

Left Out for I am Slow: A Phenomenological Study on Lived Experiences of College Students

Teody Lester V. Panela

Abstract

Academic performance in the form of grades has been the defining factor for students to be classified into groups. With the questions on the quality of teaching and learning, it is best to focus on students who felt left out of the academic circle. Thus, Phenomenological Research, with the help of a semi-structured interview, identified and explored the lived experiences of college students who felt being left out because of their deviation from typical high achievers. This study was anchored on Sternberg's Theory of Thinking Styles and Perry's Theory of Cognitive Development. From the data analysis with implementation of the Colaizzi Process, Three Major Themes emerged: (1) Admitting Limitation; (2) Understanding Exclusion; and (3) Self-Worth Valuation. The result showed that these students shared an experience of being excluded due to their academic ability. They mostly end up leaving the academic circle as a major resort in escaping the feeling of being left out. Despite such unfortunate predicament, they aspire to do good in areas where they excel and slowly gain the confidence in believing in oneself. It is recommended that the schools place equal value and attention to all types of students. Further and in-depth studies are also recommended.

Key Words: Slow Learner, Academic Circle, College Life, Turning Point, Out of Place

1. Introduction

Over the years, academic performance in the form of grades has been the defining factor for students to be classified into groups. There has been a growing interest in the topic, such that most of the researches focused on pitting the subject to the following variables: social media usage (Ainin et al., 2015; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Paul et al., 2012), quality of diet (Florence et al., 2008), in-class multi-tasking (Junco, 2012; Junco & Cotten, 2012), sleep loss and learning capacity (Curcio et al., 2006), academic self-efficacy (Honick & Broadbent, 2016), music (Cabanac et al., 2013), self-discipline (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005), cognitive test anxiety (Cassady & Johnson, 2002), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (Daley & Birchwood, 2010), personality (Poropat, 2009), teaching methods (Ganyaupfu, 2013), and psychological correlates (Richardson et al., 2012).

The No Child Left Behind Act was implemented to make sure that students feel included, that they are valued, and they are excelling with their peers (Abedi, 2004; Klein, 2015; Menken, 2009). The sense of inclusivity resonates with that of blending in (Al-Dubai et al., 2011; Deasy et al., 2014; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Fares et al., 2016; Gibbons et al., 2011), fitting in (Reay et al., 2010), and learning in unison (Foureaux Koppenshtiner, 2014), but certain circumstances are hard to explain in grades and numbers and need a little digging up in a more personal domain to understand the truth behind every experience (Symeonides & Childs, 2015). The closest study conducted on student's personal experience, the feeling of being left, focused on the exploration of the negative effects of low feeling of belongingness (Layous et al., 2017).

Teody Lester V. Panela, College of Education, Northwest Samar State University
Calbayog City, Samar 6710, Philippines

It can be noted that to truly grapple the essence of academic performance, one must fully immerse in the experiences of the students in terms of their sense of relatedness and fitting in, and how they perceive themselves. By establishing the gaps as to the conduct of the study, there is a strong need to explore the lived experiences of students who perceived themselves as slow learners, engage them in in-depth conversation on instances of them feeling left out and how they are coping with such challenges.

2. Objectives

With its main objective of exploring the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges of college students in the context of feeling left out because of their perceived level of intellect, this study would like to answer the following questions :

1. What are experiences of the participants ;
2. What is their perception about feeling left out of the academic circle because of their perceived level of intellect; and
3. What are their aspirations?

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This qualitative study, anchored on Sternberg's Theory of Thinking Styles and Perry's Theory of Cognitive Development, utilized phenomenological approach that aimed to investigate the experiences of college students - how it is to be a student and perceiving themselves as slow learners at the same time. A qualitative research study aimed to examine a phenomenon that impact on the lived reality of individuals or groups in a particular cultural or social context (Mills et al., 2017; Mills & Birks, 2017; Ritchie & Ormston, 2014). A qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem (Creswell, 2003). The Researcher builds a complex and holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. Phenomenology aims to accurately describe the phenomenon without a pre-existing knowledge to a framework, but remaining true to the facts (Cerbone, 2010; Connelly, 2010; Dalal & Priya, 2016; Neubauer et al., 2019). More so, using a qualitative research, the Researcher would be able to connect with the participants and to see the world from their viewpoints (Corbin & Strauss, 2012). The Researcher found this method most suitable to the inquiry, in order to provide a comprehensive analysis on the lived experiences of college students.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The participants of the study were identified using purposive sampling. Using purposive sampling, the Researcher can choose the participants who will be fit for the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Simply put, the Researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience (Dolores & Tongco, 2016). Eight (8) individuals participated in the study. Participants met the description of the career changer: (1) Persons who consider themselves as slow learners; (2) Currently enrolled, (3) A college student; (4) A resident of Calbayog city; and (5) Willing to participate in the study.

3.3. Data Collection

In gathering the appropriate data for the study, semi structured interview was used. Semi-structured interview is a type of interview that has become the most familiar strategy in collecting qualitative data (Adams, 2015; Kallio et al., 2016; Wilson, 2014). A semi-structured interview is a qualitative method of inquiry that merges a predetermined set of open questions with the privilege for the Researchers to explore particular responses further, and are used to understand how interventions work and how they could be enhanced. It also allows to ask follow-up questions for clarification. The content of the interview guide was validated by two professionals who were expert in the field of Psychology. The Researcher also provided an agreement that included obtaining informed consent, ensured confidentiality, time and place commitments, permission to record, detailing the ethical principles of research. As to data storing methods, the Researcher used note taking and dialogic form interview to reach deeper responses of the respondents

3.4. Data Analysis

The following steps represent Colaizzi process for phenomenological data analysis (Morrow et al., 2015). (1) Each transcript should be read and re-read, in order to obtain a general sense about the whole content. (2) For each transcript, significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon under study should be extracted. These statements must be recorded on a separate sheet noting their pages and line numbers. (3) Meaning should be formulated from these significant statements. (4) The formulated meanings should be sorted in categories, clusters of themes, and subthemes. (5) The findings of the study should be integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study. (6) The fundamental structure of the phenomenon should be described. (7) Finally, validation of the findings should be sought from the research participants to compare the Researcher's descriptive results with their experiences.

3.5. Research Reflexivity

In the study, the Researcher's approach is different in terms of other researchers' perspectives. As a person who knows the struggles of college students and their aspiration, the Researcher understands his stand that might lead to a different development and an equally valid understanding of the particular situation under study.

The study has a preconception with a tone of positivity of eventually creating meaning during the entire process. The position and the background of the Researcher will affect the choices made in the investigation, from an angle, with the methods that best judged the sole purpose of the study, framing, coming up with themes and the overall conclusion of it, with the intent of sharing the results with the participants of the study. Furthermore, preconception is not equated in any form of bias unless the Researcher fails to mention them (Malterud, 2012).

3.6. Ethical Consideration

The study focused on the lived experiences of college students, their self-concept, and aspirations. Therefore, the ethical considerations centered around the situations depicted solely from participants' experiences, interactions and actions observed. The issues of theoretical, theological, situational, critical and covenantal situational approach to research ethics were irrelevant to the overall study (Arifin, 2018; Roberts, 2015; Robinson, 2014). The literal transcriptions and summary were used in the narratives.

4. Results and Discussion

Significant information on the current experiences of college students were generated on the premise of feeling left out because of their perceived level of intellect. Current knowledge on higher education scenarios, potential of exploring other means of coping and aspiration for academic path were noted. The generated information can help in establishing not only springboard for subsequent research but also a platform for the college students feeling left out to be heard and show the cacophony of their experiences.

From the data analyses with implementation of the Colaizzi Process, Three Major Themes emerged: (1) Admitting Limitation; (2) Understanding Exclusion; and (3) Self-Worth Valuation.

4.1. Admitting Limitation

Most of the participants had episodes of being unwanted and left-out which further fueled how small they see themselves in terms of their academic achievement and perceived level of intellect. It is illustrated in the following participants' statements:

4.1.1. Outright Exclusion

- "I am always picked last when picking members for a debate, been happening since grade school."
- "Here I thought I was picked first because they believe in my capability, but the group leader pulled me to the corner and told me that I was picked out of pity and only followed the instruction of our teacher not because they think I am capable."
- "There were only two of us left, leaders are picking members for the quiz bee. One of the members from the other group yelled to the teacher and asked if I can be a group of my own because they see me as a burden more than a contributing member."

4.1.2. Obvious Insult

- "My teacher asked me to solve something on the board, and while I was doing that, the teacher said that 'I gave you the easiest one because I know you can't handle the difficult items', that was really devastating."
- "The group I was with, was busy preparing for a presentation, when I was about to approach them, they said that they intentionally did not call my attention for the brainstorming, because I only bring in the storm but no brains to the group."
- "We were a point away from winning when I messed up big time, they yelled and yanked me going out of the room and called me stupid in front of many people."

4.1.3. Overt Inadequacy

- "I admit that I am weak as a student and there is no need to measure my IQ since the people around me make me feel that way."
- "Ever since my mother and elementary teacher told me that I equate to nothing, I carried that ever since and believe that I am really no good."

- “I am considered as the weakest student in my class, even I agree so myself, so I don’t bother trying anything to improve my grades, I am dumb so why bother?”

4.2. Understanding Exclusion

Most of the participants admitted that despite excluded by their peers and acknowledging their own shortcomings, they still understand the reason behind such actions. They feel the full blow of their insults, but choose to respond positively to the situation. It is illustrated in the following participants’ statements:

4.2.1. Deeper Consideration

- “I understand where they are coming from, they have expectations of me that I cannot deliver and I can’t change anything about it.”
- “Although it hurts, I cannot do anything to make light of the situation, I just psyche myself to understand their reasons and hope that it will change in the future.”
- “I just cry myself out every night, my parents always tell me to be strong no matter what, not everything in life is determined by your academic performance, always be the better person.”

4.2.2. Belief Tolerance

- “I just let them be, eventually I would get used to it for it will reach its prime.”
- “That is what they want to label me as someone who is dumb, and I just tolerate that because I am not in mood to entertain their teasing, I am already bombarded with problems.”
- “Though they make me feel as a nobody, I am just taking it all in like a sponge, I don’t want any more drama plus they will just stop at some point and disregard my existence as always.”

4.3. Self-Worth Valuation

Most of the participants self-confessed that there is a silver lining to their negative experiences, that being left out in the academic setting is not all that bad, that it makes someone realize their true worth as a person, encourage them to love their self more, and make opportunities for self improvement. It is illustrated in the following participants’ statements:

- “I am over with the crying and hurting and see these negative experiences as an opportunity to improve myself and prove them wrong.”
- “Most people would see me as slow learner, which I take advantage of, because they do not expect anything good from me.”
- “I know myself more than what they say of me, and I can’t wait to rub it on their faces what I can actually do.”
- “I am unique, and I know that my time will come for me to prove something worthwhile.”
- “This experience of mine makes me want to work more and spend my time to improve myself.”
- “I will make everything in my power to succeed in life, prayers and hardwork is all I need.”
- ✱ “I know I can do more to if I put my heart and soul into it, life is what we make it.”

Instances of being unwanted and left out in the class are quite common in any academic setting. Reasons could range from various sources, experiences, and circumstances. The situations which rooted from home and school often exacerbate the problem, with students having lesser confidence and seeing themselves as slow learners. With such term being used loosely, the students tend to conform to an identity they believe to possess or to the label they are given. By presenting them with limitations they tend to convince themselves that they are really what other people perceive them to be. Self-limiting behaviors are often devastating not only to the disposition of the student but to their overall goals and aspiration in the future. By limiting their options, they feel that they are only until that level and dare not explore further on what they could be in the future.

Most of the participants admitted that despite excluded by their peers and acknowledging their own shortcomings, they still understand the reason behind such actions. They feel the full blow of their insults and choose to respond positively to the situation. Often, when bombarded with such negativity, a person tends to see it as a situation requiring utmost understanding. They understand the situation very well that disrupting the order as it was presented, can often change the course of a routine or an established environment. The need to maintain such ideal environment comes at an expense of sacrificing one's happiness and trading it with the constant mockery. They also understand since they believe that a very good reason could explain such misfortune happening to them.

As a culmination, not every bad experience equates to a bad outcome. Sometimes, a person sees it as an opportunity. Opportunity to improve what they do, enhance what they know, and upgrade what they are. Such process takes time, realization, and effort, but when one's back is pressed against the wall, the claws come out and the inner beast comes shining through. Seeing oneself as person who needs improvement is the first step in truly changing for the better. It is a play on which side of the road one follows-- Is it the one that others designed for you or a path you are willing to take risks and make sacrifices. There is a silver lining in every situation, treating scenarios as opportunities and not roadblock to what a person can become in the future.

Conclusion

The result showed that these students shared experiences of being excluded due to their academic ability. They mostly end up leaving the academic circle as a major resort in escaping the feeling of being left out. Despite such unfortunate predicament, they aspire to do good in areas where they excel and slowly gain the confidence in believing in oneself. It is recommended that the schools place equal value and attention to all types of students. Further and in-depth studies are also recommended.

References

- Abedi, J. (2004). The No Child Left Behind Act and English Language Learners: Assessment and Accountability Issues. *Educational Researcher*. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033001004>
- Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews. In *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation: Fourth Edition*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch19>
- Ainin, S., Naqshbandi, M. M., Moghavvemi, S., & Jaafar, N. I. (2015). Facebook usage, socialization and academic performance. *Computers and Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2014.12.018>

- Al-Dubai, S. A. R., Al-Naggar, R. A., Alshagga, M. A., & Rampal, K. G. (2011). Stress and coping strategies of students in a medical faculty in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences*.
- Arifin, S. R. M. (2018). Ethical considerations in qualitative study. *International Journal of Care Scholars*.
- Cabanac, A., Perlovsky, L., Bonniot-Cabanac, M. C., & Cabanac, M. (2013). Music and academic performance. *Behavioural Brain Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbr.2013.08.023>
- Cassady, J. C., & Johnson, R. E. (2002). Cognitive test anxiety and academic performance. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.2001.1094>
- Cerbone, D. R. (2010). Understanding phenomenology. In *Understanding Phenomenology*. <https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil199316222>
- Connelly, L. M. (2010). What is phenomenology? In *Medsurg nursing : official journal of the Academy of Medical-Surgical Nurses*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1477175600000798>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2012). Basics of Qualitative Research (3rd ed.): Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory. In *Basics of Qualitative Research (3rd ed.): Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452230153>
- Creswell, J. W. (2003). Research design Qualitative quantitative and mixed methods approaches. *Research Design Qualitative Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. <https://doi.org/10.3109/08941939.2012.723954>
- Curcio, G., Ferrara, M., & De Gennaro, L. (2006). Sleep loss, learning capacity and academic performance. In *Sleep Medicine Reviews*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smrv.2005.11.001>
- Dalal, A. K., & Priya, K. R. (2016). Introduction to qualitative research. In *Qualitative Research on Illness, Wellbeing and Self-Growth: Contemporary Indian Perspectives*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315539829-7>
- Daley, D., & Birchwood, J. (2010). ADHD and academic performance: Why does ADHD impact on academic performance and what can be done to support ADHD children in the classroom? In *Child: Care, Health and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2214.2009.01046.x>
- Deasy, C., Coughlan, B., Pironom, J., Jourdan, D., & Mannix-McNamara, P. (2014). Psychological distress and coping amongst higher education students: A Mixed method enquiry. *PLoS ONE*. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0115193>
- Dolores, M., & Tongco, C. (2016). Purposive Sampling as a Tool for Informant Selection. *Ethnobotany Research & Applications*.
- Duckworth, A. L., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2005). Self-discipline outdoes IQ in predicting academic performance of adolescents. *Psychological Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2005.01641.x>
- El-Ghoroury, N. H., Galper, D. I., Sawaqdeh, A., & Bufka, L. F. (2012). Stress, coping, and barriers to wellness among psychology graduate students. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028768>
- Fares, J., Al Tabosh, H., Saadeddin, Z., El Mouhayyar, C., & Aridi, H. (2016). Stress, burnout and coping strategies in preclinical medical students. In *North American Journal of Medical Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.4103/1947-2714.177299>
- Florence, M. D., Asbridge, M., & Veugelers, P. J. (2008). Diet Quality and Academic Performance. *Journal of School Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2008.00288.x>
- Foureaux Koppensteiner, M. (2014). Automatic grade promotion and student performance: Evidence from Brazil. *Journal of Development Economics*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2013.12.007>
- Fraenkel, J. R., & Wallen, N. E. (2006). The Basic of Educational Research. In *How to design and evaluate resaerch in education with PowerWeb*.
- Ganyaupfu, E. M. (2013). Teaching Methods and Students' Academic Performance. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention ISSN (Online)*.
- Gibbons, C., Dempster, M., & Moutray, M. (2011). Stress, coping and satisfaction in nursing students. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2010.05495.x>
- Honicke, T., & Broadbent, J. (2016). The influence of academic self-efficacy on academic performance: A systematic review. In *Educational Research Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2015.11.002>

- Junco, R. (2012). In-class multitasking and academic performance. *Computers in Human Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.06.031>
- Junco, R., & Cotten, S. R. (2012). No A 4 U: The relationship between multitasking and academic performance. *Computers and Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2011.12.023>
- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. In *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031>
- Kirschner, P. A., & Karpinski, A. C. (2010). Facebook® and academic performance. *Computers in Human Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2010.03.024>
- Klein, A. (2015). No Child Left Behind: An Overview. *Education Week*.
- Layous, K., Davis, E. M., Garcia, J., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Cook, J. E., & Cohen, G. L. (2017). Feeling left out, but affirmed: Protecting against the negative effects of low belonging in college. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2016.09.008>
- Malterud, K. (2012). Systematic text condensation: A strategy for qualitative analysis. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1403494812465030>
- Menken, K. (2009). No child left behind and its effects on language policy. In *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190509090096>
- Mills, J., & Birks, M. (2017). Qualitative Methodology: A Practical Guide. In *Qualitative Methodology: A Practical Guide*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473920163>
- Mills, J., Birks, M., Mills, J., & Birks, M. (2017). Introducing Qualitative Research. In *Qualitative Methodology: A Practical Guide*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473920163.n1>
- Morrow, R., Rodriguez, A., & King, N. (2015). Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. *The Psychologist*.
- Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2>
- Paul, J. A., Baker, H. M., & Cochran, J. D. (2012). Effect of online social networking on student academic performance. *Computers in Human Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.06.016>
- Poropat, A. E. (2009). A Meta-Analysis of the Five-Factor Model of Personality and Academic Performance. *Psychological Bulletin*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014996>
- Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2010). "Fitting in" or "standing out": Workingclass students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920902878925>
- Richardson, M., Abraham, C., & Bond, R. (2012). Psychological correlates of university students' academic performance: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026838>
- Ritchie, J., & Ormston, R. (2014). The applications of qualitative methods to social research. In *Qualitative Research Practice: a Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*.
- Roberts, L. D. (2015). Ethical Issues in Conducting Qualitative Research in Online Communities. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2015.1008909>
- Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543>
- Symeonides, R., & Childs, C. (2015). The personal experience of online learning: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Computers in Human Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.05.015>
- Wilson, C. (2014). Semi-Structured Interviews. In *Interview Techniques for UX Practitioners*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-410393-1.00002-8>