



# Silaw Framework: A Guide for Supporting Mother-Students in Finishing College Degrees

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

Higher education provides increased opportunity for earnings and satisfaction. Greene and Paul (2021) note that colleges and universities throughout the nation have increased their focus on equity in higher education for students, staff, and faculty. One population that is increasing on college campuses is student-mothers. However, women who pursue higher education while raising children face constant demands from both school and family. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2020), students with children are much less likely to complete college than other students, with just 37 percent graduating with a certificate or a degree within six years of enrollment, compared with nearly 60 percent of students without children. As Cantero et al. (2024) explain, the simultaneous pursuit of education and motherhood presents a complex challenge for many women, as balancing academic responsibilities with the demands of childcare can significantly impact a woman's academic journey and overall well-being.

The difficulty of this path is further detailed by Askelson et al. (2020), who found that external barriers such as working and parenting while taking classes make persisting and completing college challenging. Similarly, Nikiforidou and Holmes (2023) stated that student-mothers experienced inadequacy in engagement and commitment to their studies due to time restrictions, distractions, and a lack of motivation and connectivity with schools, particularly in distance education. Therefore, early parenthood presents social and economic challenges, and young mothers often face significant consequences.

Gbogbo (2021) argues that social stigma within communities, health consequences, and a lesser likelihood of completing high school and college can lead these mothers to earn less and experience higher rates of poverty due to early childbearing. Being a mother at a very young age is challenging for women, many of whom are in shock and can hardly believe their situation. As Pueyo (2022) observes, facing motherhood while still being young is quite difficult, and these young mothers often struggle to cope with the increased responsibilities that come with the birth of their babies while also caring for their children. Furthermore, Govender et al., (2020) report that when teenage mothers disclose their pregnancies, it often findings in anger and humiliation among their family members, which can lead to a strained and uncomfortable home atmosphere.

The simultaneous expectations of balancing academic workloads with the responsibilities of motherhood can be overwhelming, as noted by Torres et al., (2020). According to Ntshayintshayi et al. (2022), pregnant teenagers often feel that they have disappointed their families and society. Both the adolescents and their families recognize the consequences of early childbearing as a social deficiency, leading to stigmatization, rejection, social exclusion, and mockery from peers and communities.

Institutional responses to the needs of student-parents vary significantly. Moreau (2016) identified three institutional approaches to support student parents: careblind/universal, target, and mainstreaming. In the careblind approach, there is minimal policy intervention, and provisions are constructed as universal and neutral; however, Moreau (2016) characterizes these as being geared toward childfree students, forcing student parents to adjust their care practices to fit into rigid systems. The target approach involves specific provisions such as

on-campus childcare and relevant financial aid. Finally, the mainstreaming approach includes efforts to integrate the needs of student parents into the broader policy fabric, such as designated advisors and extensive online resources.

Despite these efforts, Baddley (2021) points out that many student mothers and fathers remain unaware of these policies or unable to access available services. In many cases, even basic resources are not properly publicized, leaving students uninformed about the support they can receive, especially when facing an unplanned pregnancy. Pueyo (2022) reiterates that adolescent mothers face a grueling journey of managing time between their baby and school tasks while meeting basic needs with limited resources. Evitts (2022) concludes that a foremost challenge is financial incapability and means that additional research is required to understand how institutions may better serve non-traditional adult students who are parenting.

Askelson et al. (2020) establishes that student-mothers encounter specific external barriers that directly trigger internal feelings of inadequacy and academic disengagement. Building on this, Nikiforidou and Holmes (2023) focus on how these same external obstacles create a persistent sense of struggling against the system. Adding a social dimension, Govender et al. (2020) highlight that social stigma remains a primary complication in the educational journey of these women. Similarly, Ntshayintshayi et al. (2022) point toward familial rejection as a critical factor that further complicates their path to a degree. Finally, Smith (2019) identifies a significant gap in this body of work, asserting that there is still an insufficient understanding of the actual lived experiences and the specific interventions needed to support them.

Regarding the move toward equity, Askelson et al. (2020) note that student-mothers face substantial hurdles, specifically in the form of financial hardship. Nikiforidou and Holmes (2023) complement this by emphasizing the emotional stress that accompanies these financial burdens. Looking at the research landscape, Baddley (2021) argues that while challenges are well-known, there is a gap in understanding how specific coping strategies lead to academic success. Espiritu et al. (2023) support this claim, stating that the literature has yet to fully explain the mechanics of how these students thrive. While Harcourt (2023) observes that many student-mothers do, in fact, complete their studies, she notes that these successes are rarely documented. In a similar vein, Corrente (2022) points out that these success stories remain largely underexplored, leaving a hole in the current academic narrative.

Baddley (2021) indicates a need to move beyond the study of barriers to focus on the experiential processes that enable graduation. Moreau (2016) aligns with this view, suggesting that the focus should be on the factors that facilitate successful outcomes rather than just the obstacles. Confirming this lack of balance, Aperocho et al. (2023) state that while multidimensional challenges are well-documented, the actual pathways to achievement are not. Finally, Mercurio and Parina (2024) confirm that while literature on coping strategies is extensive, there is a distinct lack of research on the specific mechanisms that help student-mothers not just survived their education, but truly thrived within it.

## Framework of the Study



Figure 1: The Transtheoretical Model (TTM) or Stages of Change Theory

The conceptual framework for this study was rooted in the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), an integrative framework developed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1983) that described behavior change as a progressive, stage-based process rather than a single event. By incorporating key constructs from various psychological theories, the TTM explained how individuals modified problematic behaviors or acquired positive ones through a sequential series of transitions (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997).

In the context of this research, the TTM provided a structured mechanism to interpret how mother-graduates navigated the complexities of returning to academia. As noted by Abrash Walton et al. (2022), the TTM served as a critical tool for practitioners to facilitate behavior change, emphasizing that individuals required different types of support depending on their specific phase. The model's emphasis on readiness, decisional balance, and self-efficacy (Prochaska & Prochaska, 2019) allowed for a deep exploration of the psychological shifts experienced by the participants as they balanced the dual demands of parenting and higher education.

The initial phase of this journey occurred during the Precontemplation stage, which was characterized by a lack of intention to take action in the immediate future. Prochaska and Prochaska (2019) described this as a period where individuals were often unaware of the need for change or felt stuck, feeling that change was impossible as stated by Prochaska and Velicer (1997). Within this study, the Precontemplation stage was used to identify the timeframe when participants did not yet believe that returning to school was a viable option. This aligned with the findings of Ansari-Majd et al. (2021), who highlighted that TTM-based education influenced the decision-making processes of women balancing family goals. This stage lay in its ability to highlight the initial external and internal barriers where the cons or disadvantages of pursuing a degree such as the high cost of poverty and systemic invisibility mentioned by Lewis (2026) heavily outweighed the pros, explaining the initial lack of intention to act as documented by Prochaska (2008).

Transitioning forward, during the Contemplation stage, the individuals began to recognize the opportunity for growth and started seriously weighing the benefits of change against the associated costs as outlined by Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross (1992). For the mother-graduates, this involved a significant cognitive shift where they recognized the long-term value of a degree for "Studying for Two," a concept introduced by Winters and Poster (2026). Petrocelli (2002) noted that while individuals in this stage recognized the problem, they often remained ambivalent. This stage was used in the study to analyze the turning point of motivation and the decisional balance required to commit to a major life transition, specifically the shift in perceiving the benefits of education as greater than the barriers as evidenced by Prochaska (2008).

As the intention to act solidified, the participants entered the Preparation stage, where they began planning specific actions and taking initial steps toward their goal as described by Petrocelli (2002). In this research, this stage was used to document the logistical groundwork laid by the mothers, such as researching degree programs and arranging a village of support as identified by McMillen (2022). This stage was critical as it marked the transition toward active engagement, a perspective shared by Stirling et al. (2021) regarding field placements and internships. Using the Preparation stage justified the investigation into the support systems and preliminary efforts that made the actual transition to student life possible, emphasizing the principle from Prochaska and Velicer (1997) that success began with strategic planning.

This was followed by the most visible phase, during the Action stage, which involved the active modification of behavior and environment through sustained effort as defined by Prochaska and DiClemente (1983). This stage represented the core academic experience of the mother-graduates, where they actively managed the triple threat of work, parenting, and academics as discussed by Montgomery et al. (2025). Using the Action stage justified the study's focus on coping mechanisms like time management and problem-focused coping which were found relevant by Espiritu et al. (2023). It highlighted how participants moved from planning to the tangible execution of their academic goals despite physical exhaustion and role strain as documented by Baddley (2021).

The final primary phase was the Maintenance stage, where the individuals focused on sustaining the new behavior and preventing a return to old patterns according to Prochaska and Velicer (1997). In this study, Maintenance was defined as the persistence and grit required to stay enrolled until graduation. Mutti (2020) asserted that reaching graduation required specific strategies to prevent relapse into disengagement. This stage was used to interpret how participants navigated setbacks using self-efficacy as a psychological anchor as argued



by Thorson (2021). Prochaska and Prochaska (2019) emphasized that change was often cyclical, meaning that moments of relapse such as the temporary suspension of goals noted by Evitts (2022) were a normal part of the process and offered opportunities for learning as described by Prochaska and Velicer (1997). Including the Maintenance stage justified the study's exploration of resilience and reflective meaning-making as framed by Corrente (2022), showing how each woman navigated challenges to achieve a permanent life transformation through graduation. Applying the TTM helped structure these diverse experiences into a coherent narrative of growth as supported by Petrocelli (2002) and Prochaska (2008).

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The following literature presents a comprehensive understanding of significant concepts used to substantiate the discussion of the findings. Likewise, these studies justify the significance of conducting the present research by providing theoretical and empirical foundations related to the experiences of student-mothers in higher education.

### Success of Student-Mothers in Higher Education

The discourse surrounding the success of student-mothers begins with Harcourt (2023), who asserts that success is a multifaceted concept that frequently diverges from traditional institutional metrics like GPA. Following this, Braund et al. (2020) argue that the definition of success must be expanded to include the caregiving context rather than just credit attainment. Kava et al. (2020) further this point by stating that for this demographic, success is a holistic understanding shaped by the constant presence of domestic responsibilities. Tighe et al. (2024) expand on this by linking academic success directly to the wellbeing of student parents, suggesting that improving educational outcomes is a two-generation benefit that stabilizes both the parent and the child. Adding to the personal dimension, Dasig (2020) highlights that these women primarily define their own success through their ability to balance parenting duties and maintain family well-being alongside their academic growth. This collective evidence means that institutional metrics often fail to capture the qualitative weight of a mother's academic journey. Consequently, success is not merely a final grade but a sustained state of familial and personal equilibrium.

The motivation behind this success is explored by Winters and Poster (2026), who introduce the concept of "Studying for Two," suggesting that academic persistence is fundamentally driven by the desire to provide a better future for the child. This perspective is deepened by Baluyos and Alvarico (2024), who view the degree not as an individual trophy but as a collective family asset intended for social transformation. Complementing this, Bustillo et al. (2024) find that success for these mothers is measured by emotional resilience and the specific pursuit of opportunities that provide a dual benefit to both the mother and her children. These studies collectively indicate that the child serves as the primary psychological anchor that prevents attrition during high-stress periods. By reframing the degree as a tool for caregiving, student-mothers transform individual ambition into a shared family mission. This shift in perspective allows them to endure rigorous academic demands that might otherwise seem insurmountable. The mother's persistence becomes an act of maternal devotion and generational investment.

Moving into the academic environment, Walia (2026) introduces the theory of rhetorical agency, arguing that success is achieved when mothers name and claim their dual identities to reshape the institutional spaces they inhabit. This individual agency is supported by Exley and Willis (2025), who propose the concept of relational agency, a loop of collaborative engagement where the school and community share the burden of persistence with the student. From a practical delivery standpoint, Mostajo (2025) identifies predictable flexibility specifically through asynchronous learning as the primary factor that allows mothers to overcome time poverty. Baddley (2021) describes success as the specialized ability to reconcile societal expectations by remaining a dedicated student while fulfilling caregiving duties. Espiritu et al. (2023) echo this by framing success as the successful integration of these often-conflicting societal roles. These findings mean that when institutions provide structural aid, mothers can more effectively navigate the militant time management required for their dual roles. The integration of maternal and scholarly identities thus becomes a collaborative process between the individual and the institution.

The enduring impact of this journey is validated by Schultheiss (2021), who noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, mothers without degrees faced significantly higher rates of job loss. In contrast, Miller (2022) observed that mothers who possessed at least a bachelor's degree maintained far greater professional stability during economic crises. Landivar and deWolf (2022) support this by providing evidence that higher education acts as a buffer for mothers against workforce volatility. Corrente (2022) frames success as a dynamic process of identity development rather than a static end-point. This is reinforced by Arabejo et al. (2025), who conclude that success is a continuous process of meaning-making where the individual learns to integrate the roles of parent and scholar. These longitudinal perspectives highlight that the value of the degree extends far beyond graduation day, providing a lifelong safety net for the family. The transformation from student to professional signifies a permanent shift in socioeconomic standing and self-perception.

Despite the depth of these studies, a critical gap remains in the literature regarding the transition from student to successful graduate. While researchers like Aperocho et al. (2023) and Mercurio and Parina (2024) have extensively documented the multidimensional challenges and coping strategies of current students, there is a scarcity of research focused on the retrospective success stories of those who have already graduated. Baddley (2021) argues that current literature lacks a unified framework that translates these lived experiences into specific, actionable support mechanisms. This research aims to address this gap by gathering the shared stories of mother-graduates, identifying the specific hurdles they cleared and analyzing the coping mechanisms that actually led to degree completion. By doing so, this study will fulfill the need identified by Moreau (2016) to move beyond barrier-analysis and develop a framework that helps future student-mothers not only survive but thrive. The focus on graduates allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the entire maternal-academic trajectory. This retrospective approach provides the necessary evidence to build inclusive policies that support long-term degree attainment.

### **The Transtheoretical Model (TTM) as a Framework for Change**

The application of behavioral models to the educational journey begins with Moreira et al (2020), who developed the Academic Performance Stages of Change Inventory (APSCI) to demonstrate that academic success is a measurable progression through specific stages of intentional change. Building on this, Abrash Walton et al (2022) introduce the Transtheoretical Model as a critical tool for practitioners to facilitate behavior change, emphasizing that individuals require different types of support depending on whether they are in the contemplation or action phase of their journey. This perspective is expanded by Lee et al (2021), who argue that using the TTM can promote social justice by addressing the specific motivational needs and readiness levels of marginalized or non-traditional populations.

The model's relevance to the specific life choices of women is highlighted by Ansari-Majd et al (2021), whose research shows that TTM-based education significantly influences the decision-making processes of women of reproductive age, particularly when balancing family goals with personal development. In the practical field of educational transitions, Stirling et al (2021) apply the TTM to understand the barriers to engagement in field placements, a context that directly aligns with the internship requirements of BEED students. Finally, Mutti (2020) defines the Maintenance Phase of the TTM, asserting that long-term success such as reaching graduation requires specific strategies to prevent relapse into old patterns of disengagement or withdrawal.

The internal drivers of this academic transition are explored by Thorson (2021), who describes self-efficacy as a psychological anchor that leads post-traditional students to success by allowing them to remain stable despite external role strain. Sutherland et al. (2024) complement this by identifying how the specific learning preferences of non-traditional students directly impact their academic self-efficacy and their belief in their ability to master complex curricula. From a social perspective, Hartsoch (2025) finds that social support is a powerful predictor of career decision-making self-efficacy, suggesting that a student-mother's belief in her professional future is heavily tied to the strength of her support network.

The necessity of individual grit is further analyzed by Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020), who link high levels of self-efficacy and achievement orientation goals directly to superior academic performance in university settings. This internal strength is often what allows students to navigate the divide between traditional and non-traditional learning, as noted by Asrifan et al (2025), who argue for bridging the educational divide by acknowledging the

unique self-efficacy needs of diverse learners. Finally, Sylvester (2025) utilizes narrative inquiry to show that the journey of non-traditional women is defined by a continuous negotiation of identity, where the act of persisting is fueled by a growing sense of academic competence.

While the literature provided by Moreira et al. (2020) and Stirling et al. (2021) successfully applies the Transtheoretical Model to general academic settings, there is a distinct gap concerning its application to the specific completion journey of mother-graduates in a rural, teacher-education context. Current research focuses on general academic performance or readiness, but there is a lack of evidence-based literature mapping how mother-students move through the specific stages of change to reach the Maintenance phase of graduation. This study justifies its focus on SOP 1, 2, and 3 by using the TTM to categorize the shared stories, challenges, and coping mechanisms of successful graduates. Ultimately, this leads to the fulfillment of SOP 4: the development of a localized framework that translates these stages of change into a practical guide for student-mother success at ISPSC Cervantes Campus.

### **Challenges Experienced by Student-Mothers**

Student-mothers encounter a unique combination of challenges that extend beyond the typical stressors experienced by traditional college students. These obstacles are multidimensional, ranging from systemic invisibility to personal role strain. The discussion begins with Behrens and Stykes (2025), who investigate the pervasive role of stigma and note that student-parents face a non-traditional bias that complicates their sense of belonging. Following this, Velasquez (2025) utilizes Photovoice methodology to uncover the dual physical and emotional weight these women carry, particularly when fulfilling maternal duties within spaces not designed for dependents. Rodriguez (2024) corroborates this by highlighting the invisibility of student-parents, arguing that a lack of institutional recognition forces these highly resilient individuals into a survival-based academic existence.

The practical manifestation of this invisibility is explored by Baddley (2021), who documents how the balancing of academic tasks and childcare leads to profound physical exhaustion. Abon et al. (2023) add to this by identifying sleep deprivation as a primary consequence of managing these dual responsibilities. Arabejo et al. (2025) further emphasize the extreme role strain that occurs when academic and parental schedules collide. These constraints are linked by Pueyo (2022) to a sense of social isolation, as mothers are often unable to participate in campus life. Espiritu et al. (2023) reported that this tension creates a persistent internal conflict characterized by deep-seated guilt and self-doubt.

The economic dimension of these challenges is addressed by Askelson et al. (2020), who explained that student-mothers must navigate very limited resources while meeting the rising costs of tuition and daily living. Anane et al. (2021) contributed the point that transportation and child-related expenses often push these students to their financial limits. Because of these pressures, Evitts (2022) observed that mothers often face the temporary suspension of their academic goals as they prioritize their child's immediate needs over their own education. Baddley (2021) notes that this situation is worsened by institutional policies that fail to provide affordable on-campus childcare, forcing mothers to make difficult economic trade-offs.

The impact of societal norms is analyzed by Aperocho et al. (2023), who observe that stereotypes particularly regarding young or unmarried mothers create immense emotional pressure. Govender et al. (2020) reinforce this by showing how these external judgments complicate the educational journey. From a cultural perspective, Dasig (2020) points out that norms prioritizing childcare above all else contribute significantly to academic anxiety. Baluyos and Alvarico (2024) support this by noting how these expectations decrease a student's ability to concentrate on her studies. These pressures ultimately reach the home, as Espiritu et al. (2023) highlight the strain placed on family relationships due to competing roles. This is echoed by Mercurio and Parina (2024), who frame the journey toward graduation as a grueling test of both academic and relational endurance.

While the literature above provides an exhaustive list of the challenges student-mothers face, a specific gap exists in the retrospective analysis of completed journeys. Most of the current research, such as that by Rodriguez (2024) and Velasquez (2025), focuses on the challenges experienced by active students who are still in the midst of the struggle. There is a lack of focus on the specific hurdles encountered by those who successfully reached the finish line. As Baddley (2021) and Moreau (2016) mean, research needs to bridge the gap between identifying

challenges and understanding how those challenges were specifically navigated to reach graduation. This study justifies its focus on SOP 2 by specifically documenting the obstacles that mother-graduates faced, providing a survivor's perspective that can inform the creation of more effective, success-oriented institutional support mechanisms.

### **Barriers Encountered by Student-Mothers**

While the previously discussed challenges focus on the internal and personal struggles of student-mothers, they also encounter systemic barriers external walls that are built into the very structure of higher education. Briegel et al. (2023) emphasize that these barriers often stem from institutional assumptions that fail to recognize the duality of the student-parent role, where the lack of specific supports inherently functions as a hurdle to completion. This is further documented by Carmichael et al. (2026), whose report on barriers to progression identifies that without clear institutional visibility and tracking, student-parents face unique risks of attrition. Andrewartha et al. (2023) analyze the policy management side of these barriers, noting that balancing the books requires institutions to address the financial and time poverty that systemic neglect exacerbates. Todd (2023) reinforces this by arguing that invisibility is a primary barrier, and success requires evidence-based interventions that move beyond mere survival to actively celebrating the student-mother identity. Expanding on this institutional critique, Montgomery et al. (2025) advocate for a paradigm shift toward a care-filled college experience, arguing that traditional models ignore the triple threat of work, parenting, and academics. Duffy et al. (2025) identify the root of this exclusion as the ideal student norm, a framework that assumes students possess unencumbered time and leads to the produced invisibility of parents. Adding a layer of nuance to this invisibility, Rodriguez (2024) points out that even when resources do exist, they are often restricted to parents of infants, effectively marginalizing those with school-aged children within an already care-blind system.

The economic and social consequences of this neglect are explored by Lewis (2026), who argues that the system marginalizes student-parents through a double burden of invisibility and the high cost of poverty. This systemic wall forces mothers to choose between immediate family survival and their long-term academic goals. Ibadullaeva (2026) further complicates this by showing how international graduate student-parents face even greater precariousness due to cultural displacement and the absence of traditional family support networks.

The structural nature of these disadvantages is best understood through the foundational work of Crenshaw (1989), who introduced Intersectionality to explain how overlapping identities like gender, race, and class create unique systems of disadvantage. Applying this to the student-mother experience, Rana et al. (2022) observe that minority student-mothers navigate racial discrimination and economic hardship simultaneously. Cabulay et al. (2025) contribute to this by noting that young or unmarried mothers face an additional layer of social stigma. Harcourt (2023) highlights how these intersecting identities clash with rigid structural limitations, such as strict attendance policies that prohibit children from entering academic spaces.

In the absence of formal institutional assistance, such as the scholarships or programs noted by Ogunji et al. (2020), student-mothers are forced to rely on alternative means of survival. McMillen (2022) describes this as the creation of a village of support, where mothers depend heavily on informal community networks. Finally, Sallee and Lewis (2025) emphasize the importance of place, arguing that a mother's success is heavily influenced by the broader socio-political and legislative environment of her specific location.

While the literature provided offers a robust critique of the systemic barriers and the care-blind nature of higher education, a relevant gap exists regarding the specific systemic hurdles that mother-graduates successfully navigated to reach completion. Most current research, such as that by Montgomery et al. (2025) and Lewis (2026), focuses on the barriers as reasons for attrition or current struggle. There is a lack of evidence-based literature detailing the specific systemic walls that were successfully scaled or bypassed by those who have already graduated. This study justifies its focus on SOP 2 by documenting these systemic challenges from a retrospective lens, fulfilling the need identified by Baddley (2021) and Harcourt (2023) to understand how academic policies specifically impact the completion trajectory of mother-graduates.

## Coping Mechanisms and Strategies

Despite the numerous challenges and barriers they encounter, student-mothers actively develop complex coping mechanisms that enable them to persist in their academic journeys. Research indicates that these strategies are multifaceted, spanning internal psychological anchors, practical management, and external support systems. According to Thorson (2021), self-efficacy serves as a primary psychological anchor, providing the internal belief in one's ability that allows a mother to stay grounded as academic demands increase. This internal strength is frequently manifested as grit, with Baluyos and Alvarico (2024) identifying personal determination, the mother's individual why, as the decisive factor and primary driver for degree completion. This is further supported by Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020), who link high levels of grit and achievement-oriented goals directly to superior academic performance. Beyond grit, Dasig (2020) highlights the role of intrinsic motivation and faith, suggesting that a strong internal belief system and spiritual practice are key factors in sustaining persistence through difficult periods.

Complementing these internal traits are practical and emotion-focused strategies. Espiritu et al. (2023) found that problem-focused coping begins with practical actions, specifically identifying that student-mothers rely heavily on effective time management to stay on track. Corrente (2022) adds that these emotional and mental states are processed through reflective meaning-making, a process where student-parents manage competing demands by mentally separating their responsibilities. On the emotional front, Aperocho et al. (2023) emphasized that receiving encouragement from family members and partners significantly contributes to psychological resilience. Furthermore, Arabejo et al. (2025) noted that external networks, such as friends and peers, act as a vital buffer against academic stress, providing a sense of community that prevents emotional burnout.

The effectiveness of these individual strategies is often mediated by the village and institutional environment surrounding the student-mother. While Varadi et al. (2024) note that many mothers must creatively navigate sparse support networks, necessitating higher internal resilience, Hartsoch (2025) emphasizes that robust social support is a primary predictor of career decision-making self-efficacy, helping a mother believe in her future professional identity. Guerrero (2021) adds that when internal coping is supported by institutional resources, such as family-friendly facilities, the family unit becomes more stable. To address the physical and mental toll, Ogunji et al. (2020) recommended that institutions provide on-campus childcare, while Kisanga and Matiba (2023) advocated for flexible academic schedules and specialized counseling. Crucially, Moreau (2016) and Blanton (2021) highlight that institutional awareness, the removal of care-blind policies, and supportive faculty mentorship are prerequisites that significantly enhance a mother's chances of successful graduation.

However, a significant gap remains in the existing literature. While studies by Espiritu et al. (2023) and Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) focus on grit and time management as isolated survival tools, there is a lack of research connecting these mechanisms to the specific stages of change defined by the Transtheoretical Model. There is little understanding of how these coping mechanisms evolve as student-mother moves from enrollment to graduation. Consequently, this study justifies its focus on the retrospective coping experiences of mother-graduates to identify which strategies were most effective at each stage of their transition, thereby informing the development of a success-oriented framework.

## Research Questions

Generally, the study aimed to explore the lived experiences of successful mother-graduates from the BEED program at ISPSC Cervantes Campus, using the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) to understand the stages of change they navigated in balancing motherhood, work, and education.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following:

1. What stories do mother-graduates share about finishing their studies while raising their children?
2. What challenges do mother-graduates encounter in completing their college degree while raising their children?

3. What coping mechanisms do mother-graduates employ to manage the dual demands of academic responsibilities and motherhood?
4. What framework can be developed based on the findings?

## METHODOLOGY

This section presents the research design, population or locale of the study, research instrument, and data gathering procedure, data analysis, and ethical considerations of the study.

### Research Design

The research employed the Qualitative Narrative Inquiry research design to investigate mother-graduates' lived experiences and success stories. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative method that is concerned with how people interpret their own experiences through the process of storytelling. It provides participants the opportunity to recount their life courses in their own terms, focusing on significant events, turning points, difficulties, and achievements (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

Using this design, the researcher sought to collect rich, descriptive, and significant accounts of how mother-graduates managed to pursue and achieve their educational objectives despite the challenges of parenthood. By concentrating on personal stories, the research aimed to reveal emotional, social, and practical elements of their experience such as how they juggled academic study and parenting, what difficulties they encountered, what mechanisms they employed to cope, and what enabled them to succeed. This design was fitting since it not only recorded events but also delved into the underlying meanings and understandings of the events, providing a complete picture of the participants' experiences.

### Selection and Study Site

The key informants for this study were ten (10) mother-graduates, specifically individuals from the municipalities of Quirino and Cervantes who have completed their Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEED) degrees since the program's introduction at the Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College – Cervantes Campus. These participants currently employed as Elementary teachers and willingly shared their educational experiences as student-mothers and graduates.

The selection of ten (10) participants was based on the principle of data saturation in qualitative research. According to Braun and Clarke (2021) a sample size of approximately 6 to 10 participants is typically sufficient to uncover meaningful themes without unnecessary redundancy. This number allowed for an in-depth exploration of each participant's lived experiences while ensuring manageability during data collection and analysis.

To ensure the relevance and richness of the data, purposive sampling was used. These intentional selection processed relevant individuals who met specific criteria, ensuring that the insights gathered were directly aligned with the research objectives.

**Table 1:** The Participants' Robotfoto

Pseudonym	Age	Civil status	# of chil/dren	Year graduated	Current position	School assigned	Length of service
P1	36	Married	1	2018	Teacher 1	Lamagan ES	2 years 5 months
P2	39	Married	4	2007	Teacher III	Malaya ES	13 years
P3	38	Single	1	2011	Teacher III	Lamagan ES	11 years
P4	43	Married	6	2005	Teacher III/TIC	Lamagan ES	14 years
P5	28	Single	1	2019	Teacher 1	Cayus ES	1 year



P6	28	Married	1	2019	Private teacher	SAS	2 years 8 months
P7	29	Married	2	2016	Private teacher	SAS	3 years
P8	52	Married	5	2000	Teacher I	Cervantes Central School	15 years
P9	28	Married	2	2019	Teacher III	Saoil PS	3 years
P10	46	Married	4	2002	Teacher III	Cervantes Central School	19 years 8 months

Participant 1 (P1) is a 36-year-old married mother with one child. She graduated in 2018 and currently serves as a Teacher 1 at Lamagan Elementary School, where she has been teaching for 2 years and 5 months.

Participant 2 (P2) is 39 years old and married with four children. Having graduated in 2007, she has established a long career in education with 13 years of service. She currently holds the position of Teacher III at Malaya Elementary School.

Participant 3 (P3) is a 38-year-old single mother with one child. She finished her degree in 2011 and has since accumulated 11 years of teaching experience. She is currently a Teacher III assigned to Lamagan Elementary School.

Participant 4 (P4) is 43 years old and married with a family of six children. She graduated in 2005 and currently serves as a Teacher III and Teacher-in-Charge (TIC) at Lamagan Elementary School, bringing 14 years of professional experience to her role.

Participant 5 (P5) is 28 years old and a single mother with one child. As a more recent graduate from the class of 2019, she is in the early stages of her career with one year of service as a Teacher 1 at Cayus Elementary School.

Participant 6 (P6) is also 28 years old and married with one child. Like P5, she graduated in 2019. She currently works as a private school teacher at SAS and has been in service for 2 years and 8 months.

Participant 7 (P7) is a 29-year-old married mother of two children. She graduated in 2016 and has been working for 3 years. She currently holds a position as a private teacher at SAS.

Participant 8 (P8) is the eldest participant at 52 years old. She is married with five children and graduated in 2000. Despite her long tenure of 15 years in the profession, she currently holds the position of Teacher I at Cervantes Central School.

Participant 9 (P9) is 28 years old and married with two children. A graduate of 2019, she has already attained the rank of Teacher III at Saoil Primary School after 3 years of service, indicating a rapid professional progression.

Participant 10 (P10) is a 46-year-old married mother with four children. She graduated in 2002 and is the most experienced among the group, with 19 years and 8 months of service. She currently serves as a Teacher III at Cervantes Central School.

Data were collected using the Robotfoto method, a biographical and contextual information tool developed by Kelchtermans (1993). This method captures essential background details such as personal, academic, and professional history. Following this, in-depth interviews were conducted with the selected participants. These interviews provided a comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and success stories as student-mothers who transitioned into professional teaching roles.

## Research Instrument

The primary research instrument utilized in this study was a semi-structured interview protocol guided by the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) of behavior change. Anchored on the stages of change (precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance) the instrument was designed to explore the developmental

progression of mother-graduates' educational journeys. This qualitative approach enabled an in-depth examination of their experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and definitions of success within the TTM framework.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of participants' lived experiences, as this method allows flexibility while maintaining conceptual direction (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyan, 2019). The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged narrative responses, enabling participants to articulate personal insights and reflections across the different stages of change. This design supported a rich exploration of the processes and contextual factors that contributed to their successful completion of higher education while balancing the demands of motherhood.

To ensure content validity and clarity, the interview protocol underwent expert validation by professionals with expertise in qualitative research and educational studies. Revisions were made based on their recommendations to enhance alignment with the study's objectives and theoretical framework. The validated interview guide is presented in Appendix d.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The data gathering procedure involved several systematic steps to ensure trustworthiness and methodological rigor. First, purposive sampling was employed to identify and recruit qualified mother-graduates from ISPSC Cervantes Campus who met the inclusion criteria: (1) graduates of the Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEED) program, (2) currently employed as elementary teachers, and (3) residing in Quirino or Cervantes. This sampling strategy ensured that participants possessed direct and relevant experiences aligned with the study's objectives.

Recruitment was conducted through face-to-face communication and via Messenger. Potential participants were informed about the purpose of the study, its significance, and their role in the research process. Ethical considerations were strictly observed by securing informed consent prior to participation and assuring confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary involvement. To protect participants' identities, pseudonym codes were assigned instead of real names. The participants were identified as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9 and P10. These codes were used consistently throughout the transcription, analysis, and presentation of findings.

Following consent, semi-structured interviews guided by the Transtheoretical Model were conducted either face-to-face or through virtual platforms, depending on participants' availability and preference. Each interview explored experiences across the stages of change (precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance). With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, and detailed field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was implemented by allowing participants to review and verify the accuracy of their transcribed responses. This process ensured credibility and minimized misinterpretation. Data management involved careful transcription of audio recordings, systematic coding, and thematic analysis aligned with the study's conceptual framework. All research data including recordings, transcripts, and coded files were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher, in accordance with ethical research standards.

### **Mode of Analysis**

The data analysis for this study followed a thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process began with the transcription of audio recordings and field notes from interviews or focus group discussions, followed by an intensive period of data familiarization. Using Braun and Clarke's systematic six-phase framework, the researcher generated initial codes and collated them into potential themes and sub-themes that directly addressed the research questions. This iterative process allowed for the identification of common patterns within the narratives of the mother-graduates, moving beyond simple description to a deeper interpretation of the data. Ultimately, the analysis involved organizing these patterns to provide a comprehensive understanding of the specific challenges, coping mechanisms, and success stories shared by the participants.

## Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were followed throughout the study to protect the rights and well-being of all participants. Informed consent was obtained; making sure each participant understood the purpose of the study, their role, and their rights including the right to stop at any time.

The study aimed to benefit participants and others by sharing inspiring stories of success. It sought to give value not only to the participants but also to other student-parents who could learn from these experiences. There were small risks, such as feeling emotional while remembering past struggles. To manage this, participants could skip any question or stop the interview anytime. The researcher was kind and respectful throughout the process. Participants' names and personal information were not shared. Only the researcher saw the real data.

All recordings, notes, and files were safely stored. The data kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of the study, exploring the lived experiences of mother-graduates who balanced the demands of child-rearing with the pursuit of their degrees. The participants' narratives are synthesized into the SILAW Framework, an original conceptual model authored by the researcher that maps the transition from deferred dreams to professional success.

The acronym **SILAW** (the Ilocano word for Light) represents five key stages: **(S)**uspended Aspirations, where goals are deferred due to maternal duties; **(I)**nternal Decisional Balance, where mothers weigh the costs and benefits of returning to school; **(L)**atent Persistence, involving strategic planning and mobilization of support; **(A)**ctive Role Integration, the rigorous management of dual roles; and **(W)**orth Realized, the successful integration of a new professional identity.

The choice of SILAW honors the Filipino archetype of the mother as the *ilaw ng tahanan* (light of the home). This framework means that while these women illuminated their homes, their motherhood served as the guiding light that drove them toward academic completion.

It should be noted that the responses of the participants were originally captured in English, Ilokano, or Tagalog to ensure a natural and profound expression of their lived experiences. For this discussion, vernacular responses are presented alongside English translations to preserve the participants' authentic voices while ensuring clarity. These narratives are analyzed in alignment with the stages of the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) of change, as elaborated in the following sections.

### Suspended Aspirations

This theme represents the initial narrative phase of the mother-graduates' journey, where educational goals were temporarily set aside to accommodate the immediate and singular demands of motherhood. This stage reflects a waiting period during which personal dreams were held in abeyance to fulfill primary maternal duties. In the context of the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), this theme aligns with the Precontemplation Stage. During this time, individuals do not yet intend to take action toward re-enrollment, largely because their current reality consisting of intensive childcare and the physical demands of early parenting consumes their entire focus and identity.

To better understand the complexities of this stage, the study identified three distinct sub-themes: (1) Navigating the Tug-of-War: Wrestling with Emotional Conflict and Maternal Guilt, (2) Breaking the Silence: Confronting Social Judgment and Stigma, and (3) Strengthening the Foundation: Mobilizing Support as a Coping Mechanism. Each sub-theme is presented and discussed below.

Navigating the Tug-of-War: Emotional Conflict and Maternal Guilt. This sub-theme refers to the mental and emotional struggle of the mothers as they weigh their personal goals against their children's needs. It captures the tug-of-war between the desire for self-improvement and the fear of being an absent mother. This conflict is often rooted in maternal guilt, the heavy feeling that leaving a child to pursue education might cause emotional

or physical harm. It highlights the practical barriers, such as the lack of childcare and the financial burden of providing for a baby's basic needs, which keep the mother from moving forward. This state of hesitation is captured in the words of the participants;

I still have the desire to go back to school after giving birth, but after 4 years of taking good care of my child, (eksakto gamin nga nagday care diay anak ko, idiyak nga nagrugi kasi, maasyanak diay anak ko nga mangpanaw nga haan nga agsuso, dagiyay da ngay, haan na paylang piman marikna diay care ti maysa nga ina.) [that was exactly when my child starts daycare when I started. Because I felt pity for my child if I left him right away, without breastfeeding him and might not feel a mother's care.] (P1)

Haanak pay ngay gamin nga kasla sure idi [I felt like I am not sure yet then] if I was ready to handle both my responsibilities as a mother and as a student. (Isu met nga nagreflect ak pay santo ak nagdecide.) [That's why I took time to reflect before deciding.] (P10)

syempre kapag meron kana kasing anak wala ng mag-aalaga noh ang hirap...so nagpanpanonotak. [Of course, if you already have a child, it's really hard when there's no one to take care of them ...that's why I really think] (P7)

The findings reveal that the Precontemplation stage for mother-graduates is a period of unselfish delay rather than a lack of inherent motivation. The participants consistently expressed that their decision to remain out of school was a protective measure for their children, prioritizing maternal attachment over personal advancement. For instance, P1's decision to wait four years until her child started daycare illustrates that the bond formed through breastfeeding and constant presence acts as a temporary anchor that prevents academic movement. During this stage, the mother's identity is entirely subsumed by her maternal role, leaving little psychological space for the identity of a student.

These findings are corroborated by Baddley (2021), who argues that student-mothers are constantly forced to reconcile the conflicting societal definitions of a good parent and a good student. This specialized ability to balance roles is a primary marker of their journey. The guilt expressed by P1 regarding her child not feeling a mother's care mirrors the cultural norms identified by Dasig (2020), which prioritize childcare above all else and significantly contribute to academic anxiety. This period is marked by what Velasquez (2025) terms the physical and emotional weight these women carry, where the emotional burden of potential neglect far outweighs the long-term pros of a degree. In this stage, the cons of returning to school are perceived as a threat to the child's well-being, aligning with Espiritu et al. (2023), who found that success is defined primarily by fulfilling parental duties; thus, academic goals are pushed to the background until those duties feel manageable.

The financial concerns and lack of childcare voiced by P7 further highlight the systemic wall described by Lewis (2026), where the high cost of poverty and childcare instability forces parents to choose immediate family survival over long-term academic goals. This precariousness is a manifestation of the produced invisibility noted by Duffy et al. (2025); because the ideal student norm assumes students possess unencumbered time, these women do not see a place for themselves within the university. When a trusted village of support (McMillen, 2022) is missing, the mother remains stuck in Precontemplation because the survival of the child is the immediate priority.

From the perspective of the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), these mothers are in a state where the pros of changing their situation are not yet high enough to overcome the significant cons. Moving out of this stage requires a drastic shift in decisional balance. As Corrente (2022) notes, the journey of a student-mother is a dynamic process of identity development an unfolding life story rather than an isolated event. Therefore, the transition from Suspended Ambition to Internal Decisional Balance often occurs only when external factors change, such as the child reaching school age, or when the mother begins to exercise what Walia (2026) calls rhetorical agency, the moment she begins to name her desire for a different future and claim her dual identity.

The findings imply that the prolonged stay of mother-graduates in the Precontemplation stage is not due to a lack of aspiration but to the absence of adequate structural and social support. Without the care-filled campus environments advocated by Montgomery et al. (2025), many mothers remain in this suspended state where

educational aspirations are continuously postponed. To facilitate the transition toward active academic engagement, higher education institutions may dismantle the ideal student norm and provide predictable flexibility through asynchronous learning (Mostajo, 2025) and state-level policy support (Sallee & Lewis, 2025) necessary to make the pros of education a realistic and safe possibility for parenting women.

**Breaking the Silence: Confronting Social Judgment and Stigma.** This sub-theme refers to the external social barriers and the internal emotional distress caused by negative community perceptions. It captured the deep-seated feelings of shame, embarrassment, and shyness that mother-graduates experienced when they faced criticism for their situation. As the participants expressed,

idi paylang a masakog ket konak idi nga ag stop akon ta mabainak ket garuden, ta diba dagiti tattao gamin ngay ket no naganak kan ket ibaga da ‘apay ageskwe eskwela payla dayta’ [Back when I was pregnant, I said I would stop because I felt shy, because sometimes you can’t avoid neighbors who gossip about you and look down on you. They say things like, ‘This one got pregnant instead of studying.] (P6)

di first talaga ket kasla madikon, kasla gamin ngay adda diay bain, mabainak ta syempre ibaga da “daytuy diay nasikogan idi” [I really didn’t want to continue because I was shy. I was embarrassed because, of course, people would say, ‘She’s the one who got pregnant.] (P7)

...no gamin adda anak mon ket ti panangkita da kanyamon awanen ti kasla mararating mon, kasla koma kasdiay, iso nga inoray ko nga nag 6 months diay amboy ko santo ak napan nag enroll. [If you already had a child, people would think that you couldn’t achieve anything anymore, like that. That’s why I waited until my child was six months old before I enrolled.] (P8)

The findings reveal that the Precontemplation stage is heavily influenced by social evaluation apprehension, where the fear of community judgment acts as a powerful deterrent to academic action. For the participants, the shyness they experienced was not a personality trait but a direct response to toxic gossip and local criticism. Consequently, in this phase, the psychological cost of facing social disapproval is perceived to be much higher than the benefits of immediate enrollment.

These findings are strongly corroborated by Behrens and Stykes (2025), who argue that student-parents navigate a non-traditional bias that fundamentally complicates their sense of belonging on campus. The narratives of the participants mirror this bias, where external stigma ranging from peer judgment to community stereotyping creates a psychological burden that forces mothers to defend their academic dedication. This identity crisis is further explained by Baddley (2021), who notes that student-mothers are often caught between conflicting societal definitions of a good parent and a good student. When the community labels a mother’s academic timing as a failure, it triggers internal conflict and self-doubt, leading many to wait until their children are older before daring to enroll.

The mockery described by the participants is a form of produced invisibility and systemic inequity. Duffy et al. (2025) and Walia (2026) mean that because institutions and communities are built around the ideal student norm, the presence of a student-mother is often treated as a deviance to be scrutinized. This social shaming is not merely a personal hurdle but a systemic barrier that targets their identity, making the academic environment feel hostile or unreachable as highlighted by Rana et al. (2022). The participants’ experience of being looked down upon reflects what Velasquez (2025) identifies as the emotional weight of hyper-visibility, where a mother’s perceived mistakes are constantly judged by a care-blind society.

From the perspective of the Transtheoretical Model, these findings imply that social stigma functions as a dominant con in the mother’s decisional balance. Moving from Precontemplation or Suspended Ambition to Contemplation or Internal Decisional Balance requires a process of environmental re-evaluation. Walia (2026) posits that this transition involved a form of rhetorical agency, where the mother begins to re-author her story, disconnecting her self-worth from community gossip and realizing that her education is a tool to prove her critics wrong. This shift is essential for building the academic self-efficacy needed to master complex curricula despite external role strain as argued by Sutherland et al. (2024).

The findings imply that academic encouragement alone is insufficient for the sustained success of student-mothers. Montgomery et al. (2025) argue that there is a critical need for stigma-reduction strategies and the creation of care-filled spaces within academia. Without institutional interventions that validate the dual identity of the parent-scholar, student-parents may remain in the Precontemplation stage indefinitely as a psychological defense mechanism against social judgment.

To counter this, McMillen (2022) emphasizes the necessity of strengthening support networks, while Exley and Willis (2025) highlight the importance of fostering relational agency. These elements are essential in helping mothers navigate the importance of place, as discussed by Sallee and Lewis (2025), enabling them to transform experiences of social mockery into professional triumph. Such support is particularly vital for those in the Maintenance Phase, where Mutti (2020) asserts that preventing a relapse into academic disengagement requires the implementation of robust, long-term success strategies.

**Strengthening the Foundation: Mobilizing Support as a Coping Mechanism.** This sub-theme refers to the supportive network of relationships that provide the emotional and physical scaffolding necessary for a mother to endure the precontemplation stage. It encompasses the encouragement from parents, practical childcare offers from in-laws, and the motivational push from friends. While the mother is not yet taking the action of enrolling, this support system serves as a vital protective buffer. This pivotal role of external encouragement is reflected in the shared experiences of the participants;

When my mother-in-law, [sabi niya, 'sige ipagpatuloy mo ang pag-aaral mo, ako ang mag-aalaga kay baby' so nagpanpanonotak.] (they said, 'Go ahead and continue; I will take care of the baby,' I thought about it carefully.) (P7)

Thankfully [buhay pa ang mga magulang ko noon na sila din ang nagpush saakin na dapat mag-aral ako.] [my parents were still alive then and they were the ones who pushed me to study.] (P2)

There's this friend of mine who pushed me to enroll, so it's like, it is influenced by someone, but after a while I also realized that I need to continue my study. (P5)

All of them, my family, [idi paylang a masikog ket konak idi nga ag stop akon ta mabainak ket garuden, ngem "ageskwela ka, konada"] (Back when I was pregnant, I said I would stop because I felt shy, but they told me, 'You should continue studying.') (P6)

The findings reveal that even while mother-graduates are in the Precontemplation stage not yet taking action to enroll they are already building the psychological foundation needed for future change through external validation and logistical reassurance. While the participants initially felt paralyzed by shame and stigma, the intervention of family members acted as a critical protective buffer. The data shows that support during this waiting period comes in two forms: emotional encouragement and structural reassurance. This means that in precontemplation, mothers rely on a collective strength to protect their self-esteem until the internal pros of education outweigh the external cons of their current situation.

These findings are heavily supported by Umarji (2023), who argues that because institutional support is often inconsistent, student-parents rely almost entirely on familial networks to bridge the gap between their current reality and their future goals. The offer of help from the mother-in-law in the narrative of P7 is a primary example of the essential childcare assistance that Umarji identifies as a prerequisite for even considering a return to academia. McMillen (2022) describes this village of support as a specialized form of relational agency. Exley and Willis (2025) mean that success is maximized when a collaborative engagement loop exists between the student, the family, and the community. In this study, the family unit effectively stepped in to provide the care-filled environment that Montgomery et al. (2025) argue the institution often lacks.

Dasig (2020) and Baluyos and Alvarico (2024) emphasize that a mother's capacity to eventually succeed is tied to how she navigates family well-being; when the family validates her goals early on, it eases the maternal guilt that characterizes the suspended ambition phase. This early validation builds what Winters and Poster (2026) call Studying for Two, where the family unit begins to view the mother's education as a collective family asset rather

than an individual burden. As noted by P2 and P6, the push from parents and in-laws allowed them to keep their aspirations alive while they waited for the right time to act, effectively neutralizing the systemic wall of childcare costs and social judgment identified by Lewis (2026).

From the perspective of the Transtheoretical Model, this coping mechanism represents the process of helping relationships occurring even before action is taken. For an individual in Precontemplation to move toward Contemplation or Internal Decisional Balance, they need a safe harbor to maintain their self-worth against the toxic gossip of neighbors. The family acts as a social liberation factor, creating a micro-environment where the mother feels she has the right to dream.

The findings imply that moving a mother-graduate toward degree completion requires early intervention at the family level. As Sallee and Lewis (2025) suggest, the importance of place extends to the immediate home environment; without an external push and the promise of future assistance, many mothers may remain in the Precontemplation stage indefinitely, as logistical and emotional barriers feel insurmountable.

Therefore, fostering relational agency is more than a personal strategy, it is a vital component in dismantling the ideal student norm discussed by Duffy et al. (2025). By challenging these rigid academic expectations, institutions and families ensure that a mother's aspirations are perhaps suspended, but never extinguished. Ultimately, as Mutti (2020) emphasizes, these long-term success strategies are essential to ensuring that the transition successfully culminates in graduation.

### **Internal Decisional Balance**

This theme represents the stage where mother-graduates begin to intend for change but remain caught in a state of profound ambivalence. Within the framework of the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), this aligns with the Contemplation Stage, characterized by a mental tug-of-war where individuals are acutely aware of the benefits of returning to school (the Pros) while remaining deeply concerned about the significant costs and barriers involved (the Cons). For the participants, this stage was a period of intense internal negotiation as they meticulously weighed their personal aspirations against the practical and financial realities of their circumstances.

To better understand the dynamics of this stage, the study identified four interrelated sub-themes that illustrate this decisional conflict: (1) Prioritizing Childcare Concerns (The Cons), (2) Navigating Financial Strain (The Cons), (3) Experiencing Role Strain (The Cons) and (4) Rekindling Latent Aspirations (The Pros). Each sub-theme is presented and discussed below.

**Prioritizing Childcare Concerns (The Cons).** This sub-theme captures the lived experiences of mother-graduates grappling with childcare-related anxieties while pursuing their education, particularly the emotional burden of leaving their children in the care of others. It reflects their worrying about the child's safety, well-being, and quality of care, alongside feeling guilt over being physically absent during crucial developmental years. Beyond logistical concerns, this code highlights an internal conflict between maternal responsibilities and academic aspirations, where mothers continuously question whether studying might compromise their child's needs, making childcare a significant perceived con in their decision-making process. The participants articulated these anxieties through the following shared narratives;

My main worries were who would take good care of my child while I was studying [Kasi 4 years old paylang diay anak ko di nag first year college ak, way back 2013.]

(Because my child was only 4 years old when I was in my first year of college.) **(P1)**

My worries is [yung anak ko, kung sino ang magbabantay.] (my child and who would watch over him.) **(P2)**

Who will look after my child while I am at school? **(P3)**

[Syempre] (ofcourse) my main thought or worries is who will take good care of my child.] **(P5)**

I was concerned about leaving my children with caregivers or family members and whether they would be okay while I was in school. (P10)

The participants' narratives reveal that childcare is the most significant con in their internal decisional balance. These worries are not merely logistical concerning who will physically watch the child but are deeply emotional, involving parental guilt and the fear of failing to provide maternal love. For many, the transition to the contemplation stage was characterized by great anxiety; even when help was available, the psychological weight of leaving a young child remained a formidable barrier. As P1 and P10 articulated, the anxiety centered on whether the child would be okay and well taken care of, meaning that for mother-graduates, academic entry is perceived as a potential risk to the child's well-being.

Espiritu et al. (2023) extensively corroborated this finding, who found that student-mothers face intense pressure to ensure their academic goals do not compromise their primary identity as good parents. This internal negotiation is a direct finding of what Duffy et al. (2025) describe as the ideal student norm, which assumes students are free from caregiving duties. Because the university system is often care-blind as noted by Moreau (2016), the mother is forced to carry the full emotional and logistical burden of childcare alone. Rodriguez (2024) highlighted that the lack of specialized institutional childcare, especially for children beyond infancy, creates an invisible barrier that forces mothers to rely almost exclusively on fragile familial networks.

The absence of reliable institutionalized support is a leading cause of educational attrition and prolonged suspended ambition. Abon et al. (2023) argue that without structural safety nets, the cons of education often feel overwhelming. This is further supported by Lewis (2026), who posits that the excessive price of childcare acts as a systemic wall, forcing parents to choose between immediate family survival and long-term goals. As Corrente (2022) emphasizes, these dimensions of struggle are not one-time obstacles but are continuously reconstructed through daily lived experience, meaning the mother may re-evaluate her decisional balance every single morning she leaves for campus. This constant role juggling is a core element of the role strain identified by Arabejo et al. (2025).

The weight of these concerns implies that for a mother, the path to graduation is a continuous negotiation of maternal responsibility. To tilt the decisional balance toward action, there is an urgent need for the care-filled college experience advocated by Montgomery et al. (2025). This includes wraparound services such as campus-based childcare services suggested by Ogunji et al. (2020), child-friendly study spaces, and the predictable flexibility identified by Mostajo (2025).

Without systemic interventions that acknowledge the daily reality of caregiving, the mother's persistence remains unsafe. As Sallee and Lewis (2025) mean, the importance of place is paramount; if the institutional and state-level policy context does not provide childcare subsidies or flexible attendance, the cons will continue to outweigh the pros, making academic success an unnecessarily stressful endeavor. By addressing these structural constraints, institutions can help transform childcare from an individual con into a shared institutional responsibility, facilitating the journey toward what Winters and Poster (2026) call Studying for Two.

**Enduring Financial Strain (The Cons).** This sub-theme captured the lived experiences of mother-graduates struggling with financial constraints while pursuing their education, particularly the challenge of allocating limited resources between academic expenses and household needs. It reflects their worrying about securing funds for tuition, transportation, and school requirements, while simultaneously providing for their family's daily necessities. Beyond practical financial difficulties, this subtheme highlights the pressure of balancing dual economic responsibilities, where pursuing education often leads to increased expenses and financial strain. It underscores how financial instability becomes a significant perceived con, shaping their decision-making and intensifying the burden of continuing their studies. As shared by the participants regarding their worries;

Where I would get the financial support to pay for my tuitions, school bus [kasi noong nag-aaral pa kasi ako is school bus, kasi from C\*\*\*\*, P\*\*\*\*\* to IS, so nag- school bus ako] (because back when I was studying, I used a school bus from C\*\*\*\*, P\*\*\*\*\* to IS) and other school requirements like Xerox copy, and during our time there was no free tuition fee. (P1)

My main thought or worries were ... [saan kukuha ng perang gagamitin sa pag-aaral.] (Where I would get the money for my studies.) (P5)

My worries are; second are expenses, my expenses doubled because I have to spend for my studies at the same for my family” (P8)

My main worries [ket diay kwarta nga talaga, pamasahem nga apan ageskwela.] (My main worries were money, transportation fare to go to school.) (P7)

The data reveals that financial strain is a pervasive barrier that complicates the decision-making process for mother-graduates. The cons identified here are not just about tuition, but the hidden costs of education transportation, instructional materials, and the literal doubling of a household budget to cover both a child's needs and academic requirements. As shared by P1 and P8, this financial anxiety creates a systemic wall where the participant may constantly negotiate between immediate family survival and the long-term investment of a degree. For these mothers, the contemplation stage is a period of calculating whether the family can afford the mother's absence from the workforce and the added presence of school fees.

These lived experiences are strongly corroborated by the work of Askelson et al. (2020), who explained that student-mothers must navigate very limited resources while meeting the rising costs of tuition and daily living. Anane et al. (2021) contributed the point that transportation and child-related expenses often push these students to their financial limits. The financial anxiety expressed by the participants regarding transportation and daily fees is a reflection of what Sallee and Lewis (2025) describe as the impact of the broader socio-political and legislative environment of a specific location. When policies fail to provide relevant financial lifelines, the cons in the decisional balance become overwhelming.

The doubling of expenses noted by P8 is a recurring theme that causes significant delays in a student's timeline as noted by Evitts (2022), who observes that mothers often face the temporary suspension of their academic goals as they prioritize their child's immediate needs over their own education. Despite these burdens, the participants' view of education as a long-term strategy for economic stability is supported by Miller (2022), who observed that mothers with at least a bachelor's degree maintained far greater professional stability during economic crises. This aligns with the concept of Studying for Two introduced by Winters and Poster (2026), suggesting that academic persistence is fundamentally driven by the desire to provide a better future for the child.

The implications of these narratives mean that institutions may recognize financial pressure not just as an administrative issue, but as a significant psychological barrier to the preparation and action stages of the Transtheoretical Model. If the cons of financial strain continue to outweigh the pros of aspirations, student-mothers are likely to remain stuck in the contemplation stage. To sustain persistence and tip the decisional balance toward graduation, institutions may provide flexible payment schemes and clear access to scholarship information as identified by Askelson et al. (2020). Fulfilling the need identified by Moreau (2016) involves moving beyond simple barrier analysis to develop frameworks that help these mothers not only survive but thrive financially.

Experiencing Role Strain (The Cons). This sub-theme describes the heavy stress mother-graduates feel as they think about going back to school. In the Contemplation Stage of the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), the person is intending to make a change (like enrolling in college). They are stuck in a mental tug-of-war. They see the benefits of a degree, but they are very afraid of the cons, the stress of balancing school, motherhood, and chores. This balance produces ambivalence, which can keep them stuck for a while. In describing this con of their decision, the participants noted;

so yung worries ko kung sino ang mag-aalaga, paano ko pagsasabayin ang anak ko at sa pag-aaral ko. [my worries ,who would watch the baby and how I would balance motherhood and studies. (P2)

ti worries ko, diay baka mafail nak diay panageskwelak, ken diay panangbalance ti school ken diay role ko as a mother and a wife also. [So my worries: the possibility of failing, how to balance my studies, and also fulfilling my role as a mother and a wife.](P6)



..My worries were: schedule, expenses, and family bond... bonding with my family will be limited because I needed time for my studies. **(P8)**

My main worries were finances, and whether I could handle the pressure of studying while fulfilling my responsibilities as a mother. **(P9)**

When I first thought about going back to school, I was really worried about how I would balance my responsibilities as a mother and a student. **(P10)**

The narratives reveal that role strain is a lived reality of constant multitasking and emotional exhaustion. Participants described a zero-sum game where time spent on studies was perceived as time stolen from family bonding, leading to a fear of failing in both arenas. This experience highlights the visceral stress of simultaneous role performance, which Arabejo et al. (2025) describe as extreme role strain occurring when academic and parental schedules collide. This tension creates a persistent internal conflict characterized by deep-seated guilt and self-doubt.

Baddley (2021) strongly supports these findings, noting that the balancing of academic tasks and childcare leads to profound physical exhaustion and sleep deprivation. This conflict is further intensified by what Kava et al. (2020) describe as a holistic understanding of success shaped by the constant presence of domestic responsibilities. As P6 and P8 articulated, this produces a state of ambivalence that can keep a mother stuck in the contemplation stage for a significant period.

These mothers face a non-traditional bias that complicates their sense of belonging, as argued by Behrens and Stykes (2025). They are often caught in a mental tug-of-war between conflicting societal definitions of a good parent and a good student. This struggle is rooted in the ideal student norm, a framework identified by Duffy et al. (2025) that assumes students possess unencumbered time, leading to the produced invisibility of parents within the institution. Consequently, mothers like P6 and P2 worry about failing their familial and academic obligations because the environment is not designed for dependents.

From the perspective of the Transtheoretical Model, moving from contemplation to action requires overcoming these significant cons. Thorson (2021) posits that self-efficacy acts as a psychological anchor, allowing post-traditional students to remain stable despite this external role strain. As Sutherland et al. (2024) note, the specific learning preferences of non-traditional students directly impact their belief in their ability to master complex curricula under these pressured conditions.

The implications for higher education institutions are clear: role strain is a structural issue as much as a personal one. To facilitate progression through the TTM stages, institutions may provide predictable flexibility, specifically through asynchronous learning, to help mothers overcome time poverty. Mostajo (2025) identifies this as a primary factor in student-mother success.

Implementing flexible academic schedules and specialized counseling programs can better accommodate the unique mental health needs of student-parents. By fostering care-filled college experiences and removing care-blind policies, institutions ensure that faculty acknowledge and respect the mother-student identity. As Corrente (2022) concludes, success is a continuous process of meaning-making where the individual learns to integrate these roles, provided they are supported by a community that shares the burden of persistence.

Rekindling Latent Aspirations (The Pros). This code represents the underlying desire for education and self-improvement that serves as the primary motivator for change. It captures the internal light of ambition that begins to glow more brightly than the fears associated with returning to school. As participants shared, this internal light was the catalyst for their return to the classroom;

I started thinking about studying again because I know that if I continued my studies, I would have better opportunities in life, [iso nga dyay nagdecideak nga oray bake baketakon ngay ituloy ko konak piman.] (that's why I decided that even though I was older, I would still continue my studies. ) **(P1)**

I know education would help me to get better opportunities, that the reason why I studied again. **(P6)**



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I did think about going back to school because I wanted to pursue my dreams. (P9)

The narratives reveal that participants viewed a degree as the essential key to unlocking better opportunities and fulfilling long-held dreams. This internal light of ambition represents a critical shift in the contemplation stage, where the desire for self-improvement becomes more luminous than the fears of returning to school. As P1 and P6 articulated, the realization that education provides better opportunities in life serves as the primary catalyst for change. For these mothers, the contemplation stage is not just a period of worry but an era of vision-building, where they begin to prioritize their aspirations over the social and logistical anchors that previously held them in a state of suspension.

This finding resonates with the research of Harcourt (2023), who asserts that success for student-mothers is a multifaceted concept that frequently diverges from traditional institutional metrics and is rooted in personal empowerment. This drive to fulfill long-held dreams is further validated by Winters and Poster (2026), who introduce the concept of Studying for Two, suggesting that academic persistence is fundamentally driven by the desire to provide a better future for the child. For the participants, the pro of education was not just personal empowerment but the creation of a collective family asset intended for social transformation. This shared future vision acts as the primary catalyst that tips the internal decisional balance toward action, transforming a personal goal into a collective mission for the entire household.

Corrente (2022) notes that academic progress is a dynamic process of identity development rather than a static end-point. This is further supported by Dasig (2020) and Baluyos and Alvarico (2024), who mean that student-mothers primarily define their own success through their ability to balance parenting duties and maintain family well-being alongside their academic growth. The transition from a state of suspended ambition to one of active intention is therefore driven by a vision of long-term stability and resilience. As Miller (2022) highlights, mothers who possess at least a bachelor's degree maintain far greater professional stability during economic crises, reinforcing the idea that higher education acts as a buffer against workforce volatility.

From the perspective of the Transtheoretical Model, this phase represents a measurable progression through specific stages of intentional change. Thorson (2021) identifies self-efficacy as a psychological anchor that leads post-traditional students to success by allowing them to remain stable despite external role strain. The internal strength manifested as grit and achievement-oriented goals is what directly links to superior academic performance in university settings.

The finding that maternal-academic transformation is driven by a beyond-the-self motive means that institutions may better support non-traditional students by aligning their outreach with the mother's long-term goals for her family. For educational institutions, this highlights the importance of emphasizing the long-term professional and personal benefits of degree completion in their outreach to non-traditional students. By validating these latent aspirations and framing education as a tool for both personal and generational empowerment, institutions can help tip the decisional balance for mothers who are still navigating the precariousness of the contemplation stage.

Recognizing the unique self-efficacy needs of diverse learners is essential to bridging the educational divide. As Walia (2026) argues, success is achieved when mothers name and claim their dual identities to reshape the institutional spaces they inhabit. By fostering an environment that celebrates the student-mother identity, institutions can move beyond mere survival-based existence and help these women truly thrive.

### **Latent Persistence**

This theme represents the intentional planning and strategic organization undertaken by mother-graduates as they transition from contemplation to action. Within the framework of the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), this aligns with the Preparation Stage, where individuals move beyond simply weighing the pros and cons and begin taking small, concrete steps toward change. For these participants, latent persistence involved creating a roadmap that addressed both their internal psychological state and their external environmental needs. This ensured they were not just re-entering school, but doing so with a structured plan for both survival and academic success.



To clarify how mother-graduates prepared for their re-entry into higher education, the study identified two complementary sub-themes: (1) Engaging in Holistic Self-Fortification and (2) Seeking Support and Building Alliances. Each sub-theme is presented and discussed below.

**Engaging in Holistic Self-Fortification.** This sub-theme represents the internal work of mother-graduates to brace themselves mentally, emotionally, and spiritually for the rigors of the academic journey. The participants describe their preparation process as;

First of all, I prepare myself [yung limang aspeto ng buhay] (the five aspects of life) for example physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, and spiritually, and as a mom I planned my schedule from Monday to Friday, so that every Saturday I could do tree planting [mapanak ngay makipulpuldiya, not only tree planting apanak makilaba kasdiay ] (I go out for manual labor, not only tree planting, I also work as a laundrywoman) for my additional allowance. I always reminded myself that no matter what happens I will continue my studies. **(P1)**

I prepared myself mentally and emotionally. **(P9)**

First, I prepared myself [yung mental health ko ganun, and nong nag go na ako don sa plan ko, lahat na ng mga ano, nagfollow na.] (my mental health and when I finally went through with my plan, everything else followed.) **(P5)**

The narratives demonstrate that readiness for a mother-graduate is a holistic endeavor. Participants did not view enrollment as a purely administrative act; instead, they engaged in self-fortification, acknowledging that success required stability across mental, physical, and spiritual domains. As seen in P1's five aspects approach and P5's focus on mental health, this stage is characterized by building internal resilience and a no matter what mindset to protect against the inevitable pressures of role conflict.

These findings are deeply rooted in the literature regarding student-mother resilience. Thorson (2021) identifies self-efficacy as a psychological anchor that leads post-traditional students to success by allowing them to remain stable despite external role strain. This internal strength is often manifested as grit, which Baluyos and Alvarico (2024) point to as a decisive factor where a mother's individual why serves as the primary driver for completing her degree. Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) link high levels of grit and achievement-oriented goals directly to superior academic performance in university settings.

This self-fortification also reflects the findings of Dasig (2020), who highlights that these women define their success through their ability to balance parenting duties and maintain family well-being alongside academic growth. The preparation described by participants often includes spiritual practice, which Dasig (2020) means is a key factor in sustaining persistence through difficult periods. Additionally, Corrente (2022) emphasizes that success is a dynamic process of identity development rather than a static end-point, meaning this internal preparation serves as the foundation for the unfolding life story of the student-mother.

The finding implies that the transition into higher education for mothers requires more than just academic orientation. Institutions may provide specialized counseling programs to better accommodate the unique mental health needs of student-parents, as advocated by Kisanga and Matiba (2023). By acknowledging the multiple aspects of a mother's readiness, colleges can help students move from the contemplation phase into a state of sustained action.

As Sylvester (2025) utilizes narrative inquiry to show, the journey of non-traditional women is defined by a continuous negotiation of identity, where the act of persisting is fueled by a growing sense of academic competence. Providing supportive environments as suggested by Corrente (2022) allows student-parents to mentally separate their responsibilities and focus more effectively on academic work. This holistic support is essential for reaching the Maintenance Phase of the Transtheoretical Model, ensuring long-term success and graduation.

**Seeking Support and Building Alliances.** This sub-theme encompasses the active negotiation and communication strategies student-mothers employed with family members and in-laws. These interactions are essential for securing the financial, emotional, and logistical scaffolding necessary to sustain their academic goals. This



deliberate effort to gather resources and reach agreements is clearly evidenced in the statements of the participants;

... I also talked with my family and in-laws for support and I always reminded myself that no matter what happens I will continue my studies. (P1)

In preparation... I discuss the needs of the school and the home with my family. (P8)

I asked my family for financial, emotional, and childcare support. (P9)

For mother-graduates, preparation is not an individual act but a collective family negotiation. Participants actively sought contracts of support regarding childcare and finances before taking the leap into enrollment. As seen in the discussion of P8 regarding the needs of the school and the home, mother-graduates recognize their success as inextricably linked to their familial scaffolding. They are not just students; they are coordinators of a support network who may secure logistical and emotional commitments before the first day of class.

This collective approach is strongly validated by Umarji (2023), who concludes that because institutional support is often inconsistent, student-parents rely almost entirely on familial networks to bridge the gap between their current reality and their future goals. The specific requests for financial and childcare support mentioned by P9 reflect what Exley and Willis (2025) term relational agency, a loop of collaborative engagement where the family and community share the burden of persistence with the student. Espiritu et al. (2023) also emphasize that student-mothers perceive success as the successful integration of conflicting societal roles, meaning that the preparation stage is essentially a phase of risk-mitigation for the family unit.

The importance of family proximity is further underscored by Cabulay et al. (2025), who note that factors such as marital status can function as significant assets. Partnered students benefit from a shared caregiving load that directly impacts their academic persistence. Hartsoch (2025) finds that social support is a powerful predictor of career decision-making self-efficacy, suggesting that the village a mother builds helps her believe in her future professional identity. Baddley (2021) corroborates that the ability to reconcile the roles of good parent and good student depends heavily on the reliability of this external support, allowing the mother to navigate her degree without compromising her primary domestic responsibilities.

From the perspective of the Transtheoretical Model, the transition from contemplation to action is marked by a final shift in the decisional balance. While role strain and childcare concerns initially created a state of profound ambivalence, the transition occurred when the participants' aspirational anchoring became heavy enough to tip the scale. This movement is defined by what Corrente (2022) describes as a dynamic process of identity development, where the mother stops viewing her dual roles as an immovable conflict and starts treating them as a set of life-management tasks to be mastered.

The necessity of this external support implies that institutional policies may be family-inclusive rather than care-blind. By recognizing the navigational capital of these families, colleges can lower the burden on informal support systems. As Montgomery et al. (2025) advocate, creating a care-filled college experience requires a paradigm shift that acknowledges the triple threat of work, parenting, and academics.

Higher education institutions may recognize that when they admit a mother, they are essentially engaging with her entire support ecosystem. Implementing flexible academic schedules and specialized counseling programs as suggested by Kisanga and Matiba (2023) can ensure that the transition from the preparation stage to active pursuit is sustained. By fostering relational agency, institutions help dismantle the ideal student norm identified by Duffy et al. (2025), ensuring that mother-graduates can move through the stages of change toward walking in fulfillment.

### Active Role Integration

This theme embodies the lived experience of mother-graduates as they transition into the Action Stage of the Transtheoretical Model (TTM). It represents the period of rigorous implementation where participants actively managed their time, fulfilled parenting duties simultaneously with academic requirements, and demonstrated

unwavering persistence. At this stage, the perceived benefits of achieving a degree finally outweigh the barriers, leading to visible behavioral changes and strategic lifestyle adjustments. This phase is characterized by the practical application of the plans developed in the previous stage, as the mother-graduates move from preparation to full immersion in their dual roles.

To better understand the multidimensional nature of this stage, the study identified three interrelated sub-themes: (1) Enduring the Weight of the Dual Burden, (2) Mastering Time Management and Prioritization, and (3) Sustaining Relational Reliance. Each sub-theme is presented and discussed below.

**Enduring the Weight of the Dual Burden.** This sub-theme represents the physical pain, mental exhaustion, and deep motherly guilt that participants felt while trying to finish their degrees. Even with support, they faced moments of self-pity and extreme stress. As expressed by the participants,

The hardest was, when there were event at my son's school, I could not attend... I could not always help him review his notes... especially when I was in the field of practice teaching... sometimes I pitied myself because I felt tired the whole day, not only mentally but also physically **(P1)**

The financial struggle is the main problem as a student-parent, and then the time, and the exhaustion. **(P5)**

Stress and having postpartum [idi agrac practice teachingak.] (when I was doing my practice teaching.) **(P6)**

Stress, especially [no nagsasabayan, nagsangit ni baby tas madama ka agleslesson plan tapos reality lang nga adda diay kadwam nga haan na aweren diay anakyo ... makasao kan ti haan dapat nga maisaon.] (when everything happened at once: the baby is crying while you are making a lesson plan, and then your partner won't watch the child, it makes you even angrier, to the point you might say things you shouldn't.) **(P7)**

The hardest part was dealing with homesickness, academic pressure, and parental guilt. I felt guilty when I had to divide my time between schoolwork and my child. **(P9)**

The narratives show that the action stage is not merely a logistical challenge of organization; it is a period of intense physical and emotional endurance. Participants described carrying a dual burden characterized by parental guilt, which stems from the painful perception that they were failing their children by missing school events or neglecting academic reviews and role overlap stress. This physical and mental exhaustion is directly reflected in the work of Velasquez (2025), who conceptualizes these lived experiences as the weight student-parents may carry. Baddley (2021) further illustrates how mothers feel constant pressure to reconcile the roles of a good parent and a good student simultaneously, leading to profound physical exhaustion.

The visceral stress felt by P7 is validated by Umarji (2023), who notes that the tension of simultaneous caregiving causes significant anxiety. These hardships are a direct consequence of what Duffy et al. (2025) term produced invisibility. Because the institution operates under the ideal student norm assuming students are unencumbered by dependents mother-graduates are forced to perform the labor of role integration without formal recognition. This lack of institutional recognition often leads to the sleep deprivation and extreme role strain identified by Abon et al. (2023) and Arabejo et al. (2025).

Montgomery et al. (2025) describe this as the triple threat of work, parenting, and academics. They argue that when a university operates under a care-free model, it forces mothers into a state of survival-based academic existence as noted by Rodriguez (2024). While the journey is defined by a continuous negotiation of identity amidst exhaustion (Corrente, 2022), these hardships are ultimately what build the emotional resilience and grit that define successful mother-graduates (Bustillo et al., 2024).

To better support the long-term well-being of student-parents, institutions may move away from care-blind models and recognize that degree attainment for student-mothers is a significant test of endurance. Educational institutions may recognize that these students often function at a breaking point. Providing specialized counseling programs and mental health support, as advocated by Kisanga and Matiba (2023), are vital interventions. Offering resources for postpartum health and excusing absences for essential family events can help dismantle the rigid structural limitations identified by Harcourt (2023).

This institutional shift is necessitated by the complex reality described by Cantero et al. (2024), who explain that the simultaneous pursuit of education and motherhood presents a multifaceted challenge where the balancing of academic responsibilities with the relentless demands of childcare significantly impacts well-being. By fostering a care-filled college experience as suggested by Montgomery et al. (2025), institutions can help mothers maintain the perseverance and academic self-efficacy necessary to sustain their journey until graduation day. As Campbell (2025) emphasizes, when institutional supports are in place, academic success serves to build a sense of self-worth and professional agency that extends far beyond domestic roles.

**Mastering Time Management and Prioritization.** This sub-theme represents the strategies and sacrifices mother-graduates utilized to ensure academic progress, including the use of strict daily routines and the elimination of social distractions. To manage the dual demands, participants shared;

I manage my time by making a daily routine schedule, where all my priorities were written; I studied during my free time at school. So that at home I will just focused to my child, [Pag time ng uwian, uwi agad, no barkada] (When it's time to go home, I go home immediately) no for personal wants. **(P1)**

I planned my schedule [so dapat, school, balay laeng, kasdiyawan ti barbarkada, and no adda dapat asikasuem, asikasuem en a. set aside mo paylang dagiti ragragsak.] (so it should just be school and home. No hanging out with friends, and if there's something you need to take care of, take care of it. Set aside time for leisure.) **(P6)**

Since my school was far from home, I stayed in a boarding house near the school during weekdays so I could focus on my studies. I made sure to communicate with my family regularly to check on my child and to stay emotionally connected. On weekends or free days, I went home to spend quality time with my child and give full attention to my role as a mother. **(P9).**

The data shows that the action stage for mother-graduates requires a total restructuring of their social and personal lives. Participants employed militant time management, eliminating social activities and personal desires to maintain a clear division between their academic and maternal responsibilities. As seen in the accounts of P1 and P6, they utilized dedicated time blocks to manage competing demands, treating their schedule as a survival tool. By prioritizing academic requirements during school hours, they ensured that their role as a mother remained uncompromised when they returned home.

This is extensively corroborated by Andrade, Fernandes, and Almeida (2024), who suggest that students who successfully move into the action stage employ meticulous strategies like active planning to manage external pressures. Campbell (2025) further notes that this period is where a psychological shift occurs from merely surviving to developing the competence to master life management skills. The sacrifice of leisure mentioned by the participants aligns with Jones-Foster (2022), who describes the academic wall as a constant struggle for balance inundated with a lack of time for both rest and self-care. For the mother-graduates in this study, their rigid adherence to routines was a structural necessity to bridge the gap between a care-blind campus and a care-demanding home.

The meticulous time-blocking strategies utilized by the participants are consistent with the time-shifting behaviors identified by Mostajo (2025), who argues that for student-parents, the ability to control study periods is a vital survival mechanism. Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) link this type of achievement-oriented goal setting and grit directly to superior academic performance. These findings mean that the strict routines were a manual version of the flexibility that contemporary asynchronous programs aim to provide, reinforcing that time control is central to the action stage.

Baddley (2021) highlights that student-mothers must constantly reconcile conflicting societal and institutional expectations, a tension that necessitates the strict prioritization observed throughout these narratives. As Corrente (2022) adds, these dimensions of identity and self-efficacy are continuously reconstructed through these daily lived experiences, where every successfully managed hour builds the mother's confidence to persist. This reinforces the point made by Tighe et al. (2024), that improving educational outcomes through such management is a two-generation benefit that stabilizes both the parent and the child.

The findings imply that time management for mother-graduates are not merely a soft skill but a structural necessity for academic survival. Institutions can support this stage by providing predictable, fixed schedules and asynchronous learning options that allow these students to maintain their dedicated blocks for parenting without falling behind academically. By recognizing that the mother-graduate is a navigator of a complex dual reality, higher education systems can implement policies that respect the limited time of these scholars, moving from a model of care-blindness to one that actively accommodates the labor of caregiving.

As Sylvester (2025) posits that the journey of these women is defined by a continuous negotiation of identity where the act of persisting is fueled by a growing sense of academic competence. Providing supportive environments and removing care-blind policies as advocated by Moreau (2016) allows student-parents to mentally separate their responsibilities and focus more effectively on academic work, ultimately ensuring their transition leads to successful graduation.

**Sustaining Relational Reliance.** This sub-theme represents the experience of mother-graduates leaning on a village of family, spouses, in-laws, and institutional financial aid to navigate heavy workloads and economic barriers. The transformative power of this collective support, which often simplifies the most difficult aspects of their journey, is vividly captured in the words of the participants;

There are so many things I consider in finishing my degree, first is ofcourse ni [it's] God who is the center of everything, secondly my family was always there behind me, supporting and cheering me on everyday especially during those sleepless nights spend creating instructional materials and lesson plan.. (P1)

..siguro diay daddoma, hardest kaniada ta ti talaga gamin nga narigat ket diay panagaywan , pero with the help of my parents and my husband di ako ganoong nahirapan, maybe isu talaga ti main reason, kasi mahahati diay time mo eh pero the hard, kunada garud no diay hard ket adda mangtulong kenka, agbalin nga easy. (Perhaps for others, the hardest part is really the caretaking, but with the help of my parents and my husband, I didn't find it that hard. Maybe that's the main reason, because your time is divided, but as they say, if there is someone to help you, the 'hard' parts become easy). (P2)

I did not feel hard because my Mother-in-law is very supportive, also my parents, they help me as well my siblings. (P4)

scholar nak gamin dita IS, di sinumrekak gamin as valedictorian , 100% gamin nga free[tuition], iso di sinumrekak haanko problema ti tuition ko, and dita la asideg ti balay ko, haanko problema ti boardingko, haanko problema transportation ko, kasi malapit lang. (I was a scholar at ISPSC because I entered as valedictorian, so it was 100% free [tuition]. Because of that, I didn't have a problem with tuition...and since it [the school] was near my house, I didn't have a problem with boarding or transportation.) (P2)

The relational reliance found in this study is a lived manifestation of what Exley and Willis (2025) term relational agency. For the mother-graduates, the assistance of husbands, parents, and siblings was not merely help, but a form of collaborative agency that made the hard parts of practice teaching feel manageable. Their narratives prove that when the community and family engage with the student's academic world, the path to graduation becomes a shared victory. As P2 and P4 noted, the perceived difficulty of the journey is inversely proportional to the level of support; assistance from the household transforms the most challenging tasks into manageable daily routines.

These findings are heavily validated by Umarji (2023), who concludes that because institutional support is often inconsistent, student-parents rely almost entirely on familial networks specifically partners and parents to provide essential emotional, financial, and childcare assistance. This is reinforced by Winters and Poster (2026), who identify the village effect as the most critical factor in preventing attrition. They argue that without both relational reliance and institutional support, the weight of the dual burden becomes academically unsustainable. This corroborates the experiences of P2, whose journey was facilitated by the active involvement of extended family and the removal of systemic walls through institutional scholarships and geographic proximity.

This village of support is what Lewis (2026) describes as a multigenerational intervention. She argues that because the costs of poverty and the lack of systemic support are so high, student-mothers may leverage every relational asset they have to ensure that their degree can eventually break the cycle of poverty for the entire family. The importance of relationship status as a significant asset is underscored by Cabulay et al. (2025), who argue that partnered students benefit from shared financial and caregiving loads. The role of scholarships mentioned by P2 is consistent with Umarji (2023), who notes that financial grants are vital lifelines that allow students to focus on their aspirational capital rather than immediate survival.

From the perspective of the Transtheoretical Model, this reliance represents the process of helping relationships during the Action and Maintenance stages. As Hartsoch (2025) finds, social support is a powerful predictor of career decision-making self-efficacy. For the participants in this study, the presence of these family-based lifelines dictated their total academic capacity (Kisanga & Matiba, 2023). By bridging the gap between a care-blind institution and a care-demanding home, these alliances allowed the mothers to maintain their student identity without sacrificing their maternal role.

The necessity of this external support implies that degree attainment for student-mothers is a significant test of endurance where the institution may become an active partner in the village. Educational institutions may recognize that these students often function at a breaking point and may provide family-inclusive policies. This includes implementing flexible academic schedules and specialized counseling programs to better accommodate the unique mental health needs of student-parents as advocated by Kisanga and Matiba (2023).

By acknowledging these challenges, institutions can help mothers maintain the perseverance and determination necessary to sustain their journey until graduation day. This institutional shift is necessitated by the complex reality described by Cantero et al. (2024), who explain that the simultaneous pursuit of education and motherhood presents a multifaceted challenge where the balancing of academic responsibilities with childcare significantly impacts well-being. Ultimately, as Campbell (2025) emphasizes, when these institutional supports are in place, academic success serves to build a sense of self-worth and professional agency that extends far beyond domestic roles, stabilizing the mother's identity as a competent professional.

## Worth Realized

This theme represents the culminating stage of the mother-graduates' journey, aligning with the Maintenance Stage of the Transtheoretical Model (TTM). In this phase, the participant has successfully reached her academic goal and transitioned into a new reality. The degree is no longer a distant aspiration but a permanent asset that has fundamentally altered her socioeconomic standing and self-perception. This stage is characterized by the stabilization of the new normal, where the mother-graduate sustains her achievements and navigates the professional world with the credentials she fought to obtain.

To capture the enduring impact of this achievement, the study identified three interrelated sub-themes: (1) Sustaining Motivation for Future Growth, (2) Integrating into the Professional Sphere, and (3) Internalizing Identity Transformation. Each sub-theme is presented and discussed below.

**Sustaining Motivation for Future Growth.** This sub-theme captures the intrinsic drive and external support systems that empowered mother-graduates to persevere, maintain focus, and remain committed until graduation. As shared by the participants,

There are so many things I consider in finishing my degree, first is of course ni God who is the center of everything, secondly my family was always there behind me, supporting and cheering me on everyday especially during those sleepless nights spend creating instructional materials and lesson plan and most of the time for taking good care of my son during my busy days, strong determination is my key finishing my degree. **(P1)**

First ket diay family nga talaga, ken maysa ket haan mo maiwasan ngay ti kailiam nga sumanao, ti kita da ngay gamn ket nababa, parang ganun, diay kunkunada nga 'emm daytuy imbes ket nga ageskwela agpaspasikog ti ubra na' kasla kasdiay, ket konak sige man, ta ipakitak nga kayak, oray nasikoganak palpasek daytuy, ipalpas ko, agboardak makapasa ak, ken aside from that ket diay sweldo, makitkitam[other teachers] diay , wow teacher

en, pia pay daytuy makaparebond , napintas ti kasasaad ti biag na, isu dagyay ti ng nang motivate kaniak, ngem first talaga ket dagitay sao ti sabsabali dagitay judgement da. [First, it's really my family who supports me. But sometimes you can't avoid neighbors who gossip about you and look down on you. They say things like, 'This one got pregnant instead of studying.' When I hear that, I tell myself, 'I will prove them wrong. Even though I got pregnant, I will finish my studies. I will graduate, take the board exam, and pass it.' Aside from that, the salary motivates me too. Seeing other teachers, I think, 'Wow, they are now teachers, and they can even get bonuses. Their life is good.' That really motivates me, but the main reason is to those people who judge me wrong.] (P7)

Diay anak ko, isuna ti nagbalin nga motivation ko. [My child is my main motivation.] (P6)

My child is my main motivation... My love for my child and my dream of giving them a better life kept me motivated. (P9)

The data shows that finishing a degree was fueled by a triple engine of motivation. First, the Child/Family factor acted as the primary driver, where maternal love was transformed into a push for a better future. Second, External Pressure specifically gossip and community judgment was repurposed into a positive force; as P7 articulated, negative comments were used as fuel to prove their worth. Third, Internal Vision and Faith provided the psychological scaffolding to survive the rigors of the academic journey. These mothers were pulled toward the finish line by a clear vision of professional stability and family pride.

These sustaining forces are strongly backed by the literature on non-traditional student success. Umarji (2023) notes that extrinsic motivation, specifically the desire to provide for children, is the most powerful driver for student-parents. This aligns with the concept of "Studying for Two" (Winters & Poster, 2026), where academic persistence is fundamentally driven by a two-generation benefit that stabilizes both the parent and the child (Tighe et al., 2024). Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) link high levels of grit and achievement-oriented goals directly to superior academic performance, explaining why these mothers maintain such an intense focus despite external pressures.

The strategy of proving others wrong, as mentioned by Participant 7, aligns with the findings of Baddley (2021), who argues that graduation serves as a powerful means for mothers to reconcile their dual roles while effectively silencing social criticism. This process functions as a form of rhetorical agency, a concept discussed by Walia (2026), wherein the mother re-authors her personal narrative to decouple her self-worth from community gossip. Furthermore, the reliance on spiritual centering described by Participant 1 is consistent with the research of Dasig (2020), who identifies spirituality as a primary coping mechanism that fosters balance and family well-being. Ultimately, as Espiritu et al. (2023) observed, when a mother frames her success as a collective family achievement, she gains the resilience necessary to avoid succumbing to the academic wall of exhaustion.

The implications of these findings suggest that a mother's motivation is inherently relational; it is tied to her children, her parents, and her community. This highlights the importance of institutional environments that validate the student-mother identity rather than ignoring it. As Montgomery et al. (2025) mean, creating a care-filled college experience involves acknowledging the triple threat of work, parenting, and academics, and framing the degree as a tool for generational empowerment.

For educational institutions, the best way to prevent attrition among mother-students is to reinforce their why. Programs that celebrate the student's family or provide clear professional roadmaps such as guidance for board exams and career placement can help sustain these high levels of motivation. By recognizing the aspirational capital (Umarji, 2023) of these women, institutions can help ensure that the internal light of ambition leads them from the action stage into a state of permanent professional fulfillment and worth realized.

Integrating into the Professional Sphere. This sub-theme describes how finishing school immediately changed the mothers' lives by giving them access to stable jobs and better pay. The feeling of transformation is best expressed by the participants;



After I graduated, my achievement impacted my personal life and family by opening up work opportunities. **(P1)**

After I graduated gamin, nagkinder teacher ak nga dagos diay central, so diyay after 1 year nakastrekak nga dagos met ti DepEd, sunga di nakastrekak, dyayen a, iba parin yung nakatapos ka , dahil makakapasok ka kaagad ng trabaho. [After I graduated, I immediately became a kinder teacher at central... After one year, I was able to enter DepEd right away. It really is different when you've finished your studies, because you can get a job immediately.] **(P2)**

It also led me to better job opportunities, career advancement, and higher earning potential. **(P8)**

The data shows that for mother-graduates, a degree is a life-changing catalyst that moves them from a state of chronic financial worry to a state of professional security. The participants highlighted that graduation was the specific key that opened doors to stable government positions, such as those within the Department of Education. For these women, the degree was not merely a symbol of academic learning; it was a practical and powerful tool used to increase their household income and provide a better life for their children. As P2 noted, the transition from a student-teacher to a permanent teacher happened quickly, proving that the maintenance stage of their journey is defined by the successful integration of a new professional identity.

These findings are extensively supported by a wide range of research. Miller (2022) and Campbell (2025) both argue that obtaining a college degree is the most effective strategy a mother can use to achieve economic stability and re-author the financial future of her family. This matches the findings of Umarji (2023), who means that the primary extrinsic motivation for student-mothers is the secure future of their children. The immediate jump into the workforce seen in the story of P2 aligns with Harcourt (2023), who asserts that success for student-mothers is a multifaceted concept that frequently diverges from traditional institutional metrics and is rooted in long-term personal empowerment.

This decision to return to school as a calculated move to find a path out of poverty is a theme explored by Jones-Foster (2022). For the participants in this study, the professional integration they achieved is the physical evidence that their earlier sacrifices were a sound investment. This is further validated by Dasig (2020) and Baluyos and Alvarico (2024), who show that mother-graduates primarily define their own success through their ability to balance parenting duties and maintain family well-being through their new capacity to help their families. This finding in what Winters and Poster (2026) call the generational return on education, or Studying for Two, where the mother's degree becomes a permanent family asset that benefits the next generation.

Tighe et al. (2024) link academic success directly to the well-being of student parents, suggesting that improving educational outcomes is a two-generation benefit that stabilizes both the parent and the child. As Walia (2026) argues, this level of success is achieved when mothers name and claim their dual identities to reshape the spaces they inhabit. The professional integration stage proves that the financial strain and the systemic walls felt during the earlier stages were worth the struggle, eventually leading to a state of worth realized.

The professional integration of mother-graduates implies that degree attainment is one of the most effective ways to break the cycle of poverty within a community. For educational institutions, this means that providing scholarships and flexible programs does more than just help a single student; it changes the economic status of an entire household. By recognizing the aspirational capital of these mothers as discussed by Umarji (2023), schools can foster an environment where walking in fulfillment becomes a reality for more parenting students.

Institutional awareness and the removal of care-blind policies, as emphasized by Moreau (2016), are prerequisites for ensuring that more mothers reach this stage of professional stability. When institutions provide the necessary structural safety nets advocated by Evitts (2022), they facilitate a smoother transition into the workforce. Ultimately, as Campbell (2025) emphasizes, academic success builds a sense of self-worth and professional agency that extends far beyond domestic roles, permanently stabilizing the mother's identity as a competent professional.

Internalizing Identity Transformation. This sub-theme represents the deep internal change in the mothers. They moved from feeling judged by others to feeling proud, independent, and respected. Reflecting on their success, the participants share;

Kasla ngay confident nakon, naging proud nak diay bagik nga kayak met gayam. [I became confident... I feel proud of myself that I made it.] **(P6)**

I had increased confidence for completing a degree because this boosted my self-esteem and empowered me to take on new challenges. **(P8)**

Kasla naging independent ak metten dagitay sumanao idi madengngeg mon nga kasla ipraise dakan haan nga kasla idi nga kitan daka ti nababa. [It's like I became independent..Those who used to speak negatively about me are now praising me, unlike before when they looked down on me.] **(P7)**

After I graduated, it strengthened my self-confidence. **(P10)**

I was recognized sa mga hardships ko and shown that I can be able to graduate despite of what happened to me. **(P5)**

The findings show that graduation fundamentally repaired the participants' self-image, facilitating a profound status shift within their communities. Before completing their degrees, many participants felt marginalized due to the stigma of being student-parents. The act of graduating transformed this external perception into one of praise and professional respect. As expressed by P6 and P7, this change created a strong sense of independence and a confident attitude. This phase represents the successful transition from a state of suspended ambition to a realized professional identity where the mother is finally seen as a capable leader.

This transformation is strongly validated by Campbell (2025), who explains that academic success builds a sense of self-worth and professional agency that extends far beyond domestic roles. Corrente (2022) describes the journey of a student-mother as an unfolding life story where identity is constantly rebuilt and improved through lived experience. Lewis (2026) expands this by positing that the completion of a degree is a multigenerational intervention; the mother's realized worth acts as a catalyst that shifts the trajectory for her children. In this context, the mother's pride is not just personal but is a shared asset that reshapes her family's social standing, a concept Tighe et al. (2024) describe as a two-generation benefit.

The shift from being judged to being praised is a key part of what Baddley (2021) describes as reconciling roles. By graduating, these women proved they could successfully occupy the roles of both a good mother and a good student, effectively silencing social criticism. Pueyo (2022) noted that this realization of self-worth is the final step in overcoming the emotional burden of dual roles. Additionally, the resilience these mothers developed while studying makes them uniquely goal-oriented as they enter their professional lives (Bustillo et al., 2024). This aspirational capital, as noted by Umarji (2023), eventually stabilizes into a permanent state of high self-esteem.

The identity transformation found in this study aligns with the rhetorical agency described by Walia (2026). By graduating, these mothers have re-authored their stories, moving from a position of marginalization to one of leadership. Their success effectively transforms the world around them, forcing their communities to recognize their professional competence. The finding implies that graduation provides a form of social healing where the emotional weight felt during the action stage is replaced by a sense of victory.

For higher education, this means that graduating mother-students creates resilient role models who demonstrate that personal growth and identity transformation are as significant as academic grades. As Harcourt (2023) asserts, success for student-mothers may be viewed as a multifaceted concept that goes beyond traditional metrics. Institutions can support this final stage of the Transtheoretical Model Maintenance or Worth Realized by providing alumni networks and career mentorship that continue to validate the professional identity of mother-graduates. By celebrating these narratives of success, colleges help dismantle the ideal student norm (Duffy et al., 2025) and prove that academic environments can be spaces of profound personal and social restoration.

## Challenges Encountered by Mother-Graduates

This theme presents the multifaceted obstacles encountered by student-mothers as they navigate the rigorous demands of higher education alongside their primary caregiving roles. These challenges are not merely academic or logistical but represent a complex interplay of economic, emotional, and social pressures that test the resilience of the participants.

To capture the complexity of these obstacles, the study identified five interrelated sub-themes: (1) Childcare Responsibility, (2) Financial Constraints, (3) Time Management Struggles, (4) Physical and Emotional Exhaustion, and (5) Social Judgment and Stigma. Each sub-theme is presented and discussed below.

**Childcare Responsibility.** This sub-theme represents the fundamental logistical challenge of securing reliable and consistent childcare. It encompasses the anxiety and practical difficulty of finding a trustworthy person or system to supervise the child while the mother attends classes, completes school requirements, or participates in off-campus activities like practice teaching. The constant internal negotiation regarding the safety and supervision of their children is clearly reflected in the shared experiences of the participants;

My main worries were who would take good care of my child while I was studying. **(P1)**

My worries is yung anak ko, kung sino ang magbabantay. [My worry is my child, who will look after them.] **(P2)**

Who will look after my child while I am at school? **(P3)**

Syempre my main thought or worries is who will take good care of my child. **(P5)**

Diay konak garud yung walang mag-aalaga sa aking baby. [As I've said, no one will take care for my baby.] **(P7)**

The finding indicates that the absence of a dedicated caregiver is a primary deterrent that complicates the mother's ability to focus on her academic responsibilities. Mothers mean that without a guaranteed support system, the act of attending school feels like a gamble with their child's safety and well-being. This transition is relevant because it demonstrates that the mother's academic participation is entirely contingent upon the availability of a surrogate caregiver, making childcare the most critical infrastructure for her success.

This perspective is supported by Harcourt (2023), who notes that success for student-mothers is a multifaceted concept measured primarily by the family's thriving. This implies that academic progress becomes secondary if the child's care is in question. Dasig (2020) adds that these students often define their success through their ability to serve as role models, meaning that the struggle to find childcare is frequently internalized as a personal failure to manage dual roles. While Espiritu et al. (2023) suggest that grit is sustained by motives beyond the self, the persistent worry over childcare can drain the mental energy required to maintain that determination. Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) further argue that logistical stability is a relevant predictor of academic endurance, as it outweighs the temporary discomfort of fatigue.

The lens of family well-being remains the ultimate metric for staying the course, as identified by Kava et al. (2020), while Braund et al. (2020) suggest that success must include the mother's ability to remain emotionally connected to her child. Moreau (2016) points out that a mother's internal motivation creates a care-centric logic that often clashes with the care-blind nature of academic institutions. While Blanton (2021) suggests a child can act as a psychological buffer, this only occurs when the mother feels the child is secure. Milsom (2021) notes that the demanding nature of academia is tolerable only when the student perceives her labor as a sacrificial investment, a sentiment that vanishes if the child is perceived as neglected. Finally, Kisanga and Matiba (2021) conclude that while a clear purpose reduces role strain, the lack of a caregiver creates a structural burden that individual motivation cannot resolve.

To address these systemic barriers, institutions may enhance support by integrating child-friendly policies into core student services as recommended by Moreau (2016). Establishing on-campus childcare or partnerships with

local providers may reinforce the stability necessary for students to maintain their sense of belonging, a need emphasized by Espiritu et al. (2023). Academic advising may also implement family-centered goal-setting to help students navigate semesters with fluctuating childcare availability. By validating the necessity of reliable childcare, the institution may move away from a care-blind approach and toward a more inclusive environment that honors the collective sacrifice of the household.

**Financial Constraints.** This sub-theme describes the direct financial burden of higher education on the student-mother. It involves the constant struggle to fund tuition fees, daily transportation costs, and various school requirements like instructional materials, which often compete with the household's basic needs. The pressure of choosing between academic expenses and the child's immediate needs is clearly reflected in the shared experiences of the participants:

Where I would get the financial support to pay for my tuitions, school bus... and other school requirements, like xerox copy. **(P1)**

nadagdagan yung need ng mother and as a student, kinakailangan na may budget kasi may anak na ako noon, and the tuition fee and my child's needs. (a mother's needs increased, and as a student, a budget was necessary because I already had a child then.) **(P4)**

Syempre my main thought or worries is... saan kukuha ng perang gagamitin sa pag-aaral. [where I will get the money for my studies.] **(P5)**

My main worries ket diay kwarta nga talaga, pamasahem nga apan ageskwela. [My main worry is really the money, the fare to go to school.] **(P7)**

My main worries were finances. **(P9)**

The findings show that financial constraints function as a systemic barrier, reframing the academic journey as a high-stakes economic struggle. For these participants, every educational expense represents a direct trade-off with their child's immediate needs, inducing a state of perpetual financial anxiety. Consequently, academic persistence is redefined: it is no longer merely a measure of intellectual capability, but a grueling test of financial endurance and resourcefulness.

The finding is deeply corroborated by existing research which identifies the economic landscape of higher education as a high-stakes environment for student-mothers. According to Askelson et al. (2020), these women must navigate extremely limited resources while simultaneously facing the rising costs of both tuition and daily living expenses. This reality is reflected in the participants' shared worries regarding school fees, family needs and the recurring costs of transportation, a challenge that Anane et al. (2021) describe as a pressure point that often pushes student-mothers to their absolute financial limits. This is further substantiated by Briegel et al. (2023), who emphasize that systemic hurdles often arise from institutional assumptions that fail to recognize the duality of the student-parent role, leading to a lack of specific support mechanisms that are essential for degree completion. Complementing this, Carmichael et al. (2026) identify a critical lack of institutional visibility and tracking for this demographic, noting that without clear data on student-parents, they face unique and heightened risks of attrition throughout their academic journey.

This economic struggle carries profound implications for the nature of academic persistence, transforming it into a test of financial endurance. As Evitts (2022) observes, the intense pressure of these financial trade-offs often leads mothers to temporarily suspend their own goals to prioritize their family's immediate well-being. However, when these mothers do persist, the literature suggests they are fueled by what Winters and Poster (2026) call "Studying for two", where the degree is reframed as a tool for caregiving rather than a personal trophy. This perspective aligns with the work of Baluyos and Alvarico (2024), who argue that for these women, the pursuit of education is a collective family asset intended for social transformation. By enduring the financial anxiety described in the findings, the student-mother transforms her individual ambition into a form of maternal devotion and generational investment. This shift allows them to navigate what Andrewartha et al. (2023) call

time and financial poverty, where every school expense is strategically managed to avoid compromising the household's basic needs.

The broader impact of overcoming these financial walls is validated by longitudinal studies which show that the value of the degree extends far beyond graduation day. Researchers like Miller (2022) have found that a bachelor's degree acts as a critical buffer against workforce volatility and economic crises, providing a lifelong safety net for the family. Therefore, while the participants experience their current financial situation as a state of perpetual anxiety, the completion of their studies signifies a permanent shift in their socioeconomic standing and self-perception, as noted by Schultheiss (2021). This corroboration shows that institutional support, such as the predictable flexibility identified by Mostajo (2025) and the removal of care-blind policies advocated by Montgomery et al. (2025), is essential to bridge the gap between financial struggle and long-term familial stability. Ultimately, the findings highlight that for student-mothers, academic success is not merely a test of intelligence but a grueling test of financial resourcefulness that requires a more care-filled and inclusive approach from higher education institutions to move beyond simple barrier analysis toward actionable support mechanisms.

**Time Management Struggles.** This sub-theme represents the core challenge of time management and role strain. It involves the struggle to meet the strict demands of academic schedules while fulfilling the unpredictable and intensive demands of mothering and household management, often leading to divided attention. The constant pressure of navigating these two greedy institutions school and home is clearly reflected in the shared experiences of the participants;

I was worried about my time, and if I could balance school and my child. ken diay panangbalance ti school ken diay role ko as a mother and a wife also. [and how to balance school and my role as a mother and a wife also.] **(P6)**

How could I manage my time being a mother and a student at the same time? **(P8)**

I was really worried about how I would balance my responsibilities as a mother and a student... I was worried if I could still keep up with the lessons and if I could still balance my time. **(P10)**

The findings indicate that the challenge of balancing dual roles is a significant source of both mental and physical exhaustion. For these mothers, identity is often fractured between two demanding institutions, academic life and domestic responsibilities, leaving negligible time for self-care. This transition is pivotal because it redefines success not just through academic mastery, but through the constant juggling of roles, where the primary skill becomes the ability to rapidly shift between disparate identities and tasks.

The findings show that the main challenge for student-mothers is the constant battle to manage their time between school and home. This is more than just feeling busy; it is a state of time poverty where every hour is strictly used for either chores or school, leaving zero time for rest. Because their schedules are so tight, these mothers must learn to switch instantly between being a student and being a parent.

This is supported by Baddley (2021), who explains that the intense effort needed to balance schoolwork with childcare leads to deep physical exhaustion, as seen in the experiences of the participants. Arabejo et al. (2025) further emphasize that the heaviest strain happens when school deadlines and family needs collide at the same time, leaving mothers with no flexible hours. These findings imply that for student-mothers, success is not just about academic learning, but about mastering the art of logistical agility, the specialized ability to reconcile two conflicting roles within a very limited timeframe.

The participants' worry about keeping up with lessons highlights a problem identified by Duffy et al. (2025), who note that most schools are designed for students who have open and flexible schedules. Since student-mothers do not have this luxury, their academic journey is defined by militant time management (Espiritu et al., 2023) and the ability to negotiate for the time and space they need (Walia, 2026).

Without specific support such as asynchronous or flexible learning, Mostajo (2025) emphasizes that student-mothers struggle to regain control over their time, making it difficult to meet academic demands alongside

caregiving responsibilities. In the absence of these supports, they face what Montgomery et al. (2025) describe as a triple threat of work, parenting, and academics, which significantly increases their risk of attrition.

This corroboration implies that academic success for mother-graduates is not solely dependent on individual effort but is heavily shaped by the availability of external support systems. To facilitate degree completion, institutions may move beyond merely identifying challenges and instead provide concrete structural interventions. As argued by McMillen (2022), the presence of a village of support, combined with institutional flexibility such as adaptable scheduling, is essential in enabling mothers to manage their time effectively and sustain their academic engagement.

**Physical and Emotional Exhaustion.** This sub-theme captures the total depletion of the student-mother's physical and mental resources. It focuses on the biological impact of the schedule, including sleep deprivation, postpartum recovery struggles, and the general stress of managing multiple high-stakes responsibilities. The exhaustion stemming from the night-shift labor required to balance academics and parenting is clearly reflected in the shared experiences of the participants;

Sometimes I pitied myself because I felt tired the whole day, not only mentally but also physically. **(P1)**

Well I guess the hardest part is waking up early in the morning then sleeping late in the evening to finish my all my requirements. **(P3)**

Stress and having postpartum idi agrac practice teachingak. [Stress and having postpartum while I was doing practice teaching.] **(P6)**

Stress, especially no nagsasabayen, nagsangit ni baby tas madam aka agleslesson plan tapos reality lang nga adda diay kadwam nga haan na aweren diay anak u, kasla nga karkaro nga makaunget kan ngay, nga makasao kan ti haan dapat nga maisaon, or no maminsan awan ti kadwa nga agawer. (Stress, especially when everything happened at once: the baby is crying while you are making a lesson plan, and then in reality, your partner is there but won't watch the child it makes you even angrier, to the point you might say things you shouldn't, or sometimes there's just no one to help watch the baby.) **(P7)**

The finding indicates that sleep deprivation and postpartum struggles are constant companions of the student-mother, serving as the physical manifestation of her role conflict. Mothers mean that their academic labor is primarily night-shift labor, performed when the child is asleep, leading to perpetual exhaustion. This transition is relevant because it shows that the mother's academic performance is hindered by her biological need for rest and recovery, making her achievement a relevant feat of physical endurance.

Kisanga and Matiba (2023) emphasize that the mental toll of managing multiple responsibilities is intensified by physical exhaustion, which can undermine long-term academic stability. This aligns with the accounts of the participants, particularly the experience of sleepless nights, which illustrate how time deprivation translates into both cognitive and physical fatigue. In this context, success is not limited to academic performance but extends to endurance, as Harcourt (2023) explains that achievement for student-mothers is multifaceted and includes the capacity to sustain physical and emotional resilience. Supporting this, Dasig (2020) highlights that mother-students define success through grit and perseverance, qualities that are continuously tested under conditions of fatigue and limited rest.

This internal drive is further reinforced by Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020), who identify self-regulation and achievement-oriented motivation as strong predictors of persistence despite exhaustion. However, this endurance is not pursued for individual gain alone. Kava et al. (2020) argue that student-mothers measure success through the lens of family well-being, meaning that sacrifices such as sleep deprivation are reframed as necessary acts of caregiving. In the same vein, Braund et al. (2020) assert that a holistic understanding of success must include the mother's physical well-being, suggesting that prolonged exhaustion may challenge the sustainability of this balancing act. Despite these constraints, Moreau (2016) notes that internal motivation enables student-mothers to navigate care-blind academic systems, allowing them to persist even when institutional support is limited.

Winters and Poster (2026) frame this period furthermore, as one of identity formation, where the mother's role as both caregiver and student is continuously negotiated, often under physically demanding conditions. This evolving identity is sustained by a strong sense of purpose, as Blanton (2021) emphasizes that having a clear goal serves as a critical anchor that helps mothers endure the physical toll of exhaustion.

Taken together, these findings mean that while physical fatigue is an inevitable consequence of managing dual roles, it is mitigated by a combination of internal motivation, caregiving priorities, and a redefined understanding of success. However, the persistence of such conditions also underscores the need for institutional structures that not only recognize resilience but actively reduce the physical burden placed on student-mothers.

According to Harcourt (2023), to mitigate the biological and mental toll of dual-role demands, the institution may implement structural changes such as asynchronous learning options that allow student-mothers to align their studies with their necessary rest cycles. It also means that the institution could provide official maternity leave policies or flexible return-to-school plans for postpartum mothers. As Moreau (2016) argues, by acknowledging the biological reality of childbirth and caregiving, the university could move away from a care-blind approach. Finally, these findings mean that wellness and self-care resources could be relevant to supporting the mother's worth realized.

**Social Judgment and Stigma.** This sub-theme represents the external social pressure and internal emotional responses associated with being a mother in an academic environment. It involves negative comments from the community and the resulting feelings of shame or embarrassment that mother-students must overcome to persist. The weight of being viewed as irresponsible or incapable by one's community is clearly reflected in the shared experiences of the participants;

Oray anyia ti konkona dagiti tao, ta diba dagiti tattao gamin ngay ket no naganak kan ket ibaga da “apay ageskwe eskwela payla dayta” (Some people would criticize you just because you had a child, saying, ‘Why is she still studying?’) **(P6)**

Haan mo maiwasan ngay ti kailiam nga sumanao, ti kita da ngay gamin kenkan ket nababa... ‘daytuy imbes ket nga ageskwela agpaspasikog ti ubra na’. [you can't avoid your other people talking, they look down on you... 'Instead of studying, she gets pregnant instead.'] **(P7)**

no gamin adda anak mon ket ti panangkita da kanyamon awanen ti mararating mon. [when you have a child, their view of you is that you won't achieve anything anymore.] **(P9)**

The findings reveal that social judgment functions as a critical external barrier that shapes the academic experience of mother-students by generating internal feelings of shame, embarrassment, and diminished self-worth. The participants' narratives demonstrate that negative community perceptions such as being labeled irresponsible or incapable, do not only affect how others see them but also influence how they see themselves, often creating hesitation and self-doubt in pursuing higher education. This indicates that the challenge extends beyond academic demands into the social sphere, where mothers must continuously negotiate their identity in the face of stigma. As a result, their educational journey becomes a struggle for both academic completion and social validation, where persisting in school requires resisting and redefining these negative societal labels.

This finding is corroborated by Moreau (2016), who explains that the care-blind nature of higher education institutions often reflects broader societal attitudes, thereby reinforcing the marginalization and invisibility of student-mothers. In this context, the stigma experienced by the participants is not isolated but structurally reproduced, making their persistence more difficult. Similarly, Dasig (2020) highlights that mother-students define success through their ability to overcome such barriers, suggesting that confronting and enduring social judgment becomes a central component of their resilience and growth. Harcourt (2023) further supports this by asserting that success is multifaceted, extending beyond academic achievement to include the restoration of self-worth and social standing. This perspective reframes graduation as not only an educational milestone but also a symbolic reclaiming of dignity.

Winters and Poster (2026) describe this transition as the end of a maternal intermission, where mothers regain agency in both public and professional domains. This regained agency is closely linked to self-efficacy, which Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) identify as a strong predictor of persistence and future success, enabling mothers to challenge and eventually silence societal judgment. From a familial standpoint, Kava et al. (2020) emphasize that success is measured through family well-being, positioning graduation as concrete evidence that their sacrifices were meaningful and beneficial. In line with this, Braund et al. (2020) argue that a holistic understanding of success must include social stability; reinforcing the idea that overcoming stigma contributes to long-term reintegration into both academic and community contexts. Additionally, Kisanga and Matiba (2023) suggest that the sense of pride and accomplishment gained through graduation helps mitigate the lasting effects of social judgment, transforming earlier experiences of shame into empowerment.

This finding implies that social stigma is not merely an emotional burden but a structural challenge that can hinder academic persistence if left unaddressed. Therefore, institutions must move beyond academic support and actively foster inclusive and non-judgmental environments that recognize and validate the identities of student-mothers. Addressing stigma through awareness, supportive policies, and community engagement is essential to reducing the psychological barriers they face. Ultimately, supporting mother-students requires acknowledging that their success is not only about completing a degree but also about reclaiming their place in society as capable individuals who can fulfill both maternal and professional roles.

### **Coping Mechanisms Employed by Mother-Graduates**

This theme explores the various strategies and internal processes mother-graduates utilized to navigate the intense pressures of their dual roles. These coping mechanisms represent the practical and psychological tools that enabled the participants to transition from a state of suspended ambition to one of worth realized.

To capture the diverse ways participants managed these pressures, the study identified five interrelated sub-themes: (1) Seeking Support Systems, (2) Practicing Time Management, (3) Strengthening Personal Motivation, (4) Engaging in Self-Regulation, and (5) Reframing Challenges Positively. Each sub-theme is presented and discussed below.

**Seeking Support Systems.** This sub-theme refers to the act of relying on external networks, including immediate family, parents, in-laws, and partners, to manage the demands of school and motherhood. It involves the practical acceptance of childcare assistance and the receipt of emotional encouragement that provides the mother with the necessary breathing room to focus on her studies. The vital role of these family networks in bridging the gap between domestic and academic life is clearly reflected in the shared experiences of the participants;

I also talked with my family and in-laws for support. **(P1)**

thankfully, buhay pa ang mga magulang ko noon na sila din ang nagpush sa akin na dapat mag-aral ako, so sila din ang nagsabi na sila na ang mag-aalaga sa anak ko, so yung worries ko na kung sino ang mag-aalaga, paano ko pagsasabayin ang anak ko at sa pag-aaral ko, but with the help of my parents, nagdakkel ti tulong da iso diay worries ko, parang nawala. (My worry was my child and who would watch over them, but thankfully, my parents were still alive then and they were the ones who pushed me to study. They were also the ones who said they would take care of my child. So my worries about who would watch the baby and how I would balance motherhood and studies, with the help of my parents, their help were so great that my worries essentially disappeared.) **(P2)**

I am unprepared, but I have a support system that guided me through. **(P3)**

I did not feel hard because my Mother-in-law is very supportive, also my parents, they help me as well my siblings. **(P4)**

When my mother, ni katugangak, mother-in-law, sabi niya, 'sige ipagpatuloy mo ang pag-aaral mo, ako ang mag-aalaga kay baby' nagpanpanonotak sige agenrollak man laengen, konak iman, so intuloy ko nga. (Not at first, but when my mother-in-law said, 'Go ahead and continue; I will take care of the baby,' I thought about it carefully until I said to myself, 'Alright, I'll enroll.' So I continued my studies.) **(P7)**

It's good I have my husband with me so he took charge of the childcare. **(P8)**

The findings underscore that support systems are not merely supplementary but foundational to the persistence and success of mother-students, functioning as the stabilizing force that enables them to navigate the demands of both academic and family life.

Tighe et al. (2024) emphasize that the stability provided by a support network is central to the two-generation benefit, as it secures a nurturing and consistent environment for both the mother and the child. This reinforces the idea that a mother's educational journey is not an individual endeavor but one embedded within a broader family context. In line with this, Harcourt (2023) conceptualizes success for student-mothers as multifaceted, often measured through the collective well-being and progress of the family unit rather than solely academic achievement. Dasig (2020) further supports this by highlighting that mother-students define success through their ability to overcome obstacles, with support systems acting as the critical bridge that enables them to do so.

This perspective is deepened by Espiritu et al. (2023), who argue that grit is sustained when students experience a sense of belonging and support, suggesting that emotional and relational connections mitigate the impact of academic stress. Similarly, Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) identify external social support as a key predictor of academic endurance, as it provides the psychological buffer necessary to manage the mental and emotional strain associated with multiple roles. From a familial standpoint, Kava et al. (2020) assert that maintaining family well-being is the primary metric of success, indicating that support systems are not optional but essential for preserving the family structure while the mother pursues her education. Complementing this, Braund et al. (2020) argue that a holistic understanding of success must include the mother's integration into a supportive community, further reinforcing the importance of relational networks.

However, the reliance on these support systems is also shaped by structural gaps within higher education. Moreau (2016) explains that the care-blind nature of academic institutions often leaves student-parents without formal support, making private networks their primary safety net. Within this context, Blanton (2021) highlights that the presence of a supportive partner or family member serves as a crucial psychological buffer against burnout, while Kisanga and Matiba (2023) note that such support reduces the impact of role strain and helps maintain the mother's mental well-being. Together, these insights suggest that the success of student-mothers is deeply contingent upon both the availability and strength of their support systems.

The implications of these findings point to the need for institutions to move beyond a care-blind framework and actively integrate support mechanisms into the academic environment. Universities can foster a more inclusive and supportive ecosystem by implementing programs that intentionally involves families in the educational journey, such as family orientation initiatives that recognize their role in student success. Academic advising can also be expanded to include guidance on building and sustaining support networks, acknowledging that relational resources are as critical as academic ones. Furthermore, creating peer support groups for student-parents would provide a platform for sharing experiences, resources, and strategies for managing family and academic responsibilities. By institutionalizing support rather than leaving it solely within the private sphere, universities can create an environment where mother-students are not only able to persist but are empowered to thrive alongside their families.

**Practicing Time Management.** This sub-theme involves the deliberate and strategic allocation of time to balance academic and maternal responsibilities. It includes creating strict schedules, prioritizing high-stakes tasks, and utilizing small pockets of time effectively to ensure that neither the child's needs nor school requirements are neglected. The commitment to a rigid, highly organized daily structure is clearly reflected in the shared experiences of the participants;

I manage my time by making a daily routine schedule, where all my priorities were written; I studied during my free time at school. **(P1)**

I planned my schedule, so dapat, school, balay laeng, kasdiyawan ti barbarkada, and no adda dapat asikasuem, asikasuem en a ta idi gamin nagtagibi ak ditoy ag PT PT ak ngay, practice teaching ak, so nga narigatanak, so nga dapat ngay ket ammom nga I use tay time mo wisely. I set aside mo paylang dagiti ragsagsak.

(I planned my schedule, so it should just be school and home. No hanging out with friends, and if there's something you need to take care of, take care of it. Back then, I struggled because I was doing practice teaching, so it was really hard. That's why you need to use your time wisely. I even set aside time for leisure.) **(P6)**

Masapol nga ammo ti ag-organized or i-fixed mo diay task nga kastoy nga time panag-iinnaw, kasdiay ngay planoemon dagitay aramidim tapno ngay , ta no rush gamin awan ti malpas , magahol kapay ti oras. You need to know how to organize or fix your tasks according to the time you have. You have to plan your tasks so that nothing is rushed, because if you rush, things won't get done and time will be wasted **(P7)**

I plan every day, week, month in advance, includes dedicated blocks for my studying, parenting, self-care and household chores. **(P8)**

I prepared myself by setting realistic goals and creating a study schedule that would fit my responsibilities as a mother... I learned to use small pockets of time efficiently. **(P10)**

The findings show that practicing time management is not merely a helpful strategy but a critical survival skill that enables mother-students to sustain both their academic and maternal roles. The participants' narratives consistently reflect a deliberate and highly structured approach to time, characterized by strict routines, advanced planning, and the intentional use of even the smallest available moments. This indicates that their success is deeply tied to their ability to impose order on otherwise competing and unpredictable demands. Time, in this context, is treated as a scarce resource that must be carefully allocated, where leisure and personal rest are often deprioritized in favor of fulfilling responsibilities. As such, time management becomes a form of discipline rooted in necessity, allowing mothers to prevent role conflict from escalating into role collapse. The transition highlighted in this finding suggests that academic labor for mother-students is defined by time poverty, where productivity is maximized at the expense of personal time, reinforcing the intensity of their daily lived experience.

This finding is strongly supported by Harcourt (2023), who explains that success for student-mothers is multifaceted, encompassing not only academic achievement but also the ability to effectively manage conflicting schedules, which aligns with the participants' reliance on structured routines. Similarly, Dasig (2020) emphasizes that mother-students define success through their ability to overcome barriers, positioning the creation of disciplined schedules as a tangible expression of their grit and perseverance. Winters and Poster (2026) further frame this as a shift toward practical agency, where the end of a maternal intermission is marked by increased time discipline and intentional control over daily activities. In this sense, time management reflects not only organization but also the mother's active reclaiming of agency over her dual roles.

Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) identify self-efficacy as a key predictor of academic success, which is reinforced through the successful management of complex and demanding schedules. Each instance of effectively organizing time strengthens the mother's confidence in her ability to meet both academic and familial expectations. From a caregiving perspective, Kava et al. (2020) highlight that family well-being is the primary metric of success, suggesting that time management is not solely an academic strategy but also a form of caregiving, where mothers ensure that their children's needs are met alongside their educational goals. Complementing this, Braund et al. (2020) argue that a holistic understanding of success must include the mother's ability to maintain emotional connection despite time constraints, indicating that effective time management must balance productivity with relational presence.

The structural context of this practice is further explained by Moreau (2016), who argues that in care-blind academic systems, student-mothers develop their own care-centered logic in prioritizing time, guided by both internal motivation and caregiving responsibilities. This is reinforced by Gault et al. (2020), who note that the long-term economic benefits of obtaining a degree justify the intense time discipline and sacrifices made during the period of study. Together, these perspectives highlight that time management among mother-students is both a personal adaptation and a response to institutional limitations.

The implications of these findings point to the need for institutions to recognize and support the extreme level of time discipline required of student-mothers. As Moreau (2016) suggests, moving away from a care-blind

institutional culture requires the integration of flexible scheduling and targeted academic support. Providing early access to syllabi, asynchronous learning options, and time-management workshops tailored to student-parents can help reduce scheduling pressures and allow mothers to plan more effectively. In line with Gault et al. (2020), acknowledging the intensity of their time-management efforts enables institutions to design interventions that are responsive to the realities of role integration.

Furthermore, these findings suggest that the advanced time-management skills developed by mother-graduates should be recognized as a valuable competency, positioning them as highly adaptable individuals in the modern workforce. Ultimately, supporting student-mothers requires not only acknowledging their discipline but also restructuring academic systems to align with the temporal realities they navigate daily.

**Strengthening Personal Motivation.** This sub-theme refers to the internal drive and psychological resilience derived from the mother's desire to provide a better future for her children. It involves drawing inspiration from the child, holding onto long-term career goals, and reframing the academic struggle as a necessary sacrifice for the family's eventual worth realized. The shift from individual ambition to a purpose-driven, maternal persistence is clearly reflected in the shared experiences of the participants;

I still have the desire to go back to school after giving birth, dreaming that one day all my ambitions in life will be fulfilled. It's my own decision, so I started thinking about studying again because I know that if I continued my studies, I would have better opportunities in life. **(P1)**

The main thing ngay ket diay bagik lang ngay, through my experience nga my father and mother talaga nga haan da nga nakaadal, kasi lahat kami diyan kami sa IS, yun yung una kong naisip , "kasanon no siak to met ket haanak nga nakalpas, kaya through my experience ngay nga haan ko kayat nga mariknan to ti anak ko tay nariknak. (Mainly it just myself; through my experience where my father and mother really weren't able to study because all of us went to IS, that's the first thing I thought: 'What will happen if I don't graduate either?' So through my experience, I didn't want my child to feel what I felt. **(P2)**

My dreams help me keep going. **(P5)**

Jay anak ko, isuda ti nagbalin nga motivation ko. (My child is my main motivation.) **(P6)**

My love for my child, the support of my family, and my dream of giving them a better life kept me motivated. **(P9)**

Reminded myself why I started... having a clear long-term vision for myself and my family. **(P10)**

The finding indicates that the child serves as both the reason for the struggle and the primary source of the energy needed to overcome it. Mothers mean that their personal ambition is no longer separate from their maternal role; instead, the degree is a tool for caregiving. This transition is relevant because it marks the shift from suspended ambition to a purpose-driven persistence where the child is the psychological anchor.

Tighe et al. (2024) mean that the mother's drive for a degree is inextricably linked to the two-generation benefit, as her success directly improves the child's life chances. Harcourt (2023) notes that success for student-mothers is primarily measured by the family's thriving. Dasig (2020) highlights that mother-students define their success through their ability to be role models, meaning that finishing the degree is an act of teaching resilience to their children. Espiritu et al. (2023) mean that grit is sustained when a student has a beyond-the-self motive, which in this case is the child's future. Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) mean that this internal motivation is a relevant predictor of academic endurance. Kava et al. (2020) mean that for this demographic, maintaining family well-being is the metric for success, suggesting that the child is the ultimate motivator. Braund et al. (2020) mean that the holistic understanding of success includes the mother's ability to remain emotionally connected to her goals. Moreau (2016) mean that the mother's internal motivation creates a private care-centric logic that helps her survive systemic challenges. Blanton (2021) mean that the child acts as a psychological buffer, making the sacrifices of school feel meaningful rather than just exhausting.

According to Harcourt (2023), recognizing that maternal motivation is an essential component of academic endurance requires that the institution adopt a holistic approach that honors the student-mother's dual identity. This finding implies that the institution should celebrate the whole-person achievement of its student-parents, rather than viewing their maternal roles as a distraction. As Espiritu et al. (2023) explain, by fostering a sense of community, the university could help mothers maintain their beyond-the-self motive during periods of high stress. Finally, these findings mean that the university may use these narratives of purpose-driven persistence to inspire other non-traditional students navigating similar challenges.

**Engaging in Self-Regulation.** This sub-theme involves the internal discipline and emotional preparedness required to stay focused on academic goals. It includes practicing patience, maintaining mental discipline, and setting boundaries such as avoiding social distractions to protect the limited time and energy the mother has for her dual roles. The necessity of active behavioral and emotional policing to preserve personal resources is clearly reflected in the shared experiences of the participants;

I always reminded myself that no matter what happens I will continue my studies , I always carried with me my prayer and patience every single day of my life as a mother, as a student and as a wife, [yun yung naging strength ko ngay no maaw awananak idi ti chance, nagrigat ngay gamin.](That's what gave me strength everytime I feel loss because things were just so hard.) **(P1)**

I need to have a self-care to avoid stress... managing my emotions and staying positive. **(P8)**

Reminded myself to take care of my own well-being so I wouldn't get overwhelmed... set clear boundaries with my family. **(P10)**

The finding shows that self-regulation is a relevant psychological mechanism that protects mothers from burnout and distraction. Mothers actively police their own behavior and emotions to ensure that their limited energy is allocated to their most essential roles. This transition highlights a strong level of metacognitive awareness, where mothers consciously recognize that they cannot engage in the same social luxuries as their traditional peers without compromising their academic and caregiving responsibilities.

As Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) emphasize, self-efficacy and self-regulation are strong predictors of academic success. Dasig (2020) further explains that mother-students often define success through achievement despite adversity, making the deliberate avoidance of barkada not simply a restriction, but a purposeful sacrifice for long-term goals. Harcourt (2023) broadens this perspective by describing success as multidimensional, including the emotional achievement of maintaining focus under pressure. Similarly, Espiritu et al. (2023) highlight how grit fosters a growth mindset, enabling students to view discipline as empowerment rather than limitation. Kisanga and Matiba (2021) note that role strain requires continuous emotional management to preserve psychological stability, while Kava et al. (2020) emphasize that well-being becomes a primary lens for evaluating progress in this demographic. Braund et al. (2020) reinforce this by arguing that emotional stability is an essential component of holistic academic success. Moreau (2016) further explains that internal motivation and strict personal discipline are key survival tools in navigating care-blind institutions.

Moreau (2016) also suggests that institutions should respond to this self-driven discipline by adopting more flexible instructional models that acknowledge and support these efforts. In addition, celebrating the success narratives of mother-graduates can provide meaningful role models for those currently experiencing academic strain. Consistent with Espiritu et al. (2023), institutional support that fosters a growth mindset allows student-parents to reframe self-discipline not merely as a coping mechanism, but as a form of empowerment. Taken together, these findings imply that strengthening targeted mental health and institutional support systems is essential for sustaining both academic persistence and long-term success among mother-students.

**Reframing Challenges Positively.** This sub-theme involves the cognitive process of turning struggles and negative experiences such as social criticism into sources of motivation. It represents a growth mindset where hardships are viewed as temporary and as opportunities to prove one's capability and worth. The internal shift from viewing obstacles as barriers to viewing them as catalysts for success is clearly reflected in the shared experiences of the participants;

I always reminded myself that no matter what happens I will continue my studies... dreaming that one day all my ambitions in life will be fulfilled. (P1)

Okay lang kasi tinuloy ko lang naman yung pag-aaral ko, kahit nadapa man ako pero nakita ko na iyun ang naggang inspirasyon ko sa pag-aaral ko. (It was fine because I just continued my studies; even though I stumbled, I saw that as my inspiration for my studies) (P5)

ipakitak nga kayak, oray nasikoganak palpasek daytuy, ipalpas ko, agboardak makapasa ak, ngem first talaga ket dagitay sao ti sabsabali dagitay judgement da. (I will prove them wrong. Even though I got pregnant, I will finish my studies. I will graduate, take the board exam, and pass It.' but the main reason is those people who judge me wrong (P7)

To show that I can still achieve my dreams even though I already have a child... reminded me that I can achieve my goals even while being a mother. (P9)

The finding indicates that reframing is a relevant cognitive tool that allows mothers to reclaim their agency from social stigma. Mothers mean that by viewing criticism as a challenge to be overcome, they transform a potential source of shame into a source of power. This transition is relevant because it marks the psychological victory over social judgment, leading directly to a sense of worth realized.

The literature provides strong support for cognitive reframing and growth mindset in similar contexts, particularly among student-mothers navigating academic and social pressures. Espiritu et al. (2023) explain that the development of grit fosters a growth mindset, enabling individuals to confront challenges with resilience and sustained determination. Building on this idea, Dasig (2020) emphasizes that mother-students tend to define success not by the absence of struggle but by their ability to achieve despite persistent obstacles. In a broader sense, Harcourt (2023) reinforces this view by highlighting that success is multidimensional, suggesting that psychological transformation and emotional endurance are as significant as academic attainment itself.

Extending the discussion on internal motivation, Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) associate self-efficacy with academic success, particularly when students are able to reframe fear of failure into motivation for achievement. Similarly, Kava et al. (2020) contextualize this reframing process within family life, explaining that mothers often interpret academic progress through the lens of family well-being, where temporary separation is viewed as a long-term investment rather than neglect. This emotional balancing is further supported by Braund et al. (2020), who stress that emotional resilience is an essential component of holistic academic success. Complementing these perspectives, Moreau (2023) explains that academic attainment also functions as a form of social repositioning, where education becomes a pathway for overcoming stigma and re-establishing social identity.

The institution may support student-mothers by providing structured mentoring and coaching programs that strengthen growth mindset development, as identified by Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) as essential for academic success. It should also establish recognition programs that highlight the achievements of mother-graduates, reinforcing positive narratives of perseverance and success. In addition, fostering peer support systems and a strong academic community can help sustain resilience and motivation, consistent with Espiritu et al. (2023) on grit development.

These findings imply that higher education institutions should institutionalize growth-mindset-oriented interventions such as mentorship programs, psychosocial support, and peer networks that help student-mothers reinterpret stigma and challenges as motivation for achievement. Institutions may also formalize recognition systems that validate the success of mother-students, thereby reinforcing positive identity reconstruction and resilience. Overall, such institutional support is essential in enhancing academic persistence, psychological well-being, and completion rates among student-mothers.

### **The SILAW Framework**

This framework is an original conceptual model conceived, developed, and authored exclusively by the researcher. This framework represents a unique intellectual property emerging from an independent synthesis of



the study's qualitative findings and the Transtheoretical Model of Change. It stands as a contextually grounded roadmap for student-parent persistence, offering a beacon of SILAW (Illumination) for those navigating the shadows of academic intermission.

## Rationale

The framework begins with Suspended Aspirations, a narrative phase where educational goals are temporarily set aside for maternal duties. Research findings reveal this stage is characterized by unselfish delay and maternal guilt, where mothers feel an overwhelming duty to prioritize maternal attachment over their own dreams. For example, Participant 1 shared that she felt pity for her infant child, particularly during breastfeeding, believing that the child might not yet fully experience a mother's care when she leaves for school. This internal darkness is thickened by social stigma and community gossip that labels early pregnancy as a failure, creating a state of Precontemplation where education feels like a premature separation from the child. Supporting literature from Gbogbo (2021) and Ntshayintshayi et al. (2022) notes that social stigma and the labeling of early pregnancy as a social deficiency lead to exclusion and mockery. From the TTM perspective, these mothers are in a state where the cons of change, such as the high cost of poverty and systemic invisibility, heavily outweigh the pros.

The transition point is the Internal Decisional Balance, which aligns with the Contemplation Stage. Findings show a mental tug-of-war where individuals weigh the benefits of a degree against the significant costs and barriers involved. Findings reveal that childcare anxieties act as systemic walls, with participants like Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 5 explicitly worrying about who would take good care of my child. Financial strain also acts as a barrier; Participant 8 noted that her expenses doubled while balancing school and family. To move forward, the village of support must tip the balance. This aligns with Winters and Poster (2026), who introduced the concept of Studying for Two, where the academic path is driven by a desire to provide a better future for the child. Furthermore, McMillen (2022) describes how mothers depend on informal community networks to overcome structural barriers.

A unique contribution of this model is Latent Persistence, representing the Preparation Stage where mothers move beyond ambivalence to take concrete steps toward change. Findings reveal that even during academic absence, the desire to finish remains a silent spark. This is a period of quiet endurance where mothers engaged in Holistic Self-Fortification, preparing themselves physically, mentally, and spiritually for the rigors of academia. Participant 1, for instance, planned a strict schedule and took on manual labor to earn allowances before enrolling. This stage marks the transition toward active engagement, supported by Exley and Willis (2025), who refer to this as Relational Agency a collaborative loop where the family and community share the burden of persistence with the student. Additionally, Hartsoch (2025) finds that social support is a powerful predictor of career decision-making self-efficacy.

The framework then guides Active Role Integration, embodying the Action Stage of rigorous implementation. Findings show that once the decision is made, mothers undergo a process of time management and resource optimization, often treating their schedules as survival tools. Participants reported Enduring the Weight of the Dual Burden, characterized by systemic burnout and physical exhaustion. Because traditional settings are often care-blind, the framework advocates for a shift toward Role Harmony. Supporting literature from Moreau (2016) emphasizes that removing care-blind policies is a prerequisite for success, allowing the mother-student identity to be respected rather than ignored. Montgomery et al. (2025) further argue for a shift from a care-free to a care-filled college experience to address the triple threat of work, parenting, and academics.

The framework culminates in Worth Realized, where the student-mother's light is fully restored. Findings synthesize a profound identity transformation where mothers who were once subjects of mockery emerge as figures of professional competence. Participants shared a shift from feeling judged to feeling proud, independent, and respected, with Participant 1 noting she became confident. This marks the point of securing professional independence. Supporting literature from Campbell (2025) emphasizes that academic success builds a sense of self-worth and professional agency that permanently stabilizes the mother's identity as a competent professional. Furthermore, Tighe et al. (2024) link educational success to a two-generation benefit that stabilizes both the parent and the child, ensuring a generational return on education.



## **Vision**

The SILAW Framework envisions a transformative and inclusive educational landscape where motherhood is recognized as a profound source of aspirational capital rather than a barrier. It seeks to empower every student-mother to harmonize parental responsibilities with academic ambitions to achieve full professional potential.

## **Mission**

The SILAW Framework is dedicated to providing a structured, evidence-based pathway that guides student-mothers through the critical transition from pausing their dreams to realizing their inherent worth. By fostering institutional flexibility and strengthening familial structural reassurance, it aims to illuminate the journey toward degree completion.

## **Implementation Plan**

**Addressing Suspended Aspirations:** School administrators may conduct proactive outreach and orientation programs to encourage mothers in intermission to return. Schools may collaborate with local community leaders to identify student-parents and provide clear information on re-enrollment, thereby reducing the shadows of judgment and rebuilding academic confidence.

**Supporting Internal Decisional Balance:** Academic offices may provide specialized advising and transparent scholarship information to assist mothers in the mental tug-of-war of re-entry. Registrars may offer flexible enrollment options that account for financial and childcare anxieties, helping mothers weigh long-term benefits against immediate survival challenges.

**Activating Latent Persistence:** Support systems may strengthen the silent spark of ambition by involving the family unit. Institutions may provide orientation sessions for spouses and parents to highlight the necessity of relational agency, encouraging them to assist with household duties so the mother may focus on her studies.

**Managing Active Role Integration:** Faculty members may implement flexible learning strategies, such as adjustable deadlines and accessible communication channels, during the active pursuit of a degree. These measures may acknowledge the dual roles of student-mothers, allowing them to manage potential burnout while maintaining high academic standards.

**Promoting Worth Realized:** Institutions may establish mentorship groups where successful mother-graduates share their testimonies of professional success. These programs may reinforce a positive identity transformation and inspire current student-mothers to recognize their own professional worth.

The effectiveness of this framework may be monitored through the academic progress and retention rates of student-mothers. Regular feedback through informal consultations may guide future improvements in institutional policies, ensuring the SILAW of education remains bright for all student-parents.

## Illustration of the Framework

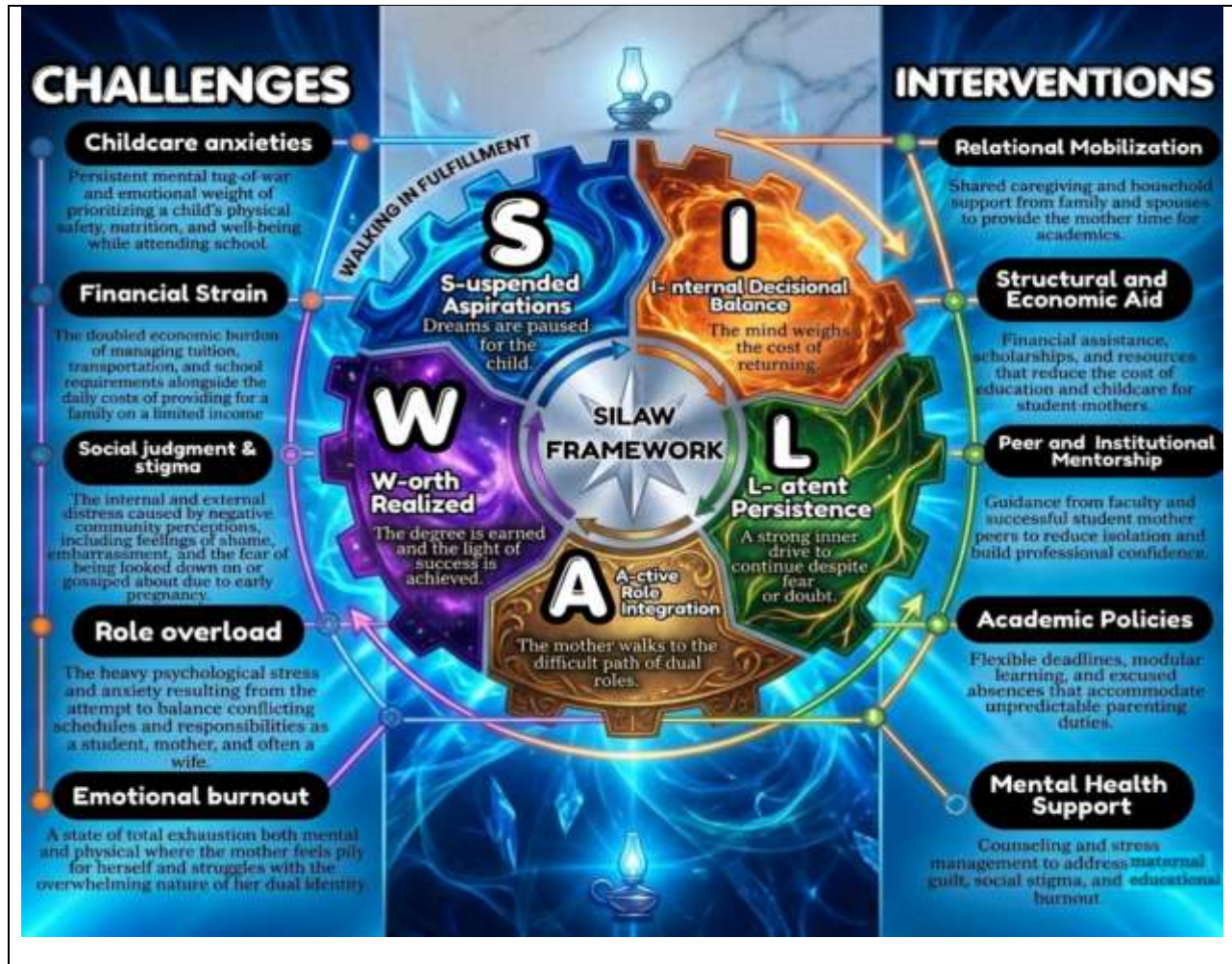


Figure 2: Conceptual stages of degree completion for mother-students

## CONCLUSIONS

The postponement of education among mother-students is a deliberate act of unselfish delay, where academic goals are temporarily set aside to prioritize maternal attachment and the critical early development of the child. This initial phase of the journey is defined not by a lack of ambition, but by a strategic choice to fulfill caregiving roles before re-engaging with personal aspirations. The path back to the academe is fraught with systemic and social barriers, making resilience a relational endurance rather than an individual trait. Success is heavily dependent on the presence of a reliable support system which provides the structural and emotional scaffolding necessary to prevent academic stalling. To navigate this double burden, mother-graduates undergo a sophisticated psychological shift, reframing their children as the primary motivation for success rather than a hindrance to their professional identity. Ultimately, the attainment of a degree serves as a catalyst for professional independence, acting as a final validation that dissolves long-standing social stigmas and establishes a new foundation of self-worth and financial stability.

## Recommendations

School administrators may design flexible academic policies, such as extended deadlines or modular learning options, to accommodate the unpredictable caregiving schedules of student-mothers.

Guidance counselors may implement targeted support programs that address the psychological impact of maternal guilt and social stigma during the initial phases of reintegration into college.

Family members and spouses may provide consistent domestic assistance and emotional validation to strengthen the student-mother's persistence during high-pressure academic periods.

Additionally, faculty members may cultivate inclusive classroom environments that acknowledge the dual roles of student-parents, thereby reducing the shadows of judgment often felt by non-traditional students.

Community leaders may establish local childcare initiatives or support groups to offer practical relief to student-mothers who lack immediate family assistance.

Finally, future researchers may utilize the SILAW Framework to investigate the lived experiences of other marginalized student populations to further refine strategies for academic success and role integration.

### Limitations of the Study

While this study provides deep insights into the maternal-academic transformation of mother-graduates, several limitations should be noted:

1. The study was conducted in the rural municipalities of Cervantes and Quirino, Ilocos Sur. Because qualitative research is context-bound, the strong community support found here may differ for mothers in urban cities.
2. Following the standards of narrative inquiry, the study involved only ten (10) participants. While this allowed for in-depth life stories, the findings are not meant to represent all student-mothers in the Philippines but rather to offer relatable themes for those in similar situations.
3. Some participants graduated between 2000 and 2019, requiring them to recall events from over 20 years ago. This may lead to memory bias, where participants might have forgotten specific details or now view past hardships more positively because they have already achieved success.
4. The SILAW framework focuses exclusively on mothers. Therefore, the findings do not reflect the experiences of student-fathers, who may face different societal expectations and academic challenges compared to women.
5. All participants were graduates of the Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEED) program. The specific demands of teaching such as practice teaching and a clear path to government employment might differ from the experiences of mothers in other fields like Criminology, Medicine, or Engineering

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