

Exploring the Adaptability of Junior High School Students with Balikbayan Parents: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Working overseas has become a common trend in the Philippines. With the parents being gone for a long period of time, this has caused their children to fall back on having to develop different coping mechanisms and changing perceptions upon their parents' return. This study uncovered the ability of the left-behind children of OFWs who are junior high school students from Saint Mary's University to adapt with the changes in their lives brought by their balikbayan parents who return home temporarily in order to shed more light on this specific trend. The study utilized a qualitative approach, specifically the descriptive phenomenological method. This enabled the researchers to gain a deeper understanding regarding the perspectives of the left-behind children of OFWs about their parents. Through use of Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Method of analysis, Nine (9) key emergent themes were generated to explain the adaptation of the junior high school students namely constant communication and pieces of advice, spending quality time, detachment, extended family and other support systems, understanding family set-up and acceptance, avoidance, adjustment and compromise, motivation and aspirations, and comfort and material support. This study may be a significant resource to future researchers, balikbayan parents, guardians, psychologists and guidance counselors as it offers insightful information regarding adaptation.

Keywords: behavioral adaptability, coping mechanisms, cognitive adaptability, emotional regulation, left-behind children, Marian Coalition of Sons and Daughters of OFWs, perceptions, qualitative approach

INTRODUCTION

Change, being inevitable, is beyond the control of anyone, including parents and children. In the Philippines, working overseas or becoming an Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) is a common trend. Aguilar (2021) emphasized that the Philippines is one of the biggest migrant sending-countries in the world and Asia's largest source of labor workers. While it contributes to brain-drain, skilled Filipino workers seek jobs abroad due to lack of job opportunities and low pay here in the Philippines. Many Filipinos have actually found this as a financial opportunity, enabling them to provide better for their families. Lobos et al. (2019) mentioned that working overseas has become a viable option to address the problems being encountered by one out of twelve Filipino families.

However, while OFWs are in demand in other countries, it creates consequences for them and their left behind children. Montajes (2023) noted that it is common to encounter children in the Philippines being separated from one or both parents and left with non-parental caregivers or guardians. Malijao et al., (2023) mentioned that parents being away can have an impact on their children. With that being said, there would be moments where changes in the relationship of the balikbayan parents and their left-behind children happen. There are even certain occasions where the left-behind children experience certain symptoms of stress such as under-eating and headaches.

Some of the common stressors of the children are missing their parents and feeling lonely, eating a lot, parents having high expectations and having a misunderstanding with friends among close friends (Navarro & Gorospe, 2014). Delima (2022) identified several key themes experienced by children separated from their Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents. These include emotional distress, such as anguish upon departure and anxiety regarding their

parents' safety; familial shifts, including altered parent-child dynamics and the presence of extramarital affairs; and adaptive responses, characterized by the need to accept their new reality and a desire to reciprocate their parents' sacrifices through personal success. Shaw (2022) highlighted that children left behind by OFW mothers often utilize their time apart to strengthen bonds with extended family, peers, and partners. These relationships serve as a crucial support network in the mother's absence. Given this reality, both parents and children must learn to adapt to their changing circumstances to ensure they remain meaningfully connected despite the distance.

The study of Martin et al. (2013) stated that adaptability is appropriate cognitive, behavioral and/or affective adjustment in the face of uncertainty and novelty. Wadleck et al. (2021) posited that it is a key mental resource referring to an individual's cognitive, behavioral and emotional regulation (adjustment) in situations of change, novelty and uncertainty. Saavedra (2024) also mentioned that adaptability is a skill of molding actions and reactions to the changing environment. Because of the rapid changes around the world, it is essential to have the skill of adaptability (Ibrahim, 2023).

On the part of the left-behind children of OFWs, they may resort to certain coping mechanisms which Machica and Montallana (2018) enumerated such as being with their friends when they are being lonely and the use of dynamic communications such as facebook, messenger and so forth, to communicate often with their parents. Taola et al. (2024) also observed students coping with the absence of their parents by reciprocating their parents' efforts through good academic performance, understanding their parents' reasons for working abroad and building a circle of friends and family support system. In another article, from a Straussian grounded study by Derasin et al. (2023), there are four themes that children of balikbayan parents go through. The first theme is the initial reaction, where the child feels resentment, desolation and withdrawal from their parents. The second theme is the impact of parental absence which includes yearning, envy of others, loneliness and even the lack of guidance from parents. The third theme is coping with parental absence, focusing on how the child copes with the absence of their parents, including strategies of diversion and seeking help from friends and family. Lastly, there is acceptance where the children just accept the circumstance and have the right perspective and appreciation for their parents.

In the context of this study, *balikbayans* is another term used for an OFW and refers to Filipino citizens who have been continuously out of the Philippines for a period of at least one year (Embassy of the Philippines, RA 9174). In a survey by Philippines Statistics Authority (2022), it was estimated that there are 1.96 million OFWs who worked abroad from April to September 2022 and 7.1% of them are from Region 2. The rising trend of Filipino parents working abroad is largely fueled by economic necessity and the scarcity of local employment (Montajes, 2023; Amoroso et al., 2023). Because parents prioritize their responsibility to provide for their children's needs, they often feel forced to seek higher-paying opportunities overseas (Amoroso et al., 2023). As Delima (2022) notes, this migration is viewed as a necessary sacrifice to secure a more comfortable and stable future for their loved ones.

Considering that having an OFW parent is common to children in the Philippines, Saint Mary's University has organized the Marian Coalition of Sons and Daughters of OFWs for the purpose of group or individual counseling and for their empowerment and building a community for them since their parents are absent in their everyday lives. The sons and daughters of OFWs have emerged as paragons of the Filipino youth, demonstrating productivity in social, religious, and academic spheres despite the challenges of parental absence. They represent a unified vision of the youth as the nation's future. Consequently, the school facilitates their holistic development by automatically designating these students as members of the organization. The sons and daughters of OFWs have emerged as paragons of the Filipino youth, demonstrating productivity in social, religious, and academic spheres despite the challenges of parental absence. They represent a unified vision of the youth as the nation's future.

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This study sought to investigate the phenomenon of having OFW parents among students of Saint Mary's University who have balikbayan parents. Specifically, it determined the profile of the students who have balikbayan parents; documented the lived experiences of these students; and discovered their adaptability to their situation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach which is phenomenological study, specifically Husserl's Descriptive or Transcendental Phenomenology. The researchers utilized this approach to better explore and understand certain experiences in a deeper context, exploring reality in its undistorted form, which in this study is the adaptability of the children of balikbayan parents. With this method, the study was able to dive deeper into the experiences from the people who have gone through those situations from their perceptions.

Husserl's (2019) phenomenology involves a four-step process, including bracketing, intuiting, analyzing and describing. Bracketing is the act of identifying and setting aside preconceived ideas and opinions about the phenomena. Intuiting is for the researchers to maintain an open mind about the meanings that are attributed to the phenomena. Analyzing involved gathering themes, categorizing and giving sense to the phenomenon. Lastly is Descriptive, a critical step. The researchers then defined and understood the phenomenon in question, all according to Greening.

The data collection took place within the premises of Saint Mary's University (SMU) Junior High School Department, Saquing St., Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya. The respondents of the study were 15 students of the Saint Mary's University Junior High School, specifically from the Marian Coalition for Sons and Daughters of OFW (MCSDO). The Junior High School Guidance and Testing Office assisted in screening the possible participants with the authorization from the principal's office. The researchers then visited each classroom to briefly inform selected students that they were candidates for the study and provided them with informed consent forms. Out of the 50 students that were screened, 16 students passed the screening process and were given consent forms. Students only became participants once the forms were signed by their parents. A total of 15 students submitted their consent forms and were interviewed by the researchers.

The researchers employed the use of (1) Robotfoto Form and (2) a Researcher-Made Interview Question/Guide to elicit the responses relevant to the objectives of the study. The first part of the research instrument included the Robotfoto Form, a dutch term that entails the cartographic sketch of the participants (Kelchtermans & Ballet 2002, as cited by De Guzman 2009). Various demographic variables such as name, gender, age, course and year, school, and the parent who is currently abroad is included in the robotfoto form to delve into the profile of the students with *balikbayan* parents. The students' names were turned into aliases by the time of publishing for the participant's anonymity. The situations of change, novelty and uncertainty that happened upon the return of the student's OFW parent(s) was explored. The impact of the *balikbayan* parent, changes in life and relationship dynamic were encompassed in this section. Five (5) interview questions are included in this section namely 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6. The third section is on the cognitive adjustments that students made upon the presence of their *balikbayan* parents, particularly their insights and perceptions. This section of the interview guide comprised five (5) open-ended questions namely 5, 7, 8, 9 and 17. The fourth section in the researcher-made interview addressed the behavioral adjustments like behaviors, habits and routines that students adapted during the return of their OFW parent(s). This section included five (5) interview questions such as 10, 11, 12, 13, and 18. The last section in the

researcher-made interview sought to understand the emotion regulation of the students with balikbayan parents. This section contained five (5) questions namely 14, 15, 16, 19 and 20.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Section 1. Demographic Profile of the Participants

Table 1

Summary of Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Grade Level
Anastasia	Female	12-15	7
Beatrice	Female	12-15	8
Clara	Female	12-15	9
Darcy	Female	12-15	9
Ellise	Female	12-15	8
Faith	Female	12-15	7
Gil	Male	12-15	8
Heart	Female	12-15	8
Ivy	Female	12-15	8
Jordan	Male	12-15	8
Katherine	LGBTQIA+	12-15	8
Lina	Female	12-15	9
Melanie	Female	12-15	7
Nika	Female	12-15	8
Olive	Male	12-15	9

Section 2. The Lived Experiences of Students with *Balikbayan* parents

The study found multiple themes entailing the experiences of the participants in relation to the family dynamics when their *balikbayan* parents are abroad and at home. The experiences of the participants that were found to be prominent in this study are daily struggles, open conversations and openness. daily check-ins, adjusting to separation, availability and unavailability, longing, emotionally distant, anxiety/nervousness, initial awkwardness, difficulties connecting, reconnecting and emotional connection, growing apart, indifference to changes, accustoming, shifting interactions within the family, insecurities, isolation, sensitivity of topic, precaution, distraction, independence, optimism, gratitude, awareness, discipline, feeling at ease/being laid back, consolation, finding support, unconditional support and lastly, financial support.

According to Corchado (2024), the ideal family dynamics is based on having an open and healthy communication, giving and receiving love, care and support, having trust and respect for each family member, giving time to have a bonding moment with each other, sharing the same values and goals and at the same time having to accept values and goals different from them, and lastly, having to resolve conflicts in a healthy and constructive way. In contrast to that, a family with one or both parent/s being physically absent or away from the family could greatly impact the family dynamics or change it completely. Children are the most affected in the shifting of these dynamics for they are more vulnerable. A parent's prolonged absence could cause emotional, developmental and educational concerns due to the lack of physical presence of the OFW parent (Gudoy, 2024). However, being a child with OFW parents also has its advantages

especially on the economic and financial aspects in life. Mothers who are abroad provide for their children's financial needs like for education, food, clothings and in some cases gifts (Ramirez, 2024).

Section 3. Adaptability of Students Who Have *Balikbayan* Parents

Adaptability is a process wherein an individual accommodates their behavior, thoughts and emotions as a key protective feature of mental health against their ever changing environment.. These changes may be fixed, seasonal, evolutionary, progressive or new all together (Gillette, 2022). Furthermore, adaptability is not a fixed skill and may be developed on both a personal and organization level (EY UK, 2021).

To further understand the adaptability of the participants, their adaptability process are expounded. The adaptability processes that were explored were: constant communication and pieces of advice, spending quality time, detachment, extended family and other support systems, understanding family set-up and acceptance, avoidance, adjustment and compromise, motivation and aspiration, and lastly comfortability and material support.

Children of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) rely heavily on adaptability, which is the capacity to change one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior in response to shifting circumstances (Gillette, 2022; EY UK, 2021). As a strategy, children benefit from regular communication with OFW parents because it offers them emotional support and direction. By bridging the gap, technology enables parents to communicate their concern and provide guidance (Gaspan and Sasot, 2024; Magantor, 2024). Meanwhile, participants like Olive and Gil appreciate the guidance they get, and Lina finds solace in talking to her parents about her scholastic experiences. Heart emphasizes her mother's encouragement. According to Taola et al. (2024), candid discussions improve the bond between parents and children. Regular check-ins also allow parents to stay up to date on their children's life (Pinzon, 2021; Gaspan & Sasot, 2024; Taola et al., 2024) . However, as Gil, Heart, and Darcy's experiences demonstrate, difficulties occur because of different time zones and hectic schedules (Burgos, 2020). Nonetheless, children value their parents' attempts to stay in touch despite these obstacles (Montajes, 2023). However, even with frequent communication, emotional distance can still play a role (Magantor, 2024; Soriano et al., 2022), highlighting the necessity of continuous communication to improve relationships (Delima, 2022).

Another theme is spending meaningful time with OFW parents at home which proved to be crucial for reestablishing and strengthening family ties. As demonstrated by Darcy's experience, activities such as outings aid in overcoming early uneasiness (Delima, 2022; Agonos et al., 2015). Through this, children show joy when their parents return, demonstrating the desire for a full family (Abenir, 2021; Pinzon, 2024; Delima, 2022).

But then detachment may occur in children who have had little parental involvement (Gaspan and Sasot, 2024; Montajes, 2023). Ellise's story serves as an example of how desensitization can result from extended absence. Whether they are at home or overseas, some individuals say their interactions with their parents have not changed significantly. But in order to provide both practical and emotional assistance, extended family members are essential (Cabrera & Lu, 2021; Amoroso et al., 2023). Faith and Ivy are among the participants who look to family members for direction. Also, as demonstrated by Heart and Olive's stories, not all encounters are favorable, as family dynamics change based on the presence of the OFW parent. Delima (2022) highlights how crucial it is for OFW parents and kids to stay in touch.

While Pinzon (2021) notes that OFW children benefit from both material and emotional consolation, individual priorities vary; Ellise emphasizes the value of her father's gifts, whereas Anastasia and Faith cherish emotional connections. This support helps facilitate a progressive acceptance of the migration status (Burgos et al., 2020; Capol et al., 2024). While students like

Ivy and Ellise have developed a clear understanding of the necessity behind their parents' absence, others, like Katherine, still grapple with the desire for their parents' physical return. Finally, when acceptance is difficult, students may turn to distractions as a coping strategy (Gaspan & Sasot, 2024), a trend exemplified by Clara's anxiety and Faith's efforts to divert her attention.

Conclusion

The process of adaptation among children of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) is complex and influenced by a number of variables. The emotional landscape is characterized by the need for acceptance and possible detachment, even though regular communication, quality time spent during visits, support from extended family, and technology all play important roles in building resilience. In the end, the experiences demonstrate how the kids actively navigate the challenges of international families and how well they can adapt to the cyclical nature of parental presence and absence. The long-term effects of these adaptive techniques on the children's general well-being and family dynamics might be investigated in more detail.

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