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Balancing Acts: A Phenomenological Study of Single Mothers Who Are Successful Students in Higher Education

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Abstract: This research sought to discover the characteristics of single mother students in higher education who successfully balanced their many responsibilities associated with their roles as mother, employee, family member, friend, and college student. While telling their stories, these women also offered suggestions to administrators and faculty in higher education.

Introduction

Cardis is a single mother who works part time as a data entry clerk in a bank and is enrolled in a university degree program. In order to be a mother, work, and attend school, Cardis starts a typical day at 5:30a.m. She gets herself ready for the day, wakes her two young children at 6:20a.m., helps them get ready for school, and makes sure they have breakfast. They must leave their apartment by 7:30a.m. in order to catch public transportation to the children's school (they do not live far enough away from the school to qualify for the school bus, but live too far to walk, and Cardis does not have a car). They arrive at the children's school by 8:00a.m. Cardis then takes another bus to the university where she attends classes until 2:00p.m., trying to grab a quick meal between classes, and then catching the 2:15p.m. bus to pick up the children from school. The younger child is dismissed at 3:00 PM, the older child is dismissed at 3:30 PM. The school allows Cardis and her younger child to wait inside the building during inclement weather. Once her older child is dismissed, they get back on the bus to go home. Cardis prepares dinner while her children get started on their homework. After dinner, she makes sure the children are settled for the night. Sometimes a relative comes to baby-sit, sometimes the older child is left in charge. Cardis leaves home at 6:00p.m. to travel to work, doing some of her homework on the bus. She works until 12:30a.m., back on the bus, does a little more studying, and arrives home at 1:30a.m. She looks over the children's homework and any notes from school, tries to unwind, watch the news, and get into bed by 2:30a.m. - then up again at 5:30a.m. to start the next day.

Cardis defies the stereotype of single mothers - "poor, welfare-dependent, and frequently minority women who lack adequate education and employment skills and the motivation to acquire them" (Haleman, 2004, p. 770). Cardis is just one of a large number of single mothers who see a college education as a way to improve their quality of life.

Women head 85% of the single parent families in this country, and these families account for almost 33% of all families living in poverty (Dowd, 1997). Huff and Thorp (1997) report the poverty rate for families headed by single mothers who lack a high school degree is 90%, while the poverty rate for families headed by single mothers with a college degree is 16%. It is important, then, for single mothers, their children and society as a whole, that single mothers are encouraged to pursue education. While the number of women earning bachelor's degrees has steadily increased in the last 25 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), single parents make up only 9% of those earning a degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

Much of the literature on single mothers in higher education focuses not only on the difficulties these women have to face daily (Jing & Meyer, 1995, Stowe, 1998; Kerka, 2000; Haleman, 2004), but also on the difficulty of fitting their very complicated lives into the

traditional university framework (Huff & Thorpe, 1997). There have been several studies which identify the barriers single mothers face in an attempt to earn a college degree (Huff & Thorpe, 1997; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall 1999; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Austin & McDermott, 2003), but few which attempt to discover the characteristics of those single mothers who are successful. This study addressed that perspective.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by feminist inquiry which values women's lived experiences, is conducted with and for women, places women at the center of interest, and often leads to movements of change precipitated by a collaboration of researcher and study participants (Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Sheared and Sissel, 2001). This study was conducted using a feminist perspective, asking what is it like to be a woman, single mother, employee, and college student - looking at women's experiences in the contexts of their lives.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify those conditions and characteristics that act as positive influences and contribute to the success of single mother students in higher education. The questions guiding this study were: (1) Why and how are successful single mothers in higher education able to balance their many roles? Why and how do they persist? (2) Are there institutional practices which contribute to or interfere with their success?

This phenomenological study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with fourteen single mothers who were enrolled in, or had recently completed, a bachelor's degree program at a mid-sized university in the Midwest. The women ranged in age from 24 to 40, and had from one to six children. All participants were employed: 6 held full-time jobs, 8 held part-time jobs. The eight women who worked part time took a minimum of 12 credit hours - the minimum required to maintain financial aid. Five of the six women who worked full time also took a minimum of 12 credit hours, again to adhere to financial aid regulations. Twelve participants delayed the start of college. Two participants started college right out of high school, but both dropped out, and/or changed schools, after their freshman year. Only one of these two participants continued her undergraduate work to completion without any further interruption.

Interview questions were developed following Patton's (1990) suggestions: knowledge questions to determine demographic information as well as other factual information the participants bring to the interview; feeling questions to help understand the emotional responses the participants have to their experiences; and opinion/values questions to determine what the participants think about the topic and how their value systems relate to it. The preplanned structured questions yielded the same kind of demographic information from each participant; the open-ended questions allowed each participant to answer based on their own perspective which should give the researcher insight into the phenomenon.

Data included audiotaped initial and follow-up interviews and field notes. The taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and copies were sent to each participant to approve, revise, or edit. The interviews were then repeatedly analyzed for themes and categories. These themes and categories were also shared with participants in order to verify the researcher's interpretations. Throughout the process, reflexivity (Borkan, 1999) was practiced in order to eliminate researcher influence on the wording of questions, selection of data to code, and interpretation of findings.

Findings

The fourteen women who participated in this study came from varied backgrounds and had a wide variety of experiences, yet a number of common themes emerged from their interviews.

The Values of Education

Common throughout the conversations was the belief that a college education will lead to a better life, a more satisfying career, a higher level of respect from potential employers which will lead to new opportunities when needed, an ability to better communicate with people outside one's normal social group, an ability to adapt to an ever-changing society, a sense of empowerment, and an increased sense of self-esteem, personal pride, and dignity.

Mother as a Role Model for Her Children

When speaking of the difficulties of balancing all their roles, each participant spoke lovingly of their children and expressed concern for their children's future. Each mother hoped for a successful adult life for her children without all of the struggles she was enduring. However, each mother saw her struggles as an example for her children to learn from and to follow. Each mother intentionally shared her life as a student with her children, practicing her class presentations in front of her children, sharing the difficulties in a course or with writing a paper, nervousness over an upcoming exam, happiness with a good grade, and positive comments written on their papers by professors. Participants felt that by sharing this information, their children would understand the sacrifices being made, the benefits of hard work, the importance of education, and possibly be inspired to achieve as well.

Faith in a Higher Being

Each participant spoke of her faith as a constant, steadying force relied on daily, and most especially when times were most difficult. Most participants attended church, spoke of the importance of prayer, and their belief that there were times when things looked very grim, the right person was sent into their lives, or housing or a job became available when there appeared to be no hope. Faith is an internal support system which helps these women through difficult times in their quest for a better life through education.

Quitting Means Failure

The themes of failure and disappointment came through in each interview. Giving up on education is seen as quitting by most participants, and for most, quitting means failure. All participants spoke positively about their high school experiences. All but two completed high school where they started, one completed at an alternative high school, and one earned her GED. Perhaps because all participants did well in high school and had encouragement from at least one of their high school teachers, they felt that once they experienced their first successful semester in college, to not continue meant they were giving up on themselves. This concept of failure and the fear of other's disappointment permeates all the interviews and appears to be a strong motivation to continue

Patience

All of the participants expressed the idea that any stress they felt trying to balance their many roles was temporary and tolerable because the rewards will be great. The ability to see the “bigger picture” or “the other side” and be patient while working towards that goal is an inner strength each participant drew upon to continue to balance her many roles.

External Support

Each woman actively sought and found some level of support from someone else - from financial support to just words of encouragement. Though the level of external support was different for each participant, no one felt they were completely alone.

Sacrifice

Juggling all of the responsibilities inherent in the life of a single mother student is not without cost: time away from their children, no time to allow their children to participate in extracurricular activities, loss of an active social life and participation in outside interests, being absent from class because of child’s illness or child care problems, and the inability to take advantage of available academic support on campus.

Woven throughout these themes was a strong sense of self-determination. The participants who had no one to help, along with those who were determined not to rely only on parents or friends, investigated and found other types of support. They also investigated all that social services had to offer, as well as services and employment opportunities at the university. They were creative with class and work schedules. In short, they were not easily deterred from their long-term goal: a better life for themselves and their children

It was expected that the lack of money would arise as a theme and would be an important barrier to the success of these women as was evidenced in other studies about single mother students (Huff and Thorpe 1997, Schein 1995). However, as Mason (2002) found in her two-part study, information gleaned from quantitative studies using surveys showed money to be at or near the top of a list of barriers to higher education, but information gleaned from qualitative studies using interviews showed other conditions as more difficult barriers to overcome. Examples of barriers cited in this qualitative study as more difficult than the lack of money included the sacrifices that had to be made (sleep, social life, personal interests), the feelings of guilt because there was not much time to participate in activities with the children, and the lack of emotional support from family or friends who thought that going to college was a waste of time.

Implications for Practice

The second question guiding this study attempted to discover institutional practices which contribute to or interfere with the academic success of single mother students. Most of the participants had very little to say on this subject, responding, “I knew what I was getting into,” or “I don’t expect the university to make exceptions for me. I have to make it work.” During the interviews, however, themes did develop.

Many of the participants expressed frustration with faculty who berated them for missing a class or coming in late without taking the time, or having the interest, to ask why. Single mother students are mothers first, students second or even third. It often takes a tremendous effort for a single mother to attend class - a hidden struggle many

professors know nothing about. This is very different from the traditional college student for whom college is usually their first priority. We can either enable or inhibit learning by the message we send students through our words, actions, and even course attendance policies.

Positive, constructive feedback in class and on written work can increase a student's self-confidence and self-esteem, both of which can give the student strength to meet the next academic challenge. The participants spoke about the strong positive effect of teachers' positive verbal or written comments, no matter how brief.

All of the women in this study were first generation college students. Consequently, they do not know the protocol when missing class, when to or how to drop classes, meeting with faculty outside of class, which services are available on campus, etc. Faculty can help by including this information in course syllabi.

Faculty can also maintain flexible and varied (in time) office hours with an open-door policy, virtual office hours online, and/or email office hours, thereby making it possible to provide individual, personalized feedback to students at times more accessible to students.

Attending class is sometimes difficult, but creating a class schedule can be a nightmare for some single mother students. Participants who have access to and are comfortable on the computer wished there were more online courses available. Others said they wished there were more weekend classes available because childcare would be so much easier. Others recommended "compressed classes" - classes that would meet for eight weeks instead of sixteen, allowing the completion of more classes in a shorter amount of time - an important concept because some financial assistance programs expire after two years.

Most of the participants in this study spoke of the financial assistance they received and said that if it had not been for friends, they would not have known the assistance was available. It is recommended that financial aid administrators hold regular information meetings to inform students of available grants, scholarships, and aid programs.

In conclusion, the experiences of the participants of this study clearly showed that, while not easy, it is possible to successfully perform the balancing acts required of single mother students. These women were determined to achieve a better life for themselves and their children and believed the way to do this was through education. Their personal determination, perseverance, and commitment sustained them during the many stressful days and nights they endured, during those times when they questioned if they were being good parents, and when hearing discouraging comments from family, friends, or teachers.

We cannot underestimate the challenges faced by these women, and the courage and strength required to meet these challenges. Studies have shown the strain on the time, finances, and energy levels of single mother students which often results in sacrificing important personal needs (Kates, 1995, Huff & Thorpe, 1997, Mason 2002). Miller (1967) created the Force Field Analysis theory to explain how adult learners can use positive forces in their lives to decrease negative forces that threaten to lead to failure. The interview data in this study confirmed that these participants were able to view their experiences at home, work, and school as positive forces, which helped them push back the negative forces always present in their very busy lives.

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