

Lived Experiences of Parents Supporting the Education of Children from Vulnerable Families

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ABSTRACT

Parental support plays a critical role in children's educational participation and success, particularly among families experiencing social, economic, and cultural vulnerabilities. This study explored the lived experiences of parents supporting the education of children from vulnerable families within the contemporary schooling context. Guided by a narratological qualitative design, the research examined parents' understandings of educational success, the influence of their life histories and social positioning on educational aspirations, the challenges encountered in supporting schooling, and the strategies employed to navigate these challenges. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 parent-participants selected using maximum variation purposive sampling and were analyzed through narratological thematic analysis. The findings revealed four interconnected themes. First, parents conceptualized educational success as holistic development encompassing school continuity, literacy, character formation, responsibility, future security, and cultural identity rather than academic achievement alone. Second, parental aspirations were shaped by personal experiences of poverty, interrupted schooling, migration, family responsibilities, and limited access to resources. Third, parents encountered multidimensional challenges, including financial constraints, emotional strain, time limitations, communication barriers, and cultural adjustment difficulties that affected their capacity to support their children's schooling. Fourth, despite these challenges, parents demonstrated resilience through sacrifice, resourcefulness, family and community support networks, communication with teachers, faith, and hope. The narratives highlighted that parental support extends beyond material provision and includes emotional, moral, cultural, and relational dimensions.

KEYWORDS

Vulnerable families; parental educational support; lived experiences; narratology; school-family partnership; educational aspirations; qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

The recent OECD PISA 2022 report highlighted that learning and equity remained major concerns in global education. Educational achievement was closely linked to the wider circumstances that shaped students' opportunities to learn, including family background, socioeconomic condition, access to resources, and the support available at home and in the community (OECD, 2023). Within this framework, children's education did not depend

solely on schools. It was also shaped by the social, relational, cultural, and material conditions surrounding the child.

This concern became more significant in the case of children from vulnerable families. Vulnerable families referred to families whose ability to support children's education was affected by poverty, unstable income, limited educational background, limited access to school resources, migration or relocation, Indigenous or cultural marginalization, single-parent or extended caregiving arrangements, and other social conditions that made schooling support more difficult. Vulnerability, therefore, was not treated as a weakness of the family. Rather, it was understood as a layered context that shaped the stories parents told about sacrifice, struggle, hope, responsibility, and educational support.

From a narratological perspective, parents were not viewed merely as providers of support or background factors in children's schooling. They were understood as narrators of lived experience who organized their memories, hardships, hopes, and actions into meaningful accounts. Their stories revealed how educational support was narrated through episodes of difficulty, turning points, sacrifices, decisions, and aspirations for their children's future. In this sense, parental support became not only a set of observable practices but also a narrated experience shaped by biography, social position, and institutional encounter.

Moreover, parents were key players in this support network. Family involvement was important not only for children's academic performance but also for their school engagement, well-being, and broader developmental outcomes. Martinez-Yarza et al. (2024) found that family involvement could partly explain differences in student performance and well-being across diverse socioeconomic contexts. Their study also showed that school engagement increased with home-based family involvement, which, in turn, supported students' social-emotional development. Thus, parental support was not viewed as a marginal factor but as a significant way through which children attended school, experienced schooling, and continued within it.

In addition, parental support, however, was a varied and multidimensional practice. It did not only involve attending school events or participating in school activities. It also included home-based guidance, emotional support, monitoring of schoolwork, organizing study time, teaching the value of education, providing for school needs, and continuously explaining what educational success meant within the family. In the Philippine context, Garcia et al. (2025) found that parental educational involvement among low-income Filipino parents was shaped by motivators, facilitators, and barriers connected to socioeconomic status. This highlighted that educational support was not a fixed or uniform behavior but a practice shaped by family life, available resources, and parents' lived realities.

Nonetheless, parental educational support was not provided under equal conditions. Parents told their stories from different social positions, with unequal access to time, income, cultural capital, institutional familiarity, and social recognition. Bond et al. (2025), in their study of schools in economically disadvantaged areas in Wales, found that parental involvement and engagement were socioeconomically distributed and that schools did not always sufficiently account for the realities of poverty when defining or evaluating parental support. This challenged narrow and deficit-oriented views of parental involvement and suggested that families in deprived contexts may already have been supporting learning in ways schools did not fully recognize. Thus, parental educational support was not understood merely as compliance with school instructions, but as a social, situational, and context-dependent experience.

Furthermore, when the discussion moved to vulnerable family contexts, the complexity of parental narratives became even more visible. The educational engagement of Indigenous families, migrant families, economically deprived families, and other families experiencing social or material disadvantage could not be assumed to have the same storyline. Using evidence from 41 studies in a systematic review on Indigenous parents' educational engagement, Sianturi et al. (2022) emphasized the complexity of Indigenous parents' perceptions of and involvement in home-school partnerships. Similarly, Melnikova (2022) noted that migrant parents' engagement in high school remained understudied, particularly in relation to how school practices opened or restricted meaningful opportunities for involvement. These studies showed that vulnerability was not simply a demographic label. It referred to multiple conditions of disadvantage, marginality, mobility, cultural difference, and exclusion that influenced how parents narrated their relationship with schools and how schools recognized them.

In addition, a parent's involvement in education was also closely linked to the meanings they gave to success and the hopes they held for their children. These meanings were not formed in a social vacuum. They were shaped by parents' own educational experiences, including whether they experienced exclusion, interruption, or opportunity. They were also shaped by class position, income, cultural background, and family responsibilities. Strømme and Wiborg (2024) showed the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of parental education, class, income, and wealth on educational attainment over time, while Thomsen (2023) emphasized that social class shaped the formation and pursuit of educational expectations. These studies were relevant to the present inquiry because they showed that parental aspirations were rooted in personal histories and social positions that shaped the futures parents narrated as possible, desirable, or necessary for their children.

Within the contemporary schooling system, supporting a child's education was not simply an act of care. It was also narrated as a process of navigation. Parents were expected to communicate with teachers, respond to school requirements, sustain attendance, support learning at home, attend meetings, provide materials, and align family practices with institutional expectations. For parents from vulnerable families, these expectations became difficult because of limited income, irregular work, distance from school, limited literacy, cultural differences, time constraints, or lack of confidence in dealing with school personnel. Johnson et al. (2025) proposed an equity-centered framework for school-family partnerships to support attendance, while Anazia et al. (2025) highlighted shared responsibility, communication, and collaboration in home-school partnerships. Likewise, Melnikova (2022) emphasized the role of school leadership and school practices in making schools more welcoming and equitable for parents. Taken together, these studies suggested that parental support was inseparable from institutional interaction. It involved negotiation with formal systems that may have enabled some families but alienated others.

Although research on parental involvement, family-school partnership, and educational inequality had grown, it remained fragmented. Existing studies discussed parental involvement in relation to social-emotional development, attendance, socioeconomic barriers, Indigenous educational engagement, migrant-school encounters, and class-shaped educational expectations. However, these studies were often population-specific, outcome-specific, or problem-specific. Many focused on barriers and facilitators, school participation, or measurable developmental outcomes. There remained a need for a more integrative understanding of how parents from vulnerable family contexts narrated educational success, connected their life histories to their children's futures, and described the continuous work of supporting schooling under conditions of vulnerability. This gap

supported the need for a study centered on narrative meaning, interpretation, and lived experience.

Parents in vulnerable family contexts did not simply “participate” in education. In their narratives, they allocated limited resources, balanced competing family needs, managed uncertainty, responded to institutional expectations, and kept their hopes alive despite limitations. Their stories included personal sacrifice, borrowing money, seeking help from relatives, adjusting work schedules, communicating with teachers, praying, encouraging their children, and continuing support even when resources were scarce. These narrative episodes showed that parental educational support was not only practical but also moral, emotional, relational, and deeply biographical.

In the same way, schools and educational systems faced important questions on how to become more inclusive, responsive, and equitable in their partnerships with families. The growing emphasis on equity-centered partnerships and context-sensitive home-school collaboration underscored the importance of understanding parental narratives not only for educational theory but also for school leadership, policy, and institutional practice. Listening to parents’ stories allowed schools to recognize forms of support that may not always appear in formal measures of parental involvement but were deeply meaningful in vulnerable family life.

Specifically, this research investigated how parents in vulnerable family contexts narrated their lived experiences of supporting their children’s education within today’s schooling system. It sought to understand how they described educational success for their children, how their own life histories and social positioning shaped their aspirations, and how they narrated the challenges and strategies involved in supporting schooling. Using a narratological orientation, this study examined the stories, meanings, turning points, and interpretive patterns through which parents made sense of educational support as lived, remembered, and narrated within vulnerable family life.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using narrative inquiry and narratological thematic analysis to explore the lived experiences of parents from vulnerable families in supporting their children's education within the contemporary schooling context. The study was grounded in a narratological perspective, which viewed parents as storytellers who constructed meaning from their experiences through narratives of aspirations, challenges, sacrifices, and educational support. Rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses, the research focused on understanding how participants interpreted and narrated their educational experiences and responsibilities.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in the Buenavista District, Division of Agusan del Norte, Philippines. The locale was selected because it represented a community characterized by diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and family circumstances, including families experiencing poverty, migration-related challenges, cultural marginalization, limited educational attainment, and varying access to school and community resources. The setting provided a rich context for examining how vulnerability influenced parental educational support and school-family relationships.

Research Participants and Sampling Procedure

The participants consisted of fifteen (15) parents or primary caregivers of school-aged children. They were selected through maximum variation purposive sampling to capture a broad range of experiences across different family structures, economic conditions, cultural backgrounds, migration experiences, and levels of educational familiarity. Eligible participants were those who had direct responsibility for supporting a child's education through activities such as monitoring attendance, assisting with school requirements, communicating with teachers, and providing emotional and practical support. The sampling strategy prioritized narrative depth and contextual diversity rather than statistical representation.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that encouraged participants to share detailed accounts of their experiences, aspirations, challenges, and coping strategies related to their children's education. Ethical standards were strictly observed through informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Member checking was conducted to verify the accuracy of interpretations and ensure that the findings reflected participants' intended meanings.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data analysis followed a narratological thematic analysis process. Meaning-capturing excerpts were identified from interview transcripts, coded, and organized into narrative meaning units. Similar meanings were clustered into categories and themes that reflected recurring patterns across participants' stories while preserving the uniqueness of individual narratives. The analysis focused on four key areas: parents' understanding of educational success, the influence of life histories and social positioning on educational aspirations, challenges encountered in supporting schooling, and strategies used to navigate these challenges. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed member checking, maintenance of an audit trail, systematic documentation of theme development, and reflexive analysis. These procedures strengthened the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Educational Success as Holistic Growth, Continuity, and Future Security

The narratives of the fifteen parent-participants suggest that educational success was understood as a holistic process extending beyond academic achievement. Parents described success not only through grades, awards, or academic recognition but also through school continuity, literacy development, responsible behavior, confidence, character formation, future security, dignity, and cultural rootedness. Across narratives, remaining in school despite adversity was viewed as an important indicator of success. Educational success was therefore closely linked to hope, resilience, and opportunities for social mobility. These findings indicate that parents viewed education not merely as a pathway to academic accomplishment but as a means of preparing children for meaningful participation in society and family life.

The findings further indicate that parents from vulnerable family contexts adopted broader definitions of educational achievement that reflected their lived realities. Unlike school systems that often emphasize measurable academic outcomes, parents appeared to

understand educational success as a process of personal development, social responsibility, and future preparedness. Their narratives emphasized the importance of developing values such as respect, discipline, perseverance, and responsibility alongside academic learning. These observations align with Lin (2026), who found that parents frequently associate success with perseverance, fulfillment, and life satisfaction rather than academic achievement alone. Similarly, Cecalupo et al. (2026) emphasized that educational success is socially constructed through family values, expectations, and lived experiences.

Another important dimension emerging from the narratives was the significance of cultural identity. Indigenous and culturally rooted parents emphasized that educational attainment should not come at the expense of cultural belonging. Parents desired educational advancement while maintaining language, traditions, family relationships, and community values. Educational success was therefore viewed not only as educational attainment but also as the preservation of dignity, identity, and cultural continuity. This finding supports Sianturi et al. (2022), who reported that educational engagement among Indigenous families is often connected to cultural continuity and identity preservation.

Overall, the findings suggest that educational success among vulnerable families is understood as a multidimensional and socially embedded construct that incorporates academic, moral, social, cultural, and future-oriented dimensions. Rather than focusing exclusively on academic performance, parents emphasized the development of capable, responsible, and culturally grounded individuals who can navigate future challenges while maintaining their sense of identity.

Theme 2: Aspirations Shaped by Life Histories and Social Positioning

The narratives indicate that parents' aspirations for their children were deeply rooted in their own life histories, family circumstances, and social realities. Participants frequently reflected on experiences of poverty, interrupted schooling, economic hardship, migration, caregiving responsibilities, and limited educational opportunities. These experiences appeared to shape their determination to secure better futures for their children. Education was consistently viewed as a pathway toward improved living conditions, stable employment, greater opportunities, and a life free from many of the struggles they had personally experienced.

The findings demonstrate that parental aspirations were socially situated rather than individually constructed. Parents' hopes reflected both personal experiences and structural realities, including income limitations, educational attainment, access to resources, family obligations, and community conditions. Their aspirations were often shaped by a desire to break cycles of poverty and create opportunities that had previously been inaccessible. These findings support Thomsen (2023), who argued that educational expectations are influenced by social class and life experiences. Likewise, Strømme and Wiborg (2024) found that parental education, wealth, and socioeconomic position significantly shape children's educational opportunities and aspirations.

The narratives further suggest that aspirations were often accompanied by practical concerns regarding transportation, school supplies, daily allowances, educational expenses, and household responsibilities. Parents continuously negotiated between long-term educational goals and immediate family needs. Their hopes for educational advancement existed alongside concerns about financial stability and daily survival. This observation supports Kollannoor et al. (2025) and Yang et al. (2025), who identified parental aspirations as important predictors of children's motivation, educational engagement, and future achievement.

Overall, the findings suggest that parental aspirations emerged as both expressions of hope and responses to structural constraints. Parents' educational goals for their children were shaped by personal histories, family realities, and broader social conditions, highlighting the interconnected nature of aspiration, opportunity, and social positioning.

Theme 3: Multidimensional Challenges in Supporting Children's Schooling

The findings reveal that challenges associated with supporting children's education were multidimensional, interconnected, and often hidden beneath visible indicators of disadvantage. Financial difficulties emerged as the most prominent challenge, affecting parents' ability to provide transportation, school materials, uniforms, projects, meals, and other educational requirements. However, the narratives indicate that educational challenges extended beyond material concerns and were embedded within broader emotional, relational, cultural, and institutional contexts.

Parents described experiences of worry, anxiety, sadness, exhaustion, guilt, frustration, and helplessness arising from their inability to consistently meet educational demands. The narratives suggest that these emotional burdens were intensified when children experienced embarrassment, exclusion, hunger, absenteeism, or difficulties keeping pace with school requirements. Such experiences demonstrate that educational disadvantage cannot be understood solely through economic indicators but must also consider emotional well-being and family functioning.

Work responsibilities, household obligations, caregiving demands, limited time, communication difficulties, and institutional expectations further complicated parental involvement. For culturally rooted and migrant families, issues of adjustment, belonging, language, and communication with school personnel created additional barriers. These findings support Garcia et al. (2025), who found that parental educational involvement among low-income Filipino families is shaped by socioeconomic realities and access to resources. Similarly, Bond et al. (2025) argued that schools often overlook the hidden effects of poverty when evaluating parental participation. The findings also align with Mitchell et al. (2025), Todd et al. (2025), Finch et al. (2026), Melnikova (2022), and Park (2025), who reported that vulnerable families experience overlapping economic, emotional, cultural, and institutional pressures that influence educational participation.

Overall, the findings suggest that parental involvement should be understood within broader social and contextual realities rather than through deficit-based assumptions. Absences, incomplete requirements, or limited school participation may reflect deeper family struggles rather than a lack of commitment to education.

Theme 4: Resilience Through Sacrifice, Resourcefulness, and Support Networks

Despite numerous challenges, the narratives suggest that parents demonstrated resilience and commitment in supporting their children's education. Participants described various strategies used to sustain schooling, including budgeting limited resources, borrowing money, seeking assistance from relatives, working additional jobs, prioritizing educational expenses, and maintaining communication with teachers. These actions illustrate parents' active efforts to navigate adversity and sustain educational participation despite significant constraints.

Beyond material strategies, participants relied heavily on emotional, relational, and spiritual resources. Faith, patience, hope, encouragement, family solidarity, and perseverance emerged as important sources of strength. Parents appeared to draw motivation from their children's futures and from their belief that education could improve family circumstances. These findings suggest that resilience was not merely an individual

characteristic but a process supported by relationships, community connections, and personal beliefs.

The narratives also highlighted the importance of support networks. Family members, relatives, teachers, community leaders, and informal support systems provided assistance that helped parents respond to educational challenges. These findings support Bourdieu's Theory of Capital, particularly the role of social capital in facilitating access to resources, information, and opportunities. The results also align with Johnson et al. (2025), who highlighted the significance of collaborative school-family partnerships, and Anazia et al. (2025), who emphasized communication and shared responsibility as essential elements of educational support. Similarly, Mendoza and Lasco (2025) noted that Filipino caregiving practices frequently involve extended family and community participation, reflecting collective approaches to supporting children's education. Duque et al. (2026) further emphasized the importance of resilience, family functioning, and social support in sustaining caregiver well-being.

Overall, the findings suggest that parental support extends beyond financial provision and includes emotional encouragement, moral guidance, cultural transmission, advocacy, and relationship-building. Resilience emerged as a dynamic process through which parents continuously adapted to challenges while remaining committed to their children's educational development.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that parental educational support within vulnerable family contexts is a dynamic and multifaceted process shaped by aspirations, constraints, resilience, and meaning-making. Parents conceptualized educational success as holistic development, constructed aspirations from their life experiences, encountered multidimensional challenges, and relied on personal, familial, community, and spiritual resources to sustain educational participation. The findings indicate that educational support is not simply an individual parental responsibility but a socially embedded process influenced by family histories, economic realities, cultural identities, institutional interactions, and available support systems.

These findings strongly support Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains how educational experiences are shaped by interactions among family, school, community, and broader societal structures. Likewise, Bourdieu's Theory of Capital provides insight into how unequal access to economic, cultural, and social resources influences parents' capacity to support their children's education. Together, these theoretical perspectives help explain why educational support among vulnerable families is simultaneously shaped by personal agency and structural conditions.

The study underscores the importance of inclusive, culturally responsive, and context-sensitive school-family-community partnerships that recognize diverse forms of parental involvement. Educational institutions should move beyond narrow definitions of participation and acknowledge the many ways parents contribute to their children's learning and well-being despite significant challenges. Strengthening collaborative support systems may help create more equitable educational opportunities for learners from vulnerable family contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of parents from vulnerable families in supporting their children's education within the contemporary schooling context. The findings reveal that parental educational support is a complex and socially embedded process shaped by aspirations, challenges, resilience, and meaning-making. Parents viewed educational success not merely as academic achievement but as a holistic form of development

encompassing school continuity, character formation, dignity, cultural identity, and future security. Their aspirations for their children were deeply influenced by personal experiences of poverty, interrupted schooling, family responsibilities, migration, and limited educational opportunities, reflecting a strong desire to create pathways toward improved life outcomes.

The study further demonstrates that parents from vulnerable family contexts face multidimensional challenges that extend beyond financial hardship. Emotional burdens, caregiving responsibilities, time constraints, communication barriers, and institutional expectations collectively influence their capacity to support their children's education. Despite these constraints, parents consistently exhibited resilience through sacrifice, resourcefulness, faith, hope, and reliance on family, community, and school support networks. These findings challenge deficit-oriented perspectives of parental involvement by illustrating that limited participation in school activities does not necessarily reflect a lack of commitment to children's education. Rather, parental engagement is shaped by broader social, cultural, and economic realities that often remain invisible within formal educational settings.

The findings support Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory by demonstrating that children's educational experiences are influenced by interconnected relationships among family, school, community, and societal structures. Likewise, Bourdieu's Theory of Capital provides insight into how unequal access to economic, cultural, and social resources shapes educational opportunities and parental capacity to provide support. Together, these theoretical perspectives highlight the importance of understanding educational support as both an individual and structural phenomenon.

The study contributes to the growing body of literature on vulnerable families by foregrounding parents' voices and experiences within educational discourse. It underscores the need for inclusive, culturally responsive, and context-sensitive educational policies and practices that recognize diverse forms of parental involvement. Schools, educators, and policymakers should strengthen collaborative school-family-community partnerships, improve communication and support mechanisms, and develop interventions that address both material and psychosocial barriers to educational participation. By recognizing the strengths, resilience, and aspirations of vulnerable families, educational institutions can foster more equitable and supportive learning environments that enable all learners to thrive regardless of their social circumstances.

Ultimately, the study affirms that parents from vulnerable families are not passive recipients of educational support but active partners in their children's learning journeys. Their narratives reveal enduring commitments to education, sustained by hope, sacrifice, and resilience, and highlight the transformative potential of supportive educational ecosystems in promoting educational equity and social inclusion.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen educational support for learners from vulnerable family contexts and to enhance school-family-community partnerships.

First, educational institutions should adopt more inclusive and culturally responsive approaches to parental engagement. Schools are encouraged to recognize diverse forms of parental involvement beyond attendance at meetings and participation in school activities. Flexible communication strategies, home-school collaboration initiatives, and culturally sensitive engagement programs may help strengthen relationships between schools and families experiencing socioeconomic and cultural challenges.

Second, teachers and school administrators should develop support mechanisms that acknowledge the multidimensional realities faced by vulnerable families. Educational interventions should consider not only academic needs but also the emotional, social, and economic circumstances that influence students' educational participation. Strengthening guidance services, mentoring programs, and psychosocial support systems may help address barriers that affect both learners and their families.

Third, local government units, community organizations, and other stakeholders should strengthen collaborative programs that provide educational assistance to vulnerable families. Financial support initiatives, learning resource programs, transportation assistance, and community-based educational partnerships may help reduce the material burdens that limit educational participation and continuity.

Fourth, policymakers should consider developing policies that promote equitable educational opportunities for learners from vulnerable backgrounds. Such policies should support context-sensitive interventions, strengthen school-family-community partnerships, and ensure that educational programs are responsive to the diverse needs of families experiencing poverty, migration, cultural marginalization, and other forms of vulnerability.

Finally, future researchers may build upon the findings of this study by examining the experiences of vulnerable families in different educational and cultural contexts. Comparative studies involving larger and more diverse participant groups may provide deeper insights into how socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional factors shape parental educational support. Further research may also explore the perspectives of learners, teachers, and school leaders to develop a more comprehensive understanding of educational support systems within vulnerable communities.

By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions and stakeholders may contribute to the creation of more inclusive, equitable, and supportive learning environments that recognize the strengths, aspirations, and resilience of vulnerable families while addressing the barriers that affect educational participation and success.

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