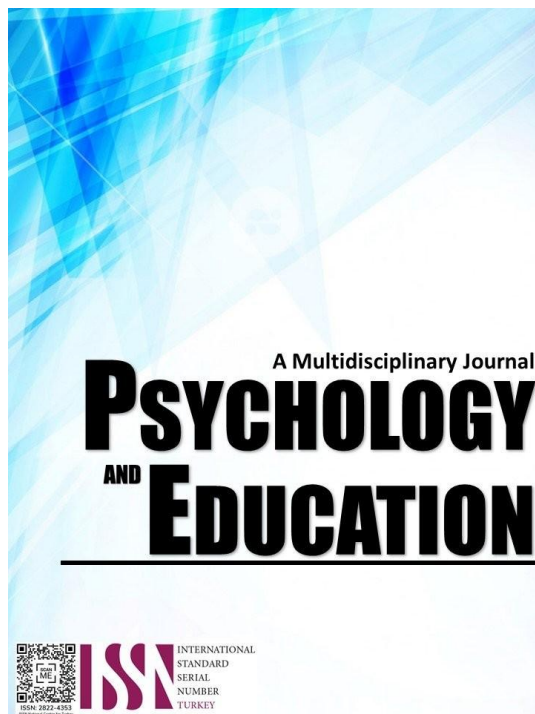


NAVIGATING TWO WORLDS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE LIVES OF BORACAY'S ISLAND SCHOLARS



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Navigating Two Worlds: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Lives of Boracay's Island Scholars

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of island-based students from Boracay who commute to Malay College on the mainland for tertiary education. Through an interpretive phenomenological analysis, the research captures the complexities of their academic journey, highlighting the emotional, social, cultural, and financial challenges they face. While national policies such as the Tertiary Education Subsidy aim to bridge access gaps, they often fall short of addressing the localized realities of archipelagic learners. Five key themes emerged from the data: (1) Negotiating Island and Academic Identities, (2) More Active and Personal Life, (3) Forging New Communities Beyond the Island, (4) The Emotional Bridge: Connecting with Home from Afar, and (5) Anchored in Our Roots, Affirming Island Identity in a New World. The study provides a nuanced understanding of how these students navigate between two worlds, contributing valuable insights for the development of context-sensitive policies and institutional support systems to improve academic outcomes for geographically isolated learners.

Keywords: *island scholars, Boracay students, Malay College, qualitative, phenomenology*

Introduction

Boracay, a world-famous tourist destination, is also home to a resilient local community whose youth face significant educational limitations (Leasa, 2023; Lowe, 2023). Due to the absence of a full-fledged university on the island, many students—referred to as "island scholars," must commute or relocate to the mainland to pursue higher education, primarily at institutions like Malay College. This daily journey from an island to a mainland institution embodies broader global and national challenges concerning geographic inequality, access, and inclusivity in archipelagic contexts (Samuel, 2023). Their pursuit of education requires not just academic perseverance, but also significant physical, financial, and socio-emotional resilience (Seetal, 2021).

The challenges faced by these students are a microcosm of a global issue where the universal right to education remains difficult to realize for those in geographically isolated areas (Roberts, 2022). Globally, island communities face limited infrastructure, understaffed schools, and a digital divide that limits access to technology and resources (Armstrong, 2020; Lgiu, 2022).

In the Philippines, despite national policies and programs like the Tertiary Education Subsidy (TES) and the "Last Mile Schools Program," disparities persist between mainland and island communities (Jolah, 2022; Island Innovation, 2024). These well-intentioned policies often face inconsistent implementation due to decentralized governance, limited resources, and an inability to accommodate the unique needs of island learners (Gamsu, 2020; Siope, 2022).

While the challenges of island learners are acknowledged in global reports and national policies, there is a significant research gap concerning the lived experiences of Boracay's students. Most existing literature focuses on macro-level indicators and general socioeconomic factors, failing to capture the unique, day-to-day realities of these specific learners (Barcenas, 2021).

The journeys of these students have been largely undocumented in formal academic literature, with no comprehensive, place-based research that centers their voices. This void means we lack a nuanced understanding of their specific challenges, coping mechanisms, and support systems as they navigate the complexities of their educational journey.

This study aims to fill that gap by providing a qualitative, in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of Boracay's island scholars. By documenting and analyzing the challenges they face, the strategies they employ, and the support systems they access, this research will provide a comprehensive view of their educational pathways. The findings will contribute to the broader understanding of educational mobility, access, and equity within the Philippine archipelagic setting, offering a unique perspective rarely found in mainstream academic discourse.

The need for this study is urgent and practical. Policies alone are insufficient unless they are grounded in the lived realities of island-based learners. Understanding the specific experiences of Boracay's students is essential for evaluating whether national educational efforts are effectively reaching the grassroots level (Pazoto, 2022).

The findings will serve as crucial evidence for developing context-sensitive policy reforms, educational planning, and community-based interventions that can make quality education more accessible and equitable for island communities, not only in Aklan but across the entire nation.

Research Questions

This study explores the lived experiences of Boracay-based students enrolled at Malay College, focusing on the challenges and strategies involved in navigating their academic and personal lives across island and mainland settings. Specifically, it sought to answer

the following questions:

1. What academic, emotional, social, and financial challenges do Boracay-based students encounter as they pursue higher education on the mainland?
2. How do these island scholars cope with the cultural and psychological transitions between their home island and the academic environment of Malay College?
3. In what ways do Boracay-based students maintain and affirm their island identity while integrating into a new educational and social context?

Literature Review

Island learners, particularly those in archipelagic nations like the Philippines, represent a unique and often marginalized demographic facing multiple barriers to quality education (Lucy Stokes, 2022). These students contend with compounding geographical, socioeconomic, and infrastructural challenges that set them apart from their mainland counterparts (Putri, 2021). The most immediate obstacle is the physical journey to school, which often involves risky sea travel or long commutes, leading to higher rates of absenteeism and dropout (Sanchez, 2022; Arif, 2022). Compounding this, many island schools suffer from limited resources, understaffed faculties, and a lack of essential infrastructure like electricity and internet, creating significant learning gaps from early childhood through tertiary education (Alipio, 2023; Izharsyah, 2022).

Beyond physical access, island students grapple with deep-seated systemic and economic disadvantages. Many island communities rely on unstable, seasonal incomes from tourism or fishing, which makes affording educational expenses—from tuition to transportation and lodging—a constant struggle (Bibon, 2022). This economic pressure often forces students to work part-time or delay their studies. Furthermore, government policies aimed at promoting educational equity, such as scholarship programs and new curricula, frequently fall short in implementation due to bureaucratic hurdles and a standardized approach that fails to accommodate the distinct realities of remote learners (Naliboff, 2022; Henderson, 2022). The lack of institutional continuity and uneven support from local governments further exacerbates these problems (Gamsu, 2020).

Cultural, psychological, and linguistic barriers also shape the educational journey for island students. Many students grow up speaking local dialects that differ from the medium of instruction in mainland schools, creating a language gap that affects comprehension and confidence (Gill, 2022). They also face a psychological toll from homesickness, social isolation, and the emotional burden of representing their community. This is compounded by an educational system where curriculum content often feels irrelevant to their island-based lives, leading to a disconnect between their cultural identity and their academic pursuits (Díaz-Mendoza, 2022). Moreover, traditional gender roles can sometimes conflict with school attendance, especially for girls who are expected to prioritize family responsibilities over academic goals (Gocotano, 2021).

The digital divide presents another major challenge, especially since the shift to online learning. A lack of reliable internet, digital devices, and consistent electricity in many island communities means these students are disproportionately excluded from modern learning tools and opportunities (Gill, 2022; Island Innovation, 2024). This digital inequality limits their access to research, scholarship information, and online applications, further hindering their academic competitiveness. Additionally, island schools and students are on the front lines of climate change, with intensifying typhoons and natural disasters causing prolonged school closures, displacement, and damage to already fragile infrastructure, making educational continuity a constant battle against the elements (Arif, 2022).

Despite facing these layered disadvantages, island students demonstrate remarkable resilience and a strong desire to succeed (Istiana, 2021). They often view education as a vital pathway to upward mobility and community development, aspiring to return and contribute to their home islands (Henderson, 2022; Lgiu, 2022). This deep sense of purpose is a form of social capital that, if harnessed correctly, can be a powerful driver for change. The literature overwhelmingly concludes that top-down, standardized interventions are insufficient. Instead, researchers advocate for localized, place-based solutions such as satellite campuses, community-based education models, and participatory planning that actively includes the voices of students, parents, and local leaders to create a genuinely inclusive and resilient education system (Díaz-Mendoza, 2022; Barcenas, 2022; Bibon, 2022).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative methodology, particularly the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) is used as a framework for collecting and analyzing data. IPA was developed to study people's lived experiences and how they make sense of them. This approach has phenomenological (focus on lived experience), hermeneutic (interpretation by the researcher as a way to gain insight into the experience of the participants), and ideographical (focus on in-depth analysis of particular participants) roots (Finlay, 2011; Smith, 2011b). In IPA, the researchers attempted to make sense of the participants' attempts to understand what was happening to them. This process is also referred to as a 'double hermeneutic' (Smith, 2011a: p.10). IPA recommends an in-depth analysis of data obtained from one or more individuals.

Participants

The participants of this study were eight students (8) enrolled in the BS Tourism Management program at Malay College, all residing on Boracay Island. The researchers employed purposive sampling in selecting the participants. The researchers took the following steps: first, with the help of the College Registrar. Then, the Suggestions of the Program heads recommend the names of participants who met the following criteria: (a) officially enrolled in Malay College, and (b) preferably, can converse in English.

Instrument

The bulk of the data was collected through in-depth interviews using a researcher-formulated semi-structured interview guide. Before the interview, the interviewer was trained to conduct the interview sessions. This training was necessary to calibrate and synchronize styles in conducting in-depth interviews, thereby ensuring the trustworthiness of the data. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each key informant was assigned a code to protect their anonymity, and the data was safeguarded correctly to ensure confidentiality.

Procedure

Before initiating the data collection, the researcher first secured the necessary permissions and ethical clearances to ensure that the study adhered to academic and ethical standards. A formal request letter was sent to the administration of Malay College, seeking approval to conduct interviews with Boracay-based students currently enrolled at the institution. Upon approval, the researcher also coordinated with designated faculty members or student affairs personnel to help identify potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. An informed consent form was prepared, detailing the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. The researcher conducted a briefing session for the selected respondents, during which the study's objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations were clearly explained. This preliminary phase ensured that all participants were fully aware of their rights and the scope of the research.

The actual data collection was conducted through individual, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. Each interview took approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was scheduled based on the availability and convenience of the student-respondents. The interviews were conducted in a quiet and neutral location to ensure privacy, comfort, and minimal distractions. With the participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to capture the full richness of their responses for accurate transcription and analysis. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions and explore emerging themes as they naturally arose during the conversations. Participants were encouraged to share their stories openly, with the researcher taking note of both verbal and non-verbal cues. Throughout the process, rapport and trust were maintained to create a respectful and safe space for honest sharing.

After the interviews were completed, the recorded audio files were transcribed verbatim by the researcher to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the data. Transcripts were carefully reviewed, and any identifying information was removed or coded to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. The researcher then began the initial stages of data organization and thematic coding, preparing the responses for analysis using the phenomenological method. Participants were allowed to review their transcripts or provide clarifications if needed, a process known as member checking, which enhances the credibility of the findings. The data were stored securely, both digitally and in hard copy, accessible only to the researcher. Finally, the insights gathered during the interviews formed the foundation for analyzing and understanding the lived experiences of island students, ensuring that their voices were authentically and ethically represented throughout the study.

Data Analysis

This study followed the IPA protocol of Smith and Osborn (2007), which consists of five steps, namely: a) Looking for themes in each case. In this step, the transcript was read and reread several times. The researcher immerses himself in the data to gain familiarity with the participants' responses. Beside each transcript is a margin where anything significant, engaging, and striking stated by the participants was written down. b) Looking for connections. In this stage, the emerging themes were listed on the right side of the transcripts. After this, the themes were clustered based on their connections. The clustered emerging themes were compared again with the transcript to ensure all other related words were included. c) Compiling a table of themes. This stage involved displaying all the themes, which had been clustered and labeled coherently according to connections. This process was done with care to ensure that the themes would be represented in the verbatim excerpts and not be influenced by the researcher's bias. d) Compiling a master list of themes for the group. As the analysis progressed following IPA, a final list of themes was compiled. e) Writing reports. This step involved writing reports for publication based on the master list of themes. The themes were translated into narrative accounts. Verbatim excerpts from the participants' narratives were incorporated into the write-up to confirm the researcher's interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher observed ethical considerations in the conduct of the study by observing justice, respect, and beneficence of the participants involved. Protocols pertaining to the conduct of the study were secured in the different Offices and with the participants.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Negotiating Island and Academic Identities

The theme "Negotiating Island and Academic Identities" highlights the complex and active process that Boracay students undertake as they transition to tertiary education at Malay College. This is not simply a change of scenery, but a profound psychological and cultural shift where students must reconcile their deep-rooted island values, traditions, and community-driven lifestyle with the formal, structured, and often more diverse environment of a mainland academic institution. The students' experience is a continuous negotiation, marked by both a proud assertion of their unique heritage and the development of new skills in independence, resilience, and cultural adaptation. They become "cultural negotiators," learning to navigate the dual realities of their past and present, which not only shapes their self-concept but also enriches the academic community by bringing a fresh perspective on topics like community, sustainability, and life beyond the mainstream. The nuance of participants is evident during the interviews below

Participant 1 shared that,

"At first, I felt like I didn't belong. The way people talked, the way they dressed, everything was different from what I was used to in Boracay,"

Meanwhile, Participant 2 affirmed,

"Being away from the island helped me realize how different our lives are. It's not bad, but it's something I had to adjust to—especially how we approach time, responsibilities, and relationships."

In like manner, Participant 3 expressed that,

"Even if I miss the sea breeze and the community back home, studying in Malay College made me see another world. I've learned to be more independent and to appreciate where I come from."

Students often face challenges in adapting to new cultural contexts and developing a sense of belonging. They may experience feelings of isolation and struggle to integrate with local communities (Morgan Poteet & B. Gomez, 2015; Safary Wa-Mbaleka & N. Joseph, 2013). These students often form multicultural friendship networks with other international students while remaining somewhat detached from the host country (Morgan Poteet & B. Gomez, 2015). The experience of being an "outsider" can lead to conflicting emotions and questioning one's place in the new academic environment (Palmer, 2015). However, this cross-cultural experience can also contribute to the development of international mindedness and a unique sense of self in "third culture kids" (Poonoosamy, 2018). Coping strategies and support from educational institutions are crucial in helping international students navigate these challenges and successfully adapt to their new surroundings (Safary Wa-Mbaleka & N. Joseph, 2013; Palmer, 2015).

Theme 2: More Active and Personal Life

For Boracay students, the transition to Malay College is marked by a challenging adjustment to a new level of academic rigor. Initially, the shift from smaller, less-resourced island schools to a demanding mainland institution creates a noticeable educational gap, leading to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. However, this challenge sparks a determined effort to adapt. Students actively bridge this gap by seeking peer support, attending tutorials, and developing into more self-directed learners. This process of confronting academic demands, from mastering formal writing to navigating new digital tools, not only helps them succeed in their studies but also builds a newfound sense of confidence and resilience. Below are the nuances of their narratives on their activities and personal lives:

According to Participant 3,

"In high school, we didn't have much training in research or writing long papers. So when I got to Malay College, I felt overwhelmed by all the requirements,"

Another student, Participant 4, said,

"There were times I cried because I didn't understand the lessons, and everyone else seemed to know what they were doing. But I just studied harder and asked my classmates for help."

Participant 5 expressed that,

"The first few weeks were the hardest. I didn't know how to use the online platform, which led to me failing some quizzes. But after a while, I got used to it and even helped other students who were struggling."

The transition from high school to college presents significant challenges for many students, even those considered high-achieving. Research indicates that first-year students often struggle with academic library use, scholarly reading comprehension, and understanding faculty expectations (Head, 2013). In Malaysia, first-year students face difficulties with independent learning, research, time management, English proficiency, and critical thinking (Terpstra-Tong & Ahmad, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, with students experiencing isolation and technological issues in online learning environments (Puteh Behak et al., 2022). Despite high test scores and GPAs, even students at elite institutions may be academically unprepared for college,

as these metrics fail to account for non-academic factors crucial to success (Holles, 2016). These findings highlight the need for improved transition programs and closer relationships between high schools and universities to better prepare students for the demands of higher education (Terpstra-Tong & Ahmad, 2018).

Theme 3: Forging New Communities Beyond the Island

Forging New Communities Beyond the Island" encapsulates the active and intentional process by which Boracay students navigate their social lives at Malay College. Moving from a close-knit island community to a larger, more diverse campus environment often presents a significant challenge, creating feelings of isolation and a social disconnect. However, this transition is not passive; students actively work to build new social networks and find a sense of belonging. This involves forming new friendships with peers from diverse backgrounds, engaging in campus activities, and finding support systems that help them overcome homesickness and cultural adjustment. Ultimately, their journey is a testament to their resilience, as they deliberately create a new sense of community, blending their island roots with new relationships and experiences to form a strong social identity that is both independent and integrated. The nuances of their narratives are evident below:

Participant 1 shared that,

"At first, I didn't talk to anyone in class. I was too shy, and I thought they might judge me because I was from the island,"

In like manner, Participant 2 expressed that,

"I felt like an outsider because I spoke differently and didn't know the same things they talked about,"

In Contrast, Participant 3 revealed that,

"Eventually, I met people who were curious about Boracay, and they started asking questions. That helped me open up. Now I have friends from different places, and it feels good to be accepted."

The research papers explore social and linguistic challenges faced by students from different backgrounds in new academic environments. Students from islands or distinct cultural regions often experience feelings of isolation, shyness, and difficulty integrating due to language differences and unfamiliarity with local customs (Dos Santos et al., 2023; Jagad et al., 2025). Factors such as an inferiority complex, social phobia, and lack of self-esteem can hinder classroom participation (Garingan, 2021). However, social positioning plays a crucial role in determining acceptance and inclusion within the classroom community (Kayı-Aydar, 2014). Over time, students may develop strategies to overcome these barriers, such as engaging with curious peers and embracing their unique identities (Dos Santos et al., 2023). To address these challenges, educators are encouraged to create friendly classroom environments, employ student-centered approaches, and use innovative teaching strategies that promote equitable learning opportunities and social skill development (Garingan, 2021).

Theme 4: The Emotional Bridge: Connecting with Home from Afar

For many Boracay students, the experience at Malay College is profoundly shaped by a persistent and powerful homesickness. This isn't just about missing a place, but about the emotional void created by the absence of their island home's close-knit community, familiar routines, and sensory experiences like the sound of the sea. The psychological toll is particularly acute during moments of quiet or stress, often manifesting as feelings of loneliness and sadness. While the emotional distance from family and the comfort of their island life can be draining, these students actively work to manage their feelings, relying on their academic goals and coping strategies to navigate this significant and emotionally challenging transition. Below are their significant stories:

When Participant 1 was probed, she responded that,

"Every night, I would call my mother just to hear her voice. It made me feel like I was still connected to Boracay."

Similarly, Participant 2 added,

"I would look at pictures of the beach and my family to remind myself why I'm doing this. It's hard, especially during holidays when everyone is together back home and I'm here studying."

Participant 3 said,

"There were times I wanted to quit and just go back. I missed the simple life on the island. But I reminded myself that this sacrifice is for a better future."

Research on various groups facing challenges while pursuing education or work reveals common themes of struggle, resilience, and coping strategies. Student mothers experience personal struggles and societal acceptance issues, relying on family support and faith to cope (Alvarado et al., 2023). Children of overseas contract workers report feelings of desertion and isolation, using social media to maintain family relationships (Apolonio Machica & Montallana, 2018). Teen mothers express regret and confusion but also hope and dreams for the future (A. Rosario et al., 2016). Teachers on Zaragosa Island face unique challenges like sea travel and lack of support systems, but demonstrate resilience in surmounting these obstacles (Herebias et al., 2025). Across these groups, standard coping

mechanisms include maintaining connections with family, focusing on future goals, and drawing strength from support systems. These studies highlight the importance of understanding diverse experiences in education and work to provide targeted support and improve conditions for vulnerable groups.

Theme 5: Anchored in Our Roots, Affirming Island Identity in a New World

The theme, Anchored in Our Roots, Affirming Island Identity in a New World, captures the profound and intentional process by which Boracay students maintain their cultural heritage while immersed in the academic environment of Malay College. Far from losing their identity, these students draw strength from their island origins, using their unique cultural values and experiences as a foundation in their new setting. This isn't a passive preservation, but an active affirmation; they bring a distinct voice shaped by island life into classroom discussions, social interactions, and personal growth. By doing so, they become cultural ambassadors, demonstrating a powerful sense of pride that both sustains them through challenges and enriches the diverse community around them, proving that their roots are not a tie that holds them back but an anchor that keeps them grounded. Below are the nuances of their narratives:

According to Participant 1,

"Whenever people find out I'm from Boracay, they think all I do is relax on the beach. I tell them there's more to our life—we work hard, and we value education."

In like manner, Participant 2 emphasized,

"I carry my identity with pride. I may be far from home, but I bring my values wherever I go—respect, simplicity, and care for the environment."

Meanwhile, Participant 5 shared,

"Sometimes people ask if we even have proper schools on the island. I use those moments to educate them. I want them to see that we're more than just a tourist spot."

Recent studies have explored various aspects of life and work in Boracay, Philippines. The successful rehabilitation of Boracay Island has led to positive behavioral changes towards environmental consciousness among residents and improved the island's attractiveness as a tourist destination (Chriszela Sabandal & Gynnyn Gumban, 2024). Research has shown that higher educational attainment in the Philippines is associated with more positive environmental values, attitudes, and actions (Bedural, 2018). The complex issue of sex work in Boracay has been examined, revealing challenges such as social discrimination and safety concerns faced by sex workers (Toring et al., 2025). Additionally, a study on remote workers in Boracay identified key factors for developing organizational culture in remote settings, including effective communication and flexibility in work arrangements (Danao et al., 2025). These studies collectively highlight the multifaceted nature of life on Boracay, encompassing environmental consciousness, education, social issues, and evolving work dynamics.

Conclusions

This paper aims to explore the lived experiences of Tourism students in Malay College who reside in Boracay Island, Malay, Aklan. This study is limited to the Lived experiences of students enrolled in the Bachelor of Tourism Management program. This study will help educators and institutions develop campus activities that address learners' needs for emotional attachments and adjustment to the tertiary education system. The theme that emerged during the analysis of interview transcripts are: Theme (1) Negotiating Island and Academic Identities, theme (2) More Active and Personal Life, theme (3) Forging New Communities Beyond the Island, (theme 4) The Emotional Bridge: Connecting with Home from Afar, and theme (5) Anchored in Our Roots, Affirming Island Identity in a New World. The study will contribute to the administrators of Malay College in cultivating initiatives suited to the island learners and will be effectively integrated into the College ecosystem for better academic productivity of the students. In this study, I employed a qualitative method. A similar analysis can be conducted using quantitative or mixed approaches.

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