



Articles

“It’s an Adjustment”: Experiences of Stay-at-Home Mothers in Graduate Teacher Education Programs

Karrin Lukacs, Shenandoah University

Abstract

Administrators, designers, and instructors of teacher education programs need to be aware of their students’ lives and experiences both inside and outside the classroom. This applies especially to students who are also stay-at-home mothers, trying to balance the demands of their personal and professional lives and to adjust to the differing expectations for each. This study explored the experiences of 10 stay-at-home mothers who decided to return to school to become teachers. Results indicate that the students felt motherhood helped them to be more tolerant and understanding. However, the students often found it difficult to balance their dual roles of mother and student. Implications for graduate teacher education

Résumé

Administrateurs, concepteurs et instructeurs de programmes de formation à l’enseignement doivent connaître la vie et l’expérience de leurs étudiants, tant à l’intérieur qu’à l’extérieur de la classe. Cela s’applique surtout pour les étudiantes mères au foyer, qui essaient de trouver un équilibre entre les exigences de leurs vies personnelle et professionnelle, et de s’ajuster aux différentes attentes auxquelles elles font face. La présente étude a analysé les expériences de dix mères au foyer qui ont décidé de retourner à l’école dans le but de devenir enseignantes. Les résultats indiquent que, selon les étudiantes, la maternité les a aidées à améliorer leurs niveaux de tolérance et de compréhension. Toutefois, il leur était souvent difficile d’équilibrer leurs rôles



programs include the need for flexibility in both course and program design.

de mère et d'étudiante. Par conséquent, les programmes de formation à l'enseignement doivent répondre au besoin de flexibilité, tant dans la conception des cours que dans celle des programmes.

Keywords: *inclusive andragogy, non-traditional students, returning students, student mothers, teacher education programs*

Introduction

Women age 24 or older are the fastest-growing group of non-traditional students at post-secondary institutions (Husser & Bailey, 2011). In addition to being students, many of these women are also mothers (Mottarella, Fritzsche, Whitten, & Bedsole, 2009). These “student mothers” experience school differently than do the “traditional” students with whom they are attending classes (Mahaffey, Hungerford, & Sill, 2015). For example, student mothers often suffer from “super mom syndrome” (D’Amore, 2012) as they try to balance the many demands on their time and attention. Given that teaching is viewed as a profession that allows for work-family balance (Lipets, 2014), women who choose to return to school often do so to earn their teaching credentials. Although studies have focused on what a mother’s return to school means for her family (Suitor, Plikuhn, Gilligan, & Powers, 2008), little is known about what returning to school means for those student mothers who want to be teachers themselves. Since student mothers are especially vulnerable to attrition (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002), administrators, designers, and instructors of graduate teacher education programs need to better understand them and their experiences if these students are to be successful.

Literature Review

As the number of women with children in the workforce has remained steady since 2000 (Cohany & Sok, 2007), the number of women enrolling in degree-granting institutions has risen dramatically (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). As a result, several studies have examined the experiences of mothers who decide to return to school. For example, research has explored how student mothers try to achieve balance between their academic and personal responsibilities (Gilbert, 2008). Other research has investigated the supports mothers in graduate school need to be successful (Grenier & Burke, 2008). However, few studies have focused



on mothers who decide to return to school at the graduate level to become teachers. As their numbers continue to grow, postsecondary or tertiary institutions need to find out more about this particular group of “non-traditional” students.

Today, many students in postsecondary settings can be classified as “non-traditional.” They are often in their mid-20s or older, work full time, or did not go directly from high school to college (Freeman, 2004). Since 2000, the number of female non-traditional students has risen to 60% within the overall undergraduate population, while, in graduate schools, women constitute over half of the student body (Cohany & Sok, 2007). In other words, more and more women are making the decision to re-enter formal education at the graduate level.

Women return to school for various reasons, including the opportunity to grow both personally and professionally (van Rhijn, Lero, & Burke, 2016). In addition to this benefit, a mother considering graduate school faces a unique set of concerns when making the decision to continue her education.

Put simply, a student mother faces both internal and external pressures (Bradburn, Moen, & Dempster-McClain, 1995). She is often concerned about the costs of her education, how her children will be cared for, and how school will affect her relationships with friends and family (Lynch, 2008). But despite these concerns, a growing population of stay-at-home mothers is choosing to attend graduate school (Kuperberg, 2009).

Teaching is a highly feminized profession, but while there is some concern over the lack of research with a focus on the gendered nature of teaching (see Galman & Mallozzi, 2012), several studies focus on the role(s) of motherhood in the field. For example, previous studies have explored the teacher as mother figure (James, 2010) and teachers who decide to become mothers (Thomson & Kehily, 2011). White (2009) looked specifically at why stay-at-home mothers choose to return to school to become classroom teachers and what they experience when re-entering the college-level classroom. Although these findings inform our understanding of some aspects of the relationship between being both a mother and a teacher, they do not focus on what motivates mothers to decide to return to school to become teachers.

In an effort to understand what motivates mothers to re-enter school, White (2009) interviewed six New Zealander women with children who were studying at the undergraduate level to become primary school teachers. Results of numerous in-depth, semi-structured interviews revealed that mothers choose to return to school “when the time is right” for their families, usually when the children have entered primary school themselves. Although they choose the teaching profession because it “fits” with family obligations, they often experience fatigue and/or guilt during the course of their studies.

White (2008, 2009) discusses the many implications of these findings for postsecondary institutions, including scheduling courses during primary school day hours, holding classes close to the student’s home, and providing on-site childcare. These are all important findings, but as



more and more women return to school, it is important to extend White's work in several ways by exploring the answers to a range of questions.

First, White's studies focused only on students wanting to work with elementary-aged children. This study focused on participants who wanted to teach in grades above the elementary level. Are the experiences of mothers who want to teach older students different from those who want to teach younger students? Second, the participants in White's studies were all mothers hoping to earn an undergraduate degree in education. The participants in this study were all mothers who held degrees in a subject area other than education. What role (if any) do these students' undergraduate studies play in influencing their experiences? Third, the women in this study were seeking to earn a master's degree. Do their experiences differ from students working at the undergraduate level? The current study was designed to address the overarching question "How do women who are also mothers experience their graduate teacher education program?"

Methods

After receiving approval from the university's Human Subjects Review Board, I conducted interviews with 10 participants ($n = 10$) during the first and third semesters of their course of studies, to try to understand what it was like for these mothers to return to school to become teachers. This study was designed to replicate and extend the work of White (2009), and its methodology was likewise based in "feminist sociology" (Duncan, 2000, as cited by White, 2009).

Participants

A recruitment flyer was sent to all female students enrolled in a graduate teacher education program ($N = 63$) at a private university in the Mid-Atlantic United States. This graduate teacher education program provides the coursework necessary for students who do not have undergraduate degrees in education to become licensed teachers in elementary, secondary, or special education classrooms. Students typically complete the program in three to four semesters. It includes coursework on assessment, lesson planning, and classroom management, as well as a 15-week supervised teaching experience. Ten women—Betty, Christina, Emily, Hannah, Jane, Katherine, Olive, Sophia, Susanna, and Stacy—responded to the flyer and agreed to be interviewed. (All names are pseudonyms.) Here is a brief description of each student.

Betty

Betty is the mother of three children—two boys (ages 11 and 10) and one girl (age 7). Betty was an anthropology major as an undergraduate student, and she worked in the telecommunications industry prior to becoming a student in the special education program.



Christina

Christina, 53, is the mother of two teenage sons (17 and 15). Before returning to school to become a secondary school teacher, she worked in the IT industry and for a mortgage company. She was also an independent consultant.

Emily

In her early 50s at the time of the study, Emily is the mother of three sons ages 25, 22, and 20. She was a stay-at-home mother for over 10 years before returning to school to become a special education teacher. Prior to becoming a stay-at-home mother, Emily worked as an insurance analyst and real estate agent.

Hannah

At 23, Hannah, a student in the elementary education program, was both the youngest participant in the study and the only mother with only one child. She became pregnant while working on her undergraduate degree in psychology. Since she has always been a student, she has never held a long-term, full-time position outside the home.

Jane

Jane, 43, is the mother of two boys ages 15 and 13. Prior to spending nine years as a stay-at-home mother, Jane worked as an accountant and efficiency expert. Jane was seeking licensure in elementary education while working full time as an instructional assistant in a local school district.

Katherine

Katherine is the mother of two children, a 20-year-old son and a 17-year-old daughter. Katherine holds an undergraduate degree in finance and an MBA and worked as a software engineer before having children. She stayed home with her children for 13 years before deciding to become an elementary school teacher.

Olive

Olive is the mother of three children ages 16, 13, and 10. Olive earned a degree in psychology and then worked for several years as a substance abuse counsellor. When her children were young, Olive opened her own in-home daycare, and at the time of this research she was studying toward her degree in elementary education.

Sophia

In her mid-30s, Sophia is the mother of two sons, three years old and 15 months. Sophia worked in the publishing industry after the birth of her first child, but decided to return to school to become an elementary school teacher after her second child was born.



Stacy

Stacy, in her early 40s during the study, was the mother with the most children in the study; she had four children—one was 19, one was 15, and two were 9. Before returning to school to become an elementary educator, Stacy earned an undergraduate degree in political science, participated in the Teach for America program¹, and taught English in Japan.

Susanna

One of two women studying to become teachers at the secondary level, Susanna, 31, worked in several fields (including as a receptionist and a veterinary assistant) before deciding to stay at home with her six-month-old daughter. She was the only participant to have her child while enrolled in the program. At the time of the study, she was studying toward becoming licensed as a history teacher.

Data Collection

The “feminist sociology” framework focuses on the need for the participants to feel welcome and protected in the interview environment. For example, the interview protocol was shared prior to the interview itself, and the first question asked was about the participant’s child(ren) rather than a more personal or sensitive topic. Each interview lasted approximately two (2) hours. Participants were asked the following questions:

- Tell me a bit about yourself—Your age? Number of children and their ages?
- What did you do before you became a stay-at-home mom?
- Why did you decide to become a stay-at-home mom?
- What motivated you to become a teacher?
- How did you make that decision?
- What impact(s) does this choice have on your family?
- Describe a time in your teacher education program when being a mother was a benefit.
- Describe a time in your teacher education program when being a mother was a challenge.
- What particular skills “carry over” from motherhood to teaching?
- What can your teacher education program do or provide to help you reach your goals?

Responses were audio-recorded with the participants’ permission. During the second interview, each woman was given the opportunity to review the transcript of her first interview,

1 Founded in 1990, Teach for America is a program in which high-performing college grads teach for a minimum of two years in a high-need urban or rural school.



and encouraged to make additions and/or deletions and to provide additional information. After the second interview, transcripts were shared with participants via email to allow for additional clarification and approval. Once all transcripts were approved, they were then analyzed for common themes (Gibbs, 2007).

Data Analysis

To maintain fidelity to the replicate/extend design of this study, data analysis followed the procedure described in White (2009). First, the entire transcript for each interview was read in its entirety. On subsequent readings, words or phrases that were mentioned more than once were highlighted. Highlighted portions were labelled by codes. At the onset of data analysis, there were 33 unique codes, including words or phrases such as “frustration” and “empathy for students.” Upon subsequent readings, the codes were grouped into themes. For example, the specific codes “choices” and “alternatives” were categorized as the more general theme of “flexibility.” The entire process, which was conducted by the author, was repeated in several cycles to ensure that there were neither overlaps between nor gaps among the data.

Results

Analysis of the interview data reveals that—perhaps unsurprisingly—being a mother while studying to be a teacher has both advantages and disadvantages. In addition, participants shared many ideas about how their graduate teacher education program could better support them in their studies. For example, nearly all participants reported that flexibility would be beneficial to their success.

Advantages of Being a Student Mother

Participants noted that having their own children gave them a perspective unlike those of their peers who did not have children. The mothers were able to see students as unique individuals, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. As Jane put it:

Being a mother has given me a knowledge of children, understanding their minds and how they work. I’ve watched them go through the [developmental] stages. And not just my kids, their friends, too. So I feel like I’ve seen it all and I understand [children] better.

Similarly, having a strong sense of intuition about what happens in a classroom was often mentioned as an advantage of being a mother in that classroom. Sophia described it like this:

In teaching there’s that concept of “withitness,” this idea that you know what’s happening even though you don’t really know what’s happening. Motherhood prepares you for it because you’ll be doing something in the classroom, and all of a sudden, it gets real



quiet and you know that doesn't sound right. And sure enough, there's someone off-task, somehow acting inappropriately. So that kind of "sixth sense" has really helped me.

Participants reported that patience was another benefit of being both a mother and a teacher. In other words, the mothers interviewed felt that they were more tolerant and understanding of the differences between and among their students, especially in terms of classroom management or unexpected situations, than were their peers who were not mothers. As Christina explained:

It's like because you've dealt with this scenario before at home, or you dealt with it on the soccer field, or something like that. You've got better tolerance, better patience to handle situations as they start going out of control. For example, the Friday before Christmas, I was substituting, and one of the students fell out of his chair and cracked his head open. And I was like, "Oh, you're bleeding. Okay, are you dizzy? Are you okay? Can you tell me how many fingers I have up?"

I got him to the clinic, and one of the special ed teachers looked at me and said, "How were you so calm?" I said, "Because he did the exact same thing my son did ten years ago." So being a mother gives you coping mechanisms, I think.

The idea of coping mechanisms relates directly to the second theme of the data—the disadvantages of being a mother in a graduate teacher education program.

Disadvantages of Being a Student Mother

In terms of disadvantages, many respondents mentioned difficulties in dealing with what Olive called "mommy guilt," or the feeling that to focus on oneself meant being self-centred in a way that was uncomfortable for the participant. For example, Katherine said:

Sometimes I come home and I see the laundry piled up and the house is dirty and the refrigerator is pretty much empty. And I think, "I am a bad mother." It is incredibly hard for me to ignore all of this stuff and sit down and take time—and I do mean *take* time [away from my family]—to do what I need to do.

Feelings of guilt were mentioned when participants described their efforts to adapt to meet the demands on their time and attention and feeling motivated to maintain that balance. When speaking of the challenges she faced when managing her time, Stacy remarked:

As far as kids, I have to say, there is a part of this that is stressful because my son E. has special needs. Homework time, because he likes to get his homework done right after school, that's a crunch. I know this past fall I had a class that started at 4:30 instead of 5:00. Trying to be home to do his homework with him and get to class on time . . . we both were in tears at times because it was so hindering. Very difficult. And then



sometimes I would get home from class and I'd walk in and everyone would still be lingering with their homework. I felt like my days were just like an entire day of nothing but school and no free time. Or vice versa. It's an adjustment . . . constantly going back and forth between "mommy mode" and "I gotta do my own homework!" mode. Not easy.

The feeling of being hindered by a lack of time often led to feeling unmotivated to persist with one's schoolwork. As Hannah noted:

I find myself challenged, like I know I should do my homework when my daughter's napping but I don't always want to because it's exhausting and frustrating. When I finally get her to take a nap, it's like okay, now I have to turn around and read 50 pages of something really boring versus like watching [*Keeping Up with*] *The Kardashians* or something mindless to distract myself. It's that sort of "buckle down and do it" thing that's hard for me.

As their comments indicate, the participants were aware of both the advantages and disadvantage of being a student mother. With regard to the latter, the conversations revealed several suggestions for improvement in the participants' teacher education program.

What Supports Are Needed

When participants were asked how their graduate teacher education program could better meet their needs, their responses often echoed those found in White's (2009) study. In particular, the mothers in this study felt that programs (and classes) that allowed for flexibility in terms of task completion and assignment deadlines would foster their success as students. In addition, they mentioned that engaging assignments, more online learning opportunities, and recognition of previous classroom experience would be helpful.

Flexibility

Nearly every participant mentioned the desire for leeway in terms of scheduling and course options. In describing her experiences, Susanna mentioned:

I have to say that not all of the teachers have been good. I mean, I tried to never be late with an assignment, but I did have one [instructor] who said, "This is graduate school. If you miss a class, the best you can get is a B," and I said, "Of course I am going to miss a class—I am going to have a baby! And I am trying to make plans around that." It really bothered me that that person wouldn't work with my situation.

In addition to the need for flexibility, the participants desired classwork and assignments relevant to their professional goals.



Meaningfulness

All of the participants—regardless of their children’s ages—mentioned that maintaining the multiple roles in their lives was difficult in even the most ideal of circumstances. As such, mothers need to feel as though the time they are taking away from family is “worth it.” As Olive shared:

Even though my kids are older and not at home as much, I want to be there for them if they need me. What I do not want is to be wasting my time on “busywork” or completing some sort of assignment that is completely irrelevant.

The importance of flexibility and relevance were also evident as the mothers discussed options for course delivery.

Options

One difference between this study and those of White (2008, 2009) is the mention of online course options. Many participants reported that this format was much more conducive to their overall learning experience than the traditional face-to-face format. When talking about online classes, Katherine said:

For the online classes—the reason that I prefer an online class is as a mother I have to be organized and disciplined and this carries over into my schoolwork. So for me to be able to set a time and follow it and stick to a schedule is easy. And I knew that I wouldn’t feel as stressed if something were to come up and for some reason I can’t get to class on Thursday night, or my husband has to go out of town and now I’ve got to figure out carpool arrangements, or whatever else it is. When you’re doing it [taking classes] online, those kind of things don’t really matter. Or if my son’s having a horrible day, an online [class] keeps me from having to say, “I’m so sorry, honey. I can’t talk now. I’ll be back at 9:00 p.m.”

In summary, stay-at-home mothers in this study who decided to go back to school to become teachers felt that motherhood offered many benefits when working with children. In particular, they felt that being a mother allowed them to better understand how a child develops, grows, and learns, and how that can vary from student to student. In addition, these mothers felt that they were able to use their intuition and be patient in stressful situations to maintain a calm classroom environment. At the same time, however, these mothers studying to become teachers often felt frustrated when trying to strike a balance between school and their other responsibilities, and they reported that more could be done to support them. To that end, this study’s findings lead to several implications for graduate teacher education programs and recommendations for future research.



Implications

Student mothers face particular challenges (Holm, Prosek, & Godwin Weisberger, 2015). Graduate teacher education programs should be responsive toward and supportive of these needs. This study's findings suggest that there are several ways in which graduate teacher education programs—and their faculty—can support mothers who are returning to school. It has been demonstrated that higher education should practise inclusive pedagogy with adult learners (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012). The experiences of the mothers in this study suggest that the approach could be more even specific in its focus. In other words, graduate teacher education programs should practise “inclusive andragogy” by implementing strategies designed to meet the particular needs of these women. The following strategies would benefit mothers returning to school.

For one, special care should be taken to ensure that the work assigned is meaningful and worthwhile in terms of meeting the student's goals. Clear schedules and agendas with advance notice of what assignments are due and when and courses offered in locations close to their homes go a long way to mitigate the effects of “mommy guilt” that these students experience.

Further, since these students have already demonstrated their ability to be successful in an academic setting by earning an undergraduate degree, more latitude in terms of course structure is appropriate. For example, providing opportunities to learn in an online setting would be of particular benefit, especially considering that these student mothers have demonstrated their readiness to learn by making the decision to return to school (Zorn-Arnold & Conaway, 2016).

Another way in which graduate teacher education programs could demonstrate inclusive andragogy would be to consider creating a pathway to teacher licensure or certification that would allow these students to “use” their classroom experiences as substitute teachers—or perhaps even their experiences as stay-at-home mothers—to meet certain course requirements. For example, most teacher education programs require that a student take a course in child development. Allowing students to somehow “prove” their mastery of this subject through an alternative assessment rather than to require that they spend additional time away from their families in a semester-long course would support their efforts to become teachers.

Similarly, participants also expressed frustration with the fundamental structure of their graduate teacher education program. For example, many of the mothers initially became interested in teaching through their work as part-time substitute teachers. As Betty remarked:

I started substituting because it was so flexible . . . and then I thought, “Hey! I think I might want this to be a real job.” I could have my summers off and be home in the afternoons. I wouldn't have to try to get back into telecom [telecommunications] after being out [of the field] for so long. So I investigated programs near me. I was disappointed that



none of my subbing could count towards anything. I mean, I got a lot of experience, but it sort of felt like I was starting all over when I applied to this program.

Many students, like Betty, would benefit from having their previous classroom experiences formally acknowledged, but most graduate teacher education programs do not allow for this.

Lastly, as the number of women who choose to be stay-at-home mothers continues to increase (Galley, 2014), graduate teacher education programs are uniquely situated to offer a viable path for returning to the workforce. In general, teaching can be considered as a “family-friendly” profession, and this aspect is particularly attractive to women who are interested in striking a healthy balance between their personal and professional lives. Although there is some debate as to whether or not there is a teacher shortage in the United States, there is agreement that certain populations and subject areas are underserved (Cowan, Goldhaber, Hayes, & Theobald, 2016). Graduate teacher education programs could address this demand by more effectively marketing the profession and directly advertising to playgroups, pre-schools, and other neighborhood locations frequented by stay-at-home mothers.

Recommendations for Future Research

In terms of future research, there is still a great deal more to learn about mothers who return to school to become teachers. For one, although this study did broaden the scope of earlier work by White (2009) by focusing on graduate students seeking a variety of endorsements, none of the participants in either study was a woman of colour or a single parent. Moreover, participants were not asked to share information about their socio-economic status. To what extent might any of these factors affect a mother’s experiences in a teacher education program?

In addition, every participant remarked on the importance of a strong support system in order to be successful. Typically, she was referring to a significant other or spouse. Future research could explore the experiences of mothers who do not have a “built-in” support system, as well as how a graduate teacher education program might address or compensate for the need for ongoing support of these students. For example, it has been demonstrated that a formalized mentor system is beneficial for early career teachers (Lozinak, 2016). Could such a system benefit pre-service student mothers as well?

Further, this study focused only on women who had already earned a bachelor’s degree in a non-education field. As mentioned previously, non-traditional students make up a large part of the undergraduate population, so it is reasonable to assume that there are also mothers working to become teachers at the undergraduate level. It would be interesting to compare and contrast their experiences with those of their counterparts at the graduate level. Do they differ in terms of what they see as the benefits and challenges of being both a mother and a student?



In sum, women who are both a mother and a student are a growing population. The experience of being home with their children and having a “first-row seat” as they grow and develop is so powerful that many stay-at-home mothers who hold undergraduate degrees decide to return to school at the graduate level to earn their teaching credentials. This study replicated the work of previous studies exploring these women’s experiences, especially the frequent adjustments required as they navigate their personal and professional lives. The research extended earlier work by highlighting the importance of choice and flexibility in terms of course design and program structure. It is hoped that this study’s findings will inform graduate teacher education programs as they endeavour to meet the needs of student mothers.

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Biography

Karrin Lukacs is an associate professor, curriculum and instruction, at Shenandoah University in Winchester, VA. Her fields of expertise include teacher change agency, teacher education, school improvement/reform, program evaluation, and how teaching/learning are portrayed in popular media. She likes to spend her free time with her husband and two children. When they are not around, she likes to read, solve crossword puzzles, and watch movies (especially old ones).

Karrin Lukacs est professeure agrégée, programme d'études et enseignement théorique de l'Université Shenandoah, à Winchester, en Virginie. Parmi ses champs d'intérêt, on compte les vecteurs de changement en enseignement, la formation de l'enseignant, la réforme/l'amélioration des institutions d'enseignement, l'évaluation des programmes, et le portrait de l'enseignement/de l'apprentissage par les médias populaires. Elle aime aussi passer ses temps libres en compagnie de son mari et de ses deux enfants, ou encore à lire, à faire des mots croisés et à regarder des films (surtout de vieux films).