Alberta Journal of Educational Research, Vol. 68.3, Fall 2022, 340-356

Exploring the Personal and Professional Realities of Parenthood and Graduate Studies[1]

Melissa Corrente

Nipissing University

This qualitative study using narrative inquiry as methodology explores the ways in which five parents experienced the phenomenon of graduate studies within the context of parenthood. The study uses Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space to examine, deconstruct, analyze, and gain insight into dominant themes. The research question for exploration is How do graduate student parents navigate lived experiences in both parenthood and graduate studies? The inquiry broadens the field by focusing on the stories of participants as they reflect on their struggles balancing graduate work with parenthood, recognizing that although the experiences of parents are not identical, they share similar elements.

Cette étude qualitative utilise l'enquête narrative comme méthodologie et explore les façons dont cinq parents ont vécu le phénomène des études supérieures dans le contexte de la parentalité. L'étude utilise l'espace tridimensionnel d'enquête narrative de Connelly et Clandinin (2006) pour examiner, déconstruire, analyser et comprendre les thèmes dominants. La question de recherche à explorer est la suivante : comment les parents aux études supérieures composent-ils à la fois avec leurs expériences de parents et d'étudiants ? L'enquête élargit le champ d'investigation en se concentrant sur les récits des participants qui réfléchissent à leurs difficultés à concilier études supérieures et parentalité, en reconnaissant que si les expériences des parents ne sont pas identiques, elles partagent des éléments similaires.

Few institutions are tracking the size of the student-parent population and there is little solid data at the provincial or national levels. A 2013 report by Quebec's Conseil superieur de l'education places the number of student parents at approximately 25 percent (Gouvernement du Quebec). Diverse views of the graduate student parent experience exist in the literature, and gender affects how men and women handle parenthood and graduate school. Some studies determine that academia and parenthood do not merge well (Castle & Woloshyn, 2003; Churchill, 2011; McAlister, 2008), with others describing how parenthood expands the self (Baker Sipes, 2010; Carver, 2005; Laney et al., 2014; Pillay, 2009). Yet other literature discusses the guilt and challenges associated with being a parent, specifically (or "particularly") as a mother, in academia (Fothergill & Feltey, 2003; Gilbert, 2008; Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009; Home, 1998; Vancour, 2005). Graduate student fathers, as will become evident, are largely underrepresented in the literature (Reddick et al., 2012; Sallee, 2012, 2014). Literature discussing the academic pursuit of

 © 2022 The Governors of the University of Alberta

tenure and working in academia is included and relevant because becoming a university professor remains one of the main reasons for pursing doctoral studies in Canada (Desjardins, 2012).

The experience of graduate studies while parenting is complex, delicate, and characterized by negotiation and flexibility, challenges, gendered experiences, and the creation of narratives of hope and possibility. The literature is filled with such formulations and narrative accounts, many of which discuss the need for continual negotiation and flexibility: *Papa PhD* by Marotte et al., (2011), Irvine (2011), *Mama PhD* by Evans and Grant (2008), Gruner (2008), *The Parent Track* by DeRoche and Berger (2017), Barker (2017), Long (2017), Eisenbach (2013) and Brooks (2013). The flexibility afforded by academia is discussed as both a positive and negative. Positive flexibility allows parents to prioritize what needs to be done (Campbell, 2011; Long, 2017; Reeve, 2011). Negative flexibility, however, has the potential to interfere with home life such as when a new research project or opportunity to travel arises (Brookfield, 2017; Osteen, 2011; Wells, 2011). Academia and parenthood do not merge well due to university course scheduling and the lack of childcare beyond the traditional workday. Academic women are forced to examine the tensions in their roles as ideal worker and "good mother" (Middleton, 2005, p. 73), especially in some academic fields where "traditional gender norms still prevail" (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012, p. 104).

Graduate student parents have taken up the call to pursue graduate studies and raise children simultaneously. At times, they will find themselves in situations where the demands of graduate school and parenting compete. A substantial amount of literature highlights the sacrifices parents had to make such as negotiating pregnancy, health issues, and career progression (Augspurger, 2011; Berger, 2017; Careless, 2017; Irvine, 2011; Milmine, 2017; Sutherland, 2008) along with recommendations to make universities more family-friendly. Family-friendly university strategies include paid parental leave, childcare support, health insurance for dependents, mentoring, and faculty and graduate student training and support (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; O'Connor, 2009; Springer et al., 2009; Williams, 2007). Cultural changes to re-envision academia include offering dignified part-time positions, campus-wide conferences to support work-life balance, building networks of graduate students, and more flexible career paths (Mason et al., 2009; Peterson Brus, 2006; Sanders, 2008; Sotirin, 2008). The remaining literature recounts the guilt and challenges that come with being a parent, specifically a mother, in academia (Fothergill & Feltey, 2003; Gilbert, 2008; Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009; Home, 1998; Vancour, 2005). The negative aspects of being a graduate student parent include inner conflicts, the chilly academic climate, work-life balance issues, and the sacrifices involved (Gardner, 2008; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Mason et al., 2009; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Peterson Brus, 2006; Springer et al., 2009; Williams, 2007).

The gendered nature of higher education can be traced back to these early origins where, in some institutions, male students were encouraged to study languages, and women were released from study to do the male students' laundry (Parker, 2015). "At the turn of this century, Canadian higher education was predominantly, although not exclusively, the preserve of upper class, Anglo-Canadian males" (Guppy, 1984, p. 79), making the history of Canadian higher education institutions not a whole lot different than our American counterparts. The gendered experience of academic mothering is prevalent in the research literature (Careless, 2012; Castle & Woloshyn, 2003; Mills, 2008; Sallee, 2013; Sotirin, 2008). Social, cultural, and physical differences are discussed alongside tensions of care and career (Aubrey et al., 2008; Sotirin, 2008). Parenthood offers different challenges, roles, and sources of support for mothers and fathers; it is important to listen and discuss both experiences with understanding and compassion (Doucet, 2006;

Steinberg, 2005). Gender equality has come a long way, especially in the areas of pay, employment opportunities, and access to education. Universities have the opportunity to change traditional gender norms on campus and beyond, which starts with dialogue and continues with action. There is still work to be done to drive gender equality on university campus, including equal representation of women in senior leadership roles.

Research documenting the experiences of faculty fathers is limited (Reddick et al., 2012; Sallee, 2012, 2014), perhaps because traditional gender norms remain entrenched in the structure and culture of universities. “Men are generally praised when they are involved parents, yet simultaneously penalized if they prioritize family over work” (Sallee, 2014). The impact of gender in graduate studies is a prominent theme. Conflicts and challenges for women in doctoral studies include timing, tension between work and home responsibilities, and the logistical challenges of attending conferences (Brown & Watson, 2010; Carter et al., 2013; Cohenmiller, 2014; Crabb & Ekberg, 2014; Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006; Medina, 2007; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Murphy & Cloutier-Fisher, 2002; Myers, 1996; Wall, 2008). It is possible that the gendered experience that academics see in contemporary research is an academic inheritance that exists alongside women’s ongoing quest for gender equality and balance in the workplace and home.

Narratives of hope and possibility demonstrate the power to learn from experiences. The ability to reconceptualise the experience of parenting within the context of graduate school provides an opportunity for improvement and expansion. Despite the numerous challenges, compromises, and incompatibilities of combining parenthood and academia, graduate student parenting is indeed attainable with a balance of positive role models, effective time management skills, and quality childcare (Connelly & Ghodsee, 2014; Mason & Mason Ekman, 2008; Seth, 2014; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Many studies state that motherhood expands the self and is a positive partnership (Baker Sipes, 2010; Carver, 2005; Laney et al., 2014; Pillay, 2009). “Maybe the appearance of babies on campus brings out the human in humanities” (Carver, 2005, p. 85). Laney et al. (2014) found that having children expands the self personally, relationally, generationally, and vocationally; “motherhood allowed the women to develop greater capacities within themselves and these capacities were extended to others in relationships and through the women’s careers” (p. 1245). Exploring the reciprocal benefits and keys to success in graduate student parenting complements the existing literature; the more stories gathered and heard, the closer graduate student parents get to a sense of being connected to something that is larger than their own experience, the more graduate student parents come to understand their own experiences within the larger context of graduate school.

Research Design

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Nipissing University’s Research Ethics Board. As a research methodology, narrative inquiry focuses on participants’ lived experience and the stories told and retold about those experiences in an effort to make meaning. As in other qualitative methodologies, the number of participants is not the point; rather, the shared experience of individuals is the focus, thus adding to the body of literature on the topic under study across time. Clandinin and Connelly’s (2006) three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework was utilized to support the interpretations and explanations of each graduate student’s experience. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2006) temporality, sociality and place work together to highlight the relational aspect that researchers and participants take together.

Purposeful sampling was utilized which eventually led to snowball sampling (Clandinin &

Connelly, 1991, 1994, 2000) as more graduate student parents heard about the research study and wanted to share their stories. The search commenced with recruiting colleagues and then an electronic recruitment invitation was sent to the graduate departments of two universities and posted on a university graduate student Facebook group. Sixteen graduate student parents, ranging in age from 28–46, responded to the recruitment notice; they represented five publicly-funded universities, four of which were in Canada. Not wanting to deny any interested graduate student parents the opportunity to share their story, all sixteen participants were interviewed twice.

Stories and data were gathered using an entry survey, conversational interviews, a research journal, and email correspondence (Brown & Watson, 2010; Careless, 2012; Laney et al., 2014). Data collection methods were designed to clarify and form a deeper understanding of words, thoughts, perspectives, and experiences. Charts were created from the interview data to assist in compiling general themes that existed across the majority of participants' stories. This comparative work revealed a smaller group of participants who identified feelings, experiences or sentiment that captured what the majority of graduate student parents said.

My original intention was to write 16 full narratives; however, it was deemed too overwhelming for the reader and would have led to limited depth. I returned to the interview data and created charts to assist me in compiling general themes that existed across the majority of participants' stories. As I engaged in this comparative work, I found a smaller group of participants who identified feelings, experiences, or sentiment that captured what the majority of graduate student parents said. Ultimately, the voices of five participants (Daniel, Bree, Ashley, Sloane and Bob) effectively captured themes and perspectives shared by the entire group, and it is with these five participants that I further engaged the process of narrative inquiry. Details regarding each participant, including their pseudonyms, ages, status in the program, number and age of children, marital status, and work status are included in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant's name, age (years)	Status in program	Number & age of children	Marital status	Work status	Frequency and type of contact
Daniel (32)	2018—Year 1 PhD student (full-time)	One: age 5	married	part-time	2 video Skype interviews (30 min.); 6 follow-up emails
Bree (29)	2018—Year 3 PhD candidate (full-time)	One: age 7	common-law	part-time	2 video Skype interviews (35 min. & 25 min.); 6 follow-up emails
Sloane (46)	2018—Year 7 PhD candidate (full-time)	One: age 12	married	full-time	3 phone interviews (40 min., 25 min., & 25 min.); 1 follow-up email
Bob (47)	2018—Year 10 PhD candidate (part-time)	Two: ages 10 & 13	married	full-time	3 phone interviews (45 min., 30 min., & 40 min.)
Ashley (42)	2018—Year 4 MEd student (full-time)	One: teenager	single parent	part-time	1 follow-up email; 2 phone interviews (40 min. & 35 min.); 3 follow-up emails

Narrative inquiry is a methodology which takes place in relationship between people where the researcher honours the participant as a co-composer (Clandinin, 2013). Co-composing is relational work that is negotiated throughout each phase of the inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a journey both researcher and participants take together. Narrative inquiry spaces are "spaces of belonging for both researchers and participants—spaces that are marked always by ethics and attitudes of openness, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and care" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 200). As a researcher, I was intentional about an ethical attitude of relationship and responsibility throughout the research process.

Coding for patterns helped solidify observations into meaningful themes and confirmed the "descriptions of people's Five Rs: routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships" (Saldana, 2015, p. 6). After determining that participants' stories were closely aligned with Clandinin and Connelly's (2006) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, participants' stories were underlined using different colours: the commonplace of temporality was yellow, sociality was pink, and place was blue. The patterns and themes uncovered during the first set of interviews influenced some of the follow-up questions utilized during the second set of interviews. Themes were established by revisiting each participant's stories and cross-referencing words and phrases that were common across multiple graduate student parents. As themes and tensions emerged from the stories, I provided graduate student parents with multiple opportunities to member check and ensure that their voice was accurately and authentically reflected (Patsiopoulos & Buchanan, 2011).

There are many ways of knowing and understanding experience. My desire to understand the experiences of graduate student parents rather than predict or control what I thought they might say is why I was drawn to narrative inquiry. My findings were established through authenticity, resonance, and trustworthiness (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), which was accomplished by highlighting the contextual nature of graduate student parents' experiences and focusing on their struggles, successes, motivations, barriers, and supports. I did not seek to put a broken mirror back together; my goal was to tell the story of each piece on the floor (Downey & Clandinin, 2010). I was open to the fact that my participants had alternative views and alternative ways of coming to know. Narrative research has an interpretive quality that nurtures reflection and re-storying for everyone involved (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991).

Results

Three cross-participant themes emerged from the data; these include the need for identity, the need for self-efficacy, and the need for support systems.

The Need for Identity

The continual push and pull of balancing being a learner and being a role model for children poses the greatest challenge to the graduate student parent identity. Even though graduate student parents are following their dreams, engaging in lifelong learning, and demonstrating that hard work and persistence pay off, they may also be unintentionally modelling the disconnect that often takes place when scholarly expectations and demands force them to compartmentalize, minimize connections, privilege one role over the other, or even battle intense feelings of "not being good enough." Sloane mentioned not being fully present during conversations with her daughter because she was thinking about her research. She shared how her identity as a graduate student

affected her experience at work and her identity as a parent and wife. Sloane struggled to separate her personal and professional identity as evidenced by this statement: “I feel my sense of identity around the PhD also impacts my research and my work because they are so closely intertwined.”

The way in which participants negotiated the dual identity of graduate student and parent was individualized, and there did not appear to be one solution that worked for all. Each graduate student parent’s identity was reflective of their unique strengths, assumptions, and prior experiences that were shaped and developed over time; the multiple contexts in which their work and home life took place; and the relationships they cultivated with their children, families, and supervisory committees. Temporality was evident in the quick shifts and flexibility that allowed participants to compartmentalize their lives and roles, based on what they felt was needed in different places or contexts. In Bree’s first interview, for example, she felt positive about her ability to balance graduate school and parenting. Referring to how parenting has impacted her academic journey, she replied, “The things I do get involved with are flexible so I don’t think my graduate studies have necessarily impacted my parenting.” Upon reflection, however, she realized the challenges of being a graduate student parent were left out of the conversation. Bree’s level of comfort changed over time as a result of the relationship that started to develop as evidenced by this example: “I think it’s great that you’re doing more than one interview because I think that interview really caught me on a good day but didn’t reveal the full picture of my experience.”

Fathers appeared to have an easier time segmenting their identities, depending on the context, which often resulted in them being freer to work and focus on the task at hand; granted they did share in the parenting responsibilities, they were also more adept at not allowing their parenting identity to interfere with their workday. Bob shared his belief that parenting and graduate school are philosophically connected in terms of their notions of learning and growing, however, he reflected that they are not conducive to one another. Balancing continuous and changing identities seemed to be more difficult for graduate student mothers, who reported having a more challenging time separating their graduate responsibilities from their family responsibilities. Ashley referred to juggling as an analogy to explain how parenting influenced her academic journey. Ashley’s narrative example of balancing continuous and changing identities may suggest that higher education, particularly graduate school, continues to hold gendered policies and practices: “It is a lot of juggling knives because I know if I don’t catch something right it is going to bite hard.”

Many participants experienced recurrent self-doubt as each new stage of the doctoral journey presented a new set of expectations and challenges. Perhaps the self-doubt was generated by the pressures and competition implicit in the academic. Ashley pointed out how the financial burden of being a graduate student parent often affected her ability to balance all of her part-time jobs to pay for everything. She shared that, “You can get $1000 bursaries throughout your tenure as a Masters student and it is mainly based on financial need but you do have to be a hard-working student in order to qualify.” Ashley’s story further revealed the need to differentiate graduate student financial support based on socio-economic background, race, gender, and ethnicity.

The Need for Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual’s belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977). Negotiating time and space is a common experience in graduate school. As graduate student parents worked towards achieving their goals, they attempted to balance personal and familial well-being, manage and protect time,

confront procrastination, compartmentalize, and interweave roles as they faced the many opportunities that day-to-day life offers.

Just as negotiating the dual identity of graduate student and parent is highly individualized, so too are practices that develop and enhance self-efficacy as a graduate student parent. Participants' beliefs in their ability to successfully complete their degree and their strategies, experiences, and strengths varied throughout their degree journey (temporality); the various contexts within which their graduate work took place and the resources available to them (place); and the associated feelings, hopes, and desires they experienced (sociality).

Priorities during graduate school shifted, requiring graduate student parents to make decisions of how best to use their time in order to accomplish what needed doing. Participants demonstrated how they took control of their studies and how they utilized flexibility and negotiation to restore balance in their lives. Sloane reported other priorities becoming important in her life, such as walking and doing yoga after she finished editing her dissertation. Revisiting her sense of well-being throughout this journey, Sloane said, "It is inconsistent, sometimes I feel more solid in myself than other times." Sloane's narrative illustrates the cyclical and continuous nature of identity.

Participants who came to understand that short-term stress was often necessary for longer-term gains experienced higher self-efficacy; for example, Daniel willingly worked later and longer to complete abstracts for a journal, recognizing that not only did this build his curriculum vitae, but it also achieved the goal of looking good in various contexts. In his experience, Daniel observed, "This week I submitted my first collaborative paper to a journal for consideration and started an abstract for another call for papers that's due next week." Extra task completion demonstrates Daniel's ability to see beyond graduate school.

Participants who felt comfortable and supported in their space were better equipped emotionally, which gave them greater confidence and self-efficacy while completing graduate work. This may suggest that participants were able to focus on tasks that required concentrated effort because they were able to release some responsibility such as childcare to others. Sloane divulged that her biggest challenge was often due to the different perceptions and expectations of men and women in the workplace. In her experience, Sloane's statement reveals and highlights the traditional gender roles that persist today: "If a Dad needs to pick up a kid from childcare he is amazing but if a Mom is five minutes late for childcare, she is crass."

Sociality offers insights into participants' relationships with noble procrastination and the pressure graduate student parents felt to say yes to every opportunity that arose. What graduate student parents believe about themselves can affect task choice and the level of effort put forth. Participants who reported high self-efficacy tended to procrastinate less. Daniel and Bree viewed graduate student opportunities paradoxically, as both extras and expectations, because they realized that academia is characterized typically by a publish or perish approach. Bree and Daniel expressed a strong desire to work in academia; they reported feeling some pressure to say yes to the extra opportunities offered. Exploring her need to say yes to everything, demonstrating her belief in the importance of extra opportunities, while simultaneously recognizing how easily graduate school-related tasks can be sidetracked, Bree explained, "We say yes to things because it might look good on our CVs."

Protecting time and compartmentalizing roles became strategies utilized by most graduate student parents to keep the momentum of their studies moving forward. Participants who were not pursuing their degree for professional gain felt differently about the strategies they utilized; for example, Bob did not protect time to work on his PhD because he did not want to shortchange

his kids in the process. Believing family comes first, he emphasized, “I never wanted to go through this and feel like in any way I short changed my kids on account of my own pursuit.” Bob’s example of putting family first may be connected to his part-time status in the program. His degree did not stand to benefit him financially or professionally which affected his timeline.

The Need for Support

Even though graduate student parents recognized that pursuing graduate school is not an individual endeavour, there often existed a lack of interest and understanding from family members about what graduate studies entailed. Reflecting on her limited familial support, Sloane explained, “My own family are pretty uninterested, I am the only one on either side of my family that has any post-secondary so my Mom doesn’t even understand what I am doing and never asks.”

Realizing that cohort support is a function of time spent together during the degree process, participants were often left searching for individualized support to accommodate what they required at various points throughout their journey. Revisiting the types of supports built into her PhD program, Bree revealed, “Our program has limited supports within our faculty. Your cohort can very much become your support, but it’s like the blind leading the blind.” This statement shows how solidarity is valued in a small program, and how change can be difficult to initiate.

Each graduate student identified different support over time (temporality), what support looked like in various contexts in which their work took place (place), and the changing relationship dynamics they experienced with their children, families, and supervisory committees based on what they felt they needed (sociality). Friends and colleagues were cited as great listeners and provided mutual understanding, particularly other parents in his program as discussed by Daniel. Recognizing the value of talking to others who understand what it means to be a graduate student parent, Daniel stated, “In my group of friends two of us have children so it’s nice to have someone who is experiencing similar struggles between school and parenthood.”

Most participants felt their supervisors were helpful with feedback and questioning. Bob and Ashley felt their institutions and supervisors affected their progress. Their expectations for support and for timelines got in the way and created tension. Ashley explained the complexities of working with a supervisor, particularly when the needs of the student and the supports of the supervisor varied. In her experience, Ashley observed, “I have struggled to get enough volunteers for my study and my current supervisor has not been able to help much at all.” This shows how Ashley placed blame on her supervisor instead of changing her expectations for support. Graduate student parents felt well supported by their cohort during residency requirements however some of these support networks dissipated after the time spent together ended. Reflecting on her graduate school experience Sloane shared, “When I first started the PhD program my cohort was really close but then over the years quite a few people dropped out of the program and people move on and do other things.”

Although participants had access to university campuses for research and writing purposes, most graduate students elected to utilize spaces off campus. Support was reported as periods of uninterrupted time in quiet locations where participants could focus on whatever stage of the journey they were experiencing. Time and place also provided support for participants to meet with colleagues, supervisors, and friends to discuss their progress. Bree built her own support network by meeting other graduate student’s off-campus for social events regardless of whether they were in the same faculty or program. She reflected, “I have noticed a change in my overall

levels of happiness and life satisfaction because of my new friends." Her statement reveals the balance Bree found when she shifted her focus from solely focusing on academic work to creating a network of people.

The relationship between how students view themselves and their identities, their self-efficacy practices, their needs for various types of supports (including people, financial, institutional, etc.), and their expectations is ongoing, reciprocal, positive, and negative. When expectations vary, there is a tendency for graduate student parents to look outward to either what is happening or what they need to do in the world (e.g., working multiple jobs, seeking funding, writing papers, meeting yet another deadline), instead of looking inward at their own personal experience and the meaning they make of that experience. This leaves many students feeling divided and disconnected. Instead of accepting the opportunity to connect inwardly with oneself and one's deepest experience, reformulating as Dewey (1938) would suggest, graduate students often manipulate the circumstances of their lives in an effort solve their problems and the way they are feeling (e.g., travelling overseas, compartmentalizing their identities, settling for the external goal of "good enough"). Instead of looking at the journey through a lens of opportunity and possibility, many graduate students tend to settle in to the widely held beliefs of isolation, perfection, even the slowing of time as negatives.

Implications and Recommendations

The results suggest that participants' need for identity, self-efficacy, and support is individualized and characterized by continual negotiation of time, space, and relationship. To meet the scholarly expectations of graduate school, participants utilized strategies such as compartmentalizing, minimizing connections, and privileging one role over the other. Graduate student parents adjusted their expectations for support, for self, for others, for the committee, and for the institution in order to succeed. In this inquiry, it was evident that graduate students required different support over time in order to achieve short- and long-term goals. Participants spoke about balancing family/personal well-being, managing and protecting time, confronting procrastination, and interweaving roles. Participants who looked at the journey through the lens of opportunity and possibility experienced higher levels of self-efficacy throughout graduate school.

This study underscores the importance of focusing on the need for continuity (Dewey, 1938; Palmer, 2004) between who graduate student parents are, who they think they are, and who they need to be as graduate students and parents (Barker, 2017; Castle & Woloshyn, 2003; DeRoche & Berger, 2017; Hoben, 2017), but even more importantly, as researchers. Researchers who do not know themselves may find it difficult to come to know others. Negotiating graduate studies requires a holistic understanding of self that balances content and process in a way that contributes to the well-being of self, other, and society. For graduate student parents to fully understand their journey, they must first come to terms with the nature of human experience, first their own, then that of their participants. This research may prompt positive social change at the individual/personal, practical/organizational, and social/societal level as discussed below.

Personal Recommendations

At the individual level, this study may inform how graduate student parents approach the dual task of parenting and attending graduate school. What works for one individual may not work for

another; the recommendations are, however, meant to provide a starting point for graduate student parents. Recommendations for graduate student parents pertain to the logistics, information, and expectations of graduate school.

- Trust in the process and utilize parenting skills such as time management, prioritization, planning, problem-solving, communication, negotiation, responsibility and financial management. Being a parent keeps life in perspective and is a continual reminder that graduate school is part of your life's work, not your life.
- Research the context of graduate school. Ensure an institution meets individual and family needs by exploring the opportunities for flexibility built into the program. Graduate school is a choice, a challenge, and an opportunity. Further education has the ability to benefit the entire family because it can lead to better employment opportunities and future stability.
- Establish realistic expectations of parenting and school responsibilities. Some participants mentioned that being an effective role model for their children required them to negotiate their own expectations in order to balance their graduate student identity. Compartmentalizing roles based on what is needed in different places or contexts is one effective strategy for parents to consider.
- Prioritize self-care. Each individual will naturally gravitate toward different self-care practices (e.g. yoga, knitting, cloud watching, unplugging from technology, walking, napping). Sleeping well, exercising regularly, and eating healthy are important strategies to manage any stress that arises.
- Define priorities based on what graduate student parents value. The perfectionism that occasionally accompanies both academic work and parenting influences what can be accomplished in the time allotted for graduate requirements (Salomons, 2017). Engage fully every day and recognize that work-life balance is more a state of mind than a state of life (Black, 2017).

Practical Recommendations

Organizational suggestions for institutions and graduate student parents related to preparedness, logistics, and the challenges faced by graduate student parents are offered.

- Choose a supervisory committee well. Each participant spoke about the importance of choosing a supervisor who was supportive, understanding, and flexible of family and work demands such as bringing children to meetings or providing more time for writing deadlines. Relationships need to be open, honest, and realistic in order for everyone to succeed. Graduate student parents must communicate with their supervisor and committee when family comes first, because one week will not resemble the next.
- Offer on-site childcare spaces. Having a safe space on campus where parents can drop off their children to attend class, study, or teach a course would improve time management and emotional stress. Many institutions offer on-site childcare, but wait lists render it inaccessible when needed. Institutions with limited budgets for parental resources could utilize resources already on campus, such as recruiting education and nursing students to organize workshops or volunteer to run childcare while parents study.
- Develop support systems that reflect the unique profiles and needs of graduate student

parents. Recognizing there is no formula for what supports should look like, institutions could begin by collecting data regarding the number of graduate student parents on campus as a starting point. This would help universities create support systems that reflect their unique needs, for example by creating dedicated lactation spaces on campus or creating a family resource centre.

- Utilize local networking opportunities to expand graduate student parent self-care. Connecting with others and sharing experiences is one way to improve and encourage graduate student parent well-being. Attending and presenting at conferences or graduate student colloquiums expands graduate student parents' social networks and provides the opportunity to meet more people. Ongoing discussion and collaboration may help reduce the social isolation that is often felt during the graduate school process.
- Offer workshops to enhance the graduate experience. Offering workshops early in graduate programs where graduate student parents learn about the process of feedback for improvement in course papers, comprehensive exams, proposals, and the dissertation could add to the understanding of the expectations required when working with professors and supervisors throughout the program. Workshops could detail the options that exist after graduate school to help graduate student parents expand their definition of career success and broaden their scope of future prospects.

Social/Theoretical Recommendations

At the societal level, this study contributes to the discussions of social, cultural, and physical differences found in the literature alongside tensions of care and career (Aubrey et al., 2008; Sotirin, 2008) and addresses issues of equity and social justice with regard to graduate student funding, family-welcoming spaces, and university policies and practices.

- Provide more consistent and equitable access to financial supports. The financial consequences of pursuing graduate studies interfered with participants' attention and time to working on research and writing. The formula to determine who qualifies for funding and how much they receive should be reviewed to ensure that single parents are not overlooked or compared to a student with a reliable family income. Participants discussed the importance of funding equity and advocated for providing opportunities to differentiate financial support based on socio-economic background, race, gender, and ethnicity.
- Develop family-welcoming spaces. The University of Toronto Libraries opened Canada's first academic library family-friendly study space in 2019. The room includes child-sized furniture, toys, and a "take a book, leave a book" library of children's books. Canadian women spend on average 50.1 hours per week on unpaid childcare, compared to 24.4 hours for men (Statistics Canada, 2010). The lack of family-friendly spaces disproportionately impacts women and has a negative effect on equitable access to library resources, services and, research opportunities.
- Challenge policies, practices, and assumptions that are inequitable. Universities have the opportunity to contribute to gender norms on campus and beyond, which starts with dialogue and continues with creating equitable policies and procedures. Graduate students should be offered paid parental leave while still maintaining enrollment status with the opportunity to extend deadlines. Many parents decide to pursue graduate school part-time;

however, funding opportunities are not always equitable for part-time students. Universities should provide need-based financial support for childcare services.

Conclusions

Even though everyone's journey is their own, and there is no specific approach that will work for every graduate student parent, it is the ability to see reality through different eyes that makes the journey worthwhile and meaningful. Connecting with others and knowing you are not alone is powerful and can provide reassurance and advice for those currently enrolled in graduate school or those thinking about applying. As is the case with many narrative studies, my study examined the experience of a small number of participants. Replicated at a later date with a different group of graduate student parents may yield different information and offer possibilities that would extend our understanding of parenting within the context of graduate studies. I identified as a graduate student parent during the research study, so my personal biases as a researcher also impacted data analysis and interpretation.

Future Research

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of graduate student parents, more voices are needed. Focusing on different populations such as same sex parents, grandparents, or the graduate student parents who left graduate school would be beneficial. It is valuable to understand the experiences of those who did or did not complete their degrees and how it has impacted their lives.

Finally, it is possible that the experience of graduate student parents is no different than that of working parents (Berg et al., 2003; Ezra & Deckman, 1996; Milkie et al., 2010; Premeaux et al., 2007). It therefore would be beneficial to compare the experience of graduate school parenting to the experience of working parents to provide important insights for institutions, graduate schools, and graduate school parents.

References

Aubrey, J. S., Click, M. A., Dougherty, D. S., Fine, M. A., Kramer, M. W., Meisenbach, R. J., & Smythe, MJ. (2008). We do babies! The trials, tribulations, and triumphs of pregnancy and parenting in the academy. *Women's Studies in Communication, 31*(2), 186–195. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2008.10162531

Augspurger, M. (2011). Dreaming of direction: Reconciling fatherhood and ambition. In M. Marotte, P. Reynolds, & R. Savarese (Eds.), *Papa PhD: Essays on fatherhood by men in the academy* (pp. 168–175). Rutgers University Press.

Baker Sipes, J. L. (2010). *Juggling toddlers, teens, and tenure: The personal and professional realities of women on the tenure track with children* (Doctoral dissertation). Indiana State University.

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review, 84*(2), 191–215. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191

Barker, J. (2017). Navigating role conflict in pursuit of an academic career: A.k.a. "you will get used to it." In C. DeRoche & E. Berger (Eds.), *The parent track: Timing, balance, and choice in academia* (pp. 203–211). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Berg, P., Kalleberg, A. L., & Appelbaum, E. (2003). Balancing work and family: The role of high-commitment environments. *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy & Society, 42*(2), 168–188.

https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-232X.00286
Berger, E. D. (2017). Work-family balance? A challenging yet rewarding journey through gendered academia. In C. DeRoche & E. Berger (Eds.), *The parent track: Timing, balance, and choice in academia* (pp. 23–27). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
Black, K. (2017). A tale of two roles. In C. DeRoche & E. Berger (Eds.), *The parent track: Timing balance, and choice in academia* (pp. 185–200). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
Brooks, R. (2013). Negotiating time and space for study: Student-parents and familial relationships. *Sociology, 47*(3), 443–459. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038512448565
Brown, L., & Watson, P. (2010). Understanding the experiences of female doctoral students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 34*(3), 385–404. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2010.484056
Campbell, D. G. (2011). Gifts from the sea. In M. Marotte, P. Reynolds, & R. Savarese (Eds.), *Papa PhD: Essays on fatherhood by men in the academy* (pp. 16–25). Rutgers University Press.
Careless, E. J. (2012). Dueling clocks: Mothers on the path to tenure. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, 25*(1), 31–46. https://cjsae.library.dal.ca/index.php/cjsae/article/view/361
Careless, E. J. (2017). Conversations with women: Mothers and academics. In C. DeRoche & E. Berger (Eds.), *The parent track: Timing, balance, and choice in academia* (pp. 31–39). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
Carter, S., Blumenstein, M., & Cook, C. (2013). Different for women? The challenges of doctoral studies. *Teaching in Higher Education, 18*(4), 339–351. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2012.719159
Carver, H. M. (2005). Two truths and a lie: Performing professorhood/motherhood. *Journal of American Folklore, 118*(467), 78–89. https://doi.org/10.1353/jaf.2005.0002
Castle, J. B., & Woloshyn, V. (2003). Motherhood and academia: Learning from our lived experience. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, 5*(2), 35–46. https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/1999
Churchill, M. (2011). Beyond the "company man" model: Rethinking academic administration for work-life balance. *On Campus With Women, 40*(1), 2–4.
Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry: A methodology for studying lived experience. *Research Studies in Music Education, 27*(1), 44–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X060270010301
Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Left Coast Press.
Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1991). Narrative and story in practice and research. In D. Schon (Ed.), *The reflective turn: Studies in reflective practice* (pp. 258–281). Teachers College Press.
Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1994). Personal experience methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 413–427). Sage.
Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Wiley.
Cohenmiller, A. (2014). *The phenomenon of doctoral student motherhood/mothering in academia: Cultural construction, presentation of self, and situated learning* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Texas, San Antonio. https://doi.org/10.13140/2.1.3059.0406
Connelly, R., & Ghodsee, K. (2014). *Professor mommy: Finding work-family balance in academia*. Rowman & Littlefield.
Crabb, S., & Ekberg, S. (2014). Retaining female postgraduates in academia: The role of gender and prospective parenthood. *Higher Education Research & Development, 33*(6), 1099–1112. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2014.911251
Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. CA: Sage.
DeRoche, C., & Berger, E. D. (2017). Introduction. In C. DeRoche & E. D. Berger (Eds.), *The parent track: Timing, balance and choice in academia* (pp. 1–10). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
Desjardins, L. (2012). *Profile and labour market outcomes of doctoral graduates from Ontario universities* (Report No. 098). http://www.heqco.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/LabourMarketOutcomesDoctoral_ENG.pdf

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Simon & Schuster.

Doucet, A. (2006). *Do men mother? Fathering, care, and domestic responsibility*. University of Toronto Press

Downey, C. A., & Clandinin, D. J. (2010). Narrative inquiry as reflective practice: Tensions and possibilities. In N. Lyons (Ed.), *Handbook of reflection and reflective inquiry: Mapping a way of knowing for professional reflective practice* (pp. 285–397). Springer.

Eisenbach, B. (2013). Finding a balance: A narrative inquiry into motherhood and the doctoral process. *Qualitative Report, 18*(34), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2013.1528

Evans, E., & Grant, C. (Eds.). (2008). *Mama PhD: Women write about motherhood and academic life*. Rutgers University Press.

Ezra, M., & Deckman, M. (1996). Balancing work and family responsibilities: Flextime and child care in the federal government. *Public Administrative Review, 56*(2), 174–179. https://doi.org/10.2307/977205

Fothergill, A., & Feltey, K. (2003). "I've worked very hard and slept very little": Mothers on the tenure track in academia. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, 5*(2). 7-19. https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/1995

Gardner, S. K. (2008). Fitting the mold of graduate school: A qualitative study of socialization in doctoral education. *Innovative Higher Education, 33*, 125–138. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-008-9068-x

Gilbert, J. (2008). Why I feel so guilty all the time: Performing academic motherhood. *Women's Studies in Communication, 31*(2), 203–208. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2008.10162533

Gouvernement du Quebec. (2013). *Indicateurs de l'education [Education indicators]*. http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/PSG/statistiques_info_decisionnelle/Indicateurs_educ_2013_webP_A.pdf

Gruner, E. (2008). I am not a head on a stick: On being a teacher and a doctor and a mommy. In E. Evans & C. Grant (Eds.), *Mama PhD: Women write about motherhood and academic life* (pp. 123–128). Rutgers University Press.

Guppy, N. (1984). Access to higher education in Canada. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 14*(3), 79–93. https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v14i3.182946

Hirakata, P. E., & Daniluk, J. C. (2009). Swimming upstream: The experience of academic mothers of young children. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy, 43*(4), 283–294. https://cjc-rcc.ucalgary.ca/article/view/58884

Hoben, J. (2017). A bridge too far? The elephant in the ivory tower. In C. DeRoche & E. Berger (Eds.), *The parent track: Timing, balance, and choice in academia* (pp. 247–256). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Home, A. M. (1998). Predicting role conflict, overload and contagion in adult women university students with families and jobs. *Adult Education Quarterly, 48*(2), 85–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/074171369804800204

Irvine, C. (2011). Pitcher this: An academic dad's award winning attempts to be in two places at once. In M. Marotte, P. Reynolds, & R. Savarese (Eds.), *Papa PhD: Essays on fatherhood by men in the academy* (pp. 207–216). Rutgers University Press.

Jairam, D., & Kahl, D. H. (2012). Navigating the doctoral experience: The role of social support in successful degree completion. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 7*, 311–329. https://doi.org/10.28945/1700

Kurtz-Costes, B., Andrews Helmke, L., & Ulku-Steiner, B. (2006). Gender and doctoral studies: The perceptions of Ph.D. students in an American university. *Gender and Education, 18*(2), 137–155. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250500380513

Laney, E., Carruthers, L., Hall, M., & Anderson, T. (2014). Expanding the self: Motherhood and identity development in faculty women. *Journal of Family Issues, 35*(9), 1227–1251. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X13479573

Long, D. (2017). Hopeful intrusions: Moments as both a dad and a professor. In C. DeRoche & E. Berger (Eds.), *The Parent Track: Timing, balance, and choice in academia* (pp. 233–246). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Marotte, M. R., Martin Reynolds, P., & Savarese, R. J. (2011). *Papa PhD: Essays on fatherhood by men in the academy*. Rutgers University Press.

Mason, M. A., Goulden, M., & Frasch, K. (2009). Why graduate students reject the fast track: A study of thousands of doctoral students show that they want balanced lives. *Academe, 95*(1), 11–16. https://www.aaup.org/article/why-graduate-students-reject-fast-track#.Ys3tMnbMLIU

Mason, M. A., & Mason Ekman, E. (2008). *Mothers on the fast track: How a generation can balance family and careers*. Oxford University Press.

McAlister, J. F. (2008). Lives of the mind/body: Alarming notes on the tenure and biological clocks. *Women's Studies in Communication, 31*(2), 218–225. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2008.10162536

Medina, S. (2007). *The impact of motherhood on the professional lives of counselor education faculty: A phenomenological study* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 304829269)

Middleton, A. (2005). Mothering under duress: Examining the inclusiveness of feminist mothering theory. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, 8*(1), 72–82. https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/5014

Milkie, M. A., Kendig, S. M., Nomaguchi, K. M., & Denny, K. E. (2010). Time with children, children's well-being, and work-family balance among employed parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 72*(5), 1329–1343. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00768.x

Mills, M. B. (2008). Intersections between work and family: When a playpen can be office furniture. *Women's Studies in Communication, 31*(2), 213–217. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2008.10162535

Milmine, S. (2017). Patchwork academia. In C. DeRoche & E. Berger (Eds.), *The parent track: Timing, balance, and choice in academia* (pp. 55–64). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Moreau, M-P., & Kerner, C. (2015). Care in academia: An exploration of student parents' experiences. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 36*(2), 215–233. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.814533

Murphy, B. L., & Cloutier-Fisher, D. (2002). Balancing act: Motherhood and graduate school. *The Great Lakes Geographer, 9*(1), 37–47.

Myers, C. F. (1996). *Writing in the dark: Composition and motherhood* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 304333363)

O'Connor, N. (2009). Envisioning a new parent track in Academia. *On Campus with Women, 37*(3). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A197802549/AONE?u=anon~5f4332d2&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=ab755c70

Osteen, M. (2011). Shared attention: Hearing Cameron's voice. In M. Marotte, P. Reynolds, & R. Savarese (Eds.), *Papa PhD: Essays on fatherhood by men in the academy* (pp. 110–115). Rutgers University Press.

Palmer, P. (2004). *A hidden wholeness: The journey toward an undivided life*. Jossey-Bass.

Parker, P. (2015). The historical role of women in higher education. *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research, 5*(1), 3–14. https://doi.org/10.5929/2015.5.1.1

Patsiopoulos, A., & Buchanan, M. (2011). The practice of self-compassion in counseling: A narrative inquiry. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 42*(4), 301–307. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0024482

Peterson Brus, C. (2006). Seeking balance in graduate school: A realistic expectation of a dangerous dilemma? *New Directions for Student Services, 2006*(115), 31–45. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.214

Pillay, V. (2009). Academic mothers finding rhyme and reason. *Gender and Education, 21*(5), 501–515.

https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250802467927

Premeaux, S. F., Adkins, C. L., & Mossholder, K. W. (2007). Balancing work and family: A field study of multi-dimensional, multi-role work-family conflict. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 28*(6), 705–727. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.439

Reddick, R. J., Rochlen, A. B., Grasso, J. R., Reilly, E. D., & Spikes, D. D. (2012). Academic fathers pursuing tenure: A qualitative study of work-family conflict, coping strategies, and departmental culture. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity, 13*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023206

Reeve, F. D. (2011). The luck of the Irish. In M. Marotte, P. Reynolds, & R. Savarese (Eds.), *Papa PhD: Essays on fatherhood by men in the academy* (pp. 26–28). Rutgers University Press.

Saldana, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Sallee, M. W. (2012). The ideal worker or the ideal father: Organizational structures and culture in the gendered university. *Research in Higher Education, 53*(7), 782–802. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-012-9256-5

Sallee, M. W. (2013). Gender norms and institutional culture: The family-friendly versus the father-friendly university. *The Journal of Higher Education, 84*(3), 363–396. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2013.11777293

Sallee, M. W. (2014). *Faculty fathers: towards a new ideal in the research university*. State University of New York Press.

Salomons, G. (2017). Fatherhood and the PhD: Time management, perfectionism, and the question of value. In C. DeRoche & E. Berger (Eds.), *The parent track, Timing, balance, and choice in academia* (pp. 87–94). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Sanders, J. (2008). In dreams begin possibilities—Or, anybody have time for a change? In E. Evans & C. Grant (Eds.), *Mama PhD: Women write about motherhood and academic life* (pp. 247–250). Rutgers University Press.

Seth, R. (2014). *The mom shift: Women share their stories of career success after having children*. Random House Canada.

Sotirin, P. (2008). Academic momhood: In for the long haul. *Women's Studies in Communication, 31*(2), 258–267. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2008.10162541

Springer, K. W., Parker, B. K., & Leviten-Reid, C. (2009). Making space for graduate student parents: Practice and politics. *Journal of Family Issues, 30*(4), 435–457. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X08329293

Statistics Canada. (2010). Time spent on unpaid care of a child in a household, by working arrangement and age of youngest child, Canada, 2010, table 6 in *Women in Canada: A Gender-Based Statistical Report*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-503-X.

Steinberg, E. (2005). *Your children will raise you: The joys, challenges, and life lessons of motherhood*. Trumpeter Books.

Vancour, M. (2005). *Motherhood ideology, role balance, and health-promoting behaviors of academic mothers* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 305462000)

Wall, S. (2008). Of heads and hearts: Women in doctoral education at a Canadian university. *Women's Studies International Forum, 31*(3), 219–228. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2008.04.007

Ward, K., & Wolf-Wendel, L. (2012). *Academic motherhood: How faculty manage work and family*. Rutgers University Press.

Wells, J. W. (2011). Hair-raising experiences. In M. Marotte, P. Reynolds, & R. Savarese (Eds.), *Papa PhD: Essays on fatherhood by men in the academy* (pp. 34–45). Rutgers University Press.

Williams, S. A. (2007). *Graduate students/mothers negotiating academia and family life: Discourses, experiences and alternatives* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 32601

Note

1. This paper draws on data collected by Melissa Corrente, in completion of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the Schulich School of Education, Nipissing University. Corrente, M. (2020). *Exploring the experience of graduate studies within the context of parenthood*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Nipissing University. https://hdl.handle.net/1807/102548

Melissa Corrente is a Senior Research Associate at the University of Ottawa. She teaches health and physical education courses for the Schulich School of Education at Nipissing University. Her research interests include teacher mental health, healthcare worker burnout, and food literacy for children. Melissa is the mother of two school aged children and is an outdoor enthusiast.