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Academic and Psychological Adjustment, Coping Strategies, and Resilience among Mathematics Education Students Pursuing an Unchosen Degree Program: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Students pursuing unchosen university programs may experience academic pressure, emotional difficulties, and psychological adjustment challenges. This study explored coping strategies and resilience among six mathematics education students at Sultan Kudarat State University, Philippines. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. Ten themes emerged, encompassing external pressures, emotional challenges, academic demands, adaptation, social support, personal reflection, and motivation. Participants described initial reluctance but gradually developed acceptance and perseverance through supportive relationships and coping strategies. The findings emphasize the importance of academic counseling, peer mentoring, and supportive educational environments in promoting students' psychological adjustment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Choosing a university degree program influences students' academic experiences, psychological adjustment, and future aspirations. However, students may enter programs that do not reflect their personal interests because of parental expectations, financial limitations, or restricted educational opportunities. Research among Filipino college students has demonstrated relationships between parental influence, motivation for choosing an academic major, and satisfaction with the selected program [1]. These circumstances may create emotional and academic challenges, particularly for students pursuing mathematics education without initially choosing this field.

Psychological adjustment is important for students facing academic pressure and uncertainty about their educational choices. Students who experience limited autonomy may encounter motivational difficulties, while supportive learning environments can help them develop competence, confidence, and belonging. Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in supporting students' motivation and psychological functioning [2]. Understanding these factors is essential when examining how students adapt to an initially unchosen academic program.

Academic challenges may become more demanding when students must simultaneously manage difficult coursework and emotional concerns. Previous phenomenological research involving Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) Science students identified learning difficulties and coping strategies associated with challenging academic experiences [3]. Educational mentoring has also been investigated as an approach to strengthening students' resilience when facing adversity [4]. These studies highlight the relevance of academic assistance, social relationships, and coping resources in educational adjustment.

Despite existing research on academic motivation and student resilience, limited attention has been given to how prospective mathematics teachers psychologically adjust to degree programs that were not their initial preferences. In particular, their emotional experiences, coping strategies, and changing perceptions require qualitative investigation. Understanding these experiences may inform academic counseling, peer mentoring, and supportive educational practices. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the academic and psychological adjustment, coping strategies, and resilience of BSEd Mathematics students pursuing an initially unchosen degree program at Sultan Kudarat State University, Philippines.** Specifically, the study addressed two questions: (i) How do students describe their experiences of pursuing an unchosen mathematics education program? (ii) How do they interpret and cope with these experiences?.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of BSEd Mathematics students pursuing an initially unchosen academic program. This approach allowed participants to describe their academic challenges, emotional responses, and coping strategies based on their personal experiences.

2.2. Participants and Research Setting

The research was conducted at Sultan Kudarat State University – ACCESS Campus, Tacurong, Sultan Kudarat, Philippines, during the 2024–2025 academic year. Six BSEd

Mathematics students were selected through purposive sampling, comprising two second-year, two third-year, and two fourth-year students. Participants were eligible if they had completed at least one academic year, had not initially preferred mathematics education, and were willing to describe their experiences and coping strategies.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30–60 minutes. The interview guide was reviewed by experts and tested through a trial interview before data collection. Participants attended an orientation explaining the study objectives, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and withdrawal rights. Following informed consent, interviews were conducted and recorded to support accurate documentation.

2.4. Data Analysis

Interview narratives were examined using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in participants' experiences. The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's thematic approach, which supports systematic identification and interpretation of qualitative themes [5]. The analysis identified ten themes concerning external motivation, emotional adjustment, academic pressure, personal growth, support systems, reframing, faith, social connection, resilience, and progress-based motivation. These themes formed the basis of the Results and Discussion.

2.5. Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality and voluntary participation were emphasized throughout data collection. Participants could discontinue interviews at their request. Member checking was conducted to clarify participants' responses and support accurate representation of their experiences. The findings were interpreted within the context of the six participants rather than generalized to the wider mathematics education student population.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Overview of Students' Lived Experiences

The thematic analysis identified ten themes describing the experiences of six BSEd Mathematics students pursuing an initially unchosen degree program. These themes reflected external pressures, emotional difficulties, academic challenges, personal adjustment, and coping strategies. Participants' narratives also illustrated the importance of supportive relationships and changing perceptions of mathematics education.

Table 1 presents the ten themes and representative statements from the original interviews. The themes describe different aspects of participants' experiences rather than a fixed progression experienced by all students.

3.2. External Motivation and Limited Agency

Participants described entering mathematics education because of parental expectations, practical considerations, or limited alternatives rather than personal preference. One participant stated, “My parents decided for me. I didn’t want this course initially” (P3). This experience illustrates the tension between students' aspirations and the circumstances influencing their academic decisions. University degree selection involves different motivations, including personal interests, career opportunities, and external considerations

[6]. Social Cognitive Career Theory further explains how personal goals, self-efficacy, expected outcomes, and environmental conditions influence educational and career decisions [7]. Limited personal choice may contribute to difficulties in accepting an academic program. However, the participants' experiences do not establish that externally influenced decisions necessarily result in negative educational outcomes.

Table 1. Themes identified from the lived experiences of BSEd Mathematics students.

NO	THEME	REPRESENTATIVE PARTICIPANT STATEMENT
1	External Motivation and Limited Agency	"My parents decided for me. I didn't want this course initially." (P3)
2	Emotional Turmoil in Course Adjustment	"It is not my preferred course... I felt I would struggle to keep up." (P6)
3	Academic Pressure and Mental Load	"Too much information in Abstract Algebra... it's overwhelming." (P3)
4	Gradual Adaptation and Personal Growth	"Over time, I started to love Math." (P1)
5	Support Systems as Pillars of Endurance	"My cousin is also a Math major... my family motivated me." (P1)
6	Reframing the Unchosen	"I realized BSEd Math offers more opportunities." (P1)
7	Anchoring through Faith and Reflection	"When I feel frustrated, I pray... my heart lightens." (P1)
8	Coping through Connection	"We help each other find solutions." (P2)
9	Emerging Stronger	"I became more responsible... college requires discipline." (P5)
10	Progress as Motivation	"I'm proud of myself because I made it... I'll graduate on time." (P1)

3.3. Emotional Turmoil and Academic Pressure

The themes Emotional Turmoil in Course Adjustment and Academic Pressure and Mental Load revealed participants' uncertainty, anxiety, and difficulties managing academic expectations. One participant expressed concern about studying in a non-preferred program, while another described Abstract Algebra as overwhelming. College adjustment involves academic, emotional, social, and institutional dimensions. Previous research has demonstrated associations between these aspects of adjustment and students' academic experiences and persistence [8]. Comparable difficulties were reported in a phenomenological study involving BSEd-Science students at Sultan Kudarat State University, where demanding learning activities and academic challenges influenced students' experiences [3]. The findings highlight the importance of academic guidance for mathematics education students. Nevertheless, the present study did not directly measure psychological distress, academic performance, or the severity of students' learning difficulties.

3.4. Gradual Adaptation and Reframing the Unchosen

Gradual Adaptation and Personal Growth and Reframing the Unchosen demonstrated changes in how participants interpreted their academic circumstances. Some students gradually developed appreciation for mathematics education, while others recognised professional opportunities associated with the program. Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in supporting motivation [2]. Research on academic major satisfaction has also identified relationships between supportive college environments, psychological needs, and students' satisfaction with their academic programs [9]. Students' perceptions of an initially unchosen degree program may change through educational experiences and recognition of future

opportunities. However, the narratives do not demonstrate that all students experience the same degree of adjustment or satisfaction.

3.5. Support Systems, Faith, and Social Connections

Support Systems as Pillars of Endurance, Anchoring through Faith and Reflection, and Coping through Connection described how participants managed academic and emotional challenges. Family encouragement, supportive friendships, and personal reflection were important resources in their narratives. One participant explained that encouragement from a relative studying mathematics provided motivation, while another described working with classmates to find solutions. Research has highlighted the importance of social relationships and interpersonal support in students' adjustment to university life [10]. The findings are also consistent with the importance of relatedness and supportive learning environments in maintaining academic motivation [2]. Participants additionally described prayer and reflection as personal strategies for managing frustration. Although these strategies were meaningful to participants, the study did not compare their effectiveness or establish causal relationships between social support, faith, and academic outcomes.

3.6. Resilience, Self-Efficacy, and Progress as Motivation

Emerging Stronger and Progress as Motivation reflected participants' developing responsibility, confidence, and appreciation of academic milestones. Some students described becoming more disciplined and viewing academic achievements as encouragement to continue their studies. Research has identified academic self-efficacy as an important factor associated with university students' performance and adjustment [11]. Similarly, research published in the *ASEAN Journal of Educational Research and Technology* has examined relationships between self-efficacy and affective learning outcomes [12]. These studies provide a basis for interpreting the participants' descriptions of growing confidence and motivation. However, the present study did not use standardized instruments to measure resilience, self-efficacy, or changes in motivation. The findings therefore describe students' perceived personal development rather than demonstrating measurable improvements in psychological resilience.

3.7. Conceptual Framework of Students' Academic and Psychological Adjustment

Based on the ten identified themes, this study proposes a conceptual framework illustrating students' experiences of pursuing an initially unchosen mathematics education program (**Figure 1**). The framework organises the findings into four interconnected components: external influences, emotional and academic challenges, coping strategies and support systems, and perceived personal development. External influences, including parental expectations and limited personal choice, were associated with initial emotional difficulties and academic pressure. Participants described managing these experiences through family encouragement, peer relationships, faith, reflection, and gradual acceptance of their educational circumstances. These experiences were accompanied by narratives of growing responsibility, motivation, and appreciation of mathematics education.

The framework highlights how external circumstances, personal interpretations, and supportive relationships appeared together in participants' experiences. It may inform the development of academic counseling, peer mentoring, and inclusive student support. However, this framework represents an interpretation of qualitative findings rather than an empirically tested model of causal relationships.

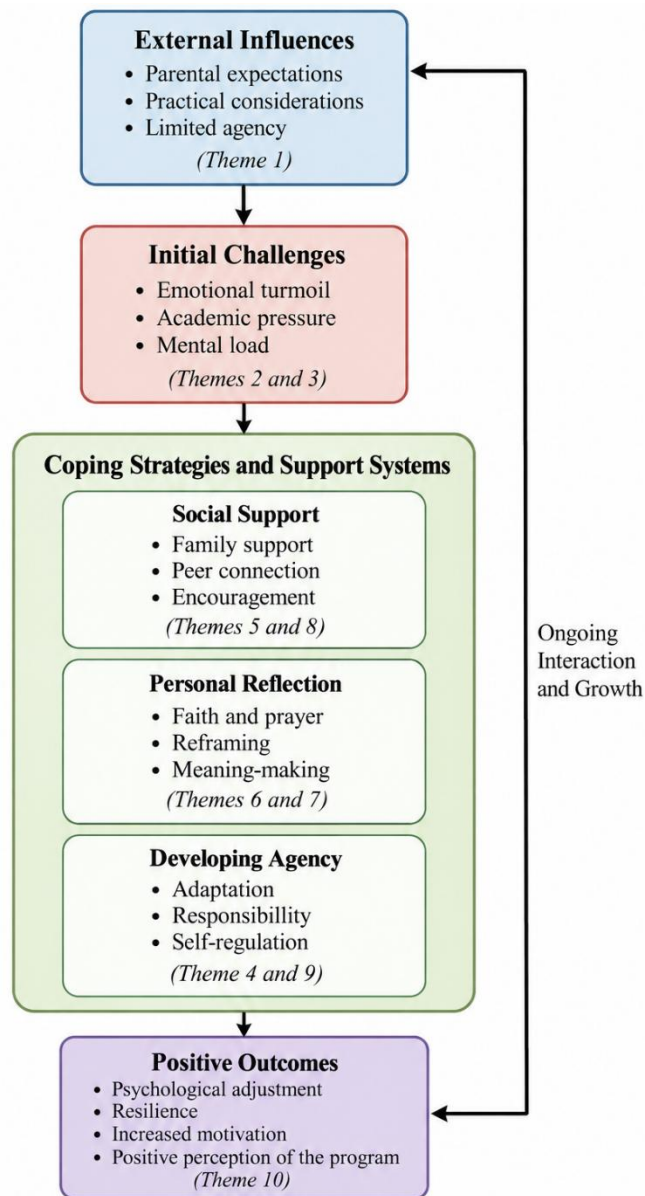


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of academic and psychological adjustment among mathematics education students pursuing an initially unchosen degree program.

3.8. Educational Implications and Limitations

Mathematics teacher education programs should consider the circumstances influencing students' academic choices and provide opportunities for academic advising, mentoring, and peer support. Such assistance may help students manage mathematical coursework, explore professional opportunities, and develop personal meaning in their educational experiences. Previous research involving secondary school students has explored educational mentoring as a means of supporting students' responses to adversity [4]. Nevertheless, the present study did not evaluate a mentoring intervention, and recommendations should be treated as educational implications rather than demonstrated intervention effects. The study involved six purposively selected participants from one university. Consequently, the findings provide contextual understanding rather than statistically generalisable conclusions. The study also relied on participants' retrospective accounts and did not include independent measurements

of academic achievement or psychological resilience. Future research may examine students from different mathematics teacher education institutions and use longitudinal interviews to investigate how their experiences, motivation, and academic adjustment change throughout their studies.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of six mathematics education students pursuing an initially unchosen degree program. Ten themes revealed external pressures, emotional difficulties, academic demands, adaptation, social support, reflection, and emerging motivation. Participants described initial reluctance but also reported developing acceptance, responsibility, and perseverance through supportive relationships and recognition of academic progress. Academic advising, peer support, and inclusive learning environments deserve attention in mathematics teacher education. Because the study involved six purposively selected students from one institution, the findings remain context-specific. Future studies should examine similar experiences across institutions and over longer periods of study.

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6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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