

Adding school to work–family balance: The role of support for Portuguese working mothers attending a master’s degree

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the work, family, and study experiences of Portuguese professional women in two different career stages: early career and mid-career. Using semi-structured interviews with a sample of 22 working mothers enrolled in a master’s degree, this study explores their experiences of combining the roles of mother, worker and student and the role of support for a successful integration of work–family and school. Support from peers was found to be a critical factor for successfully integrating work–family and school responsibilities. Differences in the use of partner and family support were found between early and mid-career women. Lack of or limited support from the workplace was a barrier that emerged in both groups.

Keywords

Working student, family–work conflict, peers, family, workplace support

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Introduction

Following the trends of other European countries, increasing number of female professionals in early and mid-career, in Portugal, are returning to university to complete a master's degree (Amaral & Magalhães, 2009; Amorim, Azevedo, & Coimbra, 2010; Russell, 2008). There are many contributing factors to women's decision to enroll in a master's degree. Some want to invest in or to add value to their careers with an additional graduation, while others take this as an opportunity to acquire a qualification that allows access to certain types of jobs (Adams & Corbett, 2010; Martins, Mauritti, & Firmino da Costa, 2005). Others want to fulfill a "dream" that was put away due to either professional or familial responsibilities. And, for others, the pressures of the competition in the labor market makes them more aware of the importance of having an additional academic qualification (Adams & Corbett, 2010; Amaral & Magalhães, 2009; Ogren, 2003). This work aims therefore to understand how mothers, who are workers and students enrolled in a master's degree, juggle their multiple responsibilities and what type of support they mostly rely on. In addition, the type of interference among roles is also explored.

The predisposition of these women to remain full-time professionals while attending higher education is, in most cases, caused both by financial need and also due to the risk of being laid off if they take a pause to invest in their studies full time. Families face, nowadays, economic hardship and the decision to enroll in a higher education, due to the financial requirements involved (e.g. tuition, commuting, and text materials expenses), is difficult without the financial resources that come from a full-time job. Tuition for master's degree programs is generally expensive, and there is a scarcity of scholarships for this level of education. Thus, many master's degree programs are designed to be attended during evening/weekend sessions allowing the students to remain full time engaged with their jobs.

Research has shown that the adaptation of professional workers to higher education is associated with an appropriate management of different life roles, namely work, family, and school roles (Adams & Corbett, 2010; Chartrand, 1990, 1992; Hammer, Grigsby, & Woods, 1998; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Ogren, 2003; Tinto, 1975, 2002). Because some of these women who work full time and study also have family responsibilities (e.g. are mothers), enrolling in a master's degree program forces them to negotiate their occupational, familiar, and professional demands. Working student parents are an understudied population as research has emphasized mainly the balance between student and parenting roles. Research suggests that female student parents experience increased role strain and conflict to manage multiple roles when compared to male students (Sweet & Moen, 2007).

The current study was conducted to add to the understanding of how Portuguese mothers who are working students manage the demands of performing, simultaneously, these three roles. In particular, we investigate the type of interference between school¹ and the other two main roles of adult life (work and family) and the role of resources, namely support from others, in this multiple role juggling across women's career.

By studying simultaneous participation in school, while working and being a mother, this study seeks to make two main contributions to the literature on working parents who also study.

First, we add to the literature by studying the impact of school on work–family balance. Most of the studies focused either on blending work and school (Butler, 2007; Oliveira & Temudo, 2008) or school and family (Sweet & Moen, 2007; van Rhijn & Lero, 2009; Van Stone, Nelson, & Niemann, 1994). However, the process of combining school with work and family roles remains under investigated.

Our second main contribution is related to our sample of working mothers enrolled in a master's degree. Most of the scholars have explored the relationship between the parent and student role (Sweet & Moen, 2007; van Rhijn & Lero, 2009; Van Stone et al., 1994) or the professional and student role with samples of undergraduate students (Butler, 2007). Given the professional (e.g. early career and mid-career) and family responsibilities (e.g. being mothers), it is plausible that many of working student mothers consider themselves as mainly professionals and parents who are currently enrolled in a master's degree program. Therefore, we contribute to the literature by using graduate working student mothers as participants in this study.

Theoretical framework

School–work and school–family conflicts

Work and family conflict is a concept that has been widely studied with respect to the work–family interface, and it refers to the negative effects of being engaged in multiple roles (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). According to role conflict theory, demands from different domains compete with each other in terms of time and energy leading to work–family conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Research has demonstrated that work–family conflict is bi-directional; work can interfere with family and family can interfere with work (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992) and that there are different types of conflict: time-, strain-, and behavior based (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Consequences of work–family conflict have been identified by several studies and include, among other, burnout, depression, poor physical and mental health (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997), decreased professional commitment, and decreased job and life satisfaction (Allen et al., 2000; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000). Although it has not been studied as extensively, the same conceptual framework can be applied to the intersection of the work, family, and student roles. Work-to-school, school-to-work, school-to-family, and family-to-school conflicts are concepts similar to those describing the interrole conflicts from work to family. Work-to-school and family-to-school conflicts refer to situations in which students experience work/family as undermining their ability, energy, and time to meet school demands (Hammer et al., 1998; Park & Sprung, 2013). School-to-work and school-to-family, likewise, refer to participation in the student role that results in stress,

scheduling constraints, and interference with the performance of the other two roles (Wyland, Lester, Mone, & Winkel, 2013).

Voydanoff (2008) delineated a conceptual model of the work–family interface, differentiating demands and resources. Demands are role requirements, expectations, and norms, which individuals must respond to with physical or mental effort. Resources are instrumental or psychological assets used to facilitate performance, reduce demands, or generate additional resources. Misfit occurs when demands and needs exceed abilities and resources, resulting in heightened strain (or conflict; Voydanoff, 2008). In this regard, work–school conflict has been shown to be predicted by greater work hours, higher job demands (demands), and by lower levels of job control (resources; Butler, 2007). Work–school conflict was found to be negatively associated with school performance (Butler, 2007) and with psychological health (Park & Sprung, 2013). School-to-work conflict has been showed to be predicted by school involvement and to hinder performance in the work domain (Wyland et al., 2013).

There is a gap in research focused on the impact of school-to-family conflict in the family domain. This is, nevertheless, an important direction to be accounted for, as working students who are parents often seek emotional support from family and friends in order to meet school responsibilities (resources; e.g. help to take care of their children while they are at the university; Chartrand, 1990). In addition, the amount of time and effort dedicated to the school role (demands) may hinder their attending to family responsibilities. In fact, when misfit occurs individuals take actions to reduce or eliminate this misfit by using strategies to reduce demands (for example, by cutting back on work hours or performing less housework) or increasing resources (for example by gaining job flexibility or using dependent care; Voydanoff, 2008). The successful use of these strategies may change the demands and resources from each domain, thus preventing future imbalance.

The role of workplace, family/partner, and peers support

Resources, deriving from the professional, familiar, or school role, may act as instrumental or psychological assets that assist individuals in coping with multiple roles (Voydanoff, 2008). Empirical research has consistently showed that work demands, work-related stressors, and strain are predictors of conflict, while social support, in both domains, has been associated with reduced work–family conflict (Aycan & Eskin, 2005; Fiksenbaum, 2014). Work-related social support (e.g. from supervisor or work colleagues) is more associated with reduced work-to-family conflict and family support (e.g. from partner or spouse) correlates with less family-to-work conflict (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005; Poelmans, O’Driscoll, & Beham, 2005; Matias & Fontaine, 2012). It is likely that this support will also be related to school-to-family and school-to-work conflicts; in fact, studies have revealed supervisor support to alleviate the negative effects of work–school conflict over

psychological health (see Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011 for a review; Park & Sprung, 2013). Furthermore, a study by Butler (2007) found that higher levels of job control are related to lower levels of work–school conflict probably because it allows students greater flexibility to accomplish school tasks at work.

In accordance with Eby et al.'s (2005) literature review, a supportive organizational culture or supportive supervisor is beneficial in reducing conflict. Family-friendly policies can create resources as time, flexibility, and recognition of family needs that can help individuals to better juggle work and family roles (Grzywacz & Butler, 2005; Andrade, 2010). In fact, family-friendly organizational cultures do not directly affect the workplace but rather improve the ability of employees to combine their work and personal life (Bloom, Kretschner, & van Reenen, 2011).

Legislation, in some countries, also provides protection to employees to pursue post-secondary education. However, this legislation does not apply to many working student parents, because programs are offered during evenings or weekend sessions that do not overlap with full-time, daily working schedules (Oliveira & Temudo, 2008).

Taken together, these aspects suggest that juggling work–family–study depends mainly on individual resources. In fact, this assertion was verified in previous research with Portuguese dual earners (Matias & Fontaine, 2012, 2015), where partner support and individual planning skills were the resources used to achieve balance between multiple roles. Moreover, cutting back on work investments was the less preferred strategy used by dual earners to accommodate their work and family. In fact, broader work–family literature has consistently established the protective role of emotional and instrumental support from family members including partners to cope with professional and familiar responsibilities (Frone, 2003; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Matias & Fontaine, 2015; Voydanoff, 2008), to recover from stressful days (Repetti, 1989), to reduce work-to-family conflict (Aryee, Srivas, & Tan, 2005; Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000), and ultimately to lead to higher performances (Baltes & Heydens-Gahir, 2003).

Among factors related to school enrollment, research showed that attending higher education increases students' social network and therefore more social support from peers is available (Kirk & Dorfman, 1983). This form of support has been found to account for academic success and overall satisfaction with the academic experience and reduced work–school conflict (Andrade, 2016; Van Stone et al., 1994). Research by Sek (1991) found that social support from friends acted as a buffer against stressful events related to university life and resulted in reduced appraisal of stress. Collectively, the findings of the cited studies suggest that university peer support may act as a valuable resource to reduce school-to-family or school-to-work conflict.

Being a mother and balancing work and school

The negotiation of work, school, and family responsibilities seems to be quite relevant for women. It has been shown that working students, who are also

parents, typically choose their personal life (responding to the family demands rather than fulfilling their student role) when confronted with incompatibility (Adams & Corbett, 2010). Nevertheless, a study by Zaleski, Levey-Thors, and Schiaffino (1998) found that mothers attending university programs often feel conflict over the short-term sacrifices versus long-term gains for their families. They also feel stress from competing demands of familial and school roles. Moreover, in situations in which the different life roles compete (e.g. being a professional, mother, and student), women tend to postpone their graduation project (Chartrand, 1990; Ogren, 2003). Related to this, women working full time were found to have difficulties in attending class regularly and in completing the necessary schoolwork that each class requires, due to their family responsibilities (Chartrand, 1990).

This particularly challenging situation of women in regard to balancing multiple roles is not novel, as previous research has consistently established Portuguese women as facing more difficulties than men to balance the roles of work and family (Matias, Andrade & Fontaine et al., 2012), women as the ones making the major sacrifices in order to achieve balance (e.g. cutting back on work investment) and getting the most out of available resources (e.g. women, when compared to men, make more use of resources, either from family or work context, to achieve work–family balance; Matias & Fontaine, 2012, 2015). It is therefore likely that an additional role in this balance, the student role, will be particularly challenging for them. Women, in Portugal are equally likely to be working full time as men; however, equal involvement in domestic and family chores is not a reality and Portuguese women still often do the bulk of domestic chores and childcare (Amâncio, 2007; Perista, 2002; Fontaine, Andrade, Matias, Gato, & Mendonça, 2007). The boundaries of work and family roles are therefore more permeable for women and so are the school roles boundaries.

This overload has roots in gender representations about work and family roles, where the man is viewed as having the main responsibility towards the “outside world” and the woman is responsible for the “inside family world” (Andrade, 2011; Matias, Andrade, & Fontaine, 2011; Matias et al., 2012). This is true even in younger generations. A study by Andrade and Fontaine (2007) found that young women (aged 18–29) professed increasingly liberal gender roles; however, this attitude had no correspondence to the division of household tasks. Female respondents reported they held the main responsibility for household tasks and childcare, while men had a more supportive role, engaging more in childcare-related task and less on household chores (Andrade, 2010; Matias et al., 2012).

This intersection of gender role attitudes, family tasks overload, and strong work involvement is, in fact, a highly salient characteristic of Portuguese society. As cited, consistently, studies performed at the national level have underlined the challenge women face to juggle their roles.

Life course perspective

Bianchi and Milkie (2010) enhanced the need to take a life course perspective on work–family conflict research. There are periods in life when more conflict in balancing

multiple roles should be expected, such as when there are young children in the home or the workers are in their early career stages (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). In fact, a life-course perspective (Moen & Sweet, 2004) anchors life-course stages to the age of the employee's youngest child and employee age to account for potential changes in the experience of the work–family interface across the life course (Hill et al., 2008).

The strains associated with the mother role are closely linked to children's levels of autonomy. Parents of young children tend to experience higher levels of role conflict compared to parents of older children (for a review, see Eby et al., 2005). Young children require more parental time and energy and demand greater effort and attention from their caregivers to satisfy their instrumental and emotional needs (e.g. daily primary care, play, and leisure activities). As a result, mothers of young children may be more psychologically overburdened by their competing work, study, and family roles than are mothers of older children who have become more self-sufficient. Children's age seems therefore an important variable to take into account.

Career stages, on the other hand, may also influence the way multiple roles are balanced. Most professionals in their early career stages are focused in developing the skills and knowledge to conform to organizational demands and to establish themselves by performing well and garnering recognition for promoting career advancement. They are usually very committed to their careers and feel closely identified with their professions (Lee, MacDermid, Dohring, & Kossek, 2005). Thus, mothers with reduced work hours have significant costs to current and future career outcomes (specifically earnings), particularly in early career stages (Murrell, Frieze, & Frost, 1991)

Due to a clear shortage in the research of school-to-work and school-to-family conflicts, this study used a qualitative approach to better grasp Portuguese working student mothers' multiple role balance. Unlike the work of Butler (2007), we focus on school-to-family and school-to-work directions, because, in the Portuguese context, "employees who study" are more common than "students who work". In order to unpack familial and career status differences, we also investigated and compared work, family, and school interferences in women in their early career stage (<5 years of professional experience) versus mid-career (10–20 years of professional experience) and in mothers of young children (<10 years old) versus mothers of teenagers (11–16 years old).

Method

Study design

The topic of combining work, family, and school is a recent topic in work–family literature and studies addressing this subject with mothers who are full-time professionals are scarce. As such, this research was conducted as an exploratory qualitative study, with working mothers enrolled in a master's degree, with the aim of understanding their experiences in combining the three roles and to understand the role of support for a successful integration of work–family and school. This

research was conducted within a social constructionist paradigm, assuming that individuals make sense of their experiences through social interactions. This focus was chosen as we aimed at theorizing the socio-cultural contexts and structural conditions that frame how the individuals experience their realities and attribute meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants and procedure

To take part in the study, working student mothers should have at least one dependent child, should live within the same household with a partner, should work full time (more than 35 hours a week), and should be enrolled in the second or third semester of a master's degree program. They could be early career (less than 5 years of professional experience) or mid-career (from 10 to 20 years of professional experience). A random sample of five classes of master's degree programs was selected from business and education departments of a higher education institution. All students comprising each selected class were asked to participate after the goals of the study were explained and the participation criteria were clarified. Students who were willing to participate were then asked for their availability and the interview was scheduled. All interviews were carried out by a team of five trained research assistants and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

The sample was collected between May 2014 and July 2014. Before the interview, an informed consent form for its recording was asked for and confidentiality was assured. Interviews were conducted at the higher education institution after classes. The interview was, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Twenty-two mothers fulfilling the criteria volunteered to participate. These women were enrolled in master's degree programs of Marketing, Communication Sciences, Tourism, and Education. Their ages ranged from 25 through 47 years old; 8 participants were in an early career stage and 14 in a mid-career stage. Concerning children's age, 19 mothers had children below 10 years and 4 had children above 10 years (Table 1). They were all married, remarried, or living with a partner.

Data collection instrument

The semi-structured interview comprised questions covering a wide range of issues related to the relationship between work, family, and school: description of tasks and schedule at the workplace and at home; task and time management at workplace, home, and school; strategies and forms of support to accommodate school, work, and family demands; experiences of interrole conflicts and impacts on family life.

Data analysis

This research was conducted as an exploratory qualitative study in order to gain a deeper understanding of Portuguese working mothers enrolled in a master's degree process of combining school with work and family roles. Therefore, thematic

Table 1. Participant demographics.

No.	Pseudonyms	Age	Children's age	Partner status	Occupation	Career stage
1	Maria	25	2	Common law	Office assistant	Early career
2	Joana	26	3	Married	Sales representative	Early career
3	Vera	27	2, 2 (twins)	Married	Office assistant	Early career
4	Margarida	28	2, 4	Married	Account	Early career
5	Ana	28	3	Married	Marketing assistant	Early career
6	Daniela	29	5	Married	Marketeer	Early career
7	Susana	33	4, 7	Common law	Teacher	Early career
8	Marta	32	7, 11	Married	Tourism assistant	Early career
9	Mariana	47	7	Common law	Office assistant	Mid-career
10	Carmo	43	4, 6	Married	Head of Sales	Mid-career
11	Lucia	45	9	Married	Office assistant	Mid-career
12	Sara	41	7, 9	Married	Sales representative	Mid-career
13	Filipa	47	14, 16	Common law	Teacher	Mid-career
14	Rita	43	6, 8	Married	Sales force	Mid-career
15	Inês	40	5	Married	HR assistant	Mid-career
16	Catarina	42	8, 12	Married	Business	Mid-career
17	Cátia	42	14	Remarried	Secretary	Mid-career
18	Diana	39	3, 5	Married	Account	Mid-career
19	Raquel	38	4	Married	Marketeer	Mid-career
20	Vânia	36	5	Married	Account	Mid-career
21	Silvia	36	4, 6	Married	PR Assistant	Mid-career
22	Teresa	35	2, 8	Married	Marketing team leader	Mid-career

analysis was considered a methodology appropriated to explore how working student mothers make sense of their personal experiences of combining multiple roles. Thematic analyses also has the advantage of highlighting similarities and differences across the data, is especially useful to summarize key features of a large body of data, and is also able to generate unanticipated topics (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Assuming that individuals create and analyze their personal life experiences through a social interactive process of meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an inductive process was used, allowing the themes to emerge from the semantic themes expressed by the participants. Thus, the phases of the thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases: (1) getting familiar

with the data, (2) creating codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) naming and defining themes, and (6) generating a written report. The interviews were verbatim transcribed. Using an inductive process of the transcribed interviews, dominant codes and themes in the working student mothers' transcripts were identified: (i) interrole conflicts and directions of conflicts and (ii) strategies and forms of support used to cope with work, family, and school roles.

Results

The experience of interrole conflicts and the prevalence of school-to-family and school-to-work conflicts

All interviewees acknowledge they had experienced, at least once, some type of conflict among school, work and family. School-to-family and school-to-work were the most cited types of conflict. The following comments depict this:

I felt I need to enroll in the master's degree to get the expertise I need for the challenges I am facing at the workplace. I cannot escape to be updated otherwise my job could be at stake. My family knows how important this master's degree is to secure my job. But, yes, they complain a lot. I feel sorry for that. I often think that I am missing something at home. That is what really bothers me. (Vânia).

Another participant remarked:

I feel that I am always in a rush. Work, kids and now, evening and weekend classes, assignments, and all that is required for the program. I feel busy all the time. And, I must say that sometimes I have troubles to accomplish all the work that I have to do. I cannot spend the evenings and weekends with professional tasks, anymore. Now, if I have time to do them during the workday it is ok, otherwise I have to do it the next day. Working at home now is only for the assignments and readings for the program. And the time left during the weekends is for my family. The master's degree is costing me a lot of time and energy but my only choice, for now, it to be more focused at work. And, to be honest, I feel that now I am less productive at my work than I was before. (Rita)

Another important finding concerns some differences between early career and mid-career women in the reported school-to-family conflicts. Early career working student mothers state they assume, in most of the cases, much of the responsibility to care for their family and children. This gives them a sense of burden and potential interrole conflicts between school demands and family demands, especially because they feel that they cannot fail with their professional responsibilities, as well.

The first thing that crossed my mind when I got accepted in the program was that I cannot fail at work, otherwise my investment in education will not be rewarded as planned. I talked with my husband and he promised to give me an extra hand with the baby when I have to do my course work. So far he is doing his best to help me but,

quite often he is too busy too. From time to time it is complicated to juggle everything. And I often feel worn-out. (Margarida)

In fact, among the interviewees, there was a general feeling about the importance of “being a good professional”, despite school demands. However, when the spheres collide the preference is to fulfill family obligations. The following comment depicts this strategy:

I made the decision that if I have to travel due to my work I only do that once a month. I am aware that this could give me some troubles with my career, since I am not always available as I was before. I might pay the price of this choice in the future but I have a baby and she is first. And I really want to do the master. If there is no flexibility at work you have to settle limits. At school if I fail one or two courses I really do not care. I can do it again later this year. It was my choice to enroll in the master’s degree and I was pretty sure that it was going to be hard to combine everything. But my baby is first. (Ana)

Support to combine work and family with school

Support from the partner. The interviews showed that early career and mid-career working student mothers experience their partners’ support differently. Early career women report that their partners are also busy, so they act as a “helping hand” to manage childcare and household.

My partner often gets home later than I do. His job is really demanding in terms of schedules. There is no way I can ask him for more help at home. (Teresa)

On the other hand, partners of mid-career working student mothers seem to be supportive and involved with household tasks and childcare, when compared with the early career ones.

A mid-career participant states:

My kids need help for home work quite often and I am the one who is there for them. Now, that I am in the master’s degree program I have less time for them but, so far, they understand. And they know that the life of a teacher is not easy, nowadays. I cannot postpone the work that has to be done for my students and they know that well. Also, my husband is a very understanding person and he never complains if the dinner is later than it was supposed to be. (Filipa)

And, as summarized by another mid-career participant:

My husband understands that taking the master’s degree is important for me. It is something that I have been postponing for a while and now that I have a fixed contract

it was time to make this dream come true. Since I enrolled in this program my husband is the one who runs the house. I will owe this once I am done with the program. (Lúcia)

Peer support

Peer support comes exclusively from the master's degree program colleagues, and participants refer to it as essential for being able to succeed at the master's degree program as well as to succeed in keeping it all balanced.

My schedule is more predictable than my husbands' since I am a special education teacher. I have meetings with parents and other teachers but they are planned in advance. I am often busy at home, after dinner but, at least, I get some of my unfinished work done. School work is also part of that. I get together with my master's degree colleagues on Skype and we work as a team. They have been very supportive—I have been quite lucky with the team partners for school assignments. (Susana)

Another respondent says:

I need help all the time for the assignments and team work at university. I finished the two courses with good grades. It wasn't too difficult for me because I have very good colleagues at the university. Otherwise, I could not make it. I cannot reduce my investments in work, because you always have to prove that you are a good professional. And I have a baby that needs me. My colleagues at the university are the ones that make it happen. (Vânia)

Another response reinforces this support, by clarifying the way tasks are handled among university peers.

I returned to university after being out of school for many years. My younger colleagues have been quite generous in providing me with the help that I need to better cope with technology. When we have team work to prepare we split the tasks in the group: I summarize the ideas and do a lot of writing and they prepare presentations. So far it works well with their help. (Filipa)

Lack of workplace support. As far as workplace support is concerned, findings suggest that working student mothers who are competing to climb the career ladder (early career) feel that they are in a weaker position to request for workplace support, when compared to their colleagues who have a more secure professional contract. Mid-career women, however, are also skeptical about the workplace support they get. The following statements summarize these perceptions.

If I request extra-time at work for the university I know that someone will tell me that it was my choice to enroll in the master's degree program. And I am working on a temporary contract base. (Daniela)

I knew that it was going to be hard to enroll in the master's degree program but it is required to keep my job. And I have literally no support in my workplace. People compete all the time. (Inês)

As working student mothers face challenges related to combine university enrollment with work-family balance, the first area of analysis is related to the interrole conflicts. Several types of interrole conflicts emerged, highlighting the prevalence of school-to-family and school-to-work conflicts. Although these working student mothers faced specific challenges, they were still studying. Thus, an examination of available and utilised forms of support to facilitate the integration of school and work-family balance was the second area of analysis. Themes that emerged included support received from the partner and school peers, and feelings of lack of organizational support from the workplace.

Discussion

This study explored working student mothers' experiences of juggling work, family, and school roles as a consequence of the enrollment in a master's degree program. The results provide an important perspective on how working student mothers, in different career stages, balance their highly demanding roles as students, mothers, and professionals.

A major result, taking into consideration the characteristics of the sample, is the prevalence of school-to-family and school-to-work tensions that seem to happen quite frequently. Although this result is in line with previous research, it highlights the importance of having a deeper understanding of the impacts of adding an extra role, the student role, to the other work and family roles, which has been absent from previous research (Sweet & Moen, 2007; van Rhijn, Smit Quosai, & Lero, 2011). In fact, previous literature already showed how demanding it is for Portuguese women to cope with work and family responsibilities in a context of scarce formal support. Our findings show how this challenging and demanding situation is exacerbated for female working student mothers, who add an extra role to an already weak work-family balance. In line with this, it is the student role that adds complexity to the multiple roles juggling process by implying the devotion of time and energy both to professional and family life.

Another important set of findings is related to the importance of different types of support in reducing interrole tensions, as suggested by Voydanoff's model (2008). Support from the partner and from the university peers was positively associated with better fulfillment of school tasks, both for early and mid-career women. This result is in line with Van Stone et al. (1994) findings that support from peers and family influenced academic success of single-mother students. Even though our sample does not share the same demographic characteristics of Van Stone et al.'s (1994) study, there are some commonalities related to the importance of peers for a successful integration of the student role with other roles, like being a mother. In both studies, this resource is crucial to better accommodate the

demands of school and family life. Life-course differences were also visible in regard to career stages, as early career working student mothers tended to rely more on peer support while mid-career women rely more often on their partners' support. An explanation for this finding is perhaps the career stage of the partner. As partners' assortative mating research has established (Bianchi, 2011), early career women are more likely to be partnered with early career men who are also striving to establish themselves at work. Indeed, early career women more often mentioned that their partners were not available to make more time investment in the family due, precisely, to their demanding professional activities and careers.

A troublesome, though not surprising, result was the fact that workplace support was not reported as an available resource. Indeed, workplace support for personal and familial issues is often scarce and usually is perceived as entailing veiled repercussions to women's careers. Our participants clearly stated that enrolling in a university program was not compatible with using employees' benefits, and in the face of competing interests, professional life should be preserved at all costs, especially in a time when jobs are scarce. Again, this finding aligns with previous results concerning the balance of just the two roles: work and family. In fact, cutting back on work responsibilities is the least preferred strategy for women (and men alike), and women use more than men all available resources (family and partner support as well as own skills of planning and management; Matias & Fontaine, 2012). The lack of support from the workplace to the work–family–study balance also suggests a devaluation of investing in human resources by organizations.

Taken together, our results clearly show the integration of school with work and family life to be challenging for women in both career stages. For the early career working student mothers, the challenges derive mainly from the need of caring for young and more dependent children and from the high demands of jobs due to the constraints of a competitive labor market (Eby et al., 2005). With a lack of workplace support and busy partners, support from peers at school seems to be the key to better cope with school demands for this group. For mid-career working student mothers, their children are older and therefore more autonomous, and their partners are also more available as a source of support. This group of women has been away from the educational system for longer periods when compared to the early career working student mothers. Thus, for this group, the challenge of combining school with work and family roles comes from the need to “catch up” with new training methodologies and with new technologies. Again, the support from school peers is a highly valued resource to integrate all roles.

This study sheds light about the importance of having a better understanding about the sources and types of tensions that can arise for women who are professionals, parents and enrolled in a master's degree program. It also clarified the type of support in this process and its usefulness to buffer or diminish some of these tensions.

Conclusion

Although the present study has produced interesting results, including those arising from the importance of family and peer support in order to cope with school and work–family balance, the implications to be derived should be cautious. A larger and more diverse sample of working student mothers (e.g. working part time, single mothers) is needed to have a more complete understanding of the needs and struggles of this population. Despite these limitations, we found peer support to be striking in easing multiple roles balance. This finding draws our attention to the need for interventions that promote this type of support in university settings with the aim of reducing the challenges faced by this group of female students. Increasing and widening participation in graduate program education is an important goal for Portuguese higher educational policies (Amaral & Magalhães, 2009; Amorim et al., 2010). This involves attracting a population of prospective students who are professionals and who often have family demands. This research suggests that adding school to work and family responsibilities can be particularly challenging for Portuguese women. Managing multiple roles can have detrimental effects for the individuals, and effective peer support appears to be a key factor facilitating the integration of school and other roles. Our findings suggest that work environments can take some steps to implement practices that can be used by working student parents to help mitigate some of the tensions that arise from the combination of school with work. The fact that workplace support was absent from our interviewees' discourses also points to the need of raising awareness in human resource departments of the benefits of having a more skilled work force and the need to reduce the difficulties faced by these mothers who work and study.

Future studies should address this issue in order to have a more complete picture about how work environments can not only support the needs of working women who are investing in new skills but also to have a deeper understanding about the importance of graduate school in women's career paths.

From the graduate school perspective, it is also important to acknowledge that despite the intention of Portuguese higher education institutions to attract and widen their graduate school programs audiences, like the professionals, quite often the demands related to the teaching–learning processes do not completely fit the needs of this population (e.g. assessment system including exams and team work assignments, heavy class-work schedules, short deadlines). Graduate school experience could benefit from making more use of students' employment experiences in class and adding more teaching methodologies and making the assessment systems more flexible in order to accommodate the educational needs of these professionals.

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Note

1. We use the term school in order to designate Higher Education.

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