the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Tudge et al., 2009). When these things happen, childhood is renegotiated as a place where duty is shared and freedom is limited.

Scholarly research consistently connects parental separation and unstable finances to more caregiving responsibilities and school risk (Hooper et al., 2011). When young people live in rural areas and work, they often have to go to school and help with farming at the same time. This can make it harder for them to develop their jobs and meet their time obligations (Beegle et al., 2009; Heady, 2003). Inequality in education is made even worse by structural inequality, which embeds disadvantage in formal systems (Reardon, 2018). However, study on resilience warns against seeing things as deficits. Protective systems like caregiver warmth, school support, and community belonging are often what allow adaptive functioning to happen (Masten, 2014; Masten & Barnes, 2018). The main question, then, is not whether problems slow down growth, but how ecologically organized are resilience processes in environments with limited structure?

Changes in theory from trait-based models to developmental systems views help us understand this even better. These days, resilience isn't thought of as inner strength, but as the work of many protection systems in different social and institutional settings (Masten, 2014). According to socioecological frameworks, resilience relies on being able to access material, relational, and symbolic resources in a way that is shaped by culture and is negotiated within certain moral and social orders (Ungar, 2011; Ungar & Theron, 2020). To understand adaptive functioning in rural areas where poverty is a problem, we need to look at how family restructuring, school connections, unstable jobs, and societal inequality all work together to affect how people can grow and develop. Academic performance may be lower for kids who work

(Beegle et al., 2009; Heady, 2003), but school connectedness and hope-oriented agency can keep them going as long as relational supports are in place (McNeely et al., 2002; Martin & Marsh, 2006; Snyder, 2002; Marques et al., 2011; Theron, 2016; Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013). However, not much research has been done on how moral duty affects resilience in collectivist rural ecosystems.

Some models of socioecological resilience have been taken out of their original context (Ungar, 2011; Ungar & Theron, 2020), but empirical reports often focus on how people find resources without asking questions about the moral economies that shape youth responsibility. Parentification study, which is mostly based on Western ideas (Hooper et al., 2011), doesn't look into caregiving as a culturally acceptable part of survival economies very often. Also, while quantitative studies show links between working and educational risk (Beegle et al., 2009), there aren't many qualitative studies that show how young people in rural Philippines actively balance competing biological needs. This intrinsic qualitative case study (Yin, 2018) fills in these gaps by using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) to ask: How is resilience ecologically organized, morally mediated, and temporally sustained when paternal absence and rural poverty are present at the same time? The study improves a justice-oriented ecological understanding of resilience by focusing on limited agency within structural inequality.

Statement of the Problem

This study looks at how resilience is organized ecologically and socially in the life of a rural Filipino teen who has to deal with a long-term father absence and unstable economic conditions while still going to school. Its main goal is to answer the question: How is resilience created in the environment, shaped by morals, and kept up over time when father absence and rural poverty are present?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design

This study employed an intrinsic qualitative case study design to generate a contextually embedded account of resilience as ecologically organized adaptation within structural precarity. Intrinsic case study methodology prioritizes analytic depth over statistical generalization, enabling examination of a phenomenon through the particularity of a bounded case (Yin, 2018). The selected case was not intended to be representative but was theoretically revelatory of resilience processes operating under rural poverty conditions. The inquiry was grounded in a contextualist epistemology that conceptualizes resilience as socially constructed and systemically mediated rather than individually possessed (Ungar, 2011). Adaptive functioning was examined as an emergent property of reciprocal interactions across ecological systems, consistent with the bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Knowledge production occurred through dialogic engagement between researcher and participant, aligned with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This design enabled integrated analysis of microsystem role realignment, mesosystem school buffering, exosystem labor instability, and macrosystem structural inequality within a unified interpretive structure.

Locale

The study was conducted at Lantapan National High School (LNHS) in Balila, Lantapan, Bukidnon, Mindanao, Philippines. Lantapan is an agricultural municipality characterized by seasonal labor cycles, smallholder farming, and income instability, conditions that frequently intersect with adolescent educational participation. In such contexts, schooling often unfolds alongside household economic contribution. Structural stratification significantly shapes educational trajectories in rural poverty settings (Reardon, 2018), and empirical research demonstrates that adolescent labor participation has measurable implications for academic engagement (Beegle et al., 2009; Heady, 2003). LNHS therefore provided an ecologically appropriate site for examining resilience within the tension between labor demands and educational participation.

Participant Selection and Sampling

Purposeful criterion sampling was employed to identify a theoretically aligned case exhibiting sustained educational participation under conditions of paternal absence and economic hardship (Yin, 2018). Selection emphasized ecological complexity rather than demographic typicality. The participant met five criteria: enrollment in junior high school at LNHS, experience of long-term paternal absence, documented economic disadvantage, periodic engagement in agricultural labor contributing to household income, and consistent school attendance despite structural constraint. The focal participant was a 15-year-old Grade 7 male learner who experienced long-term paternal absence and engaged in weekend agricultural labor. Despite caregiving responsibilities and economic precarity, he maintained school engagement. To strengthen contextual validity, triangulation was achieved through supplementary interviews with one guardian and one subject teacher. These individuals were not treated as independent cases but as ecological actors embedded within the participant's developmental system, consistent with bioecological principles (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

Data Collection Procedures

Data were generated across one academic month to capture resilience processes under naturalistic conditions. Three in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the focal participant, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Cebuano to preserve linguistic authenticity and cultural nuance. Interview domains included role reorganization following paternal absence, negotiation between labor and schooling, emotional regulation and coping, educational aspiration, and perceived relational support. One interview was conducted with the guardian and one with the subject teacher to contextualize ecological dynamics within home and school environments. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated with careful attention to semantic fidelity. Classroom observations were conducted across four weeks, totaling approximately twelve hours. Observational focus included attendance patterns, classroom participation, indicators of fatigue, peer interactions, and teacher–student relational exchanges. Field notes were recorded immediately after each observation to preserve descriptive and analytic precision. Document analysis further supported triangulation. Attendance records, academic performance reports, and indigency documentation were reviewed to cross-validate narrative accounts and strengthen evidentiary credibility (Yin, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The analytic process followed an iterative and abductive approach integrating empirical coding with ecological theory. Analysis began with immersion in transcripts and field notes, followed by initial open coding across data sources. Patterned meaning units were then developed and refined into candidate themes. Themes were subsequently examined through theoretical integration across ecological systems. Coding was conducted manually to preserve analytic proximity to the data. Interpretation moved dynamically between inductive pattern recognition and deductive theoretical positioning (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Ungar, 2011). Themes were conceptualized as system-level adaptive processes rather than intrapsychic attributes.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Rigor was established through multiple strategies consistent with qualitative methodological standards. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents, multi-informant corroboration, prolonged engagement over one academic month, and in-interview clarification of emerging interpretations. Transferability was supported through thick contextual description enabling analytic generalization (Yin, 2018). Dependability was strengthened through systematic analytic memoing documenting coding decisions and theme development. Confirmability was reinforced through reflexive journaling to interrogate researcher positionality and by grounding interpretations in verbatim participant excerpts. Collectively, these procedures enhanced analytic coherence and interpretive transparency (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Researcher Positionality

The researcher's professional experience within rural Philippine schooling contexts facilitated rapport and cultural attunement. However, positional proximity necessitated reflexive monitoring to avoid romanticizing hardship or over-attributing resilience to moral strength. Reflexive memoing was employed throughout the research process to critically examine assumptions regarding poverty, responsibility, and adaptation, consistent with reflexive thematic analysis principles (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

Given the participant's minor status, comprehensive ethical safeguards were implemented. Written informed consent was obtained from the guardian, and assent was secured from the participant. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted in private settings within the school to ensure participant comfort. Digital files were securely stored, and a referral pathway to school guidance services was prepared should emotional distress arise. All procedures adhered to ethical standards for research involving minors and to case study methodological guidelines (Yin, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through reflexive theme analysis, five adaptive processes were found that work together in different ecological systems. These events show that resilience is spread out in the environment, influenced by morals, and bound by structures, not just within the mind. Instead of being separate psychological traits, themes are shown as system-level arrangements of adaptation.

1. Structurally Induced Parental Responsibility

When the father wasn't around, home duties were redistributed, which sped up the process of role realignment within the family microsystem. The person talked about a change from focusing on the child's needs to focusing on the adult's responsibilities: "Sukad nga wala na si Papa, murag ako na ang kinahanglan motabang pirmi. Dili ko pwede magreklamo kay kami ra man ni Mama." (Ever since my dad died,I've felt like I need to help everyone. It's just my mom and me, so I can't whine.)

The idea of responsibility wasn't presented as a complaint, but as a need. The word "obligation" was used instead of "force," which suggests that collectivist standards were internalized. Emotional exhaustion was recognized, but survival reasoning came first: " Gikapoy, but dili man pwede mohunong kay wala mi lain masaligan." (I get tired sometimes, but I can't stop because we can't count on anyone else.)

Observational data supported the idea of episodic tiredness, especially after working on the weekends. But regular attendance and participation in class were kept up. This arrangement shows how microsystems change when there is worker instability in the exosystem. Being poor meant that people had limited freedom, which made responsibility both helpful and hard. Cost and adaptive performance existed together, which shows that resilience did not get rid of stress but moved it around.

2. Aspirational Schooling Under Material Constraint

Schooling was a project for future movement that was based on mutually beneficial relationships. Even though farming jobs were needed, staying in school was still a must: Kapoy usahay ang eskwela labi na kung gikan ko sa uma, pero dili gyud ko gusto mo-undang." "Ang eskwela ra akong paglaom." I sometimes feel tired going to school after working on the farm, but I don't want to stop. "School is the only thing that can save me."

Academic records showed stable success, with only a few instances of being late due to farm duties. The individual admitted that they had trouble focusing after weekends with a lot of work: "If I worked for someone, I would focus on usahay malate ko o dili kaayo ko ka-focus." (Sometimes I'm late for farm work or can't concentrate well.)

The goal of education wasn't seen as personal success, but as improving the lives of family members. Going to school was more of a plan to get out of structural instability than just following the rules of the organization.This theme shows that resilience means sticking with something even when it gets harder. Disengagement did not happen, but structural constraints stayed in place. Adaptive endurance was kept up by a dedication to the future.

3. Negotiated Labor–School Role Compression

There was a persistent tension in the mesosystem between economic input and academic duty. This disagreement was clearly stated by the participant: "Kung dili ko motabang sa uma, kulang among kita. Pero kung mo-absent ko mahadlok ko nga mabiyaan ko." (If I don't work on the farm, we won't have enough money. But I'm afraid I might fail if I'm not there.)

Instead of giving more weight to one area, the participant switched around the work to protect daily attendance. A lot of farming was done on the weekends, which shows that the environment was purposely adjusted. Teacher confirmation confirmed steady effort even though it was clear they were tired. Observations in the classroom showed that students were interested in talks but sometimes less focused after hard work periods. This pattern of adaptation shows negotiated job compression. Because of structural poverty, people had to act out their worker and student roles at the same time. Instead of getting rid of role conflicts, resilience showed up as dynamic balancing within a limited temporal scope.

4. Relational Buffering Within Informal School Ecologies

In the school mesosystem, relational micro-processes worked as regulating mechanisms. It was found that teacher support was especially important: "Giingnan ko sa akong maestra nga kaya ra nako bisan lisod among kahimtang. Nakahatag gyud to og kusog." (My teacher told me I can do well even though things are hard right now. That made me very strong.)

Peer relationships helped keep emotions in check even more:

"If I have a problem, I have a family that cares about me."

"My friends are there for me when I need them."

Even though there weren't many official psychosocial programs, everyday interactions with other people created protective buffering. From what was seen, interactions between teachers and students were good, and students were included in their peers' groups. There was no sign of social withdrawal. In this case, resilience was spread out among different relationship ecosystems. Rather than institutionalized

intervention, everyday affirmations helped people adapt their performance. Connectivity at school worked as a protection process at the mesosystem level.

5. Temporally Structured Hope as Regulatory Projection

Future-focused identity projection worked as a control system to keep persistence going. The person talked about wanting to be a teacher for a long time: "I wish I could be a high school teacher so I could help the students in my family."

"Someday I want to be a teacher so I can help kids like me."

The idea behind hope was that generations should help each other instead of individuals trying to get ahead. The present suffering was reframed in the mind as a preparation:

"Bisan lisod karon, para man ni sa umaabot."

"This is for the future, even if it's hard now."

Temporal projection tied current limitations to imagined freedom of movement, keeping endurance stable when it was under stress. Hope didn't work as affective optimism; it worked as goal-directed mental order.

The results show that in this case, resilience is spread out ecologically, organized ethically, and limited structurally. Negotiated role redistribution in the family microsystem, social buffering in the school mesosystems, temporal projection toward mobility, and ongoing calibration under precarious work all led to adaptive persistence. This arrangement fits with bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and multisystemic resilience models (Ungar & Theron, 2020), but it goes further by emphasizing moral duty as a way to keep things in balance when people don't have a lot of freedom.

The trait of toughness did not show up as resilience. Instead, it happened because of system-level alignment in the areas of relationships and institutions, which happened when there was structural imbalance.

In Philippine schools, resilience is seen as a process that is spread out ecologically.

According to the developmental resilience theory, adaptive behavior is based on shared protective systems rather than personal traits (Masten, 2014). This claim is backed up by evidence from this case study in a rural Philippine school setting. Peer inclusion and teacher support worked as relational micro-processes that kept students interested in school.

Recent studies from the Philippines also show that school environments play a role in how engaged students are. Lazaga (2025) shows that welcoming classrooms depend on relational attunement and representational reinforcement. This shows that engagement is built through relationships rather than being maintained by oneself. Also, Cariaga et al. (2025a) show how systemic constraints in K–12 settings affect how responsive teachers are, showing that behaviors that support resilience are shaped by the structure.

School connectedness study (McNeely et al., 2002; Niehaus et al., 2012) is still very important. However, these new results go further by showing how relational buffering works when work is compressed in agriculture. The main protective infrastructure was informal reinforcement, not institutional programming.

Parenting and the Moral Economy in Developing Settings

A lot of Western research on parenthood focuses on the risk of maladjustment (Hooper et al., 2011). This case, on the other hand, shows how fundamental factors can change roles in collectivist moral economies. As a way of culturally managed participation in survival systems, responsibility worked.

Philippine study on students dealing with family restructuring also shows that teens and young adults living with only one parent often take on new responsibilities without completely losing their minds (Jalem et al., 2025). Instead of being a sign of a problem, duty may be a sign of limited freedom within the structures of familial obligations.

Also, Cariaga et al. (2025b) say that parental participation frameworks in developing settings should take into account interdependence that is sensitive to culture instead of nuclear family norms. This case adds to this point by showing youth responsibility as a part of a shared economy for survival rather than as breaking the law.

Adaptive performance and tiredness went hand in hand. Cost and resilience happened at the same time, which supports Ungar's (2011) theory that adapting to structural constraints does not make people less vulnerable.

Labor–School Compression and Negotiation in the Classroom

The participant's choice between working in agriculture and going to school is similar to what has been written about role compression in child labor (Beegle et al., 2009). But instead of withdrawal, adaptive recalibration took place.

Local empirical studies show that Filipino learners still use multi-role bargaining. Da-anton and Dioso (2025) show that environmental pressures, such as exposure to technology, change learning habits in complicated ways instead of always making them worse. In the same way, Fudolin and Dioso (2025) say that peer dynamics affect academic success in two ways: as a risk factor and a regulatory factor.

Pinili and Idul's research from 2025 shows that organized intervention programs can get students who are having trouble in school interested again. This shows that systemic responsiveness, not individual grit, is what makes it possible for students to keep going even when things get tough.

That is, in this case, resilience is caused by the environment and not by a trait-based persistence.

Relational Ecologies and Creating an Identity

Relational balancing in the school mesosystem was very important. The participant felt like they belonged, which is in line with what Dulaugon found in 2025. He showed how identity-based experiences in school settings affect how well people control their emotions and take part. Affirmation helps people who feel left out.

Cariaga et al. (2025c) show that problems that pre-service teachers face in K–12 classes affect the climate of relationships, which shows that teachers' abilities affect the strength of infrastructure. These studies put the current results in the context of Philippine educational ecosystems where relational warmth isn't evenly distributed but is still very important.

So, social presence built on top of systems that were not perfectly built led to resilience.

Time projection and the ability of schools to adapt to new systems

Hope was a regulatory projection that linked current suffering to imagined mobility (Snyder, 2002). The participant's desire to become a teacher was not a single-minded goal, but rather a reflection of how generations interact with each other.

In his book from 2026, Timbol talks about long-term educational resilience as system sustainability instead of short-term persistence. This case is similar to how this is framed at the level of the individual ecological system: focusing on the future kept involvement stable while limits were in place. Additionally, research on AI integration in Philippine schools (Cariaga et al., 2025a) shows how global changes in technology interact with local injustices, highlighting that aspirations for the future happen within systems that are structurally changing. So, being resilient means being able to adjust not only to poverty but also to changing needs of institutions.

What the Global South Can Do: More Than Just Navigating Resources

The study of resilience in the global south focuses on how to find resources in ecosystems that are limited (Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013; Theron, 2016). This case adds to what's already been said by showing that adaptation isn't just based on access to resources, but also on culturally mediated obligations that are part of survival systems.

More and more, study on education in the Philippines focuses on contextualized engagement and relational mediation (Lazaga, 2025; Cariaga et al., 2025b). But moral economy is still not well understood. This research suggests that moral responsibility is one of the most important factors in how people cope with agrarian precarity. In this case, resilience isn't just getting around; it's also playing your part in systems that depend on each other.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study shows that resilience in rural poverty is caused by the environment, organized ethically, and limited by structure. People developed adaptive functioning not because they were naturally tough, but because they managed role realignment within the family, relational buffering within school settings, and time-structured ambition while facing material constraints. As a result, responsibility was seen as a culturally acceptable part of a survival economy, not as an abnormal breach of boundaries. This put resilience in the context of limited autonomy within systems that depend on each other. It is important to note that the participant's tenacity did not fix the problem of structural inequality. Uncertainty in work and unequal educational opportunities continued to affect people's ability to grow and develop, showing that being able to adapt to unfair settings does not mean that the structure is adequate.

These results show that for change to help build resilience, it needs to be multisystemic instead of individualized. To reduce labor–school compression, schools that work with economically disadvantaged kids need to be able to change their structures, make their environments more responsive to relationships, and work together with social safety systems. The talk about resilience shouldn't get in the way of holding structures accountable. Instead, it should lead to a rethink of institutions that takes into account both the strengths and weaknesses that affect youth development. Comparative rural studies, longitudinal ecological tracking, and integrative modeling of labor–education dynamics should all be part of future study, rather than just looking at one case at a time. To improve justice-based ecological frameworks and policy translation in structurally constrained environments, it would be helpful to look into moral responsibility as a mediating structure in collectivist settings in more depth.

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Conflicting Interest

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Contribution

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