

Narratives of A Mother While Taking Up A Graduate Studies

Juren B. Ampong¹, James L. Paglinawan²

¹Graduate Student, Central Mindanao University

²Faculty, Central Mindanao University

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100400434>

Received: 19 April 2026; Accepted: 24 April 2026; Published: 13 May 2026

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study looks at the real-life stories of fourteen mothers who are taking graduate studies while also caring for their families and working. Using a phenomenological approach, answers were gathered through Google Forms and then studied to find common themes. The results show four main areas: reasons for studying, challenges faced, strategies used, and advice for other mothers. The mothers shared that they study to grow in their careers, improve themselves, and inspire their children. These reasons connect with Knowles' (1980) idea that adult learners are goal-driven and Ryan and Deci's (2000) theory that people are motivated when they feel capable and free to choose. The mothers also talked about struggles with time, tiredness, stress, and money, which match Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) view that stress happens when demands are greater than resources, and Hobfoll's (1989) idea that stress comes when personal energy and support are drained. To cope, they use schedules, set priorities, and ask for family help, which agrees with CohenMiller et al. (2022) and Cantero et al. (2024) who found that organization and support are key for student-mothers. The study concludes that while mothers face many challenges, their strength, discipline, and support systems help them succeed. It also suggests that schools and policymakers should give flexible programs and more support to mothers in graduate studies.

INTRODUCTION

Graduate education is often seen as a way to improve careers and personal growth. For mothers, however, studying at this level is more difficult because they must balance being a parent, a worker, and a student all at the same time. Brown and Lee (2021) explained that many mothers see graduate studies as a way to empower themselves and change their identity, while Andres (2021) pointed out that mothers also study to inspire their children and secure a better future for their families.

The reasons why mothers choose to study are both practical and personal. Some want better jobs, promotions, or financial stability. Others are motivated by their love for learning and their desire to grow as individuals. Knowles (1980) said that adult learners usually have clear goals, while Ryan and Deci (2000) showed that people are more motivated when they feel free to choose and capable of achieving. These ideas help explain why mothers, even with heavy responsibilities, still decide to continue their education.

At the same time, mothers face many challenges. Torres et al. (2025) found that student-mothers often feel guilt and exhaustion when school and family duties overlap. Fatima et al. (2025) also reported that lack of rest, financial problems, and too many responsibilities lead to stress and feelings of inadequacy. These findings connect with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory that stress happens when demands are greater than what a person can handle, and Hobfoll's (1989) idea that stress increases when personal and social resources are used up.

Despite these struggles, mothers find ways to cope. CohenMiller et al. (2022) showed that student-mothers depend on schedules and support systems, while Cantero et al. (2024) found that time management and encouragement from family help them continue. Nomaguchi and Milkie (2022) also highlighted the importance of self-care and institutional support in reducing stress.

This study adds to the growing research on non-traditional students by focusing on Filipino mothers in graduate programs. By looking at their reasons, challenges, coping strategies, and advice, the study shows how mothers manage their complex roles. It also points out the need for schools and families to give more support. In the end, this research highlights the resilience of mothers who pursue graduate education and calls for changes to make programs more flexible and supportive.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives:

This study aims to explore the narratives of a graduate mother and investigate the challenges they encounter in balancing school, work and family. Specifically, the study seek to address the following questions:

1. What made you decide to pursue a master's degree even while being a mother?
2. What challenges do you experience in balancing your time for studies, work, and family?
3. What strategies do you use to manage your responsibilities at home and in school?
4. What are your recommendations for other graduate mothers pursuing graduate studies?

Research Design: A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used to capture the lived experiences of mothers (Creswell, 2013).

Participants: Fourteen mothers currently enrolled in master's programs.

Data Gathering Procedure: Responses were collected using Google Forms, allowing participants to share narratives in their own words.

Ethical Considerations: Informed consent was obtained, confidentiality was ensured, and pseudonyms were used to protect identities.

Data Analysis: Thematic coding was applied to identify recurring themes across responses, focusing on motivations, challenges, strategies, and recommendations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reasons for Pursuing Graduate Studies Despite Motherhood (Emerging Theme: Pursuit of Growth and Opportunity)

The emerging theme on the reasons for pursuing graduate studies despite being a mother revolves around the pursuit of growth and opportunity, encompassing both career advancement and personal development. Both career advancement and professional growth, as well as personal development and passion for learning, converge under the broader idea of seeking growth and opportunity, whether for professional or personal reasons.

Participants' extrinsic motivations (e.g., promotions, earning potential, career mobility) reflect Knowles' (1980) assumption that adult learners are goal-oriented, while intrinsic motivations (e.g., passion for learning, self-improvement) align with Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory regarding autonomy and competence development. "I wanted to improve my knowledge in my field so I can be more effective in my work" (Response 1), while another emphasized, "My decision was influenced by my desire to set a good example for my children" (Response 2). Others highlighted intrinsic motivations, including passion for their field ("My motivation came from my passion for research and teaching"—Response 6) and a desire for self-improvement ("I was motivated by the need for personal growth"—Response 12).

This theme aligns with existing research on adult learners, which indicates that working professionals pursue higher education to enhance employability and adapt to evolving job markets (Smith & Johnson, 2020). The dual focus on career and personal growth reflects the concept of “lifelong learning” (OECD, 2019), where education is seen as both an economic investment and a means of self-actualization. Additionally, the struggle to balance work and studies resonates with studies on work-life balance challenges among graduate students (Brown & Lee, 2021), suggesting that institutions should provide flexible learning options to support student-mothers.

Whether for career progression or personal fulfillment, all responses reflect a shared motivation, leveraging graduate studies as a pathway to growth, opportunity, and self-improvement.

Challenges Faced in School, Work, and Family Life (Emerging Theme: Struggle to Balance Multiple Demands)

The theme identified here is the struggle to balance multiple demands faced by mothers pursuing graduate studies. Time and financial pressures exemplify primary appraisals of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), where participants perceived academic-work demands as threats to limited personal resources (Hobfoll, 1989).

Participants consistently emphasized the difficulty of allocating time effectively. “It is hard to divide my time between school and my children. Sometimes I feel I cannot give enough attention to both” (Response 1). Managing time is difficult, especially with unexpected family needs (Response 13). I also experience fatigue, which affects my focus, and sometimes feel pressure trying to give enough attention to each role.” Another noted, “I experience challenges in balancing my time for studies, work, and family due to overlapping responsibilities, lack of rest, and constant pressure to meet expectations” (Response 13, Response 2).

Financial strain was also evident, with one participant stating, “I need to work to support my family while also paying for my studies” (Response 8). Emotional exhaustion was described as “Balancing roles is exhausting. I try my best, but sometimes I feel I am not doing enough either at home or in school” (Response 12).

Analysis of this theme reveals that the struggle to balance multiple demands is not just a logistical challenge but also a psychological and financial burden. The constant negotiation between priorities leads to stress, burnout, and reduced academic or work performance. This aligns with recent literature, which suggests that student-mothers often experience role conflict, where competing obligations create tension and hinder success (Herman & Marlowe, 2020). Additionally, financial strain has been shown to negatively impact mental health and academic persistence, particularly for non-traditional students (Johnson & Smith, 2021). The emotional toll described by participants further supports findings that graduate students are at higher risk for anxiety and depression due to prolonged stress (Lee & Brown, 2019).

The implications of these findings are significant for institutions, employers, and policymakers. Universities could mitigate these challenges by offering flexible scheduling, financial aid, and mental health support tailored to student-mothers. Employers might consider accommodating academic commitments, such as adjusted workloads or remote work options. On a broader scale, these results call for systemic changes in how graduate education is structured to better support non-traditional learners.

Strategies for Managing Responsibilities (Emerging Theme: Balancing Responsibilities Through Organization and Support)

The theme that emerged from the responses is that mothers successfully manage their dual responsibilities by combining personal organizational strategies with external support systems.

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of time management tools—such as planners, to-do lists, and structured schedules—to prioritize tasks effectively. One mother shared, “I make a daily schedule so I know what to do first. This helps me balance school tasks and housework” (Response 1). Participant 13 explained, “I create a schedule to stay organized, focus on urgent tasks first, and try to avoid distractions. I also ask for help from family when needed and make sure to use my free time wisely to keep up with my studies.”

Another added, “I complete tasks early, break big tasks into smaller ones, and avoid distractions while studying” (P13, Response 2).

Additionally, many relied on support from family, friends, and classmates to maintain motivation and flexibility. Participant 14 emphasized, “I ask for help from family when needed and make sure to use my free time wisely to keep up with my studies.”

This dual strategy aligns with existing research on work-life balance among graduate students. Studies show that effective time management reduces stress and improves academic performance (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2020), while social support mitigates burnout and enhances persistence (DeCastro et al., 2019). The reliance on both self-discipline and external assistance suggests that student-mothers cannot thrive through individual effort alone; institutional flexibility and emotional support networks are equally vital. Without these, students risk burnout or academic disengagement (Watson et al., 2021).

Recommendations for Other Mothers (Emerging Theme: Balancing Responsibilities Through Structure and Well-Being)

The theme identified from the responses highlights the dual necessity of effective time management and self-care for mothers pursuing graduate studies. Participants emphasized structured planning through schedules and prioritization while also stressing the importance of rest, motivation, and seeking support to prevent burnout.

“Always manage your time well. Make a schedule and follow it so you can balance school and family” (Response 1). Another emphasized, “Do not be afraid to rest. Taking care of yourself will help you handle both school and home duties” (Response 3). Participant 14 reinforced this by stating, “I remind myself of my goals and why I started my master’s degree.”

The findings align with recent research showing that graduate students who practice deliberate time management experience lower stress levels (Pekrun et al., 2022). However, without self-care strategies, such as breaks and social support, even well-organized students risk burnout (Salmela-Aro et al., 2021). This implies that universities and employers should promote holistic support systems, including flexible deadlines and mental health resources, to help student-mothers sustain their efforts.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations. First, the number of participants was small (n=14), so the findings cannot represent all mothers in graduate school. Second, the data came only from written answers in Google Forms, which may not capture the full depth of their experiences compared to interviews. Third, the study was done in the Philippine context, so results may differ in other cultural or institutional settings. Finally, only mothers who are currently enrolled were included, not those who stopped or chose not to study.

Even with these limits, the study gives useful insights into the lives of student-mothers and can guide future research to use larger samples, interviews, or cross-cultural comparisons.

CONCLUSION

The narratives of fourteen mothers pursuing master’s degrees reveal a journey marked by struggle, resilience, and transformation. Motivations stem from career aspirations, personal growth, and family inspiration. Challenges include time management, emotional strain, and financial stress, yet strategies such as scheduling, family support, and self-discipline enable success. Their recommendations highlight the importance of balance, support systems, and motivation. This study underscores the need for institutional and policy support to empower mothers in higher education, echoing Torres et al. (2025) and CohenMiller et al. (2022).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Universities should provide flexible schedules, counseling, and childcare services (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2022).

2. Policymakers should design educational policies that recognize the needs of student-mothers (Andres, 2021).
3. Families should offer emotional and practical support to mothers pursuing graduate studies (Cantero et al., 2024).
4. Future Research should explore diverse cultural contexts to enrich understanding of mothers' narratives in higher education (Fatima et al., 2025).

REFERENCES

1. Andres, K. P. (2021). Two Faces of a Mom: Student Mothers' Lived Experiences in a State University. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*, 2(5).
2. Brown, J., & Lee, S. (2021). Empowerment Through Graduate Education: Narratives of Student-Mothers. *Journal of Higher Education Studies*, 45(3), 210–225.
3. Cantero, J. M. E., Tejano, K. G., Abear, M. M. C., Traverro, A. S., Tabigne, N. H., & Pajuyo, E. Jr. (2024). Student Motherhood: A Phenomenological Exploration of State University Students in Claveria, Philippines. *IJMRAP*.
4. Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. Jossey-Bass.
5. CohenMiller, A., Izenkova, Z., & Tabaeva, A. (2022). Graduate Student Mothers and Issues of Justice: Steps, Challenges, and Benefits of a Systematic Review. *The Qualitative Report*, 27(10), 2380–2403.
6. Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Sage Publications.
7. Fatima, H., Masood, S., Ishaque, B., & Paul, I. A. (2025). Navigating Dual Roles: Challenges and Strategies of Student Mothers in Higher Education. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 13(2), 123–143.
8. Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (2012). *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. Penguin Books.
9. Nomaguchi, K., & Milkie, M. (2022). Parenthood and Higher Education: Role Strain and Support Systems. *Journal of Family Studies*, 28(4), 560–575.
10. Torres, J. B., Balan, P. S. N., Daniel, M. B., Velasco, V. S., & Vicente, M. K. (2025). A Phenomenological Study on the Lived Experiences of Student-Mothers in Higher Education Institution. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 6543–6558.
11. Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*. Cambridge Books.
12. Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78.
13. Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*. Springer Publishing.
14. Hobfoll, S. E. (1989). Conservation of Resources: A New Attempt at Conceptualizing Stress. *American Psychologist*, 44(3), 513–524.
15. Torres, J. B., Balan, P. S. N., Daniel, M. B., Velasco, V. S., & Vicente, M. K. (2025). A Phenomenological Study on the Lived Experiences of Student-Mothers in Higher Education Institution. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 6543–6558.
16. Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*. Springer Publishing.