

“TINAPAY AT LIBRO”: CHALLENGES AND COPING MECHANISMS OF SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL WORKING STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of senior high school working students at Cordon National High School, focusing on the challenges they encounter and the coping mechanisms they employ while balancing academic responsibilities with employment. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, seven purposively selected students aged 18–19 participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed recurring challenges such as missed classes, schedule conflicts, poor time management, and fatigue, particularly among students whose work was driven by urgent financial necessity. These conditions often compromised academic performance and well-being, underscoring how economic pressures force students to prioritize work over school.

At the same time, the study identified coping mechanisms that reflect resilience and adaptability. Students with flexible work arrangements—such as weekend or break-time employment—or those supported by family and institutional programs were better able to manage their responsibilities. Structured schedules, supportive teachers, and regulated work-study programs emerged as protective factors that reduce academic strain and promote balance. Overall, the findings highlight the tension between *tinapay* (bread) and *libro* (education), emphasizing the need for institutional support, flexible policies, and financial assistance to ensure equity, resilience, and student success.

KEYWORDS: Working Students, Challenges, Coping Mechanisms, Time Management, Resilience, Institutional Support.

INTRODUCTION

Working students have become increasingly visible in today's academic environment, as many learners choose to work while completing their school requirements. Balancing employment and academic responsibilities often results in limited rest, heightened stress, and challenges that non-working students do not encounter. These difficulties—such as financial strain, long work hours, and daily responsibilities—significantly affect their well-being and academic performance. According to Reyes (2020), although students prioritize their education, they also rely on work as a crucial source of financial support, demonstrating maturity and responsibility in managing both roles. Their ability to fulfill academic requirements while sustaining job responsibilities reflects discipline, resilience, and determination to support their families and meet personal needs. Reyes further emphasized that this dual burden shapes students' values, work ethics, and decision-making skills at an early age.

While employment provides financial support, skill development (e.g., time management, responsibility), and motivation, it also creates stress, time constraints, and potential impacts on mental health and social life. Summer et al. (2023) identified four major consequences of student employment: reduced schedule flexibility, constant financial decision-making pressures, negative effects on social and emotional well-being, and the paradoxical finding that students still view work as meaningful and fulfilling. Their study recommended that universities adjust programs, policies, and faculty expectations to better accommodate students' time limitations and financial challenges.

Furthermore, although studies such as Reyes (2020), Summer et al. (2023), and Prokes and Klusacek (2025) highlight the challenges faced by working students, limited attention has been given to the combined effects of home environment, financial capacity, access to resources, and daily routines on their overall school experience. Addressing this gap allows for evidence-based insights that can guide schools in developing flexible policies, targeted support programs, and effective guidance systems. In the long run, such measures contribute to equity, resilience, and student success.

Despite financial hardship, lack of rest, and insufficient study time, working students continue to demonstrate perseverance and determination to pursue their education. Pedroso et al. (2022), Rufino et al. (2024), and Mutya (2022) emphasized that these students' persistence underscores the need for institutional support, financial assistance, and flexible policies to help them balance work and school. After all, Gapasin (2025) argued that to help students become globally competitive is to support them holistically. Hence, understanding their

experiences is essential for schools to create a supportive environment where working students can thrive academically and personally.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of working students at Cordon National High School. Phenomenology was employed to emphasize the lived experiences of participants and to explore the essence of their realities, focusing on how they confront challenges and develop coping strategies while balancing academic and work responsibilities. By focusing on meaning-making and subjective experience, this design allowed the researcher to capture nuanced insights that quantitative approaches may overlook. Seven purposively selected working students, aged 18–19 and employed part-time during weekends or holidays, participated voluntarily after providing written informed consent.

Data were collected through a researcher-developed semi-structured interview protocol, which encouraged open dialogue while ensuring alignment with the study's objectives. The instrument was validated by experts using the Content Validity Index (CVI) to ensure clarity and relevance. Institutional approval was secured prior to data collection, and participants were recruited through official channels. Interviews were conducted face-to-face during students' free time, allowing them to narrate their experiences in a respectful and supportive environment. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase Thematic Analysis framework, which provided a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying patterns and themes grounded in participants' narratives (Ahmed et al., 2025). Ethical considerations guided every stage of the research. Compliance with Republic Act 10173 (Data Privacy Act of 2012) and Republic Act 7610 (Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation, and Discrimination) ensured confidentiality, anonymity, and protection of participants' rights. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent emphasized transparency regarding the study's purpose and procedures. The principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for persons, and reflexivity were observed, ensuring that the research process was both ethically sound and responsive to participants' lived realities. Ultimately, this methodology sought to generate meaningful insights that contribute to educational improvement while honoring the voices and dignity of working students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to explore the living experiences of working students in Cordon National High School. Drawing from the data obtained, the study highlights these findings:

Table 1. Challenges Faced by the Informants

Informant No.	Responses	Themes	Sub-themes
1	... I cannot balance school and work. It affects me because sometimes I have work on days when there is class.	Missed Classes	Job responsibilities and household work
7	... Sometimes I cannot attend school because I just have work at home; everyone has their own tasks to do		
5	Before, when I was a working student, I had to go to school early—but now I am a bit late... When you prioritize work over school tasks, you end up doing school work late at night and staying up.	Schedule Conflict	Prioritizing work over academics
5	... You cannot manage your time well.	Time Management	Poor balance and mismanagement
5	Of course, you get sleepy—sometimes I even fall asleep in class because I am tired...	Fatigue	Lack of rest causing sleepiness

Table 1 shows the challenges faced by the informants. Based on the table, it reveals the most prominent challenges such as missed classes, schedule conflicts, poor time management, and fatigue. Informants 1 and 7 reported frequent absences due to job responsibilities and household tasks, underscoring how financial necessity often forces students to prioritize work over academics. Informant 5 highlighted the difficulty of managing overlapping responsibilities, describing late-night study sessions and exhaustion that sometimes led to falling asleep in class. These accounts resonate with Race et al. (2020), who observed that working students often sacrifice rest, resulting in both physical and emotional strain.

These findings illustrate that when employment is driven by urgent financial need, students' academic performance is compromised. The heavy toll of fatigue and missed opportunities demonstrates how the pursuit of *tinapay* can undermine the pursuit of *libro*.

Table 2. Coping Mechanisms of the Informants.

Informant No.	Responses	Themes	Sub-themes
2	... I only work on weekends.	Reduced Pressure	Proper work schedule
3	... I work on Saturdays and Sundays.		
4	It does not affect my attendance because it is part of my work, so it is allowed...		Proper work and class handling
6	... My work is only during break or when there is no class.		

Table 2 illustrates the coping mechanisms of the informants. This table reveals that several students demonstrated effective coping strategies through structured scheduling, institutional support, and family encouragement.

Informants 2, 3, and 6 limited their work to weekends or breaks, thereby reducing pressure and protecting their academic commitments. Informant 4, who participated in a formal work-study program, reported minimal disruption to attendance, highlighting the value of structured employment aligned with school schedules. The Asian Development Bank (2023) supports this, noting that predictable work hours significantly reduce stress and fatigue among young workers.

Support systems also played a crucial role. Informant 6 credited parental encouragement for helping them focus on academics, while Informant 2 received understanding from teachers who extended deadlines when needed. These findings echo Gallardo-Lolandes et al. (2020), who found that institutional flexibility and supportive faculty greatly improve working students' ability to cope. Programs such as DepEd's SPES (Special Program for Employment of Students) demonstrate how policy interventions can formalize employment opportunities in ways that complement, rather than conflict with, academic responsibilities.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the challenges and coping mechanisms of senior high school working students at Cordon National High School, capturing the lived realities of balancing *tinapay* (bread) and *libro* (education). The findings revealed that students often struggle with missed classes, schedule conflicts, poor time management, and fatigue, particularly when employment is driven by urgent financial necessity. These challenges highlight how economic pressures can undermine academic performance and well-being, forcing students to prioritize work over school.

At the same time, the study identified coping mechanisms that reflect resilience and adaptability. Students with flexible work arrangements—such as weekend or break-time employment—or those supported by family and institutional programs were better able to manage their responsibilities. Structured schedules, supportive teachers, and regulated work-study programs emerged as protective factors that reduce academic strain and promote balance.

Overall, the study concludes that the lived conditions of working students are defined by the constant negotiation between survival and education. Time management is not merely a skill but a necessity, shaped by financial obligations and work flexibility. Without institutional support, students are more likely to sacrifice rest and academic performance to meet work demands. Therefore, schools and policymakers must recognize these realities by providing flexible scheduling, financial assistance, and

structured work-study opportunities. Addressing these needs is essential to ensuring that working students succeed both academically and personally, fostering equity, resilience, and student success.

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