

The Essence of Perseverance in the Lives of Child Laborers

Chealsy A. Nieva¹, Maria Theresa E. Alto¹, Ysabel Roelle R. Ona¹

¹University of Perpetual Help System DALTA Calamba Campus, Laguna, Philippines

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Email of Corresponding Author: nievachealsyyy@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the essence of perseverance in the lives of Filipino child laborers who are compelled to work due to poverty, disrupted education, and familial responsibility. With over one million children engaged in labor in the Philippines, many in hazardous environments, understanding how they endure daily hardships remains an important gap in existing literature. Guided by Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1991), the study examines how child laborers form attitudes, motivations, and intentions that shape their perseverance. Specifically, it addresses the following central questions: the difficulties they encounter, how they manifest perseverance, the personal goals they set, and the motivations that sustain them amid challenging conditions. Using a qualitative design through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researchers conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with six out-of-school child laborers aged 12 to 17 in Calamba, Laguna. Findings revealed nine central themes capturing their lived experiences: persistent physical strain, exposure to workplace risks, emotional resilience, adaptive learning, family-driven motivation, goal-setting behavior, and future-oriented aspirations. The results show that perseverance is not merely survival but a complex interplay of responsibility, hope, and cultural values. These findings underscore the need for strengthened child protection policies, accessible education, psychosocial support, and economic interventions that address the systemic roots of child labor. Ultimately, the study highlights the resilience of young workers while calling attention to the urgent need to reduce labor dependence and safeguard children's rights and development.

Keywords: Child Labor, Perseverance, Resilience, Lived Experiences, Family Motivation, Future Aspirations, Adaptive Coping

1. Introduction

This study examines the essence of perseverance in the lives of child laborers, focusing on how Filipino working children endure poverty, disrupted education, hazardous work, family responsibility, and limited opportunities. It frames perseverance not merely as individual determination but as a lived response shaped by socioeconomic hardship, cultural expectations, family obligation, and the hope for a better future. Using Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior, the study seeks to understand how child laborers form attitudes, motivations, perceived control, and future-oriented intentions despite difficult labor conditions.

Children engage in labor not primarily by choice but as a response to social and economic pressures that require them to support family survival. In many communities, child laborers experience demanding routines, limited educational opportunities, early maturity, and physical and emotional hardship. Perseverance, in this context, refers to the ability to continue pursuing goals despite obstacles; however, among Filipino working children, it often emerges from necessity rather than personal ambition. It reflects adaptability and tenacity as children continue working while hoping to support their families and, in some cases, pursue education (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). Child labor remains a significant global and national concern. According to the International Labour Organization (2021), approximately 160 million children are engaged in labor worldwide, many under hazardous conditions that threaten their health and safety. In the Philippines, the Philippine Statistics Authority (2023) reported that more than 1 million children aged 5 to 17 were working, with about 678,000 exposed to dangerous labor environments. While previous studies commonly emphasize negative consequences such as school dropout, malnutrition, injury, and exploitation, fewer studies examine how child laborers themselves internalize perseverance and whether it becomes a source of resilience, a coping mechanism, or a foundation for future hope.

The literature shows that child labor is intensified by poverty, disrupted schooling, weak social protection, and household economic distress. Habib et al. (2024) identified economic hardship, school closures, increased demand for child labor, parental loss, and poor social protection as key risk factors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, UNICEF and the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2021) emphasized that millions of children worldwide continue working, often while balancing school responsibilities and family survival. World Vision (2024) also described children who work early in farms, factories, and other settings while remaining motivated by hopes for a better future. In the Philippine context,

perseverance among working children is closely tied to poverty and familial responsibility. The Philippine Statistics Authority (2023) reported that many children aged 5–17 work long hours while attempting to continue education, reflecting both resilience and systemic poverty. Mercado and Quinto (2021) found that Filipino child laborers continued supporting their families during the COVID-19 pandemic despite hunger, fatigue, and health risks. Gasingan (2025) further emphasized that economic pressure, limited access to education, and other socioeconomic issues push children into labor, making resilience both a survival mechanism and a condition linked to negative health and developmental outcomes. Psychological resilience is a major element of perseverance among working children. Habib et al. (2024) noted that the pandemic intensified the vulnerability of child laborers through school closures, economic instability, and reduced support systems. Mercado and Quinto (2021) emphasized that Filipino working children persist despite hunger, fatigue, and risk because hope for education and a better future function as a motivational anchor. Panaligan and Rojo (2022) also showed that children engaged in survival practices such as selling goods and recycling materials when household income declined, with local government and religious support helping reduce psychological burden. The literature also presents perseverance as a moral and cultural response. The Philippine Statistics Authority (2020) found that many children engage in hazardous or exploitative labor due to the need to support their households. ILO Philippines (2023) explained that Filipino working children's perseverance is connected to moral socialization, where familial sacrifice is embedded in cultural context. Tuason and Teresa (2021) similarly emphasized *pagpupunyagi* and *pakikipagkapwa* as coping mechanisms that allow families and children to withstand socioeconomic hardship.

Globally, child labor is sustained by poverty, unsafe work arrangements, weak protection systems, and exploitative supply chains. Adebayo (2023) described how children in Nigeria work in hazardous lithium mining due to family economic need, while Doyle (2023) reported that child labor remains hidden in fashion supply chains involving commodities such as cotton, gold, rubber, and leather. UNICEF (2020) also reported that children in sectors such as garment and footwear production experience long working hours, unsafe environments, malnutrition, violence, and social neglect, while ILO and UNICEF (2021) emphasized the harmful impact of these conditions on healthy growth and development. In the Philippines, child labor is shaped by household poverty, limited access to education, and hazardous livelihood conditions. The Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department (CPBRD, 2023) documented that over 800,000 Filipino children worked from 2019 to 2021, many in unsafe conditions and with interrupted schooling. Araos, Melad, and Orbeta (2022) found that economic hardship often forces children to assume labor responsibilities, resulting in educational interruptions and nutritional deficiencies that affect cognitive and physical development. Rafer (2020) also showed that child miners in Paracale, Camarines Norte were motivated by family pressure and dreams of a better life, despite exposure to serious health risks. Locally, the study focuses on six out-of-school child laborers aged 12 to 17 in Calamba, Laguna, as defined by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2020). The study excludes child laborers who remain enrolled in school because its emphasis is on children whose education has been disrupted by employment. Through in-depth qualitative inquiry, the study seeks to capture the social, psychological, and physical consequences of child work, as well as the motivations, coping strategies, and aspirations that shape their perseverance.

This study is grounded in Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, which explains how behavior is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. The theory assumes that behavioral intention is the strongest predictor of action, and that intention is shaped by how individuals evaluate a behavior, how they perceive social pressure, and how much control they believe they have over the behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Guerin et al., 2020). In the context of child labor, the theory helps explain how working children develop the intention to persist despite hardship through personal beliefs, family and community expectations, and perceived control over their circumstances. Using this theory, perseverance is viewed not only as a personal characteristic but also as a response shaped by beliefs, social pressure, and perceived personal control. Child laborers' attitudes toward work, their sense of responsibility to family, and their belief in their ability to endure adversity influence how they continue working and how they imagine their future. The framework is supported by studies emphasizing resilience and qualitative approaches in understanding adversity, including Mutya et al. (2022), who identified commitment, self-discipline, and pursuit of better opportunities among working students, and Gagani and Mananay (2024), who highlighted personal growth and adaptability during crises. The International Labour Organization's (2023) framework also underscored the importance of resilience in addressing child labor and supporting children's development and future aspirations.

Existing studies largely focus on the harmful consequences of child labor, including school dropout, malnutrition, physical injuries, hazardous work, psychological stress, and social neglect. However, limited attention has been given to how child laborers personally understand and internalize perseverance. This creates a gap in understanding whether perseverance among child laborers functions only as a survival strategy or whether it also supports resilience, goal-setting, and future hope. The study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of child laborers and examining the difficulties they face, how they manifest perseverance, how they set personal goals, and what motivations sustain them. The central question asks: What is the essence of the lived experiences of children who are engaged in labor as part of their everyday lives? By focusing on the voices of out-of-school child laborers, the study provides a deeper understanding of how perseverance is shaped by hardship, family duty, psychological resilience, cultural values, and structural barriers.

This study aligns with SDG 1 – No Poverty because child labor is repeatedly linked to household poverty, economic pressure, and family survival. It also supports SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being by addressing the physical, emotional, and psychological consequences of hazardous labor among children. The study connects strongly with SDG 4 – Quality Education because it focuses on out-of-school child laborers whose education has been disrupted by work, as emphasized by UNICEF (2020), CPBRD (2023), and Philippine Statistics Authority (2023). The study is also relevant to SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth because it examines exploitative and hazardous forms of work that affect children's development and rights. It contributes to SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions by emphasizing the need for stronger child protection systems, policy support, and enforcement of children's rights. Finally, it relates to SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals because the literature highlights the importance of coordinated efforts among barangays, local government units, schools, NGOs, and support institutions in addressing child labor and promoting child well-being.

The study contributes to public health sustainability by emphasizing the physical exhaustion, hazardous exposure, malnutrition, emotional distress, and psychological strain experienced by child laborers. It supports educational sustainability by calling attention to disrupted schooling and the need for accessible education as part of long-term solutions to child labor. It also contributes to socio-economic sustainability by showing how child labor is rooted in poverty, family survival, limited opportunities, and structural inequality. The study further supports policy and governance sustainability by providing insights that may guide LGUs, NGOs, schools, and decision-makers in strengthening child protection measures, reducing social pressure that sustains child labor, and improving family access to support services. It also contributes to community and institutional sustainability by encouraging coordinated interventions that protect children's rights, support psychosocial welfare, and transform perseverance from mere survival into access to education, development, and long-term well-being.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative research design through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Qualitative research was appropriate because it examined meanings, feelings, and behaviors in depth to understand human experiences rather than numerical data (Hassan, 2024). Phenomenology focused on individuals' ordinary experiences and how they made sense of these experiences (McLeod, 2024). IPA, developed by Jonathan Smith in the 1990s, combined phenomenology with hermeneutics and ideography to examine how people constructed and assigned meaning to their experiences, especially during adversity or personal change (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This approach suited the study because it aimed to understand how child laborers interpreted hardship, resilience, and perseverance through their own narratives.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Calamba, Laguna. This locale was selected because the participants were child laborers residing in the area. The focus on this specific location allowed the researchers to examine the lived experiences of out-of-school working children within a defined local context, although it also limited the generalizability of the findings to other areas.

2.3 Participants of the Study

The participants were six (6) child laborers aged 12 to 17 years old, as defined by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2020). The study was open to both male and female participants, provided that they resided in Calamba, Laguna. Child laborers who were currently enrolled in school were excluded because the study focused specifically on those whose education had been fully interrupted by work. This criterion allowed the researchers to better understand how perseverance developed among out-of-school working children.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study used purposive sampling to select participants with direct experience in child labor. Following Creswell and Poth's (2018) guidance for phenomenological studies, a small group of participants was selected to allow in-depth exploration of their experiences, with the possibility of adding more participants if needed to reach data saturation. Recent literature also supports this flexible approach, emphasizing that qualitative sample sizes should be guided by the depth and completeness of data rather than fixed numerical requirements (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Purposive sampling involved intentionally selecting participants based on specific criteria and the researcher's judgment (Bisht, 2024). This method ensured that the participants could provide meaningful narratives about early employment, disrupted education, and perseverance.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a set of open-ended, semi-structured interview questions. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate because they provided a guided set of questions while allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes during the conversation (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). The finalized instrument contained twelve guiding questions, with

follow-up questions generated based on participants' responses. This format followed the approach described by Saepudin Mashuri et al. (2022), which emphasized that semi-structured questions allow participants to express their thoughts fully while maintaining the direction and depth of the study. The interview questionnaire was developed in consultation with the academic adviser and was validated to ensure alignment with the objectives of the study.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers identified eligible participants based on the study criteria. Informed consent was obtained from both the participants and their legal guardians after they were given a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and right to withdraw at any time. Individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted in safe and private locations according to participant availability. Open-ended questions allowed participants to freely share their experiences, and audio recordings were used with consent to ensure accuracy. The use of six participants was aligned with contemporary qualitative research guidance, which recognizes that small purposively selected samples can generate rich, in-depth, and meaningful data when the study focuses on lived experiences and intensive interview analysis (Guest et al., 2020; Hennik & Kaiser 2022).

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study used thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes from the qualitative data (Braun et al., 2023). The researchers followed the six-step process of thematic analysis, which involved familiarization with the data, organization of significant responses into initial codes, grouping of codes into possible themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining themes and sub-themes, and preparing a report presenting the final themes and interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). This method enabled the researchers to organize the participants' narratives and interpret how perseverance was formed, expressed, and sustained in their daily lives.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The researchers followed the ethical standards of the Psychological Association of the Philippines (PAP, 2022). Since the participants were minors, informed consent was obtained from both the child participants and their legal guardians before data collection. Participants and guardians were informed about the objectives, methodology, scope, voluntary participation, and right to withdraw without negative consequences. The researchers prioritized the psychological welfare of the participants, and psychological first aid was made available in cases of emotional distress. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, personal data were securely stored, and physical files were disposed of properly after data collection and validation. The researchers also informed participants about possible privacy risks related to recorded or electronic interviews and handled all information in accordance with the PAP Code of Ethics (2022) and broader data protection principles.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Difficulties Encountered by Child Laborers in Work

3.1.1 Adaptation to Work Hardships

The results showed that several participants had become accustomed to their work despite its difficulty. Participants described their tasks as manageable because they had already developed familiarity with the routine. Others reported working long hours, beginning as early as 3:00 AM or 4:00 AM, while some started in the afternoon and continued with minimal rest. These accounts show that child laborers experience physically demanding schedules and repeated tasks as part of their daily livelihood. These findings indicate that adaptation to hardship becomes a learned response among child laborers. Their perseverance emerges largely from necessity rather than choice, as they continue working despite fatigue and discomfort. This supports prior research showing that perseverance among Filipino child laborers is shaped by economic constraints, cultural expectations, and systemic poverty (Mercado & Quinto, 2021; Habib et al., 2024; PSA, 2023). It also reflects resilience developed through repeated exposure to difficult work conditions (Mercado & Quinto, 2021; PSA, 2023).

3.1.2 Physical Exhaustion and Exposure to Workplace Hazards

The participants also reported physical exhaustion and exposure to hazardous conditions. Their experiences included burns from hot oil, exposure to extreme heat, risks from sharp tools, handling live animals, lack of sleep, body pain, dizziness, fatigue, and physically heavy tasks such as construction-related work and carrying materials. These findings show that the participants' work involved both physical strain and safety risks. These conditions reveal that child laborers' perseverance involves both physical endurance and psychological adjustment. Despite the dangers, the participants continued working because the work was necessary for survival and family support. This finding aligns with Habib et al. (2024) and Human Rights Watch (2021), who noted that children exposed to hazardous work develop resilience as a coping mechanism. Human Rights Watch (2021) also emphasized that child laborers worldwide face occupational risks that contribute to physical and psychological strain.

3.2 Manifestations of Perseverance and Future-Oriented Attitudes

3.2.1 Perseverance Through Family Support

The results showed that family and close companions served as important sources of strength for the participants. Some participants were motivated by their mothers, siblings, guardians, or relatives, while others found support from people they worked with. Their perseverance was strongly connected to the desire to help, repay, and support their families. These findings suggest that perseverance is relational and socially grounded. The participants did not persist only for themselves but also because of their sense of responsibility toward loved ones. This supports the view that perseverance among Filipino child laborers is closely tied to family relationships and cultural values (ILO, 2023; Mercado & Quinto, 2021; Habib et al., 2024). ILO (2023) also noted that Filipino children are socialized to value sacrifice for family welfare, which strengthens resilience despite risks and fatigue.

3.2.2 Aspirations for a Better Future

The participants expressed future-oriented goals, including becoming a police officer, lifting their family out of poverty, studying through TESDA, establishing a shop, and attempting to return to school. These aspirations show that their perseverance was sustained by hopes for education, stable employment, and improved living conditions for themselves and their families. These results indicate that future aspirations function as a motivational anchor for child laborers. Their dreams help them endure difficult circumstances and maintain a sense of direction despite hardship. This aligns with UNICEF and ILO (2021), who noted that hope for a better future strengthens resilience among working children.

3.3 Personal Goals and Milestones that Sustain Perseverance

3.3.1 Personal Growth and Self-Improvement

The findings showed that some participants associated perseverance with changing harmful behaviors and improving themselves. Participants mentioned wanting to stop vaping, avoid negative habits, change past behavior, and improve their attitude. These responses show that perseverance was not limited to enduring work but also involved self-reflection and personal transformation. These results suggest that child laborers view personal improvement as part of their effort to build a better future. Their aspirations are connected not only to individual growth but also to the desire to help their families. This supports the idea that familial responsibility reinforces perseverance and long-term planning (ILO, 2023; Mercado & Quinto, 2021). The findings also reflect psychological resilience, as participants showed introspection and emotional maturation in response to hardship (Habib et al., 2024; Mercado & Quinto, 2021).

3.3.2 Financial Responsibility and Saving

The participants also demonstrated financial responsibility by saving money, giving earnings to family members, and continuing to work despite difficulties. Some participants described saving for family needs, while others explained that their earnings were used to help their household. These findings show that saving and resource management were practical expressions of perseverance. These results indicate that perseverance is reinforced by forward-thinking behavior. The participants' ability to manage limited earnings reflects discipline, responsibility, and concern for future stability. This aligns with ILO (2023), which recognized children's financial planning as part of resilience in difficult circumstances.

3.4 Motivations that Stimulate Perseverance

3.4.1 Family as Motivation

The results showed that family was the strongest source of motivation for the participants. They identified parents, siblings, grandparents, and other family members as reasons for continuing to work. Some also mentioned friends as sources of encouragement, but family remained the central motivation. These findings show that perseverance is strongly shaped by moral and cultural expectations. For the participants, work was not only a means of earning but also a way of fulfilling responsibility to the family. This supports research emphasizing the role of moral and cultural imperatives in shaping perseverance among Filipino working children (ILO, 2023; Tuason, 2021; Mercado & Quinto, 2021). ILO (2023) also reported that cultural norms in the Philippines encourage children to prioritize family welfare.

3.4.2 Striving for Personal Needs

The findings also showed that some participants were motivated by personal needs, such as wanting to buy a cellphone or personal items using their own earnings. These goals reflected their desire to achieve small personal milestones through the money they worked hard to earn. These results suggest that personal motivation complements family-oriented responsibility. While family remained the primary driver, personal goals also encouraged the participants to continue working. This dual motivation reinforces consistent effort in challenging circumstances (Mercado & Quinto, 2021).

3.4.3 Prioritizing Family Needs

The participants consistently expressed that family needs came before their own. Some stated that they prioritized their family over themselves, helped their mother by selling, and gave their earnings to family members. These findings reveal that their daily decisions about work and money were shaped by a family-first orientation. These results highlight perseverance as a moral obligation rooted in family responsibility. The participants' willingness to sacrifice personal needs

shows how cultural values and economic hardship combine to sustain child labor. Habib et al. (2024) emphasized that this sense of responsibility supports resilience and helps children endure physically and emotionally demanding work.

3.5 Overall Essence of Perseverance among Child Laborers

Overall, the results showed that perseverance among child laborers is shaped by endurance, adaptation, aspiration, family support, personal growth, financial responsibility, and moral duty. The participants' experiences revealed that perseverance is not merely survival but an active process of continuing, adjusting, hoping, and taking responsibility despite difficult conditions. The findings indicate that perseverance among child laborers is both personal and collective. It is personal because it involves self-improvement, future goals, and emotional resilience; it is collective because it is sustained by family obligation, cultural values, and the desire to support loved ones. Therefore, the essence of perseverance in the lives of child laborers lies in their ability to endure hardship while holding on to responsibility, hope, and the possibility of a better future.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concludes that perseverance among child laborers is shaped by hardship, family responsibility, personal aspiration, financial discipline, and cultural values. The nine emerging themes show that child laborers endure fatigue, hazards, fear, and disrupted education while maintaining hope for schooling, skilled work, migration, and family upliftment. Family was identified as the strongest driver of perseverance, as children worked primarily to support parents, siblings, or grandparents. The findings also affirm the relevance of the Theory of Planned Behavior, as the children's persistence was influenced by their attitudes toward work, family and community expectations, and perceived control through coping, saving, and adaptation. However, the study also emphasizes that perseverance should not romanticize child labor, since it reflects deeper conditions of poverty, exploitation, and limited opportunity.

The study recommends strengthened intervention from government agencies and local government units, particularly DOLE and DSWD, through stronger implementation of Republic Act No. 7610 and the proposed B.A.T.A. Program, which integrates educational bridging, awareness campaigns, child safety and resilience workshops, and livelihood support for families. Schools should provide alternative learning systems, modular options, flexible schedules, teacher training, guidance services, and referral mechanisms for working children. Families should be supported through livelihood programs and financial literacy, while non-government and faith-based organizations may expand scholarships, mentorship, feeding initiatives, awareness campaigns, home visitation, and psychosocial support. Future researchers are encouraged to examine the long-term educational, psychological, and socioeconomic outcomes of former child laborers using larger samples, comparative regional studies, mixed-method designs, and evaluations of intervention models such as the B.A.T.A. Program.

The study was limited to six child laborers aged 12 to 17 in Calamba, Laguna; therefore, the findings may not fully represent the varied experiences of all child laborers in other areas. Its qualitative design prioritized depth and richness of narratives rather than broad generalization, consistent with the view that smaller samples can provide meaningful qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Nowell et al, 2021). The study also excluded child laborers who were still enrolled in school, as it focused only on those whose education had been disrupted by employment.

Compliance with ethical standards

This study complied with institutional ethical standards and the principles of the Psychological Association of the Philippines (PAP, 2022). Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from the child participants and their legal guardians, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Ethical procedures were observed before data collection, and the authors declare no conflict of interest, acknowledge all contributions, and affirm responsibility for the originality, accuracy, copyright, and integrity of the manuscript.

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