

Alone but not lonely: a hermeneutic phenomenology of peer relationships and academic resilience

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ABSTRACT

Academic resilience is frequently conceptualized as an individual trait, with limited attention to its relational dimensions, particularly in the Philippine secondary school context. This study examines how academic resilience is experienced and interpreted within peer contexts among secondary school students in a public university-affiliated laboratory school in the Philippines. Using a hermeneutic phenomenology (Heideggerian–Gadamerian) design, the research moves beyond trait-based models to explore lived relational experience. Six students (n=6) participated in in-depth, face-to-face interviews. Data were analyzed through iterative interpretation consistent with the hermeneutic circle. Findings indicate that resilience emerged through relational processes rather than as a purely individual attribute. Belonging functioned as emotional support during academic transitions, while academic pressure was often normalized within structured school expectations. Peers provided encouragement, academic guidance, and role modeling, but also introduced tensions that required negotiation. Participants described resilience not as the absence of difficulty, but as continued engagement in academic life supported by shared experiences and mutual recognition. The study contributes to resilience scholarship by situating resilience within peer dynamics in a Philippine secondary school setting and by highlighting its relational dimensions. Implications emphasize the importance of cultivating inclusive peer climates that sustain students' academic participation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Human existence is fundamentally relational, and engagement with others is not merely a social preference but a basic condition of being [1], [2]. Within educational spaces, interpersonal relationships are not incidental to learning; they shape how students interpret themselves, their struggles, and their aspirations. Positive interpersonal relationships reflect students' social environments and often function as vital sources of assistance in achieving personal and academic goals [3]. Through interaction, students establish connections that influence both academic engagement and personal development.

Peer relationships refer to interpersonal connections formed among individuals at similar developmental levels [4]. In school settings, these relationships serve as sources of social support and contribute to a positive learning climate. Research indicates that peer dynamics influence not only academic

performance but also well-being, motivation, and the capacity to navigate academic challenges [5]. Because adolescents spend much of their formative years in school, peer interaction becomes a central context for their identity and self-understanding.

Academic resilience is commonly defined as the ability to maintain motivation and performance despite academic risk [6]. Existing literature identifies both internal factors, such as self-beliefs and goal orientations, and external factors, such as social support systems, as contributors to resilience [7], [8]. Although the importance of social environments is widely acknowledged, much research conceptualizes resilience as a measurable trait or outcome. Less attention has been given to how students experience and interpret resilience within the quality and dynamics of their peer relationships [9].

Schools function not only as instructional institutions but also as social worlds. Students negotiate belonging, identity, and performance standards within peer contexts [10]. While peer support has been associated with mental health and academic motivation [11], peer influence may also involve exclusion, rivalry, or perceived judgment [12]. Adolescents must therefore navigate complex relational systems that intersect with academic expectations, stress, and psychological well-being. In this sense, resilience unfolds within social interactions rather than apart from them.

Despite extensive research on peer support and academic outcomes, the existing body of scholarship is characterized by three interrelated limitations. First, the predominant methodological orientation is quantitative and variable-driven, relying on surveys, scales, and statistical models to establish correlations between peer support variables and academic outcomes such as grades, engagement scores, and persistence rates. While this approach has produced valuable insights, it treats resilience as a measurable, stable attribute that can be isolated, quantified, and predicted. Second, and relatedly, most existing studies are correlational in design, identifying associations between peer factors and achievement without capturing the processes through which students experience and interpret those relationships. Knowing that peer support correlates with resilience does not explain how students make sense of belonging, encouragement, exclusion, or peer pressure in moments of academic strain. Third, and most critically for the present study, this literature gives limited attention to students' lived meanings. The subjective, interpretive dimensions of resilience remain largely unexplored: how students understand themselves within peer relationships, how they position academic difficulty within their social worlds, and how meaning-making within those relationships sustains or undermines engagement. What is missing, therefore, is not more evidence that peer relationships matter, but a grounded, interpretive account of how resilience is lived within them.

These gaps are particularly consequential in the Philippine secondary school context, where secondary schools face a combination of pressures that make the relational dimensions of academic resilience especially urgent to understand [13]. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted peer relationships at a formative period for many adolescents, severing the relational continuities that research suggests are central to academic persistence and well-being [14]. As schools transition toward full in-person learning, students are navigating not only academic recovery but also the reconstruction of peer connections amid heightened levels of anxiety, social withdrawal, and academic disengagement that have been widely documented in post-pandemic educational settings. These conditions make understanding how peer relationships sustain resilience not merely a theoretical concern but a timely and practical one [15].

Academic pressure in Philippine secondary education has intensified in the wake of the K-12 curriculum reform, which introduced senior high school and created significant transitional demands for students moving between the junior and senior levels [16]. These transitions disrupt established peer networks at precisely the moment when academic expectations intensify, leaving students navigating unfamiliar social dynamics alongside increased curricular demands. Yet institutional responses to student struggle have largely emphasized individual-level solutions, such as study skills training, self-regulation programs, and personal goal setting [17], reflecting a broader tendency in resilience frameworks to locate the capacity for persistence within the individual student rather than within the relational conditions surrounding them.

This overemphasis on individual grit obscures a critical reality: that many students do not face academic difficulty alone, but within peer contexts that shape how that difficulty is interpreted, endured, and overcome. Although recent policy initiatives in Philippine basic education highlight socio-emotional learning and learner well-being, as outlined in DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021, formal relational support structures such as peer mentoring schemes, collaborative learning frameworks, and socially attentive classroom practices remain uneven and often weakly institutionalized across schools. As a result, the relational dimensions of resilience remain only partially addressed in many secondary schools [18]. Understanding how resilience is lived within peer relationships, therefore, carries direct relevance for how schools support students amid the pressures and transitions that define secondary education in the Philippine context.

Addressing this gap, the present study shifts from an outcome-oriented perspective toward an interpretive exploration of lived experience among secondary school students in a public university-affiliated laboratory school in the Philippines. Using a hermeneutic lens that understands peer relationships not merely

as external supports but as integral to students' academic experience, this study foregrounds students' own accounts of how peer relationships shape their responses to academic challenges within the Philippine secondary education context. By examining how students interpret academic struggles through collaboration, presence, and shared engagement, the study seeks to illuminate how resilience is experienced within peer contexts.

This study makes three contributions to the existing literature. First, it fills a contextual gap in resilience research by situating academic resilience within Philippine secondary education, a setting shaped by K-12 curriculum reforms, post-pandemic relational disruption, and institutional cultures that have prioritized individual-level coping strategies; existing scholarship on academic resilience is predominantly Western in orientation, and empirically grounded insights from the Philippine secondary school context remain scarce. Second, the study offers a methodological contribution by employing hermeneutic phenomenology (Heideggerian–Gadamerian) as an alternative to the quantitative, variable-driven designs that dominate resilience scholarship. This approach foregrounds students' lived meanings and interpretive experiences rather than measuring resilience as a stable, quantifiable outcome. Third, and most substantively, the study reconceptualizes academic resilience, moving beyond individual psychological trait models, toward understanding resilience as relational meaning-making: a process constituted through belonging, shared endurance, aspirational peer modeling, and the interpretive navigation of relational tension. Together, these contributions advance understanding of how resilience is lived within peer relationships rather than possessed by individuals, advancing understanding of academic resilience in the context of Philippine secondary education. Guided by these contributions, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How do secondary school students experience and interpret academic resilience within peer relationships? (RQ1)
- In what ways do peer relationships shape students' understanding and enactment of academic resilience? (RQ2)

2. METHOD

This study is grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology (Heideggerian–Gadamerian), informed by the philosophical traditions of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Hermeneutic phenomenology assumes that human experience is always already situated within relational, historical, and contextual conditions [19]. Meaning is not treated as an objective property of events but as something disclosed through engagement with lived experience [20]. From a Heideggerian perspective, students are understood not as isolated individuals confronting academic demands independently, but as beings-in-the-world whose experiences unfold through being-with others. Academic resilience is therefore approached not merely as an internal psychological trait, but as a phenomenon that emerges within relational contexts; peer relationships are treated as constitutive dimensions of students' academic existence rather than as external variables influencing performance.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics also informs the epistemological foundation of this study. Knowledge is understood as emerging through dialogue and shaped by historical context, produced through an ongoing exchange between participants' lived accounts and the interpretive assumptions the researcher brings to the inquiry [21]. Within a hermeneutic phenomenological frame, interpretation is understood as an iterative movement in which the researcher's and participants' horizons meet and are reshaped through sustained engagement with lived accounts [22]. Guided by this orientation, the study seeks to illuminate how academic resilience is experienced and interpreted within peer relationships. The aim is not explanation, prediction, or statistical generalization, but the articulation of meaning as lived within students' shared academic worlds.

The study was conducted at the Laboratory High School of Caraga State University, Cabadbaran Campus, a public university-affiliated secondary school in Cabadbaran City, Agusan del Norte, Philippines. As a laboratory school, it operates under the university's direct supervision. Students are exposed to a relatively structured, academically demanding environment where high-performance expectations coexist with ongoing pedagogical experimentation. The school draws students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds within the city and surrounding communities, including students navigating the transitional demands of the K-12 curriculum's senior high school track. This institutional context is significant for the present study: the laboratory school setting creates a peer environment in which academic competition, collaborative learning, and mentorship dynamics are particularly pronounced, making it a meaningful site for exploring how resilience is lived within peer relationships. The school was selected because it offered both institutional access and a student population with sufficient academic diversity across grade levels to illuminate the relational dimensions of resilience across different stages of secondary schooling.

2.1. Research sample and procedure

Participant selection was guided by experiential relevance rather than statistical representation, consistent with the epistemological orientation of hermeneutic phenomenology. In interpretive qualitative research, sample adequacy is evaluated through the depth, richness, and interpretive sufficiency of lived accounts rather than numerical size [23], [24]. Scholars in the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition emphasize that small, purposively selected samples are methodologically appropriate because the goal is to obtain rich, information-dense accounts of lived experience rather than statistically generalizable findings [25]. Methodological texts thus recommend samples often ranging from about 5 to 10 homogeneous participants in IPA studies and up to 20 in other phenomenological designs, provided each case can be examined in depth [26].

An interpretive phenomenological analysis has informed sample size considerations across phenomenological traditions, recommending samples as small as three to six participants for studies seeking an in-depth, idiographic understanding of lived experience [27]. Such sample sizes are consistent with hermeneutic-phenomenological guidance that prioritizes intensive, iterative interpretation of each participant's narrative over broad statistical generalization [28]. Accordingly, six secondary school students were purposively selected from a Philippine public laboratory school. To reflect variation in developmental positioning and academic exposure, the sample included one participant each from grades 7, 8, 9, and 10, and two participants from grade 11. While this sample size precludes statistical generalization, it enabled the depth of interpretive engagement necessary to capture how resilience is lived within peer relationships across different stages of secondary schooling. The study's claims are offered as conceptually grounded insights rather than representative findings, and the limitations of the sample size are acknowledged in the study limitations section.

Purposive sampling enabled the identification of students who had encountered academic challenges and could articulate reflective accounts of peer relationships in school life. This approach was considered more appropriate than random sampling for an interpretive study, as it prioritizes experiential insight and narrative relevance over representational breadth [29]. Participants were assigned codes (C1–C6) to protect their identities, and identifying details were withheld from all written reports. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was secured in accordance with institutional research standards. Participants received an information sheet describing the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality safeguards. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

2.2. Data collection

Data were generated through face-to-face, in-depth individual interviews guided by a structured set of open-ended questions aligned with the research objectives. The interview guide provided thematic direction while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences. Questions invited students to describe specific academic challenges, recount peer interactions during those moments, and reflect on how such experiences influenced their understanding of resilience, collaboration, and support. Interviews were conducted in a quiet setting within the school to ensure privacy and minimize interruptions. Each of the six participants (C1–C6) was interviewed once during the data collection period. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in both English and Bisaya, depending on participants' language preferences and comfort levels. This approach allowed participants to articulate their experiences with greater ease and expressive depth. Interviews conducted in Bisaya were translated into English by the researchers during transcription. Translation was approached as an interpretive process, with attention given to preserving contextual and cultural meaning rather than producing literal equivalence. Translated excerpts were reviewed against the original audio recordings to ensure fidelity.

The interview guide underwent expert review by faculty members with backgrounds in English language studies and qualitative research to ensure clarity, appropriateness, and alignment with the study's focus. Institutional permission was obtained prior to conducting interviews. These preparatory steps were undertaken to ensure that the data collection process was both methodologically sound and ethically responsible. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded using a mobile recording device to ensure accurate documentation. Recordings were transcribed verbatim. Digital files were stored in password-protected devices accessible only to the researchers.

Table 1 provides an overview of participants' grade levels, sex, and brief academic backgrounds to contextualize the interpretive findings. These details are not presented as variables to be measured or controlled, but rather as contextual markers that help situate each participant within their broader educational journey. Together, they offer a descriptive foundation that supports a more nuanced reading of the interpretive accounts that follow.

As shown in Table 1, participants represented diverse grade levels and academic positions, enabling the study to explore resilience across varying developmental and relational contexts. This variation is analytically valuable, as participants at different points in their academic formation brought distinct perspectives shaped by their experiences within institutional environments. The breadth of representation across these positions enriched the inquiry by revealing how resilience is understood and navigated differently at different stages of academic and personal development.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

Participant code	Grade	Gender	Brief background/academic profile
C1	Grade 11	Male	Describes overall school experience as positive; notes pressure from quizzes and deadlines leading to overthinking.
C2	Grade 11	Female	Experienced difficult transition; later reports social inclusion; identifies time management as a challenge.
C3	Grade 10	Female	Long-term student; describes academic pressure from assignments and presentations; reports online learning adjustment difficulties.
C4	Grade 9	Male	Reports challenging semester with frequent quizzes and limited rest; minimal elaboration on negative experiences.
C5	Grade 8	Female	Describes entry as a major transition; notes peer-related stress and academic demands; views stress as growth-oriented.
C6	Grade 7	Female	Describes transition from elementary to secondary school; notes stricter rules and social adjustment challenges.

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis followed a hermeneutic–interpretive process consistent with the hermeneutic circle, in which understanding develops through recursive movement between parts of the text and the evolving whole narrative [20]. Rather than applying predetermined coding frameworks, transcripts were approached as meaningful texts requiring sustained interpretive engagement. This approach treats analysis not as a technical procedure but as an interpretive encounter between the researcher and the text, in which meaning emerges through repeated, attentive reading rather than mechanical categorization.

The analytic process unfolded in four interrelated stages. First, each transcript (C1–C6) was read multiple times in its entirety to develop a holistic sense of the participant’s academic world before any coding or annotation began. This initial reading with the text allowed the researchers to approach each account on its own terms, attending to tone, emphasis, and the relational texture of participants’ narratives. During this phase, descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes were recorded in the margins to capture how students articulated experiences of academic pressure, peer interaction, collaboration, belonging, exclusion, and influence.

Second, significant meaning-making units were identified through close, line-by-line engagement with each transcript. A meaning unit was defined as any passage, a phrase, a sentence, or a series of sentences, in which a participant articulated a distinct experiential insight about peer relationships, academic difficulty, or resilience. These units were not selected based on frequency or recurrence across participants but on their interpretive significance within each individual account. Units included accounts of peer support during academic stress, collaborative learning experiences, instances of peer discouragement or pressure, moments of recognition and validation, and reflections on coping within peer contexts. Attention was given not only to content but also to relational positioning: how participants described themselves in relation to others.

Third, meaning units were grouped into preliminary clusters through interpretive abstraction. Units were compared within and across transcripts, with attention to shared experiential structures, recurring patterns of meaning that pointed toward broader interpretive themes. Clustering was guided by relational and interpretive significance rather than frequency counts: a meaning unit shared by two participants but carrying deep interpretive weight was treated as thematically significant, while surface-level similarities across multiple participants were not automatically elevated into themes. At this stage, tentative theme labels were assigned to each cluster, described in language that preserved the experiential and relational character of participants’ accounts rather than reducing them to abstract constructs.

Fourth, preliminary themes were refined through iterative re-engagement with the full dataset. Each proposed theme was tested against the transcripts as a whole, asking whether it was coherently grounded in participants’ accounts, whether it captured something distinctive about their lived experience, and whether it held up across the diversity of the sample. Themes that could not be adequately supported by the data were revised, merged with related clusters, or set aside. This recursive movement between individual meaning units, thematic clusters, and the broader dataset reflects the logic of the hermeneutic circle: understanding at each level informed and was transformed by understanding at every other level. The four themes presented in the findings section represent the outcome of this sustained interpretive process, developed through multiple cycles of reading, abstraction, and refinement.

These reflexive practices promoted transparency and ensured that thematic development remained grounded in participants' narratives. Through this sustained interpretive process, the analysis moved beyond surface descriptions of peer interaction toward a deeper understanding of how resilience unfolds within relational contexts, not merely as individual endurance but as meaning shaped through shared academic life.

To enhance transparency and illustrate the movement from transcript to interpretive formulation, Table 2 presents an example of initial noting and interpretive coding. This example is intended not as a comprehensive account of the analytic process but as an illustrative window into how interpretive movement from raw transcript to thematic formulation was enacted in practice.

As shown in Table 2, analytic movement progressed from descriptive and linguistic noting toward relationally oriented interpretive codes, which subsequently informed the development of broader thematic structures. This progression reflects the iterative movement between parts and whole characteristic of the hermeneutic circle. Each coding decision was thus not an isolated act of categorization but a cumulative interpretive step that shaped and was shaped by the emerging understanding of the dataset as a whole.

Table 2. Example of initial noting and interpretive coding

Transcript	Initial notes	Interpretive code
C2: "At first, it was difficult because I did not know anyone, but later they welcomed me. I did not feel left out."	Social unfamiliarity; transition anxiety; peer inclusion; emotional reassurance; shift from isolation to belonging	Belonging as relational stabilization
C3: "There were numerous assignments and class presentations. Sometimes I felt alone, but not lonely, because I still had friends."	Academic pressure; workload stress; distinction between solitude and loneliness; sustaining friendship despite busyness	Relational buffering of academic strain
C4: "This semester is hard because of many quizzes and assignments." (Later: "None." when asked about negative experiences.)	Academic intensity; normalization of pressure; minimal disclosure; possible downplaying of difficulty	Normalization of academic strain; restrained vulnerability
C5: "It was a big change. There are toxic peers, but stress helps me grow."	Adjustment challenge; peer tension; stress reframed positively; developmental interpretation of difficulty	Growth-oriented reframing; resilience as reinterpretation
C6: "It's a new school. There are stricter rules, and sometimes there are rumors."	Institutional adjustment; social caution; sensitivity to peer dynamics; awareness of conflict	Adaptive social positioning; cautious belonging
C1: "There is pressure with quizzes and deadlines. Sometimes I overthink."	Performance anxiety; self-doubt; cognitive rumination; academic expectation	Internalized performance pressure; resilience-in-tension

2.4. Ensuring the rigor of the research

Rigor in this study was established through strategies that enhanced credibility, transparency, and analytic accountability [30]. The study emphasized coherence between participants' narratives, interpretive claims, and documented analytic decisions. Credibility was supported through sustained engagement with the data and collaborative review of emerging interpretations. Preliminary themes were critically examined through reflective discussion to consider alternative readings and guard against premature closure. This process strengthened the alignment between participants' accounts and thematic conclusions.

Reflexivity was continuously practiced throughout the research process. The researchers maintained analytic memos and reflexive journals to examine how prior experiences in educational settings and assumptions about peer relationships and resilience might shape interpretation. By making these influences explicit, the study aimed to enhance transparency and reduce unexamined bias.

Member checking further contributed to credibility. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts to ensure accuracy of representation. This step helped confirm that the documented accounts faithfully reflected their intended meanings. In addition, thick description was employed to present the findings. Verbatim excerpts are included to allow readers to evaluate the plausibility of interpretations and to see how analytic claims are grounded in participants' own words.

An audit trail documenting key analytic decisions, thematic development, and revisions was maintained throughout the study. This record provides transparency in how interpretations were developed and refined. Through these strategies, the study sought to ensure that its interpretations remain grounded in participants' lived experiences while maintaining clarity, consistency, and methodological accountability.

3. RESULTS

Through iterative hermeneutic engagement with participants' narratives, four interrelated themes emerged that illuminate how academic resilience is experienced within peer relationships. These themes reflect students' accounts of belonging, shared struggle, motivational influence, and adaptive social positioning. Table 3 presents the thematic architecture of the study, summarizing the major themes and their

constituent subthemes as developed through the analytic process. As shown in Table 3, the themes are organized hierarchically, with each major theme encompassing subthemes that capture the interpretive texture of participants' accounts. The discussion that follows elaborates each theme in turn, drawing on verbatim excerpts to ground the interpretations in participants' own words.

Table 3. Thematic architecture

Super-ordinate theme	Constituent themes	Illustrative focus
Belonging and relational stability	Movement from isolation to belonging; supported solitude; adaptive social navigation; presence as quiet strength	Transition adjustment; "alone but not lonely"; negotiated inclusion
Resilience within academic pressure	Internalized academic demand; endurance under structured expectations	Normalization of quizzes, deadlines, workload; persistence despite strain
Relational meaning-making	Growth-oriented reinterpretation; resilience as social positioning	Reframing peer tension as growth; managing exposure to difficult peers
Motivational peer influence	Aspirational peer modeling; collective coping	Looking up to high-performing peers; Shared academic support and encouragement

3.1. Belonging as relational stabilization

Belonging emerged as central to how students navigated academic life. Students who felt connected to their peers and teachers were better able to engage with challenging coursework and persist through setbacks. This sense of belonging functioned not merely as a social comfort but as a foundational condition for learning itself. A grade 11 student (C2) described her transition to grade 11 as emotionally disorienting:

"At first, it was very difficult. It was far from my previous school. Since elementary school, I have known everyone. Then in grade 11, I did not know anyone, not even one." (C2)

She recalled feeling afraid and awkward in a "very quiet" classroom, where the silence felt heavy and unwelcoming rather than calm or focused. The atmosphere made it difficult for her to speak up, ask questions, or connect with those around her. These early experiences left a strong impression on her sense of self within the academic environment. Over time, this shifted as she began to find her footing and build relationships with her classmates and teachers:

"They really welcomed me and did not make me feel left out." (C2)

Movement from unfamiliarity to inclusion supported her adjustment. This gradual relational transition shows how belonging is not always immediately available but can be cultivated through sustained peer openness and mutual acceptance. A grade 10 student (C3) similarly described sustained connection despite academic busyness:

"Sometimes I feel alone, but not lonely, because I still have friends." (C3)

Even amid numerous assignments and presentations, relational continuity remained intact. Belonging did not require constant interaction but existed as an enduring sense of connection. This quality of sustained, low-maintenance belonging proved particularly meaningful in a school environment where academic demands regularly competed with social time. She added:

"We support each other... even if sometimes one of us is top 1, sometimes another is top 1... we don't compete negatively. We support each other." (C3)

Across narratives, belonging functioned as an emotional anchor amid strain, grounding students even when academic and social pressures felt overwhelming. Situational distance did not equate to isolation, as students often maintained meaningful connections despite varying circumstances. Connection remained a stabilizing presence, sustaining engagement and keeping students invested in their academic lives.

Belonging was not always expressed through active reassurance or explicit encouragement, and students did not always need words or gestures to feel connected. At times, presence itself carried significance, with the simple act of being physically near others providing a quiet but meaningful sense of inclusion. A classmate sitting nearby, a teacher moving through the room, or a familiar face in the hallway could all convey acceptance without a single word. These subtle, unspoken forms of belonging proved just as powerful as more deliberate expressions of support in shaping students' experiences of their school environment. A grade 10 student (C3) and grade 7 student (C6) expressed:

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“Even if they don’t say anything... their presence is enough.” (C3)

“When I’m reviewing, I just want them not to disturb me.” (C6)

While C3 found comfort in the quiet presence of others, C6’s account points to a related but distinct dimension: belonging also means that peers respect the boundaries of focused, solitary work. In this sense, relational support is not only about being present but about knowing when to step back.

3.2. Resilience within academic pressure

Academic pressure was described as persistent and, at times, overwhelming, permeating many aspects of students’ daily lives both inside and outside the classroom. The weight of expectations, whether self-imposed or externally driven, shaped how students approached their work, their relationships, and their sense of self-worth. For some, this pressure accumulated gradually over the course of the school year, while for others it arrived suddenly in response to specific demands or deadlines. A grade 11 student (C1) articulated anticipatory stress:

“I feel pressured... especially before quizzes or deadlines... sometimes I overthink.” (C1)

A grade 9 student (C4) described exhaustion:

“No matter how much I study, I cannot rest. There are so many quizzes and assignments.” (C4)

Yet, when asked directly about negative academic experiences, he responded, *“None.”*

The coexistence of acknowledged difficulty and minimal complaint suggests that strain had become normalized. Pressure was present but not consistently framed as a grievance. This suggests that for some students, resilience is not marked by a narrative of overcoming, but by a quiet, unspoken persistence within a context where difficulty is the assumed baseline. A grade 10 student (C3) recounted pandemic-era hardship:

“Online class was the hardest part... I had no signal in our area. There were times I cried because I could not submit requirements.” (C3)

C3 also described exclusion, *“I was the only one who was not part of their friend group.”* This social exclusion compounded the academic strain she was already experiencing, making her persistence even more significant. Despite this, she concluded, *“I managed it. I overcame it.”*

Resilience did not appear as the absence of distress but as continued engagement amid ongoing demands. These accounts collectively suggest that what sustained students was not freedom from difficulty but the interpretive capacity to remain present within it. Peer connection, even when implicit, provided the relational ground from which that continued engagement became possible.

3.3. Relational meaning-making

This theme captures how students interpret relational experiences as sites of growth, positioning, and academic persistence, revealing the deeply social nature of learning and development. Relationships with peers and teachers were not merely background features of school life but active contexts in which students came to understand themselves and their capabilities. Through these interactions, students negotiated their identities, tested their boundaries, and found the motivation to continue even when challenges arose. In this way, relational experiences functioned as both mirrors and scaffolds, reflecting who students believed themselves to be while also supporting who they were striving to become.

Peer relationships were not uniformly supportive, and students’ experiences of connection existed alongside moments of tension, exclusion, and perceived judgment. While some students found in their peers a source of encouragement and belonging, others encountered social dynamics that heightened their anxiety and undermined their confidence. These contrasting experiences highlighted the complexity of adolescent peer relationships, which could shift quickly depending on context, mood, or circumstance. A grade 11 student (C2) described perceived judgment:

“It’s hard to go to school when you feel like someone is upset with you... It makes you lose motivation... You feel like you’re being judged.” (C2)

She explained that fear of gossip reduced participation:

“Instead of wanting to participate, you become afraid they will judge you.” (C2)

A grade 8 student (C5) noted strain within friendship:

“Sometimes they brought me down... They wanted to spend time together, but it affected my time to study.” (C5)

A grade 7 student (C6) described discouraging comments:

“They would say, ‘Don’t review anymore, the exam is easy,’ but later they would say, ‘The exam was hard.’” (C6)

These accounts suggest that peer dynamics are not neutral background conditions but interpretive contexts. Judgment, distraction, and comparison shape how students understand themselves as learners. Taken together, they demonstrate that resilience is not only supported by relationships but interpreted through them. Students position themselves in relation to peers, sometimes affirmed, sometimes judged, sometimes inspired. In each case, relational experience becomes a site where academic difficulty is reinterpreted, negotiated, and incorporated into self-understanding, a process at the heart of hermeneutic experience. In this way, moments of relational tension do not simply impede engagement but also contribute to students’ development as learners, prompting reflection and recalibrating their academic identities. Resilience emerges through this ongoing process of relational meaning-making.

3.4. Motivational peer influence

This theme captures how students drew on their relationships with peers as a source of motivation, direction, and academic drive, revealing the extent to which learning was a socially energized process. Peers were not simply companions in the school environment but active influences who shaped how students set goals, sustained effort, and measured their own progress. Through observation, encouragement, and shared struggle, students found in their classmates both a reflection of their own aspirations and a catalyst for deeper academic engagement.

3.4.1. Aspirational and instructional influence

Observing classmates who excelled academically inspired students to raise their own expectations, reframe what was possible, and invest more deliberately in their studies. Beyond inspiration, peers also played an instructional role, sharing strategies, explaining concepts, and modeling study habits that proved difficult to acquire through formal teaching alone. In this way, peers served as informal educators whose availability and familiarity made them approachable in ways that formal teaching structures sometimes could not replicate. A grade 11 student (C1) captured this dynamic simply and directly:

“If I don’t understand a lesson, I ask them to teach me.” (C1)

A grade 9 student (C4) added:

“They teach me until I understand.” (C4)

A grade 8 student (C5) described being inspired by a high-performing student:

“He told me everything he did to become an honor student... I was like, ‘How inspirational. I’m going to do that.’” (C5)

Peer modeling shaped study habits, effort, and academic self-understanding. Beyond the transmission of strategies, these interactions carried an identity-forming dimension: students did not merely learn what to do but began to reimagine whom they could become as learners. In this way, aspirational peer influence functioned as a relational catalyst for academic motivation and self-reorientation.

3.4.2. Collective coping

Peers were frequently described as active supports during moments of vulnerability. When students struggled academically or emotionally, it was often a classmate rather than an adult who first noticed, approached, and offered comfort. These peer-to-peer moments of support revealed an informal but powerful network of collective coping that operated alongside the school’s formal structures of care. A grade 9 student (C4) shared:

“I was crying because my score was 3 out of 10... I hid in the CR because I don’t usually show that I cry. One of my friends saw me, approached me, and asked if I was okay... They comforted me and told me, ‘Better luck next time.’” (C4)

Peer presence interrupted isolation, offering students a point of human contact precisely when they felt most alone and overwhelmed. Even when academic strain was at its most acute, the proximity of a supportive classmate was enough to restore a sense of agency and possibility. These moments of connection did not need to be lengthy or elaborate to be effective; sometimes a brief exchange or a reassuring glance was sufficient to shift a student’s emotional state. C3 described affirmation from a close friend during hardship:

“She would tell me, ‘I’m very proud of you,’ especially during the time when we had no signal... She helped lift my confidence.” (C3)

A grade 8 student (C5) emphasized small gestures:

“Even simple things like smiling and saying good morning... I think that’s the best part of the day.” (C5)

She recalled reassurance from a friend:

“She reassured me that everything will be okay... I felt like ‘I can actually do this.’” (C5)

Encouragement, reassurance, and shared presence functioned as collective coping practices. Students did not manage academic strain alone; they responded collectively, drawing strength from peer interaction that reinforced effort and persistence.

4. DISCUSSION

This study examined how academic resilience is experienced within peer relationships rather than measured as an outcome variable. The findings suggest that resilience is embedded in relational contexts that shape how students interpret pressure, belonging, aspiration, and difficulty. Rather than appearing as a fixed psychological trait, resilience emerged as sustained participation within shared academic life.

4.1. Resilience as being-with

A central finding of this study is that belonging functioned as an emotional anchor during academic transitions and periods of strain. Participants described feeling sustained not merely by explicit encouragement, but by an ongoing sense of connection, captured most directly in C3’s reflection, *“Sometimes I feel alone, but not lonely, because I still have friends.”* This distinction between aloneness and loneliness is meaningful: relational continuity persisted even when direct interaction was limited. Belonging, for these students, was less about constant contact and more about the assured availability of connection. C2’s account of transitioning to grade 11 without knowing anyone and of gradually feeling welcome similarly illustrates how belonging shapes a student’s capacity to remain engaged amid unfamiliarity and vulnerability.

This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that positive peer relationships predict academic engagement through motivational and resilience pathways. The present study adds an interpretive dimension to this pattern: belonging was not simply a social variable correlated with outcomes, but was experienced as identity-stabilizing, a sense of being recognized within a shared academic world. From a Heideggerian perspective, students are beings-in-the-world whose academic demands are always encountered within relational contexts that shape how those demands are interpreted. Resilience, in this light, appears not as individual fortitude but as sustained engagement within a world that renders difficulty meaningful and manageable. These interpretations are grounded in six participants’ accounts and are offered not as generalizable claims but as a conceptually coherent account of how belonging shapes academic persistence in this context.

4.2. Normalized pressure and everyday endurance

A second finding concerns how participants experienced academic pressure. Students consistently described workload, performance anxiety, and competing deadlines as persistent features of school life, yet many did not frame these as exceptional hardships. C4 described being unable to rest despite continuous studying, yet when asked directly about negative academic experiences, responded *“None.”* C1 similarly described anticipatory stress before quizzes and deadlines, while C3 recalled breaking down during the

pandemic when a poor signal prevented her from submitting requirements. Across these accounts, difficulty was acknowledged but not consistently treated as a grievance. Academic pressure had, for many participants, become a normalized baseline rather than a crisis requiring resolution.

This pattern aligns with research indicating that adolescents often internalize institutional academic expectations as part of identity formation [17], [31]. The present study contributes an interpretive account of what that normalization looks like from within students' lived experiences. Resilience here did not resemble a dramatic recovery from adversity; it appeared as quiet, continuous engagement within an environment where difficulty was the expected condition. This is consistent with scholarship suggesting that resilience develops not only through acute disruption but through sustained participation in demanding environments when relational support is present [32]. Through a Gadamerian lens, students' acceptance of pressure as ordinary reflects historically shaped academic cultures that are inherited rather than individually chosen. It is worth noting, however, that silent normalization carries risks: where sustained strain is met with relational absence rather than presence, endurance alone may not be sufficient to sustain engagement. The findings, therefore, point to normalized endurance as adaptive within limits, not as an unqualified strength.

4.3. Aspirational modeling and identity reorientation

A third finding is that peers functioned not only as sources of comfort or practical assistance but as horizons of academic possibility. C5 described encountering a high-performing classmate who shared how he had become an honor student, "*He told me everything he did to become an honor student... I was like, 'How inspirational. I'm going to do that.'*" C1 similarly described turning to peers when struggling with lessons, and C4 spoke of classmates who taught him "*until I understand.*" In these accounts, peers did not simply provide answers; they expanded what students believed was academically within reach for themselves.

This is consistent with research showing that peer relationships shape academic motivation through mechanisms of self-efficacy and role modeling [4]. The present findings extend this by highlighting a dimension of self-interpretation that motivational frameworks do not always capture: students did not merely adopt peers' strategies; they reoriented their sense of themselves as learners through relational encounter. Aspiration, in this sense, emerged not from abstract goals but from proximity to peers who made certain possibilities feel concrete and attainable. It is worth acknowledging, however, that aspirational peer modeling does not operate uniformly. As the following subsection discusses, peer excellence can also generate comparison and anxiety. These interpretations are offered with appropriate tentativeness given the study's scope; larger studies could usefully examine whether aspirational peer influence operates differently across academic tracks or institutional contexts.

4.4. Relational tension and interpretive growth

A fourth finding concerns the ambivalence of peer relationships. Participants did not describe uniformly supportive peer environments; tension, judgment, and competing relational demands were also present and consequential. C2 articulated the weight of perceived judgment: "*It's hard to go to school when you feel like someone is upset with you... You feel like you're being judged,*" adding that the fear of gossip reduced her willingness to participate in class. C5 described friends whose social expectations encroached on study time. C6 recounted classmates who discouraged review before a difficult examination, only for the exam to prove challenging. These were not minor inconveniences; they intersected directly with students' academic motivation and self-understanding.

Existing research confirms that peer relationships function as both protective and risk factors for adolescent well-being and academic motivation [33]. The present study affirms this duality while shifting emphasis toward the interpretive work students performed in response to relational tension. What distinguished participants who remained engaged was not the absence of difficulty but how they understood and positioned themselves within it. C3, who experienced exclusion during an already demanding period, reflected, "*I managed it. I overcame it.*" This was not a dismissal of difficulty but an interpretive reframing, a repositioning of relational strain within a broader narrative of persistence. Research on academic resilience similarly suggests that adaptive meaning-making mediates the relationship between peer dynamics and sustained engagement [32], and the present findings offer a grounded, experiential account of what that process can look like.

It is important to be precise about what this finding does and does not claim. The study does not suggest that relational tension is inherently beneficial or that students should be expected to simply reframe difficulty unaided. Rather, it demonstrates that, within this particular context and for these participants, peer tension became a site of interpretive growth rather than disengagement, partly because a broader sense of belonging remained intact. Where belonging is absent or severely undermined, the same tensions may produce very different outcomes. This nuance is important for avoiding an overly optimistic reading of resilience as something students can always generate from within difficult relationships.

4.5. Reconsidering academic resilience

The previous four themes, belonging as relational stabilization, normalized endurance under academic pressure, aspirational peer modeling, and interpretive growth through relational tension, do not operate independently. Together, they describe a coherent picture of how resilience is lived within shared academic life. Belonging provided the relational ground that made endurance possible. Peer modeling expanded students' beliefs about what they could achieve. And even relational tension, when it occurred within a context of sufficient belonging, became an occasion for interpretive recalibration rather than withdrawal. Resilience, as these participants experienced it, was not a fixed capacity exercised in isolation; it was a relational achievement sustained through ongoing engagement with peers, shared expectations, and mutual recognition.

This synthesis challenges frameworks that locate resilience primarily in individual psychological resources such as grit, self-regulation, or coping skills. While individual agency was evident in participants' accounts, it operated within and through relational conditions rather than independently of them. The study does not claim that peer relationships replace the importance of individual factors; rather, it demonstrates that in this context, relational conditions were constitutive of how individual capacities were activated and sustained. This distinction matters for how resilience is both researched and supported in practice.

The implications for educational practice in Philippine secondary schools are suggestive rather than prescriptive, given the study's interpretive scope and sample size. Nonetheless, the findings consistently point to the value of inclusive peer climates, structured collaborative learning, and educators' relational attentiveness. Supporting resilience may be less about training individual students to cope and more about cultivating the peer conditions within which coping becomes collectively possible. Teachers and school leaders who attend to belonging, affirm effort, and encourage cooperative rather than competitive peer dynamics may be contributing to resilience in ways that individual-focused interventions alone cannot replicate.

Finally, it bears stating clearly what this study does not claim. The findings are drawn from six students in a single institutional context and are not statistically generalizable. They are offered as an interpretively grounded account of how resilience can be lived within peer relationships, illuminating possibilities rather than establishing universal patterns. What participants described was not the elimination of difficulty but continued engagement within it: supported by connection, shaped by shared experience, and sustained through the meaning they made of both. That, this study suggests, is what academic resilience looks like when it is lived rather than measured.

5. IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Implications for educational practice

The findings of this study carry practical significance for teachers, school counselors, and administrators in Philippine secondary schools. Because resilience emerged through relational conditions rather than solely through individual effort, educational interventions that focus exclusively on building students' personal coping skills may address only part of what sustains academic persistence. Equally important is the intentional, structured cultivation of peer climates that actively support belonging, mutual recognition, and collaborative engagement.

At the classroom level, teachers can implement structured peer mentoring arrangements in which academically experienced students are paired with those experiencing difficulty, with explicit guidance on how to explain concepts, share strategies, and offer encouragement. This is directly supported by the findings: participants described peers who taught them "until I understand" and shared detailed accounts of how they achieved academic success, expanding what struggling students believed was possible for themselves. Teachers can also incorporate cooperative learning formats, such as think-pair-share activities, peer review cycles, and small-group problem-solving tasks, that create regular, purposeful opportunities for students to depend on and learn from one another. Beyond instructional design, teachers should conduct brief, periodic check-ins on classroom relational dynamics, particularly after transitions or high-pressure periods such as examination weeks, to identify students who may be experiencing exclusion or social tension before these escalate into academic disengagement.

At the institutional level, school administrators should consider establishing a structured peer support program for grade 11 transition students, given that disruption of established peer networks at this stage has been identified as a period of acute vulnerability. Such a program might pair incoming grade 11 students with trained senior peers during the first semester, providing both academic orientation and relational continuity during a period of unfamiliarity. Schools should also designate regular, facilitated spaces, such as homeroom periods or guided advisory sessions, where students can discuss academic stress openly with peers and a trusted adult. The findings suggest that academic pressure is often normalized into silent endurance; structured dialogue offers an alternative, allowing students to articulate difficulties before they become a crisis. Finally, school counselors can play a targeted role by developing brief

psychoeducational sessions that help students recognize both the value and the complexity of peer relationships, including how to navigate peer tension, comparison, and social pressure in academically demanding environments.

5.2. Directions for future research

This study opens several avenues for further inquiry. First, because the findings are based on six students within a single institutional context, future studies employing larger, more diverse samples across school types, regions, and socioeconomic backgrounds would help determine the extent to which the relational patterns identified here are broadly representative of Philippine secondary education. Second, the present study captured students' experiences at a single point in time; longitudinal designs would allow researchers to examine how peer relationships and resilience interact as students move across grade levels and developmental stages. Third, future research might explore how teachers and school structures actively shape the peer climates within which resilience unfolds, moving beyond student-level accounts to include educator and institutional perspectives. Finally, comparative studies examining how relational dimensions of resilience operate across different cultural and educational contexts would strengthen understanding of whether the patterns observed here are specific to the Philippine setting or reflect broader dynamics of adolescent academic life.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how secondary school students experience and interpret academic resilience within peer relationships, and how those relationships shape their understanding and enactment of resilience. In response to RQ1, the findings demonstrate that academic resilience is experienced not as a fixed psychological trait but as a relational process, constituted through belonging, shared endurance of academic pressure, aspirational peer modeling, and the interpretive navigation of relational tension. Students did not describe resilience as the elimination of difficulty but as continued engagement within it, sustained by the assured availability of peer connection. In response to RQ2, the findings indicate that peer relationships shape students' understanding and enactment of resilience in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways, through inclusion and exclusion, encouragement and discouragement, and modeling and comparison. What mattered was not simply whether peer relationships were supportive but how students interpreted and positioned themselves within those relationships in moments of academic strain.

Taken together, these findings suggest that resilience is enacted within peer contexts rather than exercised in isolation. Academic resilience, understood through a hermeneutic lens as "being-with," is not an individual possession but a relational achievement, sustained through peer relationships that shape how students interpret academic demands, navigate difficulty, and remain engaged within shared school life. Research and educational practice that focus exclusively on individual coping skills risk overlooking the relational conditions that make persistence possible. For Philippine secondary schools in particular, strengthening peer climates is not a supplementary concern but a central dimension of resilience development.

This study contributes to resilience scholarship by demonstrating that academic resilience is lived within shared school environments rather than generated solely from within the individual. Foregrounding students' own interpretive accounts adds a phenomenological dimension to a field largely shaped by quantitative, variable-driven approaches. The limitations of this study are the sample size and single institutional context. Together, these considerations situate the present findings within a broader scholarly conversation about how resilience is constituted, supported, and sustained within the relational worlds of secondary education.

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C : **C**onceptualizationM : **M**ethodologySo : **S**oftwareVa : **V**alidationFo : **F**ormal analysisI : **I**nvestigationR : **R**esourcesD : **D**ata CurationO : Writing - **O**riginal DraftE : Writing - Review & **E**dingVi : **V**isualizationSu : **S**upervisionP : **P**roject administrationFu : **F**unding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors state that there are no competing interests related to this study.

INFORMED CONSENT

All participants provided informed written consent prior to participation. They were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The study was conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines and was approved by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Caraga State University.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research with human participants was undertaken in full compliance with pertinent national regulations and institutional policies, in line with the Helsinki Declaration, and was approved by the author's institutional review board or an equivalent ethics committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The datasets supporting the conclusions of this study are provided within the article and accompanying supplementary materials. Additional data are available from the corresponding author, [RJJDG], upon reasonable request.

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