Unseen Struggles: Understanding the Burden of Parents Raising Children with Multiple Disabilities

Nancyvilla P. Galo [a] & Bryan L. Cancio [b]

[a]*nancyvilla.galo@hcdc.edu.ph* & [b]*bryan.cancio@hcdc.edu.ph*
[a]*San Jose Elementary School, Santo Tomas Davao Del Norte 8112, Philippines*
[b]*Professor of Graduate School at Holy Cross of Davao College, Poblacion, Davao City 8000, Philippines*

Abstract

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of parents raising children with multiple disabilities, focusing on the challenges of caregiving, healthcare access, educational barriers, and institutional support gaps. The research aimed to provide a localized understanding of how financial strain, emotional distress, and systemic limitations impact parental resilience. By conducting in-depth interviews with six parents from Santo Tomas, Davao Region, the study utilized thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in their experiences. The findings revealed that parents experience intense physical and emotional exhaustion, compounded by limited healthcare accessibility, inadequate special education programs, and bureaucratic hurdles in government assistance. Parents emphasized financial hardships, social stigma, and the lack of communal support as primary obstacles affecting their ability to provide adequate care for their children. Additionally, the study highlighted key coping strategies, such as building emotional resilience, relying on informal support networks, and advocating for disability rights, as essential mechanisms for overcoming these challenges. Despite institutional failures, parents exhibited remarkable adaptability, continuously seeking solutions within their limited resources to improve their children's quality of life. This study underscores the urgent need for policy reforms, increased government funding, and inclusive education initiatives to ensure that families raising children with disabilities receive equitable access to medical, financial, and educational support. Furthermore, local government units, healthcare providers, and community organizations must take active roles in reducing stigma, promoting disability-inclusive policies, and developing sustainable intervention programs. While the challenges remain significant, empowering parents through targeted assistance and structured support systems can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for families navigating disability care.

Keywords: disability caregiving; parental resilience; healthcare accessibility; special education barriers; government assistance; social inclusion

Introduction

Raising children with multiple disabilities presents profound challenges that extend beyond typical parenting experiences. Neely-Barnes and Dia (2008) highlight that families in such situations often face significant emotional and financial difficulties due to inadequate access to healthcare, education, and social services. Shahali et al. (2024) emphasize the compounded struggles these parents endure, which not only affect their well-being but also the overall development of their children.

The challenges faced by parents raising children with multiple disabilities are a pressing concern recognized globally. In the United States, organizations such as the National Center for Parent Information and Resources emphasize the critical need for tailored support systems to address the unique burdens these families encounter. Studies conducted by Shahali et al. (2024) highlight the physical, emotional, and social health challenges experienced by parents, underscoring the importance of comprehensive interventions.

Parents raising children with multiple disabilities in Saudi Arabia encounter significant challenges that reflect the global struggles associated with caregiving. According to Brown and Rodger (2020), these parents often experience significant emotional strain due to the lack of accessible healthcare and educational resources tailored to their children's needs. Similarly, McConnell and Savage (2021) emphasize the financial hardships and social isolation that arise from caregiving responsibilities, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems.

Researchers have observed that while some initiatives, such as community-based support programs and advocacy for inclusive policies, have been implemented, they often lack the necessary scope and resources to make a significant impact. Studies, including those by Shahali et al. (2024) and Abdullah and Tuncay (2024), emphasize the need for a more collaborative approach involving healthcare providers, policymakers, and social organizations to create tailored interventions.

In the Philippines, the challenges faced by parents raising children with multiple disabilities are deeply rooted in systemic gaps in healthcare, education, and social services. Lasco et al. (2024) highlight that parents often struggle with financial burdens and emotional strain due to limited access to specialized care and support systems. Jacinto et al. (2021) emphasize the societal stigma and lack of awareness surrounding disabilities, which further isolate these families and hinder their ability to seek help. In Santo Tomas, Davao Region, these issues are magnified by local socio-economic constraints, as observed in studies focusing on rural caregiving dynamics.

This study is significant in its efforts to address the complex challenges faced by parents raising children with multiple disabilities, particularly in Santo Tomas, Davao Region. It fills a critical research gap by exploring the lived experiences of these parents, offering insights into their emotional, financial, and social burdens. If these challenges remain unaddressed, they could lead to heightened distress, instability, and isolation, further straining local support systems.

Statement of the Problem

Raising children with multiple disabilities presents numerous challenges that significantly impact parents' daily lives. These experiences involve navigating emotional strain, financial hardships, and social isolation while meeting their children’s specialized needs. In Santo Tomas, Davao Region, parents encounter additional struggles due to limited access to healthcare, education, and community support, which intensify their caregiving burden. Despite their resilience, little research exists to capture the depth of their lived experiences in this specific context.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do parents raising children with multiple disabilities in Santo Tomas, Davao Region describe their day-to-day experiences and the challenges they face?
2. What emotional and social adjustments have parents made in response to their caregiving responsibilities?
3. How do parents perceive the support systems available to them, and what role do these systems play in their lives?

Theoretical Framework

This study aligns with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman in 1984, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environment. It highlights the importance of cognitive appraisal (how stressors are perceived), coping mechanisms (strategies to manage stress), and environmental factors (external resources and support systems).

In the context of this study, the lived experiences of parents raising children with multiple disabilities are explored through this lens, highlighting how they perceive caregiving stress, adapt to their circumstances, and navigate environmental factors such as healthcare, education, and community support. The theory provides a descriptive foundation for examining how stress impacts parents and how their coping mechanisms reflect their interactions with personal and social resources. By using this lens, the research offers a structured understanding of the interplay between individual resilience and environmental challenges, contributing to actionable solutions that address their unique needs.

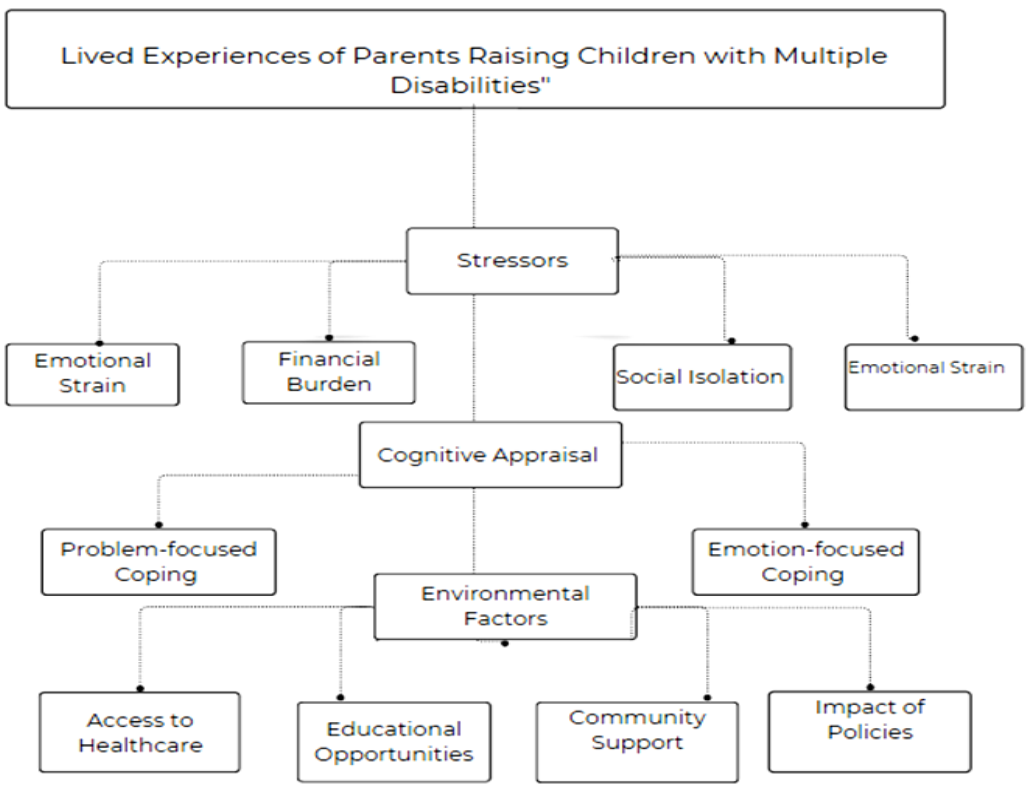

Figure 1. Unseen Struggles: Understanding the Burden of Parents Raising Children with Multiple Disabilities

Method

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of parents raising children with multiple disabilities in Santo Tomas, Davao Region, Philippines. Guided by Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (2016), the study sought to understand the emotional, social, and practical realities faced by these parents, using the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by Lazarus and Folkman as its theoretical framework. This model provided a lens to examine how parents appraise and respond to stressors through both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. Six participants were purposively selected based on their direct caregiving roles, representing a range of socio-economic contexts. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, ensuring depth and flexibility in capturing personal narratives while maintaining methodological rigor through ethical safeguards, informed consent, and participant anonymity.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which enabled the identification of key themes such as emotional strain, adaptive coping mechanisms, and systemic challenges. Interview transcripts were coded and categorized into broader themes that aligned with the Transactional Model, highlighting how parents' stress appraisals, coping resources, and external support systems interact over time. The research setting—a rural municipality with limited services—provided crucial context to these narratives, deepening the understanding of how socio-cultural and economic factors shape coping processes. Triangulation with community records and literature enhanced the credibility of findings, while constant comparison ensured thematic coherence and analytical depth. The results offer valuable insights into the stress and resilience of caregiving parents and inform strategies for more inclusive and supportive community interventions.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the qualitative data gathered to achieve the study's objectives. The data was sourced from in-depth interviews with parents raising children with multiple disabilities in Santo Tomas, Davao Region. These interviews were manually transcribed and translated into English to ensure accuracy and preserve the authenticity of the participants' experiences. Each transcript was carefully examined, allowing for the identification of significant statements that capture the realities of caregiving.

Through systematic analysis, key themes emerged from recurring patterns in the interviews, reflecting common struggles shared by the participants. Thematic analysis was applied to categorize these findings, offering a structured approach to understanding the emotional, financial, social, and institutional challenges encountered by parents. By organizing the resulting themes, the study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences of caregivers, highlighting areas where interventions and support systems are most needed.

Further, the findings presented in this section serve to deepen the discourse on disability caregiving, bringing attention to the urgent need for inclusive policies, healthcare accessibility, and community-driven support. Addressing these challenges can lead to improved assistance programs and a more compassionate approach to helping families raising children with multiple disabilities.

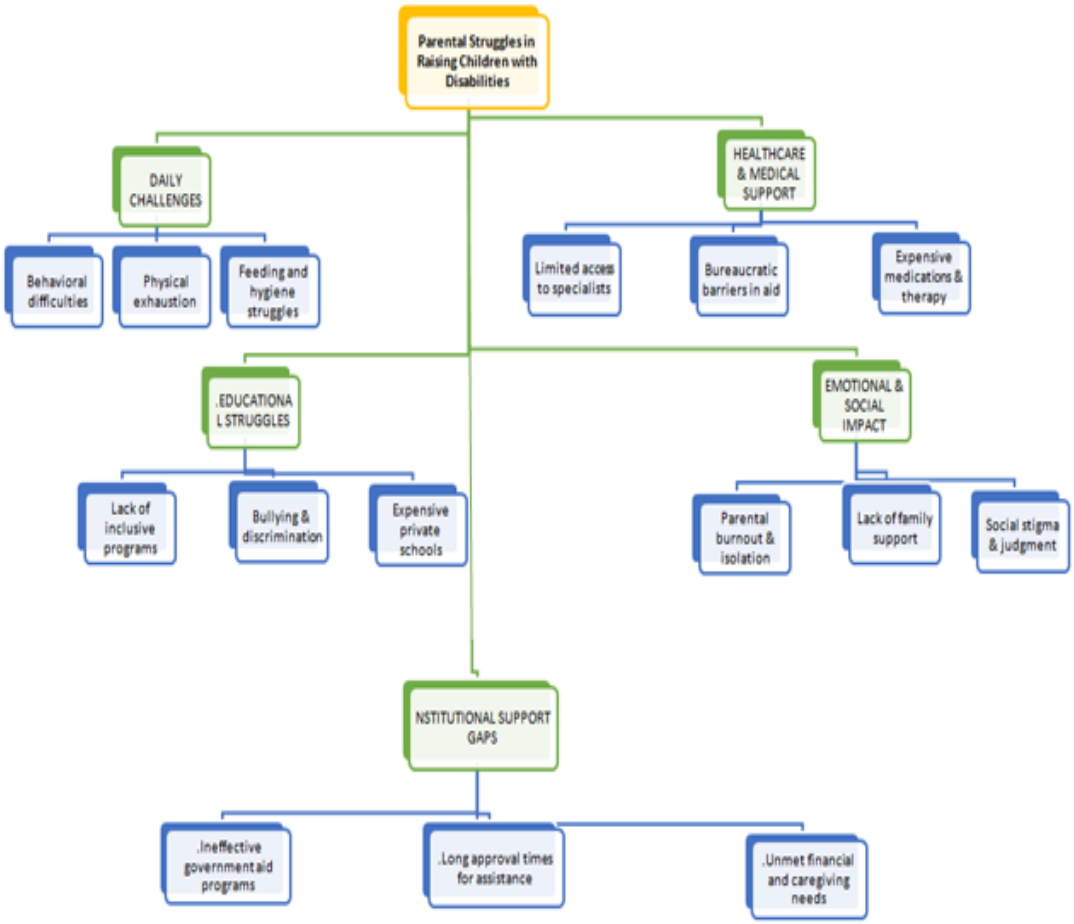

Figure 2. Presents a structured framework categorizing the challenges faced by parents raising children with multiple disabilities in Santo Tomas, Davao Region.

Daily Challenges

Raising children with multiple disabilities places an immense physical and emotional burden on caregivers, forcing them into exhausting daily routines centered entirely around their children's needs. Parents must manage feeding difficulties, hygiene maintenance, mobility assistance, and behavioral challenges, all while lacking financial and institutional support. The relentless nature of caregiving often leads to sleep deprivation, emotional distress, and chronic fatigue. The experiences of these caregivers mirror findings by Neely-Barnes and Dia (2008), who emphasize that long-term caregiving responsibilities significantly heighten stress levels among parents, particularly those without access to essential healthcare and support services.

For many parents, physical exhaustion dominates their daily lives. Participant 1 described how early mornings are spent preparing food for her child, yet feeding remains a challenge as her child often refuses to eat:

> *"Ang akong adlaw nagsugod sayo pa lang. Pagmata nako, magluto ko ug pagkaon niya, pero usahay dili siya ganahan mokaon.". ("My day starts early. When I wake up, I prepare his food, but sometimes he refuses to eat.")*

Similarly, Participant 2 highlighted the emotional frustration of managing a child who does not adhere to routine and whose dietary needs are affected by financial struggles:

> *"Kapoy kaayo kada adlaw. Sayu ko magmata, pero dili niya masabtan ang rutina. Usahay dili siya mokaon, ug wala koy kwarta para sa espesyal nga pagkaon." ("Every day is exhausting. I wake up early, but my son doesn't understand routines. Sometimes, he refuses to eat, and I have no money for special food.")*

Studies by Shahali et al. (2024) affirm that financial instability exacerbates caregiver fatigue, as parents are forced to improvise care methods due to an inability to afford therapy or specialized nutrition. The stress caused by inadequate resources intensifies the emotional and physical toll of caregiving.

Beyond feeding difficulties, hygiene maintenance and mobility assistance add another layer of complexity to caregivers' daily routines. Participant 5, who battles illness while taking care of a child, vividly illustrated the compounded burden of caregiving while facing personal health challenges:

> *"Pagmata nako, murag wala koy kusog tungod sa chemotherapy, pero wala koy kapilian—kinahanglan ko mag-atiman sa akong anak." ("Every day is exhausting. When I wake up, my body feels weak from chemotherapy, but I have no choice, I have to take care of my child.")*

This statement aligns with Brown and Rodger (2020), who found that caregivers with pre-existing health conditions struggle disproportionately in providing sufficient care due to their own medical limitations. The study underscores how parents with chronic illnesses experience intensified stress and exhaustion while managing their children's needs without additional support.

For parents raising multiple children with disabilities, the challenges multiply. Participant 6 described the overwhelming nature of caregiving for three children with Down syndrome, as each child requires individualized attention and care:

> *"Lisod kaayo kada adlaw. Sayu ko magmata para mag-andam og pagkaon, pero dili sayon ang pagpakaon sa tulo ka bata nga adunay espesyal nga panginahanglan." ("Every day is overwhelming. I wake up early to prepare food, but feeding three children with special needs is not easy.")*

This experience aligns with findings by McConnell and Savage (2021), who argue that caregivers handling multiple dependents face intensified burnout, as the overlapping demands require constant emotional regulation and physical engagement. They highlight the lack of community-driven support, which often leaves parents feeling isolated in their responsibilities.

Furthermore, caregiving does not stop at physical maintenance; parents are constantly navigating their children's behavioral challenges, particularly those related to education. Participant 3 expressed frustration over the lack of specialized educational support for her child, which further burdens parents with additional responsibilities:

"Dili siya kamao mobasa ug kasagaran maglisod sa klase, maong permi ko tawagon sa maestra."("He doesn't know how to read and struggles in class, so the teacher always calls me.")

This reflection aligns with the work of Lasco et al. (2024), who found that caregivers often become surrogate educators due to insufficient special education programs in rural communities. The failure of institutions to provide individualized learning plans for children with disabilities results in parents bearing the weight of their children's developmental needs without proper guidance or support.

The findings emphasize that caregiving for children with multiple disabilities is an all-consuming responsibility, often at the expense of parents' emotional and physical well-being. The persistent cycles of exhaustion, financial stress, and lack of institutional support place caregivers in precarious situations where they must constantly adapt without sufficient resources. Research by Florian and Hegarty (2004) underscores the necessity for structured support systems to alleviate caregiver fatigue through accessible healthcare, therapy, financial assistance, and community programs.

Healthcare Access Barriers

Access to healthcare remains one of the most pressing challenges for parents raising children with multiple disabilities. The high cost of medical care, lack of specialists, and bureaucratic hurdles make it incredibly difficult for families to secure the necessary treatments and therapies for their children. Many parents are forced to navigate complex and often inaccessible healthcare systems, which exacerbates their stress and limits their ability to provide adequate care. This aligns with Neely-Barnes and Dia (2008), who emphasize that financial constraints and systemic inefficiencies significantly impact caregivers, preventing them from accessing essential medical services. Brown and Rodger (2020) further assert that families of children with disabilities frequently struggle with long wait times, limited funding, and the absence of disability-centered medical programs, worsening their overall quality of life.

Limited Access to Specialists. Finding healthcare professionals who understand and specialize in treating children with disabilities is an ongoing struggle for many parents.

"Lisod kaayo pagpangita og hospital nga kasabot sa iyang kondisyon." (*"Finding a hospital that understands his condition is difficult.")*

"Dugay kaayo ang proseso sa pagpakonsulta sa doktor, usahay maghulat mi ug pila ka bulan." (*"The process of consulting a doctor takes too long; sometimes we wait months.")*

These responses highlight the critical shortage of specialists, forcing parents to endure long waiting periods before receiving a proper diagnosis or treatment. McConnell and Savage (2021) discuss how underserved communities experience this problem at higher rates, as medical practitioners trained in paediatric disabilities are often concentrated in urban centers, leaving rural families without proper medical support.

Expensive Medications & Therapy. Even when medical care is available, financial constraints prevent parents from affording necessary treatments, therapies, and assistive technologies.

"Wala mi kwarta para therapy, mao nga wala siya nakasuway og bisan usa." (*"We don't have money for therapy, so he has never undergone even one session."*)

"Lisod gani nako bayran ang akong chemotherapy, samot pa ang therapy para sa akong anak." (*"I can barely afford my chemotherapy, let alone therapy for my child."*)

Research by Shahali et al. (2024) highlights how the cost of disability care is often inaccessible for families in low-income regions. Many parents resort to at-home exercises or alternative treatments due to the financial burden, resulting in inconsistent healthcare for their children. Jacinto et al. (2021) argue that economic barriers limit a child's developmental opportunities, restricting their ability to receive professional medical care crucial for their well-being.

Bureaucratic Barriers in Government Aid. Government programs meant to assist families raising children with disabilities are often inefficient, requiring excessive documentation and lengthy approval processes. Many parents report that their applications for aid are delayed, denied, or provide minimal financial relief.

"Nag-apil ko sa programa sa gobyerno pero dili kaayo makahatag ug supporta." (*"I joined a government program, but the support was minimal."*)

"Wala koy oras o kusog nga maglakaw-lakaw sa opisina ug mag-proseso og dokumento." (*"I don't have time or strength to go to offices and process documents."*)

These statements reflect findings by Abdullah and Tuncay (2024), who highlight how bureaucratic inefficiencies discourage families from seeking government assistance. The complex paperwork required often prevents financially struggling caregivers from successfully securing aid. Lasco et al. (2024) further argue that reducing these administrative burdens could improve access to healthcare and essential services for families in need.

Healthcare access for children with disabilities remains a substantial challenge due to specialist shortages, high costs, and inefficient government assistance programs. The study's findings emphasize the urgent need for affordable therapy, disability-focused medical training, and streamlined government support to ensure that families receive adequate healthcare. Addressing these barriers could significantly improve the well-being of both children and their caregivers, reducing unnecessary stress and ensuring that every child has access to the medical resources they deserve.

Educational Struggles

Access to quality education remains a significant challenge for children with multiple disabilities, as many schools fail to provide inclusive programs tailored to their needs. Parents frequently encounter barriers in securing adequate learning environments, ranging from insufficient accommodations to outright rejection from institutions that lack the capacity or willingness to integrate students with disabilities. The absence of specialized teaching methods and resources leads to diminished learning opportunities, forcing caregivers to seek costly alternatives or to assume educational roles themselves. Research by Lasco et al. (2024) affirms that children with disabilities in the Philippines face systemic neglect in educational settings, limiting their potential for academic growth. Jacinto et al. (2021) further highlight that institutional shortcomings contribute to the isolation and marginalization of learners with disabilities, worsening their educational experience.

Lack of Inclusive Programs. Many parents struggle to enroll their children in schools equipped to accommodate their needs, citing the lack of individualized learning support.

"Ang eskwelahan nag-ingon nga dili nila siya madawat kay wala silay espesyal nga programa para sa bata nga naay kapansanan." (*"The school said they couldn't accept him because they don't have a special program for children with disabilities."*)

"Lisod kaayo pangitaon ang eskwelahan nga makasabot sa ilang kahimtang ug makatabang sa ilang pagkat-on." (*"It's very difficult to find a school that understands their condition and can help with their learning."*)

This challenge aligns with findings by Florian and Hegarty (2004), who state that the lack of structured, inclusive education programs creates learning gaps, preventing children with disabilities from receiving appropriate academic support. Abdullah and Tuncay (2024) further emphasize that without specialized resources, children experience increased difficulty in grasping fundamental educational concepts, affecting long-term development.

Bullying & Discrimination in Schools. Social stigma and lack of awareness among peers often result in discrimination, with children facing bullying that hinders their confidence and participation in school.

"Ang uban bata magsige siya'g sungog ug ingnon siya nga baho." (*"Other kids tease him, saying he smells bad."*)

"Naglisod siya sa klase kay ang ubang estudyante dili gusto magdula ug makiguban kaniya." (*"He struggles in class because the other students don't want to play or interact with him."*)

Bullying and discrimination exacerbate emotional distress for children, discouraging their engagement in learning activities. Jacinto et al. (2021) report that children with disabilities frequently experience social rejection, which negatively affects their psychological well-being. McConnell and Savage (2021) highlight that without intervention, exclusionary behaviors in schools can lead to long-term academic withdrawal, preventing affected students from thriving.

Expensive Private Schools as the Only Option. Due to the lack of public school accommodations, many parents are advised to enroll their children in private institutions, which often charge prohibitively high fees.

"Ang eskwelahan nag-ingon nga ipasulod nako siya sa pribado nga eskwelahan, pero dili nako kaya." (*"The school told me to send my child to a private institution, but I can't afford that."*)

"Ang mga eskwelahan nga naay espesyal nga suporta para sa iyang kahimtang mahal kaayo ug dili kapugngan ang gasto." (*"Schools that offer special support for his condition are too expensive, and the costs are overwhelming."*)

This aligns with studies by Lasco et al. (2024), which found that financial barriers severely limit parents' ability to provide their children with specialized education. Brown and Rodger (2020) argue that the lack of affordable options forces many children to remain out of school or rely on unstructured home learning, diminishing their chances of academic success.

Educational struggles continue to hinder the development and well-being of children with multiple disabilities, largely due to the absence of inclusive programs, widespread discrimination, and the financial strain of specialized schooling. These findings emphasize the need for government investment in inclusive education, strengthened anti-bullying policies, and financial assistance programs to ensure that all children, regardless of disability, have access to quality education. Addressing these barriers can create a more equitable and supportive learning environment, enabling children with disabilities to reach their full potential.

Emotional & Social Impact

Parents raising children with multiple disabilities experience profound emotional strain and social isolation. The relentless demands of caregiving often lead to burnout, as they struggle to balance their responsibilities without adequate support. Beyond exhaustion, many parents face social stigma and judgment, with communities failing to understand or accommodate their situations. Additionally, the lack of family support intensifies feelings of loneliness, leaving caregivers to navigate the challenges alone. Studies by Neely-Barnes and Dia (2008) affirm that parental emotional well-being is significantly affected by caregiving stress, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and withdrawal. Jacinto et al. (2021) further highlight how societal perceptions of disability create alienation, preventing caregivers from receiving the communal support they need.

Parental Burnout & Isolation. Long-term caregiving, especially without assistance, contributes to profound emotional fatigue, leaving parents physically and mentally drained.

"Nag-inusara ko. Dili na ko makagawas og kanunay, ug niundang na ko sa pag-istorya sa mga tawo kay dili sila kasabot sa akong sitwasyon." (*"I feel isolated. I don't go out much anymore, and I stopped talking to people because they don't understand what I'm going through."*)

"Usahay, maghilak lang ko nga mag-inusara kay wala koy kasultihan sa akong kahadlok." (*"Some days, I just cry in silence because I don't have anyone to talk to about my fears."*)

These statements reflect McConnell and Savage's (2021) findings that parents of children with disabilities often experience caregiver fatigue and emotional isolation, leading to high levels of distress. Without proper psychological support, many caregivers endure burnout, which affects their ability to provide effective care for their children.

Social Stigma & Judgment. Negative societal perceptions of disabilities often lead to discrimination, causing parents to feel alienated from their communities.

"Ang mga tawo naglikay nako. Ang akong mga igsoon wala na moanha. Murag giisip nila nga pabug-at akong anak." (*"People avoid me. My own relatives don't visit anymore. They think my son is a burden."*)

"Sige sila'g tan-aw sa akong anak, ug dili ko kahibalo unsaon pagtubag sa ilang panghusga." (*"They always stare at my child, and I don't know how to respond to their judgment."*)

Studies by Brown and Rodger (2020) highlight that societal stigma surrounding disabilities perpetuates isolation, discouraging families from seeking social interactions or community participation. Jacinto et al. (2021) assert that these judgmental attitudes lead to emotional distress among caregivers, reinforcing the cycle of exclusion.

Lack of Family Support. For many parents, the absence of meaningful family assistance deepens their struggles, forcing them to handle caregiving alone.

"Ako ra usa." (*"I am alone."*)

"Gisuwayan nako, pero pagdugay-dugay, undang na sila ug tabang. Karon, dili na ko mangayo." (*"I tried asking for help, but after a while, they stopped helping. Now, I don't ask anymore."*)

Research by Shahali et al. (2024) suggests that families often fail to provide continuous support to caregivers, leaving them with no choice but to endure caregiving responsibilities alone. Florian and Hegarty (2004) further assert that strengthening familial support structures is crucial for alleviating caregiver stress and preventing burnout.

The findings reinforce that parental burnout, social stigma, and the lack of family support severely impact caregivers of children with disabilities. These challenges not only affect their emotional well-being but also hinder their ability to provide consistent care. Addressing these issues requires stronger psychological assistance programs, community education to reduce stigma, and government initiatives to support caregivers. Creating more inclusive environments can significantly improve the quality of life for parents and their children, fostering emotional resilience and social acceptance.

Institutional Support Gaps

Parents raising children with multiple disabilities rely heavily on government programs for financial aid, healthcare assistance, and educational support. However, the inefficiencies within these programs often leave families struggling to meet basic caregiving needs. Lengthy bureaucratic processes, inadequate funding, and the failure of institutions to provide meaningful aid contribute to financial instability and emotional distress among caregivers. Research by McConnell and Savage (2021) underscores how structural deficiencies in social support systems result in families navigating uncertainty and financial hardship, exacerbating their difficulties in providing adequate care. Brown and Rodger (2020) further highlight how delays in financial and medical assistance lead to unmet caregiving needs, forcing parents to compromise their children's health and developmental progress.

Ineffective Government Aid Programs. Many parents struggle with government assistance programs that fail to provide substantial aid, either due to insufficient funding or restrictive eligibility requirements.

"Nag-apil ko sa programa sa gobyerno pero dili kaayo makahatag ug supporta." (*"I joined a government program, but the support was minimal."*)

"Ang financial aid nga ilang gihatag gamay ra kaayo ug dili igo para sa akong anak." (*"The financial aid they provided was too little and not enough for my child's needs."*)

This aligns with findings by Shahali et al. (2024), which reveal that families of children with disabilities receive inadequate government funding, making it nearly impossible for them to access necessary medical care and educational programs. Jacinto et al. (2021) further argue that these programs often fail to consider the unique financial burdens caregivers face, leaving many unsupported.

Long Approval Times for Assistance. Parents frequently experience delays in processing aid applications, forcing them to endure months—sometimes years—without receiving the financial support they desperately need.

"Naghulat ko og pila ka bulan para sa appointment sa doktor. Pag-abot nako, ingon lang sila og mga butang nga kabalo na ko daan." (*"I waited months for a doctor's appointment. When I finally got one, they only told me basic things I already knew."*)

"Wala koy oras o kusog nga maglakaw-lakaw sa opisina ug mag-proseso og dokumento." (*"I don't have time or strength to go to offices and process documents."*)

Studies by Abdullah and Tuncay (2024) highlight how long wait times and excessive bureaucracy discourage families from seeking support, forcing them to rely on out-of-pocket expenses and informal caregiving solutions. The study suggests that streamlining these processes would significantly reduce caregiver stress while ensuring timely access to vital aid.

Unmet Financial & Caregiving Needs. Without sufficient aid and timely assistance, parents face crippling financial burdens that prevent them from accessing medical care, therapy, and assistive technologies for their children.

"Kung naa unta'y tabang, tingali mas maayo ang kinabuhi sa akong anak. Pero wala, mao nga ako na lang ang nagpaningkamot." (*"If there was support, maybe my child would have a better life. But there is none, so I just do what I can."*)

"Nag-apil ko sa programa sa gobyerno pero nag-ingon sila nga wala silay pondo. Naglakaw na lang ko pauli, naghilak." (*"I went to a government office to ask for assistance, but they said they didn't have funds. I just walked home, crying."*)

Findings by Lasco et al. (2024) reaffirm that underfunded government programs fail to meet the needs of caregivers, leading to increased financial strain and emotional exhaustion. Florian and Hegarty (2004) argue that expanding financial aid structures and increasing government investment in disability programs would significantly reduce these burdens on families, ensuring better care and support for children with disabilities. Institutional gaps continue to limit access to necessary financial aid, medical care, and disability support services, leaving caregivers overwhelmed and without sufficient resources. Addressing these inefficiencies requires policy reforms, increased government funding, and the reduction of bureaucratic

barriers to ensure that families receive the assistance they need in a timely and effective manner. Strengthening institutional support systems will not only ease the financial strain on caregivers but also improve the overall quality of life for children with disabilities, ensuring they receive the medical attention, education, and resources essential for their development.

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of parents raising children with multiple disabilities in Santo Tomas, Davao Region, shedding light on the profound challenges they face in caregiving, healthcare access, education, and institutional support. Through a qualitative approach, the research captured the realities of daily caregiving, emphasizing the physical exhaustion, financial struggles, and emotional distress endured by caregivers. The findings indicate that caregiver well-being is deeply influenced by access to resources, societal attitudes, and institutional responsiveness. Parents who had stronger support networks and access to medical and educational assistance demonstrated greater resilience, while those without such support reported higher levels of stress and isolation.

Despite these overwhelming obstacles, parents displayed remarkable dedication, perseverance, and love, developing personal strategies to ensure the well-being of their children. However, these personal efforts are not enough—systemic improvements in healthcare, education, and government assistance are urgently needed to prevent caregiver burnout and ensure a more sustainable support system. This study underscores the critical need for policy reforms, increased funding for disability programs, and community-driven interventions to alleviate the burdens faced by caregivers and improve the quality of life for children with disabilities.

Future research should focus on assessing the long-term effects of caregiver stress, exploring the effectiveness of targeted government interventions, and examining how cultural perceptions impact the accessibility of disability-related services. Further studies could also investigate innovative support models, such as community-based care programs, that provide practical and sustainable solutions for caregivers navigating the challenges of raising children with disabilities. Addressing these gaps through collaborative efforts from policymakers, educators, healthcare providers, and communities will create a more inclusive, supportive, and empowered environment for families affected by disability.

Recommendation

This study recommends urgent systemic reforms to support families raising children with multiple disabilities. Strengthening government assistance programs through streamlined financial aid, expanded healthcare access, and reduced bureaucratic hurdles would alleviate the overwhelming burdens on caregivers. The Department of Education must implement inclusive learning programs, equip educators with specialized training, and ensure affordable access to assistive resources so that children with disabilities receive proper educational support. Local government initiatives, such as mental health counselling, community-based caregiver workshops, and anti-stigma campaigns, should also be prioritized to enhance social inclusion and emotional well-being for families navigating caregiving challenges.

Future research should investigate long-term caregiver resilience, assessing how economic stability, institutional interventions, and community engagement shape the experiences of families caring for children with disabilities. Evaluating the effectiveness of support models, such as government-backed financial aid

systems, school-based inclusion programs, and accessible healthcare services, will provide evidence-based recommendations for sustainable disability care frameworks.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide Questionnaire

Research Title: Unseen Struggles: Understanding the Burden of Parents Raising Children with Multiple Disabilities

Research Question	Research Objective	Interview Questions	Probing Questions (Relating to Parents' Real-Life Experiences)
1. How do parents raising children with multiple disabilities in Santo Tomas, Davao Region describe their day-to-day experiences and the challenges they face?	To understand parents' lived experiences, daily struggles, and the impact of caregiving on their personal and family life.	1. Can you describe a typical day as a parent raising a child with multiple disabilities?	1.1 What moments in your daily routine feel the most emotionally or physically overwhelming?
			1.2 Have you ever felt that certain responsibilities became too difficult to manage alone? How did you cope?
			1.3 What is a personal experience that captures both the hardships and rewards of caregiving?
		2. What are the biggest challenges you encounter in caring for your child?	2.1 Can you recall a time when accessing medical or educational services was particularly challenging?
			2.2 How have financial difficulties affected your ability to provide for your child's needs?
			2.3 What emotions do you frequently experience in response to these challenges?
2. What emotional and social adjustments have parents made in response to their caregiving responsibilities?	To examine how caregiving influences parents' emotional and social well-being, including adaptations made in their lifestyle.	1. How has caring for your child changed your emotional well-being over time?	1.1 Can you describe a moment when you felt overwhelmed or emotionally drained?
			1.2 Have you developed coping strategies to handle stress? If so, what are they?
			1.3 How do your interactions with others (family, friends, society) help or hinder your emotional state?

		2. How has caregiving affected your social life and relationships?	2.1 Have you ever felt isolated due to your caregiving responsibilities?
			2.2 What sacrifices have you had to make in your personal or professional life to accommodate your child's needs?
			2.3 In what ways have you found emotional support within your community or social circles?
3. How do parents perceive the support systems available to them, and what role do these systems play in their lives?	To analyze parents' perspectives on formal and informal support networks and their effectiveness in caregiving.	1. Can you describe your experience in accessing healthcare, education, and financial aid services for your child?	1.1 What were the biggest challenges you faced in seeking assistance?
			1.2 Can you share a specific experience where a support system either helped or failed you?
			1.3 How do gaps in existing support services affect your ability to care for your child?