Surviving the first year: An interpretive description of the experiences of mothers as university students

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Abstract

This study examines the experience of students who are also mothers studying at a regional university campus in Western Australia. In addition to the student experiences, this study identified successes, difficulties and expectations. The two main theme categories which emerged from the initial data analysis from interviews with students were management and expectations. The management theme involves the students’ management of time, family, self, finances and individual external factors. The theme of student expectations included students’ academic expectations, expectations of the overall university experience and expectations of time. These themes are particularly relevant to the education of first year university students as university institutions can prioritise the teaching of management strategies and help students develop realistic expectations which will essentially assist students, who are mothers, to have a more positive overall university experience.

Background

Students who are mothers enter university with knowledge, experiences and attitudes making them potentially valuable contributors to their own and others’ learning (Scevak & Cantwell, 2007). Typically they experience difficulties including, but not limited to, sharing their time and energy between their children, partners, domestic commitments, social commitments, extended families, fellow students, lecturers and study (Scevak & Cantwell, 2007; White, 2008). In the limited studies available, students who are mothers have expressed different motivations, benefits, experiences and difficulties than school leavers (Darab, 2004; Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Long, Ferrier, & Heagney, 2006; Stone, 2008). However, due to the scarcity of studies specifically focusing on students who are mothers, this information has largely been extracted from the participants of broader studies focusing primarily on female students and mature age students at university.

Methodology

The methodology guiding this study is Interpretive Description, being a second generation qualitative methodology articulated by Thorne, Reimer-Kirkham and MacDonald-Emes (2004). The emergence of Interpretive Description reflected variations to, and the blurring of, traditional methodologies (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992); thus having an ethnographic, grounded theory, and phenomenological ancestry (Thorne, 2008). Rather than being a new and unique methodology, Interpretive Description articulated the evolution of qualitative research that was occurring in the healthcare context (Thorne, et al., 2004). Being a non-prescriptive, yet rigorous methodology, Interpretive Description retained elements of its methodological ancestry, enhancing its rigor whilst discarding many limiting elements of its ancestry. The purpose of this methodology is to create a conceptual description capturing the themes and patterns conveyed through the experiences of multiple students who are mothers.

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Research design

Three data collection instruments will be used to collect data from the participants. These included a questionnaire, individual interviews and focus groups. Although it is recognised that individual interviews provide subjective data (Thorne, 2008), the analysis of multiple interviews provided rich experiential data facilitating theme emergence. It must be noted that the focus group data collection and analysis has not been completed at this time.

Purposive sampling was employed during this study focusing on specific students on the basis of selected inclusion criteria. This inclusion criterion was based on their student status and home lives. These participants included undergraduate on-campus students aged between 25 and 44, who were mothers and had children under 18.

Following the interviews and questionnaires being completed by 18 participants, NVIVO 9 software was employed to store and manage the data, being the primary tool used for data analysis.

Research findings

The participants from this study have described a variety of university experiences that have affected how positively or negatively they view their university experience. These experiences, and more specifically the way the students have dealt with these experiences, can be categorised into two major themes: management and expectations.

Management

The extent to which students manage various factors of their academic and non-academic experiences at university has a significant impact on the way they describe their overall university experience. The successful management of these experiences has a significantly positive impact on the students' belief that they will succeed with their studies. Conversely, the poor management of these factors has a significantly negative impact on the students' feeling of control over their overall university experience, including feelings of being overwhelmed, overworked and feeling unable to balance their multiple commitments. This management theme is divided into five categories: time, family, self, finances and external factors.

Managing time

Students who have reported being in control of their overall university experience have also reported using positive time management strategies on a regular basis. These time management strategies include having formal schedules or study timetables to ensure they maximise the time available to them to study. In addition, students have reported having well established routines with their study and home lives, thus enabling them to juggle their multiple commitments. Finally, various students have described maximising their awake hours by ensuring they study either in the early morning hours or late at night to ensure they have undisturbed study times while their children sleep.

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Managing family

There are various aspects of family life that students who are also mothers must manage to feel comfortable with their university experience. The most significant aspect for many of the students was childcare, including the availability of suitable childcare options, the affordability of childcare, the difficulties of maintaining childcare when children are unwell and the ability to arrange suitable childcare when students are on extended practicum experiences. In addition to childcare, students also report the complex and multiple aspects of managing their role as a mother. These include the physical, emotional and social needs of their children, with single parents reporting an even greater sense of responsibility when meeting these needs. Furthermore, mothers of young children have described a greater need to meet the physical needs of their children, whilst mothers of teenagers have described substantial difficulties when meeting the emotional and social needs of their children.

Managing self

Students who are mothers who feel that they are successful in juggling their multiple roles have reported their desire to manage themselves, particularly their physical, mental and social well-being. These reports include regular exercise and maintaining a healthy diet to maximise their physical well-being. Managing feelings of 'mothering guilt' particularly related to deeply seated feelings that their own ambitions and study commitments should not take time away from their parenting roles. Another factor students described was their need to manage their own mental well-being, including intense feelings of being overworked. Those students who have reported feelings of overwork have also reported feeling anxiety and stress with regards to their overall commitment levels. Finally, students have described their social experiences during university and the need to develop and maintain these connections. These social experiences include developing and maintaining connections with other students, maintaining connections with family including spouses, and maintaining connections with non-student friends.

Managing finances

All students participating in the study have reported the dual faceted area of finances. More particularly these include income and expenses. Students have reported difficulties with being able to earn an income to support their families whilst studying, as well as the guilt and difficulties involved in not earning a full-time income because of their studies. The students' reports about expenses, on the other hand, include the affordability of childcare, studying expenses including, but not limited to, text books, information technology equipment and travel expenses. Students have also described their difficulties in 'making ends meet' when describing their finances overall.

Managing external factors

Nearly all of the students participating in the study described individual external factors that affect their overall university experiences. Although these factors differ greatly between participants, they are similar in that they need to be managed physically, emotionally or financially by the students. Examples of these external factors include having a child with a
disability, running a farm, and experiencing a marriage breakdown during the university semester.

Expectations

In addition to managing various aspects of their lives, themes emerged in the data regarding the expectations of the students. These expectations are categorised into three areas: academic expectations, expectations of the overall university experience and expectations of time. Students who described what they felt to be realistic expectations upon entry, reported experiencing lower levels of stress and reported feeling that they were able to manage juggling their multiple roles more effectively than those who described less realistic expectations upon entry.

Academic experiences

Various students reported a healthy understanding of their academic abilities and a desire to achieve high grades. In addition, rather than only being at university simply to pass their degree, many students expressed that they were more concerned about getting valuable and transferable learning experiences. Students also described a reluctance to ask for extensions or to submit work that was substandard in their opinion. Lastly, students described anxiety at missing lectures, mainly because of sick children, as they reported feeling gaps in their understandings.

Expectations of the university experience

There were a variety of expectations expressed by students with regards to their overall university experience. In particular, how these expectations affect their ability to put strategies in place that ensure a positive learning experience. These expectations include their expectation of belonging within the university population, the professionalism of staff and students at a university campus, their expectations of ECU (South West) as a 'family friendly' campus, and their expectations of the difficulty of university work.

Expectations of time

As many of the students were part-time, they described various feelings relating to graduating later than their full-time peers. Students also reported feelings of anxiety and stress relating to the time they expected to be studying outside contact hours, and the time needed for study and assessment preparation.

Intended impact of findings

These findings serve to inform and assist universities to implement programs and strategies to ensure that students, who are mothers at university, maximise their positive feelings towards their university studies. This is particularly important when facilitating the learning of first year university students, as it is during this year that effective management strategies can be taught to, and implemented by, the student in order to develop ongoing strategies for success.

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Furthermore, it is during this first year at university that students adjust their expectations of the university experience to a set of expectations that will assist them throughout their university degree. It is also important for both the students and the university that these students have clear and realistic expectations of their overall university experience during their first year.

**Key questions and invitation for audience involvement**

The key questions to be raised in this nuts and bolts session are as follows:

*How easily identified are mothers with children during their first year studying at university?*

*What management strategies are currently being taught to these students by academic or non-academic staff during their first year at university?*

*Do university staff feel that first year students, who are also mothers, have a realistic expectation of the overall university experience, and if not how can this be improved?*

**References**


