

Barriers, Enablers, and Strategies for Success Identified by Undergraduate Student Parents

Tricia M. van Rhijn

University of Guelph
tvanhij@uoguelph.ca

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the experiences of undergraduate student parents balancing school and family roles. A thematic analysis is used to examine the unique barriers and enablers faced by post-secondary student parents, as well as the success strategies they use. Ten participants attending university were interviewed. Several unique barriers emerged from the analysis, including time constraints, stress, lack of resources, and perceived social exclusion. Unique enablers include perceived benefits, social support, and the ability to maintain motivation to continue. Student parents use many strategies in order to successfully balance their roles, including selective scheduling, asking for assistance, and making explicit choices, such as making personal sacrifices to be able to complete their schoolwork.

Introduction

The participation of non-traditional students, including students who have dependent children, in post-secondary education is increasing. Between 1976 and 2005, student parents accounted for between 11% and 16% of Canadian post-secondary students (van Rhijn, Smit Quosai, & Lero, 2011). To date, research has focused on large, quantitative studies examining Canadian post-secondary student parents (Holmes, 2005; van Rhijn et al., 2011). Some student parent research has begun to examine the connection between stress and academic performance (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Van Stone, Nelson, & Niemann, 1994). Research suggests that student parents face an increased likelihood of interrupting their studies (Holmes, 2005) and increased role strain (Home, 1997), stress occurring from conflicting role obligations. An exploration of student parents' experiences is required to better understand what it is like being a student parent and how these individuals manage their multiple and demanding roles. Furthermore, an in-depth understanding of student parents' experiences is crucial to develop evidence-based supports that could reduce the challenges faced by this traditionally overlooked population. This study was conducted to add to our understanding of the experiences of student parents in post-secondary study. Interviews were conducted with ten university student parents to investigate strategies for balancing parental/student roles and perceptions of factors that act as barriers/enablers to successful post-secondary study.

Literature Review

While the number of non-traditional students, including student parents, has increased in the last decade (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002), research demonstrates that being a parent acts as a deterrent to post-secondary attendance (Lero, Smit Quosai, & van Rhijn, 2007; Looker, 1997). Student parents have some distinguishing characteristics, including managing the ongoing financial costs and time demands of family and school. While there has been some recognition that the life experiences, motivation, and attitudes of student parents are highly valuable, and can contribute to these students' learning experiences (Looker, 1997), these factors can also present challenges to their success. Research has primarily focused on difficulties encountered when trying to balance the competing demands

of being a parent and a student (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Hammer, Grigsby, & Woods, 1998; Home, 1997; Medved & Heisler, 2002; Van Stone et al., 1994). Other relevant considerations include: access to financial resources, post-secondary transition challenges for older students, impact of institutional factors, and role strain. Transitioning to post-secondary study may be particularly stressful for student parents; they are often returning to a formal educational environment after an extended absence, and may find it challenging to interact with younger peers with different values, interests, and priorities. Consequently, student parents may feel excluded at times and prevented from participating in the same on-campus activities as their colleagues. Holmes (2005) found that student parents were highly unlikely to participate in campus-based activities. There are many possible reasons blocking their participation but the most likely are lack of time and appealing or applicable activities.

Time, and the lack thereof, is likely an issue for student parents. Because time is a limited resource, time commitment to one role takes away from time required for other responsibilities (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997). Single, employed mothers have been found to experience time conflicts, particularly evident in how they make intentional choices to retain “fragile control” over their responsibilities (Hodgson, Dienhart, & Daly, 2001). Student parents likely have similar experiences to single, employed mothers, given the number of ongoing responsibilities they face in their multiple roles, leading them to experience role overload where, despite spending time with family, they may be unable to stop thinking about school responsibilities. Difficulties in time management, feeling time crunched, and challenges finding a balance between their roles are likely common issues for student parents.

Student parents are also affected by specific institutional factors that can influence their academic success and intention to remain in school. Van Stone, Nelson, and Niemann (1994) identified the support of peers and family, availability of university services, and positive interactions with faculty as influential academic success factors for poor, single-mother students. In one survey, student parents reported having little access to information on how to deal with faculty members about school difficulties involving family issues (Medved & Heisler, 2002). A perceived lack of institutional support could increase the likelihood that student parents will discontinue their studies when encountering difficulties.

One suggested indicator of the conflict between school and family responsibilities is role strain resulting from competing demands. Female student parents have been found to experience increased role strain and conflict (Home, 1997; Sweet & Moen, 2007). On the positive side, multiple roles can benefit physical, mental, and relationship health (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), provided that excessive roles or demands do not lead to overload and strain (Barnett & Hyde, 2001).

While there has been some exploration of post-secondary student parents’ experiences, there are limitations to the existing literature. First, the research has largely focused on the experiences of females and single parents (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Home, 1997; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Van Stone et al., 1994). Second, it has focused almost exclusively on negative consequences of conflicting school and parenting roles (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Hammer et al., 1998; Medved & Heisler, 2002). Considering the complex relationship between family and school experiences, researchers need to better examine both the positive and negative aspects of these competing roles and their interrelationship.

Theoretical Framework

Work-family theories were used to help frame this research and develop an understanding of how student parents manage multiple roles. Work-family conflict theories propose that characteristic work stressors, such as low control, a fast pace, and frequent deadlines impact the quality of parenting over time (Crouter & McHale, 2005). These stressors also exist for students. As well, the experience of role overload and conflict, resulting from the perception of having too many demands (Duxbury, Lyons, & Higgins, 2008), is likely to occur for student parents.

Methodology

Given the identified lack of research, this project was conducted as an exploratory, qualitative study in order to deepen understanding of student parents’ experiences. Accordingly, this research was conducted within an interpretivist/social constructionist paradigm, recognizing that individuals make sense of their experiences through

an interactive (i.e., social) process of meaning-making (Daly, 2007). This focus required a methodology suited to examining how student parents make sense of their realities.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the student parents' experiences to direct future research, and ultimately provide post-secondary institutions with some direction in response to the needs of this population. The primary research question is: How do student parents balance their parental and student roles? Three interconnected concepts are explored: 1) Barriers faced by student parents, 2) Enablers they experience, and 3) Strategies they use to succeed.

Participants

The population of interest was post-secondary students with at least one child aged 18 or under, enrolled in full-time or part-time studies. Interviews were conducted with ten undergraduate student parents living with at least one dependent child, eight women and two men, selected using purposeful sampling strategies at a university in Southwestern Ontario including personal contacts, referrals, emails sent by two on-campus organizations, and flyers posted at an on-campus childcare centre. I made contact with 15 potential participants: four personal contacts, two referrals, eight email responses, and one flyer response. Five potential participants were excluded due to either failure to respond to subsequent emails or scheduling issues related to family/childcare. Repeated attempts were made to include these individuals; however, I was unable to overcome the barriers to conduct these interviews. This issue is a challenge related to research with this population. I proceeded with the study and continued recruitment efforts in order to obtain a sufficient sample. Although participants were offered a nominal cash compensation of \$20, it was not sufficient to cover childcare expenses.

The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 49, with an average of 35 (Table 1 includes demographic details assigned pseudonyms). Most of the participants were partnered (married or common-law). Only three participants identified as single parents; all of these were women. Half of the participants had only one child, four participants had two children, and the remaining participant had three children. The participants' children ranged in age from 1.5 to 18 years. The participants were enrolled in university from one semester to five years, and most were attending on a full-time basis (>60% course load); only three were studying part-time. Six participants were not engaged in paid employment while studying. The remaining four participants had previously or were currently working.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics*

#	Pseudonym	Age	Partner Status	Gender	Children's Ages
1	Anne	26	Single	Woman	5
2	Bruce	38	Married	Man	11, 14
3	Chris	47	Married	Man	18
4	Diane	22	Common law	Woman	2 ½
5	Emma	20	Single	Woman	5
6	Faye	38	Married	Woman	1 ½, 4
7	Gail	42	Married	Woman	15, 18
8	Hanna	45	Separated	Woman	12, 14
9	Inga	39	Married	Woman	5, 8, 10
10	Jean	29	Married	Woman	5

Data Collection

These data were collected through the use of ten in-depth interviews. This method of data collection enabled me to access what Geertz (1973) referred to as "thick descriptions" to describe, analyze, and interpret the student parents' experiences. Interviews were conducted at times and places selected by the participants with most occurring on-campus in quiet spaces such as unused classrooms. To address the research objectives, I designed a semi-structured interview schedule with a mix of open- and closed-ended questions (Appendix A). The questions focused on how student parents managed their responsibilities. Participants were asked about factors that enabled them to succeed, as well as act as barriers to their success. The average interview length was approximately 29 minutes, with the shortest lasting 19 minutes and the longest lasting 36 minutes.

Data Analysis

I performed a thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews, to provide a rich description of the dominant themes in the student parents' responses utilizing a contextual approach, acknowledging that people actively construct meaning from their personal experiences and that social contexts influence those meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I used an inductive process allowing themes to emerge from the data focusing on the identification of semantic/explicit themes clearly expressed by the participants. Analysis followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) six thematic analysis phases: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generation of initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the written report.

In particular, I began by carefully reading and re-reading the data to familiarize myself, starting immediately following the first interview. I then began open coding by reading the transcripts and assigning codes line-by-line to define what was happening. I searched for themes by grouping together similar codes. Themes and codes were adjusted to accommodate new information from subsequent interviews through constant comparison. Identifying recurring codes helped me make sense of issues that could be further explored in subsequent interviews for greater understanding. The process was recursive, involving induction, deduction, and abduction (Daly, 2007). Consistent with the recursive process, I utilized constant reflection working to scrutinize my own assumptions, biases, and perspectives, recognizing these influential factors as a frame within which the results could be positioned. Memoing was particularly helpful in capturing my initial thoughts about codes and categories, information about the interview context, decisions about changes in the emergent design, and insights into myself as an interviewer and my preconceptions.

Findings

Since the primary objective of this study was to develop a better understanding of how student parents balance their multiple roles, these findings are separated into the three interconnected concepts previously introduced: 1) Barriers faced by student parents, 2) Enablers they experience, and 3) Strategies they use to succeed. In the following sections, I present an examination of the emergent themes related to these concepts.

Barriers

As student parents likely face challenges related to participating in, and completing, their studies, the first area of analysis related to barriers that impeded student parents' ability to succeed. Several themes emerged, including time constraints, the experience of stress related to adding the student role, identification of resources that they were lacking, and feeling socially excluded as non-traditional students within the post-secondary environment.

Time

All ten participants discussed time-related challenges. Participants noted that scheduling classes around childcare/family schedules was difficult and limited their ability to take classes offered at certain times (e.g., early morning, evenings). Participants also experienced difficulties dealing with family responsibilities, specifically with getting children to appointments/activities, finding it difficult to maintain children's schedules in addition to their own: "My schedule is certainly impacted, I do try to schedule appointments around my school schedule but sometimes it's impossible" (Faye). Participants made sacrifices, often school-related, to achieve balance including missing classes or devoting less time to schoolwork. Other time constraints involved finding time to study, especially at home, and missing time with family. Participants regretted missing out on family time when they had to complete schoolwork: "It's hard to find time to do stuff with her. We used to do so much. Now she'll be like, 'Mom, can we go outside?' And I'm like, 'I can't, I have homework to do'" (Emma).

Stress

A second major theme within barriers was stress. Participants noted several psychological factors impacting their success, including perceived pressure to complete their education, role conflict, and negative impact of stress on their families. Four participants discussed feeling pressure to finish quickly to limit financial cost to their families.

Conflicts between parent and student roles were commonly noted, often related to feelings of guilt. As summarized by Diane:

You can never just relax. It's like thinking about what's due and what you have to do. And plus all the things at home I have to do. When I'm at school I'm like, "What am I going to make for dinner and what needs to be done at home?" And when I'm at home it's like, "What am I going to write on that essay and what am I going to do?" So, it's definitely a conflict.

Participants recognized that stress impacted their family relationships. They felt grumpier and more short-fused when taking classes: "There are also times when I'm so stressed out, when I'm trying to get something done, that I get edgy and that really impacts my relationship with the kids" (Faye). Those with children in childcare felt guilty about the amount of time the children spent in care and some students felt disconnected from their families while in school.

Lack of Resources

Participants felt that the lack of certain resources impacted their ability to be successful. Five participants expressed concern that they lacked academic skills due to the amount of time that had passed since their previous schooling and that advancing age slowed their learning process. Finances were identified as a barrier by all of the single student parents, but also by many who were married (married participants were all employed and contributing to household income prior to returning to school). Partnered participants were often unwilling to ask their partners for help, since they were now the sole income earners. A lack of affordable and accessible childcare acted as a barrier to taking classes at certain times and made completing schoolwork more difficult at times. On-campus childcare was often too expensive, inflexible (e.g., drop-in for one class), and had long wait lists. All six participants with preschool-aged children reported not wanting to subject their children to more time in care than was absolutely necessary. Inga expressed concerns about her children being "ping-pong balls" bouncing between available childcare options, noting that, "the hardest thing has been juggling the childcare along with doing my classes and the logistics of getting one of my kids there, then pick up and that kind of thing".

Social Exclusion

Participants reported feeling isolated and socially excluded. Participants felt excluded from campus events because of scheduling issues and a lack of programming specifically welcoming them *and* their children. Anne remarked that:

Nothing is set up for student parents.... I can't really do stuff at night, I have to be home. So it's like I have to be a very like minimal student. I have to just do what I'm here to do and I can't participate in other things. It sucks because you want to come to university and do that too.

Seven participants remarked that they felt disconnected on-campus, especially those without a support network. Participants without support networks at school remarked that it was difficult finding students in similar circumstances: "I go to class and the library. I go home and I've never connected. I've never met anybody here, you know what I mean? I just really wish I had connection to talk with other parents" (Emma). Six participants commented about feeling different than the majority of students, sticking out because they were older and had different life circumstances. Three participants specifically noted that they felt out of place as older undergraduate students including Faye: "I was in this room full of all these young people and I thought, 'What am I doing here?' I felt ridiculous....I felt out of place. I felt silly. I started to question myself".

Enablers

Although these student parents faced particular challenges, they were still studying and therefore an examination of factors that enabled to be successful in their studies was in order. The second area of analysis related to enablers that facilitated their success. Themes included perceived benefits of studying, support received from family and friends, and feeling motivated to continue to study.

Perceived Benefits

Participants felt they benefitted from enhanced relationships with instructors and enjoyed more flexibility in their schedule as students compared to when they were working. They were also mentally stimulated and felt pride in their academic accomplishments. Six participants identified benefits from their life experiences and different perspective providing greater understanding in classes. Participants reported feeling happier and more stimulated, resulting from their relationships with family/children. Despite some negative effects of studying (e.g., less family time), participants also hoped their children would ultimately benefit:

I feel my children benefit by understanding the importance of getting an education. That it's a privilege to be educated, it's not within the attainment of everybody within our society, and hard work is important. So indirectly I feel benefitted. I feel I did okay in that department as a parent even though I sacrifice a lot of family time. (Hanna)

Support

Participants were enabled by receiving support in a variety of ways. Support and encouragement from spouses/partners, children, family members, and friends were important supports identified by nine participants: “You have to have a partner who is supportive. If I did not have that support, I would not be here” (Inga).

Support was offered in many forms including verbal encouragement, performance of household tasks, childcare, and finances. Childcare offered by stable, accommodating providers enabled participants with younger children. Three participants identified finances as enabling, including partner’s earnings, being mortgage-free, or choosing to attend school when financially capable. Participants with on-campus support networks spoke about the benefits of being able to talk to and empathize with other student parents. As Bruce stated:

Having a network here at school, you use it. Having that ability to have a support network around you that knows what you are going through, not just at school but also at home. Coming to school as a mature student is not a normal scenario for most people, but once you're in it you realize that yeah, there's other people doing it.

Motivation

Participants were also enabled by maintaining their motivation. Pursuing a life-long goal added motivation to learn. Participants wanted to be role models to their children, and were motivated by others who had successfully completed school: “My mom was a single mom with three kids and she went back to school, so that made me think that I could do it” (Anne). Having clear priorities also motivated participants to continue. Five participants explained that having a family made it easier to prioritize and avoid wasting time by maintaining focus on their goals, even when the stress was almost overwhelming:

I visualize graduation almost every single day and that's what pulled me through when nothing else would have. It's nice to get a wonderful grade and there's a sense of accomplishment in that. But you don't get enough of that along the way to hold on to when you're really stressed and busy. So I was always focusing on what it would be like when I actually graduate. (Inga)

Participants also kept the future benefits of completing their education in mind, wanting a better future for themselves and their children: “The fact that I will have a degree; I will have better opportunity by having a half decent employment future. Thinking about having a half decent job when you get out definitely helps keep you going” (Bruce).

Strategies

The third area of analysis related to strategies that helped student parents to successfully balance family and school obligations. Three broad themes emerged as success strategies: careful scheduling of daily activities and deliberate

choices of when/how to take courses, asking for and getting help to meet obligations, and specific strategies enacted to complete schoolwork.

Scheduling

Participants often chose to return to school based on their children's ages. Two participants commented that they returned when their children were young, providing a greater benefit to their family; three other participants commented that they waited until their children were older and more independent, enabling them to study. Organized scheduling strategies, such as adopting routines, helped to ensure that both school and family responsibilities were completed. Calendars were often used to organize family and school schedules: "I have a big, colour-coded calendar with what I'm doing, who's taking [child], what's due, when I'm working. I know what I'm going to do school-wise and family-wise so it's never any surprises" (Diane). Participants' schedules commonly included reserved family time. Three participants made specific efforts to maintain their typical family routines: "I make sure there's time for [activities]. We do stories every night and I make the most of the time to make it quality time" (Anne). Finally, participants scheduled courses considering the impact on their families. Five participants shared that they considered when courses were offered and avoided evening courses unless they had no other option. Six participants purposefully reduced their course loads, noting that they felt unable to handle full course loads while effectively managing their family lives. Two participants chose to spread out their program over a longer time period to lessen the impact: "I would have preferred completing my program sooner rather than spreading it to over four years, but that was not really an option. I weighed out balancing between the quality of life within my family and my studying" (Hanna). In contrast, three participants chose to forgo the traditional "summer break" to decrease the amount of time required to finish their studies.

Getting Help

Participants asked for help to meet their family and school responsibilities. Help was requested from spouses/partners, children, family, friends, professors, and service providers. Three participants accessed on-campus resources such as counseling, disability services, and informal services (e.g., mature student organizations). Participants also requested help to reduce responsibilities to allow extra time to complete schoolwork, including assistance with household chores and asking for assignment extensions.

Schoolwork Completion Activities

Participants utilized a variety of strategies to complete their schoolwork. Those with younger children prepared activities to keep their children engaged while completing schoolwork (e.g., crafts, new toys). Participants also chose to focus on schoolwork when they were least likely to take time away from their children, such as early mornings or after children's bedtimes. Five participants commented on the difficulty of working at home and chose to physically separate themselves to complete schoolwork: "I have to be away certain evenings and go to the library so I can concentrate...to compartmentalize my life a little more by separating myself spatially from home when I need to study" (Hanna). Two participants discussed taking a proactive approach: "I've handed in papers a week early just to get them off my plate. I tend to start everything early because I never know what will happen" (Inga). Personal sacrifices were also made. Participants made explicit choices to do less schoolwork or lowered their achievement expectations to be able to spend more time with family. They also sometimes sacrificed sleep to make time for studying.

Discussion

This study explored student parents' experiences in pursuing a post-secondary education. The results provide an important perspective on how student parents balance their highly demanding roles as students and as parents. This section includes a discussion of the findings, followed by limitations and suggestions for future research.

Three concepts were explored to answer the primary research question: barriers, enablers, and strategies for success. Time was a very strong theme among barriers and reflected the conflicting demands of balancing school and family responsibilities. All of the participants discussed how they experienced time constraints that required them to prioritize their responsibilities, often by making sacrifices in order to achieve a balance. These results replicate

Hodgson and colleagues' (2001) findings for single working mothers, suggesting that multiple demanding responsibilities create the need to make choices in a kind of "time triage," prioritizing what has to be done and what does not.

Several participants felt pressure to finish their studies as quickly as possible, perceiving the cost to their family as a choice to forgo earning a full-time income while attending school. This "family financial balance sheet" approach may have been influential in making participants feel pressure to finish quickly because less time in school would reduce total costs by facilitating a quicker return to the workforce.

Many of the participants were aware that they lacked resources, some internal (e.g., ability to learn, academic skills) and others external (e.g., finances, support services, childcare). This was an issue for both single and married/partnered parents. Married parents found it very difficult to ask for help due to their spouse providing the sole income for the household, viewing money and time as finite resources within the family. Not surprisingly, lacking access to childcare was a huge barrier, especially for those with young children. Those who had found flexible, affordable, and reliable childcare had done so with home-based care, as centre-based care was seen as expensive, inflexible, and inaccessible. This suggests a strong need for flexible and affordable childcare arrangements to enable student parents to complete their education.

Student parents were challenged by interactions with younger peers with different values, interests, and priorities. Results supported previous research findings that student parents are less likely to participate on-campus (Holmes, 2005). Extending Holmes' work, these participants reported that they would like to participate but there were no activities suitable to their needs. This may be indicative of a lack of on-campus awareness of student parents and the group being socially excluded, although this appears to be a passive process. Given the active promotion of equality, anti-discrimination, and diversity, it would appear that student parents have simply been overlooked. Participants in this study certainly felt overlooked: "I felt pretty invisible for the most part...It's hard for me to get into the spirit and get really involved on-campus. I felt quite isolated at times and just became this study machine" (Hanna).

Despite a lack of recognition, participants were enabled in many ways to persevere in their studies. Participants in the study were strongly aware of many benefits of pursuing their education, they received support from a variety of sources, and some connected with an informal support network. A majority of the participants expressed a desire for formal support services to be offered and pinpointed a need for specific student parent resources.

Children's ages factored in to the timing for returning to school, but there was no consensus as to a particular 'best' age. Participants used specific time management strategies to succeed as parents and students, including altering their program progression to better accommodate family demands. It would appear that this strategy was vital to attain a balance, supporting Holmes' (2005) observation of the importance of institutional flexibility for student parents. Also, given the help that participants required to reduce time demands, it is clear that time constraints strongly influenced their success. To manage time conflicts, participants selectively chose times to complete schoolwork, and they often chose to reduce studying time or sacrifice sleep; neither of these strategies is healthy or conducive to performance at home or school.

Finally, the family impacts and tensions described for student parents relate to the work-family conflict literature relating work stressors to the quality of parenting (Crouter & McHale, 2005). There was evidence of these stressors for these student parents. Moreover, the negative consequences of stress related to coping with multiple role demands were evident for these student parents as they attempted to simultaneously balance their school and family roles. A balance must be found to successfully manage the conflicting demands of each. Balancing, for student parents, seemed to be accomplished by making tradeoffs and intentional sacrifices based on prioritizing their responsibilities.

Increasingly, the attainment of a post-secondary education is viewed as a path to gaining social, financial, and career advantages for individuals and as a vehicle for improving productivity and economic prosperity in a rapidly changing world. Student parents are no small minority on post-secondary campuses in Canada, and they face many distinct barriers to completing their studies. In their demanding and important roles as parents and students, participants in the study struggled with time constraints, had high levels of stress and role conflict, and experienced social exclusion as "atypical" students. Despite these barriers, the participants were highly motivated, and were aware of many personal benefits inherent in pursuing their education. These students were able to be successful as

parents and in their studies by asking for help, being organized, and using other specific strategies. Unfortunately, many of these student parents also used strategies that involved personal and school-related sacrifices to achieve balance.

Colleges and universities must consider the unique needs of student parents when creating programs and policies. Despite mandates promoting diversity and equity, student parents very strongly felt overlooked. As one participant stated, “It is a minority distinction and I don’t think it’s a minority distinction that’s often acknowledged” (Jean). Institutional flexibility with regards to class scheduling and alternative delivery formats (e.g., distance education), as well as on-campus programming, would be a good start towards enabling student parents’ success. Additionally, the provision of formal support services and targeted information would help to reduce feelings of social exclusion and isolation. The findings from this study suggest that student parents experience high levels of tension, social exclusion, and other negative family impacts as undergraduate students. Despite this, student parents are able to maintain their motivation to continue, and they use specific strategies to make it all fit and balance with their highly demanding roles.

Limitations

The primary limitation to this study is its small, relatively homogeneous sample of university student parents. Research suggests that the student parent population is very diverse (Holmes, 2005; Lero et al., 2007), so themes derived from these data are not fully and independently sufficient to inform policy/program development, despite being an important first step. A more diverse sample of student parents is needed to better meet the needs of a diverse student body. Recruitment was challenging and, although attempts were made to increase the sample size, this population proved difficult to access. Finding time to participate in an interview was a challenge for some volunteers, despite their clear interest in participating. Email provided the most successful recruitment method for student parents. Being unable to increase the number of participants, in particular men, limited the ability to reach theoretical saturation, and did not support any gendered comparisons.

Future Directions

The findings from this study suggest that student parents experience high levels of tension, social exclusion, and other negative family impacts as undergraduate students. Despite this, they are able to maintain their motivation to continue and use specific strategies to balance their highly demanding roles. Future research is required to extend this exploratory work and should utilize larger, more diverse samples of student parents to work towards the formation of substantive theory describing student parents’ experiences and pathways to success. This work is required in order to provide institutional and government policy makers with further direction to create evidence-based policies and programs to support this population of students. This overlooked population requires additional support to facilitate their success and provide the parents and their children with the many benefits associated with the attainment of a post-secondary education. Support is required not only to increase persistence and completion rates, but also to improve student parents’ well-being while pursuing their post-secondary education. These types of supports could provide direct benefits to the student parents as well as indirect benefits to their children and families.

References

- Barnett, R. C., & Hyde, J. S. (2001). Women, men, work, and family. *American Psychologist*, *56*(10), 781-796. doi: 10.1037//0003-066X.56.10.781
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*, 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Carney-Crompton, S., & Tan, J. (2002). Support systems, psychological functioning, and academic performance of nontraditional female students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *52*(2), 140-154. doi: 10.1177/0741713602052002005
- Crouter, A. C., & McHale, S. M. (2005). The long arm of the job revisited: Parenting in dual-earner families. In T. Luster & L. Okagaki (Eds.), *Parenting: An ecological perspective* (Vol. 2nd, pp. 275-296). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Daly, K. J. (2007). *Qualitative methods for family studies and human development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Duxbury, L., Lyons, S., & Higgins, C. (2008). Too much to do, and not enough time: An examination of role overload. In K. Korabik, D. S. Lero & D. L. Whitehead (Eds.), *Handbook of Work-Family Integration: Research, Theory, and Best Practices* (pp. 125-140). San Diego, CA: Elsevier.
- Frone, M. R., Yardley, J. K., & Markel, K. S. (1997). Developing and testing an integrative model of the work-family interface. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, *50*, 145-167.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Greenhaus, J. H., & Powell, G. N. (2006). When work and family are allies: A theory of work-family enrichment. *Academy of Management Review*, *31*(1), 72-92.
- Hammer, L. B., Grigsby, T. D., & Woods, S. (1998). The conflicting demands of work, family, and school among students at an urban university. *Journal of Psychology*, *132*, 220-226.
- Hodgson, J., Dienhart, A., & Daly, K. J. (2001). Time juggling: Single mothers' experience of time-pressure following divorce. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *35*(1/2), 1-28.
- Holmes, D. (2005). Embracing differences: Post-secondary education among aboriginal students, students with children and students with disabilities. Montreal, QC: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.
- Home, A. M. (1997). Learning the hard way: Role strain, stress, role demands, and support in multiple-role women students. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *33*(2), 335-347.
- Lero, D. S., Smit Quosai, T., & van Rhijn, T. M. (2007). Access to post-secondary education for student parents: Final report. Submitted to Human Resources and Social Development Canada.
- Looker, E. D. (1997). In search of credentials: factors affecting young adults' participation in post-secondary education. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *27*(2), 1-36.
- Medved, C., & Heisler, J. (2002). A negotiated order exploration of critical student-faculty interactions: Student-parents manage multiple roles. *Communication Education*, *51*(2), 105-120.
- Quimby, J. L., & O'Brien, K. M. (2006). Predictors of well-being among nontraditional female students with children. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *84*(4), 451-460.
- Sweet, S., & Moen, P. (2007). Integrating educational careers in work and family: Women's return to school and family life quality. *Community, Work & Family*, *10*(2), 231-250. doi: 10.1080/13668800701270166
- van Rhijn, T. M., Smit Quosai, T., & Lero, D. S. (2011). A profile of undergraduate student parents in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *41*(3), 59-80.
- Van Stone, N., Nelson, J. R., & Niemann, J. (1994). Poor single-mother college students' views on the effect of some primary sociological and psychological belief factors on their academic success. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *65*(5), 571-584.

Appendix A

Interview Guide for Student Parents

1. Demographic information:
 - a. first name or pseudonym and age
 - b. age(s) of your child(ren),
 - c. marital status
 - d. program and level of study (e.g. how long have you been studying/ full-time or part-time)
 - e. employment status (amount and type of paid work)
 - f. volunteer / unpaid work
2. Tell me about your decision to return to/enrol in college/university.
 - a. Prompt for previous PSE experience (left and returned? Why?)
 - b. Factors influencing timing of return/enrolment.
3. Have you experienced specific barriers or challenges to participating in or completing post-secondary education related to being a student parent?
 - a. Was there ever a time when you ran into difficulty or felt like quitting? What made it possible or easier for you to continue with your education at that time?
 - b. Do you have friends or colleagues who have left a post-secondary program because of reasons related to being a student parent? From what you know, why did they leave?
4. What enables or supports you to be successful and continue your studies?
5. *If employed* – Please describe why you choose to work. How does working affect your school and family life?
6. *If not employed* – Is this decision related to being a student?
7. What strategies do you use to balance school, (work) and family life?
8. What benefits do you experience related to being a student parent?
9. How has being a student affected your home life?
 - a. Your relationship with your partner?
 - b. Your relationship with your child(ren)?
10. How does being a parent affect your role as a student?
 - a. How does your partner affect your role as a student?
 - b. How do your children affect your role as a student?
11. What do you wish you had known earlier that would have helped you as a student parent (and how did you find this information)?
12. Is there other information about being a student parent that you think we should know?