

Urban Dreams and Mental Strains: Exploring the Academic Journey of Eleventh Graders STEM Pre-Science Learners during Rural-to-Urban Transition

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges facing Ateneo de Davao University Senior High School learners from rural origins as they experience an urban shift concerning their mental health and academic performance. In addition, interventions to support the adaptation of such learners are recommended. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used, including in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 Grade 11 STEM Pre-Science learners. The rural-to-urban transition presents quite a challenge in the lives of these students as they face culture shock, new learning modalities, environmental discomfort, schedule adjustment, and loneliness in living away from family members. These issues lead to stress and alienation, thus challenging academic and personal adjustment. The study calls for focused interventions, such as intensified AddU- SHS Wellness and Testing Center support, structured orientation programs, and mental health services. Future research should be conducted to determine this transition's long-term academic and psychological effects.

Keywords: rural-to-urban transition, mental health, academic performance, qualitative, phenomenology, learner support

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INTRODUCTION

Migrating, which refers to the movement of people from one place to another, whether within or outside a country, plays a significant role in changing learners' social and academic lives. Although migration increases access to education and easier economic opportunities, it also has disadvantages. Learners having migrated from rural settings often face challenges in urban environments. These include culture shock, language barriers, and challenges of acclimatization into new learning environments. Observations through previous studies indicated that rural village students experienced culture shock when they were in their first two years of university life (Pheko et al., 2014). They also faced language barriers while communicating and exchanging knowledge in school (Free et al., 2014). The push factors for urban migration in the Philippines are driven by the need for better education and employment opportunities, especially for learners from rural areas with limited resources (Awi, 2017; OECD/Scalabrini Migration Center, 2017). Despite the numerous studies on the effects of migration on mental health, there is a significant gap in the literature concerning the specific experiences and needs of urban migrant learners within educational institutions like Ateneo de Davao University Senior High School (AdDU-SHS).

Our study bridged this gap by examining the challenges experienced by Grade 11 STEM Pre-Science learners in AdDU-SHS when transitioning from rural to urban settings and their impact on their mental health. The study results revealed that such learners had faced various difficulties, such as emotive, mobility-related, climatic-related discomfort, and stress due to education, of which social pressures and lack of adequate support mechanisms often drove the students. These challenges highlight the requirement for specific, time-bound interventions that foster a sense of belonging and provide appropriate support for the urban migrant learner.

This study is relevant as it concerns a greatly understudied population segment and will likely inform practice on how best to develop effective support structures. In applying the Theory of Acculturation, which investigates changes in culture and their impact on mental health (Berry, 2006; Sam, 2015), our research contributes to a better understanding of experiences by urban migrant learners and the facilitation of strategies for wellbeing and inclusiveness within the new learning environment. All our research finally put forth optimal coping techniques and actions for learners who are in adjustment, ensuring these learners can find their full expression in an ever-increasing competitive and demanding academia.

Research Questions

1. What challenges were experienced by the urban learner migrants of AdDU Grade 11 STEM Pre-Science Learners during their transfer to urban areas?
2. What coping strategies did the AdDU Grade 11 STEM Pre-Science urban learner migrants use in dealing with their mental health?
3. What did the urban migrant learners suggest to promote mental wellness among other migrant learners?



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Study Design

In our study, we adopted a qualitative research approach to understand, interpret, and generate new insights based on the personal perspectives and experiences of Grade 11 Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Pre-Science learners who have migrated to urban settings at Ateneo de Davao University Senior High School. According to Girardin (2023), qualitative research aims to gather understanding and insight into human experiences and perspectives by examining social structures and behaviors. This is an appropriate study for ours, as this approach focused on the personal accounts of learner urban migrants concerning how migration can influence their mental health. Our participants' responses gathered through our research instrument provided the source of our primary data, allowing us to go in-depth with their diverse experiences.

We employed a phenomenological approach in our research to investigate Grade 11 STEM Pre-Science learners' experiences of learning about science and technology from their perspectives, feelings, and challenges. It is in the phenomenological research design to investigate deeper insights into people's everyday experiences involving a particular phenomenon (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022). This design was most appropriate for our study because it allowed us to exhaustively probe and understand the actual experiences of learner urban migrants in Ateneo de Davao University Senior High School.

Population and Sample

The location of our study, which focused on Grade 11 STEM Pre-Science learners transitioning from rural to urban settings, was Ateneo de Davao University Senior High School (AdDU SHS), located at McArthur Highway, Talomo, Davao City, Davao del Sur. This site was strategically chosen because it housed all the participants in the study, making it a convenient location for our research. In short, conducting this study at AdDU SHS is essential since it would let one better understand this population's mental well-being because it offered great insights into difficulties faced by such students and relevance in academic mental health research.

Our participants involved Grade 11 STEM Pre-Science learners from the AdDU SHS who had recently transitioned from rural areas to an urban environment. The approach was a snowball sampling method that is deliberate and purposeful for the focused investigation of urban migrant learners. This assured us of bringing forth a profound understanding of their experiences and viewpoints as they encounter new experiences in their urban environment. We were able to delve into their unique experiences and perspectives by examining how this transition affects their mental health.

We limited the number of participants to 15 to ensure accurate representation and practical data collection. This number was sufficient for gathering comprehensive and detailed information while considering the challenges of adapting to a new educational environment. According to Bekele and Ago, 2022, a small group of participants, between 10 and 20, effectively showed the most key insights into the studies of lived experiences. The minimum number of participants for a phenomenological study was 6, and qualitative research accepted only 15 participants as the minimum sample size.

Snowball sampling had two advantages: it saved time while effectively allowing researchers and participants to communicate. Snowball sampling is beneficial as it will enable reaching the relatively hidden population of those reluctant to give their identities. It also proved helpful in identifying the respondents to whom contact issues were a concern, such as migrants, fraud, or any other sensitive



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issue. Initial contacts helped snowball the participants into the research by the respondents themselves (Naderifar et al., 2017). Asking the participants to recruit others helped us obtain diverse views. It provided comprehensive data representing the experience and opinion of the target population.

Instrumentation

Online interviews were conducted to capture high-quality responses and extract rich data from the participants during the transition from the pandemic to a new normal. The researcher used in-depth structured interviews to collect focused data and follow-up questions to explore the topic in greater depth. Although these interviews sounded like conversations, they were explicitly conducted to gather the participants' opinions and experiences in a more casual setting that helped build trust and empathy. This helped add a context many quantitative studies cannot provide (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020).

Additional types of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to answer a range of topics and issues flexibly to gain open-ended answers. The tool provides in-depth deliberations where verbal and non-verbal messages can be given to the themes to achieve a well-rounded understanding of themes (Kakilla, 2021). The cues, hunches, laughter, and/or silences to follow up could help reveal helpful information during analysis.

Semi-structured interview questionnaires were developed based on a review of related literature and the research question to gather the necessary data. The questionnaires focused on three main areas: challenges faced, coping strategies, and recommendations for promoting mental well-being. The questions addressed learners' feelings during the transition, academic and non-academic challenges, and cultural or environmental adjustments. This part focused on productivity techniques, stress relief activities, and the existence of support systems from people around. The last section concerned the support services available at institutional levels, any advice the learner might have concerning how to keep their mental health good, and some recommendations for fellow migrants for their good in the future. The questions in the questionnaire were coupled with backup questions in case more detailed probing about a new idea could help with gaining more knowledge.

Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for this qualitative study because they enabled the unfolding of narratives, combining theory-based questions with the flexibility to explore contextual influences. This balance addressed specific dimensions while allowing participants to provide new insights on the topic under investigation.

Building rapport and paying attention during interviews were required to gain a proper and meaningful understanding of the research data (Galleta, 2013). Semi-structured interview format would allow more probing into participants' thoughts and experiences. However, this may not always yield direct answers. Instead, the questionnaire for an interview was carefully drafted to meet the expectations of the research question posed. More about that, however, an expert analyzed the interview guide to ensure the validity and reliability of the tool.

Data Analysis

Our research relied on thematic analysis according to Clarke and Braun's (2015) exposition; it is a technique that determines, analyzes, and interprets patterns in qualitative data. This method was used because of its ease of access and simple procedures; hence, it is easier to understand and apply. In addition, thematic analysis has helped understand participants' views, identify similarities and differences, and produce unexpected insights (Nowell et al., 2017).



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According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2023), thematic analysis is a six-step process. First, one needs to familiarize oneself with the data, which requires a comprehensive understanding of the data for the practical application of methodologies relevant to the data. The second step is to classify and categorize data segments and generate codes pertinent to the study. This allows the third step: grouping the codes into themes that represent the data best. The fourth step includes detailed scrutiny and finalization of the themes in light of their data reflection. The fifth step is where the definition and naming of themes are established to be short, precise, and as straightforward as possible. Finally, the sixth step calls for concrete examples from the data to support every theme, with evidence to prove they exist in the dataset. The process is iteratively followed, which not only helps to unravel significant patterns but also serves as an evident reflection of the utility of thematic analysis in several kinds of research studies.

RESULTS

Challenges Experienced by the Urban Learner Migrants of ADDU Grade 11 STEM Pre-Science during their Transfer to Urban Areas

This study based itself on Berry's (2006) Theory of Acculturation, explaining how negative feelings and issues had arisen with the acculturation transition process experienced by learner urban migrants. The answers to the interview questions helped this institution know some areas they need to improve: providing facilities and educating the learners more appropriately. The challenges were categorized into four general themes: perceived culture shock, struggles in academic transition, uncomfortable environmental conditions, and difficulty in schedule adjustment.

Under the theme of **perceived culture shock**, it was noted that change from a rural to an urban environment was challenging because a person had to adjust to an environment. For instance, adapting to a new environment meant breaking language barriers and adapting to the latest social settings and the anxiety associated with fitting socially. For example, Participant B described this experience as being "like culture shock" because it was a challenge to have friends in an environment where one's social circle was already developed. Participant C also highlighted how language differences had made it hard to interact socially. In contrast, Participant L also pointed out having to change how they speak so that others will understand them. These answers indicate that in the case of a learner urban migrant, culture shock severely impacts both mental well-being and social networking. The outcomes align with Ng et al.'s (2017) assertion that socio-cultural adaptation is the psychological dimension of acculturation affecting emotional well-being and sociality. Chen et al. (2019) concluded that language conflict, cultural conflict, and homesickness are stressors that will prevent students' academic success.

The theme of **struggles in academic transition** highlighted the academic struggles that these students experienced while adjusting to unfamiliar educational systems. Participants said they found adapting to an accelerated teaching method approach and new digital learning platforms challenging. For example, Participant B noted that following a new online courseware system was stressful and pressure-packed because they hardly knew much about it or were overwhelmed by its unfamiliar features. Participant D states, "The transition into senior high school is tough because it involves new academic demands plus trying to work with uncooperative groupmates." These academic problems align with the findings from Permatasari and Suminar (2021), which indicated that academic stress was often associated with the pressure to succeed in a competitive environment. Sulelino et al. (2020) add to this by pointing out that migrant students face the added stress of mastering new academic and social environments.



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The **poor environmental condition** posed another vital challenge for the respondents since they had to face the overcrowded and dirty urban environment with a compelling urge to leave the favorable natural surroundings of the rural area. Respondents described themselves as feeling frustrated with the overcrowding of places and hot and cold temperatures in the urban setting. Respondent A: "The city was very crowded and extremely stressful, with confusing lots." For instance, Participant G reported difficulties in adjusting to the chaotic environment full of people. Participant I informed us that his primary concerns were the hot weather and poor traffic. These are identified as key factors that influence the mental well-being and well-being of learner urban migrants, according to Wellmore (2021) and Gan & Forbes-Mewett (2019). The transition from a rural to an urban setting can considerably affect mental health, increasing one's risk of stress, anxiety, and psychological challenges.

Finally, the theme of **difficulty in schedule adjustment** reflected the participants' struggles with adapting to new schedules and managing their time effectively. Participants reported challenges in adjusting their body clocks and managing their time, which affected their academic performance and social life. For instance, Participant C indicated that waking up alone in a dormitory is challenging. Participant E even struggled to get used to the academic system but had to assimilate into pre-existing social networks. These are the challenges that previous studies have associated with student success. For example, Dorn notes that effective time management and social integration are cardinal elements of student success (2015). It suggests that the institution's scheduling and support systems need revision to better adapt to their transition into an urban way of life.

Coping Strategies that AddU Grade 11 STEM Pre-Science Urban Learner Migrants Use in Dealing with Their Mental Health

Coping strategies are one of the crucial factors that ease the stress and pressure that migrant learners in cities face as they encounter various issues. In this interview, participants gave very revealing answers, indicating coping strategies at different levels of well-being, which could benefit their mental health. Themes such as seeking a support system, crying, doing leisure activities, expressing creatively, doing sports and exercise, seeking professional help, self-caring, and attending religious activities emerged.

Seeking a support system is one of the coping strategies that urban migrant students need because it reduces stress and promotes mental stability. Participant C emphasized that relationships with friends and family, as well as counseling services, are essential. As seen in Participant C, "I am going out with friends, hanging out, shopping with friends is what made me feel healthy, relaxed, and really happy." Furthermore, the Wellness Center at school was an indispensable tool for Participant F, with visits helping smooth the transition into a new place. In the same way, Participant A highlights that staying in touch with family, even if apart, was important; thus, daily calls "help me manage stress and hardships associated with moving to a new city." These findings outline the value of interpersonal relationships and the need for institutional support to stabilize emotions in the transition. Muller et al. (2019) emphasize the benefits of such supportive systems to overcome challenges foreign learners face during their learning and recommend holistic supporting systems for these learners' health and academic success.

Crying as a vehicle to release some emotions was a typical coping response, which played the role of an emotional catharsis activity. Participant D explained how "crying accompanied by sleeping and positive thinking" helped them with their emotions as well as anxiety. In particular, Participant D elaborated that crying daily was a method to release feelings and subsequently feel better. Participants E and G also reported positive thinking and talking to others to manage their emotions. This strategy, hence, agrees with the therapeutic perspective that deems dealing with both the mind and body is effective in the administration of trauma. Koch and der Recke (2014) emphasized the need for therapies that deal with the physical and emotional aspects of trauma. Additionally, Bobowik et al. (2022) claim that crying can help articulate personal traumas and change social perceptions, leading to social inclusion and emotional relief.



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Leisure activities were the most important coping mechanism for the learners to deal with stress and settle into the new environment. Participants B and E said that there was watching movies, listening to music, or going out with friends as a distraction from stress and homesickness. In this case, leisure activities were a welcome distraction and helped establish social contact and balance. According to Berasategi et al. (2022), leisure activities are beneficial for stress management and social integration, and Qian et al. (2014) argued that these activities enhance emotional regulation and life satisfaction. Thus, the enjoyment derived from leisure activities contributes to better psychological and physical functioning and helps learners navigate their transition more effectively.

Creative expression was identified as one of the most effective coping strategies. The following activities, drawing, sketching, and painting, were utilized by participants C and H to manage stress and express emotions. Participant C noted that "through drawing, one can express feelings freely," whereas Participant H added that sketching helped get out of academic pressure. As Rivera et al. (2022) put it, art can be a powerful agent that aids migrants in maintaining their well-being when transitioning, as it provides an outlet for relieving stress and generally promotes better mental health.

Sports and exercise are also physical activities that can be an essential coping strategy. F and I shared that doing things such as playing volleyball, going to the gym, or even washing clothes could alleviate the stress and boost their mood. Gerber (2013) indicates that it plays a vital role in maintaining physical health, reducing stress, and improving well-being. Kinra et al. (2020) further report that physical activity leads to health benefits, suggesting its role in stress management and an effective way to balance lifestyle amid transition.

Another coping method was seeking professional help, especially from school services like the Wellness Testing Center. Participants G and J reported that seeking counseling and support from the Wellness Center helped them to adjust to the new environment. This support helped them handle their stress and improve their mental health. According to Afeadie (2021), community resources must be utilized to provide emotional support.

Another crucial coping strategy was **self-care**, especially in the form of sleep and rest. Participants B and E said that taking care of sleep and rest helped them to cope with stress and negative emotions. Self-care is essential for mental health and general well-being (Jost, 2023). It helps during transitions and manages stress. Brouwer (2016) also emphasizes the role of self-care in the process of cultural adaptation and the maintenance of mental health.

Some respondents identified **religious activities** as a new coping strategy. Participant A found that involvement in religious activities and community affairs contributed to spiritual support and alleviated stress. A particular case that was given as an example was the guy who was part of a religious institution and attended church every Sunday. It relieved lots of stress, he said. As Nganga (2022) put it, religious coping becomes essential in enhancing psychological well-being by providing hope and giving someone a feeling of belonging.

The Suggestions of Learner Urban Migrants to Promote Mental Wellness among Other Migrant Learners

In this subtopic, we identified themes that were suggested by the participants such as advocating for advice, joining school-related activities, seeking support group, improving psychosocial skills, and conditioning of self.

Participants mentioned that there are multiple ways of managing transitions. Advocating for advice was the leading strategy, whereby several participants would suggest various assistance mechanisms. Participant D stated, "Opening up to counselors or teachers or wellness center at school." Participant G noted that it is essential that services and groups be culturally appropriate, and Participant K said one should call one's family to get support at times. According to Participant M, being oneself is important;



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Participant N said that talking in the same dialect is helpful. These suggestions are derived from previous researches that claim counseling and culturally responsive support are necessary to cope with the emotional and practical problems of migrant learners (Hansen & Hoag, 2018; Yang, 2021; Bobga, 2016; Hu & Wu, 2020).

Another dominant theme was **school-related activities**, which the participants recommended as a coping method. For instance, Participant A explained that activities concerning Ecoteneo are beneficial since they remind them of their experience with green spaces. Participant B indicated that clubs such as YFC allow one to make friends. Participant D recommended that participation in school events and hanging out with positive peers can help. These findings underscore that engagement in co-curricular activities fosters better academic and mental outcomes and assists individuals in transitioning toward the cities more smoothly (Lombardi et al., 2019; Lippman & Rivers, 2016; Anjum, 2021).

Seeking a support group was another key theme. Participant A advised searching for trusted friends and maintaining connectivity with one's cultural roots while transitioning toward other cultures. Participant B and Participant G insisted that one must associate with good people and deliver culturally compatible services. Participant L and Participant O suggested friendship, time management, and family or friends for help and recovery. These provide evidence of the part of the support system that provides an easy integration process and reduces stress among urban migrants (Gheitarani et al., 2019; Snoubar & Zengin, 2022).

Improving psychosocial skills was another significant theme, with participants stressing the importance of social interactions. Participants C, I, and M advised making friends, engaging in group studies, and seeking peer help. Such social interactions are crucial for preventing loneliness and facilitating adaptation to new environments (Guo et al., 2023; Paltonen et al., 2022).

Balancing academic life with personal requirements requires developing essential time management skills. Proactive time management was advanced by participants B, F, J, L, and M to avoid procrastination and distribute between school hours and personal work. Effective stress management and productivity through time management also improve an individual's performance. However, high importance might cause exhaustion when not exercised cautiously (Craig, 2020; Khiat, 2019; Al-Yami et al., 2021).

Last, the **conditioning of self** was an essential theme. Participants A, D, F, H, I, J, K, M, N, and O believed that one must embrace challenges, develop healthy study habits, and maintain a positive mindset. It is through adopting new experiences and managing expectations that one will experience successful adaptation and resilience in transitions (Chen et al., 2022; Coope et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Emphasizing the implications for future studies enhances the understanding of the relevance of the findings within this study. This is supported by relevant literature and methodology, all carefully designed to align with the study's objectives and ensure precise data collection and analysis. The study suggests the following implications:

This study will mainly benefit urban migrant learners, and more will be accorded to them through the Ateneo de Davao University community, primarily through the Wellness and Testing Center. WTC can aid in creating greater recognition and more belonging among these learners in this new environment. Besides, WTC will help students cope with various academic and non-academic problems while adapting to a new educational environment.



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Support to address challenges for parents of learner migrants can enable these parents to take an active interest in their children's education. In return, academic results for such learners may be enhanced. It thus helps overcome cycles of educational disadvantage and improves social mobility and equity. Empowerment of such parents by giving importance to societal requirements calls for integrating culture and the community while creating equitable development, especially concerning the effectiveness of such support systems.

This study provides some groundwork for research in this field, where pathways for finding the long-term effects of transition on academic performance and well-being can be researched. It emphasizes developing action research by creating coping mechanisms and programs to ease transitions for urban migrant learners. Moreover, the research educates educational practitioners on needing customized support systems like orientation programs and mental health services to ease transitions and foster student well-being. Eventually, by tackling educational inequalities and social exclusion, future studies can create a more equitable society by focusing on mental health support and promoting societal inclusivity. Overall, the implications of this research emphasize the broader societal impact of supporting rural-to-urban transition experiences, encompassing academic success, mental well-being, and societal progress.

The data collected reveals the significant impact of the transition on learners, including challenges related to academic stress, cultural adaptation, and environmental conditions. This information will be valuable for the Wellness and Testing Center of Ateneo de Davao University Senior High School because it will guide the development of interventions and programs tailored to the needs of incoming senior high school learners. The WTC will use these insights to assist learners in their rural-to-urban transition better and attend to academic and non-academic needs.

The academic experience of learners transitioning from rural to urban settings will be highly illuminating to the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Strands. Identifying the problems of these learners, as well as their coping strategies, would then help establish necessary support, such as tailored interventions toward encouraging healthy practices to promote well-being. It further provides detailed information on the psychological and mental well-being of migrant learners and contributes to an overall understanding of their well-being.

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