Student Mothers: Experiences of Young Mothers Studying at University

Öğrenci Anneler: Üniversite Eğitimi Alan Genç Annelerin Deneyimleri

Ifunanya Lilian Nnadi*
Ayşe Özada Nazım*

Abstract
This study investigates the challenges faced by young mothers in pursuing higher education, examines their coping strategies for balancing motherhood and academic responsibilities, and explores available support systems. In order to accomplish the study's goals and objectives, a qualitative research design was employed. Snowball sampling was used to select women over 18 years old enrolled in a university in North Cyprus having at least one child and speaking English. Semi-structured interviews, lasting 30-50 minutes were carried out with study participants. The interviews were transcribed, coded into themes and sub-themes, and then analysed thematically. The study results revealed that student mothers bear a heavy burden of motherhood responsibilities, leading to significant emotional stress and a negative impact on their mental well-being. The mothers also encounter challenges in finding sufficient support systems, such as lactation rooms and childcare services. To overcome these obstacles, the respondents emphasize the importance of effective time management to balance their academic studies with

Öz
Bu çalışma, genç annelerin yükseköğrenimlerini sürdürürken karşılaştıkları zorlukları ele almaktadır. Bu kapsamda genç annelerin akademik sorumluluklarını dengelemek için kullandıkları başa çıkma stratejilerini incelemekte ve mevcut destek sistemlerini araştırmaktadır. Çalışmanın amaç ve hedeflerine ulaşmak için nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Araştırma katılımcılarını Kuzey Kıbrıs'ta üniversite öğrenimi gören, en az bir çocuğu olan, İngilizce konuşan 18 yaş üstü 15 kadın oluşturmaktadır. Katılımcılarla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu aracılığıyla 30-50 dakika arasında değişen sürelerde derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Verilerin analizi için öncelikle görüşmeler yazıya dökülmüş, temalar ve alt temalar halinde kodlanmış ve ardından tematik analiz yapılmıştır. Çalışma sonuçları, öğrenci annelerin annelik sorumluluklarının ağır yükünü taşıdıklarını, bunun da önemli ölçüde duygusal strese yol açtığını ve iyioluşlarını olumsuz etkilediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, annelerin emzirme odaları ve çocuk bakım hizmetleri gibi hizmetlerden yararlanmada zorluklar

* Ifunanya Lilian Nnadi, Uluslararası Kıbrıs Üniversitesi, e-posta: Ifunanyalilian@yahoo.com, ORCID No: 0009-0004-0807-3682.
** Yrd. Doç. Dr. Ayşe Özada Nazım, Uluslararası Kıbrıs Üniversitesi, e-mail: aozada@ciu.edu.tr, ORCID No: 0000-0003-4863-3168.

caring for their children. The respondents report that having a support system from family members and colleagues is valuable for coping with the challenges of motherhood and education. Therefore, addressing the challenges faced by student mothers requires a holistic approach that recognizes the intersectionality of their roles.

yaşadıkları belirlenmiştir. Bu engellerin üstesinden gelmek için katılımcılar, akademik çalışmaları ile çocuklarının bakımı arasında denge kurmak için etkili zaman yönetiminin önemini vurgulamaktadır. Katılımcılar, aile üyeleri ve iş arkadaşlarından destek almanın annelik ve eğitimin zorluklarıyla başa çıkmada önemli olduğunu belirtmişlerdir. Dolayısıyla, öğrenci annelerin karşılaştığı zorlukların ele alınması, rollerinin kesişimselliğini kabul eden bütüncül bir yaklaşım gerektirmektedir.

Introduction

Aspiring for an ideal career, pursuing education for a better future, and embracing university life as a young, independent woman are typical dreams for many. However, for young student mothers, these aspirations come with added responsibilities and challenges. In this context, research has demonstrated that graduate student mothers encounter distinctive challenges when attempting to reconcile their academic efforts with childcare responsibilities (Dokes, 2020:7). Childcare and schooling can be especially challenging for mothers who are graduate students (Adams et al., 2019). Many women enter graduate programs during their reproductive years, resulting in a complex balancing act between academic and family responsibilities (Hillier, 2023:1609). This challenge is compounded by the fact that graduate student parents, particularly mothers, have limited access to crucial resources such as mentorship, effective teaching training, and fellowships (Navarro-Cruz et al., 2021:3).

Managing childcare responsibilities while attending graduate school and conducting research can be extremely challenging for women (Dokes, 2020:7). The pressure on graduate students is already significant, but it's especially high for mothers who have to balance their academic studies with taking care of their children. One research indicates that graduate student mothers spend an average of 102 hours on their paid and unpaid duties per week, which is more than their male counterparts (Gaganis et al, 2021:7). These findings highlight the significant challenges faced by graduate student mothers and emphasize the need for additional support in the areas of education and childcare.

Graduate student mothers face the challenging task of raising children while pursuing their education, especially at the graduate level (Kasymova et al., 2021:424-425). This can be particularly difficult when there is limited support from extended family, which is often the case for graduate students studying away from home (Hoban & Liamputtong, 2013:724-775).

Moreover, graduate student mothers often follow different career paths compared to their peers without children, and they are less likely to pursue careers as "professors with research emphasis" or enrol in top-ranked departments (Minello et al., 2021:584). Kulp (2020) demonstrated that graduate students with children are less likely to enrol in top-ranked departments, which may impact their career choices. The lack of female instructors and role models further compounds the challenges faced by these students.

The literature lacks in-depth research on student mothers in North Cyprus. These mothers encounter challenges with limited access to extended family and cultural support, despite these issues being well-documented among graduate student mothers in general (Hillier, 2023:1609). There are only a few studies that have focused on this population to understand their unique experiences and obstacles. This study aims to address this gap by conducting a qualitative investigation into the challenges faced by graduate student mothers as they balance studying and childcare in North Cyprus.

It is important to understand these challenges not only to support mothers in their pursuit of education and careers, but also to inform higher education policies and social work interventions aimed at facilitating their acculturation and adaptation in foreign environments (Mahabir et al., 2023:245).

Data Collection and Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of young mothers who are pursuing higher education. Specifically, the study focuses on identifying the challenges they face, exploring how they balance motherhood and academic responsibilities, and investigating the support systems available to them. By gaining a deep understanding of these experiences, the research aims to provide valuable insights and recommendations for universities and support services to better address the needs of young mothers in their educational journey.

To gain insight into the world of mothers and understand how they experience and find meaning in motherhood, especially while navigating the demands of university life, a qualitative approach was chosen as the most suitable method for investigating this topic.

In this study, the snowball sampling approach was chosen as it allowed the researcher to access the population of interest, which might have otherwise been difficult to reach. Snowball sampling is advantageous when researching populations that are hard to reach or concealed, such as marginalized communities (Woodley & Lockard, 2016:322). In comparison to other sampling methods, snowball sampling can be more cost-effective and quicker, particularly when the population is difficult to identify or locate.

As a data collection tool, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 mothers in North Cyprus who are also enrolled as students at one of the universities in Nicosia, Famagusta and Morfou. The interviews were held either in an office at the university or at the participants' homes and had an average duration of 30-50 minutes.

The interview protocol was created to gather detailed perspectives from student mothers on their experiences with studying, pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare, both in the present and in the past. Student mothers were asked to explain in their own words how studying and caring for their child concurrently impacted different aspects of their personal, social, and family lives. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed word for word to maintain the quality and accuracy of the data.

The research data underwent thematic analysis. This method helped to summarise the salient features of the data set in a practical way and provides a rich description of the data set as s suggested by Vaismoradi et al. (2013). To start, the recorded interviews' transcripts were coded and organized into themes. Similar codes were grouped into broader concepts. To ensure accurate coding, the transcript was read multiple times for familiarity, providing a holistic view of the participants' thoughts and feelings as expressed in their stories. Each theme was thoroughly discussed to gain a qualitative understanding of the challenges student mothers face when combining studying with childcare responsibilities.

Ethical Consideration

The process of conducting research presents various important ethical challenges that require careful consideration and resolution by the researchers. Prior to conducting interviews with the research participants, the researchers made sure that the participants provided informed consent before taking part in the study. The participants were given detailed information about the purpose of the study, the extent of their participation, potential benefits and drawbacks, and their right to withdraw from the study without facing any negative consequences.

Moreover, the participants did not experience any coercion, pressure, or obligation to take part in the study. The researcher took steps to ensure that there were no negative consequences for those who chose not to participate. The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were ensured by the researcher.

The Researchers' Role

Within the scope of this study, the researchers took care to listen with empathy during each interview, adopt an ethical approach that avoided harm to the participants, and interpret the data free from prejudice to understand the experiences of young mothers studying at university in an unbiased manner. This reflexive approach required the researchers to remain attentive during the interviews to ensure that the voices of the participants were not overshadowed. In this context, the researchers acted not only as data collectors but also as facilitators, ensuring that the narratives were accurately and holistically reflected.

Results

The socio-demographic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1. Out of interviewees, 26.67% were aged 18 – 25 years, 73.33% aged 26 – 35 years and 6.67% aged 36 – 45 years. Regarding education, 20% were currently enrolled in BSc programs; 60% in MSc programs and 20% in PhD programs. Out of these participants, 33.33% defined themselves as Muslims whereas 66.67% were Christians. In terms of marital status, 20% were single mothers, 73.33% were married and 6.67% divorced.

Table 1. Participants` Sociodemographic Characteristics

Sociodemographic Characteristics	Parameters	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18 – 25	4	26.67
	26 – 35	10	73.33
	36 – 45	1	6.67
Current Education Level	BSc	3	20.00
	MSc	9	60.00
	PhD	3	20.00
Religion	Islam	5	33.33
	Christianity	10	66.67
	Others	0	0.00
Marital Status	Single	3	20.00
	Married	11	73.33
	Divorced	1	6.67

Themes

According to responses derived from the interviews, three themes were created below:

- Experiences and challenges of student motherhood.
- Coping strategies utilized by student mothers.
- Support systems.

Experiences and challenges of student motherhood

Student motherhood presents numerous challenges that can significantly affect academic performance and overall well-being (Alhajjuj, 2016:1; Daniel & Madugu, 2023:21). Research has highlighted various difficulties faced by student mothers, including the struggle to balance academic responsibilities with childcare, maternal stress, anxiety, time management issues, and feelings of guilt (Prikhidko & Haynes, 2018:322; Hillier, 2020; Daniel & Madugu, 2023).

In parallel with the literature, the current research identified numerous challenges associated with managing both motherhood and education simultaneously. However, one of the participants stated that she experienced just a few because she had people around her who cared about her and were always willing to assist her. Although she had this support system, she expressed feeling isolated, and in extreme cases, loneliness could result in anger or depression.

"The only challenge then was that I was all alone, my mum couldn't come because I was on campus then, so, I was the only one doing everything myself. I got a room, but it is far from where my parents are staying, they only come around to visit. Then attending classes, some lecturers don't like having babies around. Although most of my lecturers didn't mind". Has, (41 years old)

One of the other participants expressed similar challenges. She found the tasks difficult and struggled to balance childcare and studies, especially because she lacked assistance with her baby.

"It's difficult, it's hard, especially with the classes, trying to manage the schedule with having to spend time with my daughter and coming for classes and also even though I am a masters student and I do not have to be on campus every day, it's usually tough finding who to take care of my daughter when am in class". Saint, (30 years old)

Academic activities are closely linked with demanding competitions. As a result, the responsibilities of motherhood place a heavy burden on students. The academic community prioritizes success, growth, and ongoing competitions but offers little to no support for mothers. Thus, balancing motherhood and studies is often not seen as the norm in many universities, particularly due to societal expectations that women should primarily focus on their families or children.

Student mothers experience various emotional pressures that can create stress and affect their mental well-being. Some women choose to

postpone their education, while others give up on schooling entirely to avoid these challenges. Student mothers often receive negative feedback from the academic environment, which implies that education should be their top priority. Furthermore, prejudice against student mothers and the negative labelling they experience has led some to hide their parenting responsibilities out of fear that it will limit their opportunities for academic and scientific development.

> *"It is not easy, sometimes I feel so stressed that I feel like giving up and quitting school". Kem, (25 years old)*

> *"The fact that people keep judging you. They would ask you, "Well if you knew you were going to go for your masters, why did you have to get the child?" "Finish it all" I was like. NO! I want to be the supermum; I can do this". Ola, (24 years old)*

> *"Sincerely I would say it is difficult…. Basically, taking my son around almost everywhere I go, sometimes it is quite stressful, especially going to school, it makes it even worse". Mara, (30 years old).*

Finally, this study demonstrates that student mothers have emphasized the challenges of managing time in dual roles and the vital need for support from others, which are highlighted in two sub-themes.

Imbalance on responsibilities

This study proposes that single mothers confront distinct challenges when compared to non-single parent counterparts. The impact of motherhood on career development in academia, specifically in terms of managing childcare responsibilities alongside academic pursuits, is widely recognized as a significant hurdle for many women. Balancing motherhood and being a student at higher education institutions is a complex and challenging experience.

> *"It was so stressful because I am studying nursing here. Sometimes he will be crying when I need to come to class, and I have to take care of him before going to school. It's difficult…. not easy". Kem, (25 years old).*

> *"…especially the time I am supposed to go to class and at the same time my baby wants my attention. It is like a struggle being a mother and a student". Mama, (29 years old).*

It is certainly difficult to find a balance between being a college student and a mom. Striving to keep up with readings, studying, work, childcare, and tuition can sometimes lead to compromising on both roles. It is a common struggle for student mothers to decide between attending a course and missing their child's football game or missing a class due to their child being unwell. Student moms have a very challenging role to balance. The constant pressure of managing student responsibilities such as papers, exams, and class expectations, while also trying to fulfil the role of a mother, can exhaust student mothers and make them more likely to consider dropping out.

> *"It is very difficult… is like I would actually not give them the enough…give enough time, enough effort… like just today bringing him here to school was actual-*

ly uhm very terrifying just to think how I am going to make it to work, how am I going to deal with it?" Luxury, (26 years old).

The student mothers faced numerous challenges that left them feeling exhausted and struggling to find a balance between their responsibilities at home and school, which could ultimately result in frustration and poor academic performance. Furthermore, this serves as a sign that locating sufficient support systems, such as lactation rooms and childcare services, could pose challenges. Consequently, some individuals advise against pursuing motherhood while still being a student.

Shaping of individual perspective influenced by environmental factors

Motherhood-related societal perceptions and expectations substantially impact the experiences of student mothers. Student mothers may face maternal discrimination, inadequate support during pregnancy and postpartum, and exclusion from career opportunities. These challenges can lead to an internal conflict about their roles. Some mothers feel joy at having their children. They feel this way no matter their student status. They are determined to balance motherhood and education well.

"… It feels good, you know to be able to give birth to a new life and to be able to protect that child…". Luxury, (26 years old).

On the other hand, many student mothers may encounter difficulties in balancing the challenges of motherhood with the pursuit of education. This struggle can be further complicated by intersecting identities, such as being a migrant or minority student mother. Some participants articulated their frustration regarding the environmental changes and their negative impact, stating:

"In this environment, … it's kind of weird. … I don't fit in." Umi, (25 years old).

"Most times I get deprived of my sleep. I feel sad and depressed." San, (26 years old).

"It is not an easy thing especially when you are out you are not home like you are not back home in your country you are outside and with a family, it will be difficult". Sola, (32 years old).

These findings support that student mothers encounter a range of challenges influenced by societal and environmental circumstances, as well as sociopsychological and academic factors.

Coping Strategies utilized by student mothers

Student mothers utilize various strategies to cope with the challenges of balancing their academic responsibilities and maternal obligations. The strategies employed by student mothers encompass a range of approaches designed to manage stress, maintain well-being, and enhance their capacity to fulfil multiple roles effectively. These strategies are categorized into three sub-themes: planning and time management, financial adequacy, and emotional support networks.

Planning and time management

The current research suggests that student mothers frequently employ active coping mechanisms, including positive reframing, planning, acceptance, and social support seeking, to mitigate the stressors inherent to their dual roles. By adopting these proactive strategies, student mothers are able to reinterpret challenges positively, plan efficiently to manage their time, come to terms with their situation, and obtain support from others as necessary.

> *".... I just have to manage my time. I set the time, okay I'm going to be with my child this time, I'm going to read at this time. it is all about time management, basically." Umi, (25 years old).*

> *"...have to like manage my time well or else I will not be able to keep on...". Umi, (25 years old).*

> *"... trying to manage the schedule with having to spend time with my daughter and coming for classes and also... even though I am a masters student and I do not have to be on campus every day, it's usually tough finding who to take care of my daughter when I'm in class.". Saint, (30 years old).*

Analysis of the responses reveals that effective time management is crucial and that different individuals employ distinct strategies to optimize their time, ranging from leveraging limited availability to structuring their day and adhering to a set schedule, thereby facilitating the accomplishment of tasks with ease.

Financial adequacy

Sufficient financial assistance plays a vital role in supporting mothers pursuing higher education. Financial support can play a significant role in alleviating the stress that arises from managing educational expenses and childcare responsibilities. In addition, it is imperative for students to develop financial awareness, as lacking personal financial knowledge can present challenges in effectively managing personal finances. Ola who is a married working student mother indicated that:

> *"... we are both (my husband and I) working. Hmm, I have a BSc in software engineering. So, I write codes for people. I am also a web developer. I use that to get income and it is quite convenient. I work from home. I get paid well. And my husband is a video editor and a photograph editor". Ola, (24 years old).*

This study shows that college students often face financial burdens. As a result, they often work more or take out loans to cover their costs. However, applying for scholarships can reduce this burden.

Emotional support networks

Partners, family, and peers are crucial to student mothers' coping strategies. They provide the emotional support, encouragement, and practical help these mothers need to navigate challenges.

"Whenever I am stressed after coming back from classes, my husband keeps supporting me morally not to give up". Sola, (32 years old).

"My husband is a supportive man. At times, during exams, he would skip work to assist me in taking care of the kids. He's a good man." Kem, (25 years old).

Student mothers' coping strategies reflect a mix of proactive, problem-focused, and emotionally supportive approaches. These aim to boost their resilience, well-being, and ability to succeed in both their academic and motherhood roles.

Support Systems

Student mothers require essential support systems that provide critical assistance, encouragement, and resources to balance academic responsibilities with maternal duties. These systems comprise various sources, including teachers, classmates, parents, friends, relatives, and institutional services, which collectively contribute significantly to the well-being and success of student mothers. The importance of these support systems is emphasized in two sub-themes: support from students and colleagues, and social networks, peers and family support.

Student and colleague support

This study has highlighted how effective student support services can positively influence academic achievement and create more opportunities for students. It also emphasizes the importance of well-coordinated support systems in enhancing student outcomes. Faculty members have a crucial role in supporting student mothers by acknowledging their dual roles, demonstrating empathy, providing academic and pastoral accommodations, and offering encouragement and recognition for their efforts. The support provided by faculty members contributes to the sense of value, understanding, and inclusion experienced by student mothers in the academic environment.

"…attending classes, some lecturers don't like having babies around. Sometimes, their cry might disturb the lecture. Although, most of my lecturers didn't mind. Sometimes, during exams, some of them help in carrying the baby. It was not that difficult". Has, (41 years old).

Social network, peer, and family support

This study shows social networks and support from peers, family, and the community are vital for student mothers. They offer emotional support, practical help, and a sense of belonging. These networks also help student mothers make informed decisions, seek advice, and access resources for their well-being and success.

A strong support system helps student mothers with immediate issues. It also lets them change their roles and manage higher education

challenges. San explained how support reduces the stress of study and childcare:

"... through the help of my grand mum, she is not making me have that much feeling of a single mum. She does help me in carrying my baby". San, (26 years old).

Some participants have cited family members, specifically their spouses, as essential sources of emotional and moral support in their dual roles as mothers and students. Additionally, others have identified their friends as their primary support networks.

"My husband is a supportive man. At times, during exams, he would skip work to assist me in taking care of the kids. He's a good man" Kem, (25 years old).

"...my husband is a very understanding person. So, he gets to be with my daughter when I want to cook or study plus my daughter isn't troublesome so it's easy for me to do the things I need to do". Manda, (22 years old).

Results from this study emphasize the substantial significance of social networks and familial support in the experiences of student mothers. These support structures offer emotional encouragement, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging, thereby enabling student mothers to address urgent obstacles effectively and enhance their academic achievements. The presence of understanding spouses, helpful family members, and supporting friends significantly influences the well-being and success of student mothers, as evident from the respondents' experiences. By identifying and utilizing these support networks, student mothers can effectively navigate the complex terrain of higher education with determination and resilience, ultimately reshaping their societal roles and attaining their academic goals. It is essential to foster an atmosphere that promotes and appreciates these support systems, establishing inclusive and empowering educational environments for all individuals.

Discussion

Student mothers embark on a complex journey, navigating the challenges that arise from the intersection of academic pursuits and maternal responsibilities. Managing time effectively and dealing with psychological stressors are among the numerous obstacles that student mothers face while pursuing higher education and raising their children. To overcome these challenges, coping mechanisms are essential for juggling their concurrent responsibilities. The significance of support systems in the experiences of student mothers cannot be overstated. This part examines the themes that emerged from the study's results, includ-

ing the experiences and challenges of student motherhood, the coping strategies utilized by student mothers, and the support systems.

Student motherhood poses a multifaceted set of obstacles that can substantially affect academic achievement and personal well-being. This study reveals that the experiences of student mothers involve a variety of difficulties, including struggles to balance academic responsibilities with childcare, manage maternal stress and anxiety, and address time management issues and fatigue. These obstacles can cause significant pressure and emotional strain on student mothers as they fulfil the dual roles of student and mother. Consistent with the findings of Esteset al. (2022), who examined the influence of student motherhood on academic performance in public universities in western Kenya, the current study highlights challenges associated with student motherhood, including responsibility imbalance, anxiety, and time management constraints. Student mothers encounter considerable obstacles in college environments that often lack support, rendering it difficult to balance their dual roles (Jiménez & Oliva, 2017:126-127; Kisanga & Matiba, 2023:4152).

Research has shown that female students' preparedness for motherhood is shaped by factors including psychological acceptance, maturity, and the development of value orientations related to family life, health, love, education, and responsibility (Hwanget al., 2022:10). In spite of societal progress, female graduate students continue to face significant challenges in managing academic pursuits and motherhood due to inadequate resources (Mahabir et al. 2023:245).

This research reveals that motherhood often constitutes a crucial turning point with far-reaching consequences for educational ambitions and life paths. The concurrent objectives of being a good mother, student, and employee highlight the critical stage that motherhood represents for young mothers. Supporting teen mothers in their educational endeavors is essential to positively impact their life trajectory. This finding is consistent with previous research conducted by Smithbattle (2007) and Mahabir et al. (2023).

Maternal and family obligations present significant hurdles for female students in university environments that fail to provide adequate support for mothers. Previous research has examined the experiences of unmarried pregnant university students, highlighting the stressors they encounter during pregnancy and early motherhood, as well as the coping mechanisms they utilize (Phiri et al., 2021:3). Furthermore, another study has explored the effect of motherhood on doctoral students, revealing difficulties in reconciling the roles of mother and student, and underscoring the necessity of consistent support from academic programs (Mirick, & Wladkowski, 2020). Research has further examined

the approaches utilized by student mothers to mitigate the practical and ideological contradictions that emerge from reconciling academic endeavors with motherhood responsibilities, as demonstrated by Estes in 2011. The successful implementation of these approaches is essential for student mothers to perform their roles efficiently and reduce some of the difficulties inherent in balancing academic and parenting obligations.

Coping strategies of student mothers is another important issue discussed in current research. Student mothers enrolled in higher education institutions encounter a distinct set of obstacles as they juggle academic obligations, maternal duties, and personal wellness. In order to navigate the difficulties of balancing academic responsibilities and motherhood, effective coping strategies are essential. The current research has revealed a range of coping mechanisms employed by student mothers to manage the stressors and demands associated with their dual roles.

The findings of this study are consistent with the research conducted by Phiri et al. in 2021, which involved qualitative interviews with unmarried pregnant university students. This research highlights the significance of effective coping mechanisms in managing the stressors associated with pregnancy and early motherhood. The implementation of these strategies is crucial for student mothers to preserve their well-being and academic performance in the face of the challenges they encounter.

A study conducted by Meyer et al. (2019) examined the coping strategies and behaviours of women in academic otolaryngology who successfully manage their work, family commitments, clinical workload, and scholarly activities. The study's findings are consistent with this research, demonstrating that family members and academic colleagues who assist with childcare during the mother's absence can mitigate the anxiety experienced by student mothers during this period.

Furthermore, several studies have consistently emphasized the importance of coping strategies in determining the psychological well-being of mothers, particularly those responsible for caring for children with special needs (Liung et al., 2019; Holm et al., 2015; Findling, Barnoy & Itzhaki, 2023). The adoption of effective coping mechanisms is essential for mothers to mitigate the burdens associated with childcare and preserve their mental health.

A study examining the experiences of academic mothers in Ontario graduate programs has provided insight into the challenges they encounter in reconciling their maternal, academic, and family responsibili-

ties (Hillier, 2021:1606). The results highlight the necessity of designing coping strategies that cater specifically to the distinct needs of student mothers in academic environments.

Consequently, coping strategies are instrumental in helping student mothers manage the complexities of balancing academic responsibilities and motherhood. The implementation of effective coping mechanisms leads to improved well-being, academic performance, and overall success in fulfilling the demands of both roles.

The final theme held in this study is the support systems employed by student mothers. Student mothers encounter various obstacles, including managing their time, dealing with financial limitations, and juggling academic duties with maternal responsibilities. Nevertheless, these difficulties are frequently offset by the benefits associated with being a student mother, such as personal development, enhanced motivation, and providing a positive role model for their children.

Student mothers in higher education require support systems to balance academic responsibilities and motherhood effectively. The current research has demonstrated that support from university tutors, authorities, and classmates plays a crucial role in facilitating educational tasks for student mothers. A supportive environment is essential for student mothers to manage their dual roles successfully. Consistent with the findings of Sicam et al. (2021), who examined the phenomenon of parenting while schooling among Filipino college student mothers, support from the school authority and college staff improves the academic performance of student mothers, enabling them to concentrate more effectively.

The result of this study is also consistent with Moghadam et al. (2017) in their study of motherhood challenges and well-being along with the studentship role among Iranian women. They discovered that despite the numerous challenges faced by student mothers, support systems help significantly in mitigating these challenges and help in improving their academic performance.

Peer support has been recognized as a crucial element in the academic achievement of student mothers, complementing university services, family support, and faculty support (Mottarella et al., 2009:1606). The availability of institution-based support systems is vital for mature women students, including student mothers, to overcome the challenges they encounter in higher education (Adu-Yeboah, 2015:156). This research demonstrates that the level of support provided to student mothers can significantly affect their academic performance and overall well-being. Numerous studies have established a correlation between maternal education levels and students' exposure to explicit sexual con-

tent, highlighting the impact of maternal education on student behaviour (Meilani et al., 2020;). Moreover, students with highly educated mothers tend to exhibit a greater commitment to COVID-19 safety protocols, underscoring the role of maternal education in shaping students' attitudes and behaviours (Ibrahem et al., 2022).

Eventually, support systems utilized by student mothers in higher education institutions illustrate the delicate balance between obstacles and benefits, as well as the vital function of various support mechanisms in enabling the academic achievement and overall well-being of student mothers. It is essential to comprehend and improve these support systems in order to foster the educational advancement and overall success of student mothers in higher education.

Conclusion and recommendations

Student mothers in higher education encounter numerous challenges, as they strive to balance their academic goals with their maternal responsibilities. This study demonstrates the profound effects on academic achievement and overall well-being, highlighting the emotional and practical strains of managing these two roles. Furthermore, the experiences of student mothers have a significant impact on their children, as they serve as prominent examples of dedication to educational pursuits.

The challenges identified align with existing research, underscoring the pervasive difficulties encountered by student mothers, particularly those who are younger. Both cultural and geographical contexts serve to further shape the experiences of student mothers, thereby contributing to the complexity of their academic pursuits. The educational background of mothers, in addition to their support and attitudes, proves to be significant factors that impact student outcomes.

At micro level the coping strategies highlighted in the study emphasize the essential function of efficient time management for student mothers. This skill has a direct positive correlation with academic achievement and has become increasingly vital in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where adaptability to unusual learning environments has become essential. Furthermore, financial resources are recognized as a critical factor, as adequate financial support reduces stress and contributes to enhanced mental well-being.

The study highlights the essential role of family members in providing indispensable support systems. Family and friends offer emotional, moral, and practical assistance that is vital in helping student mothers cope with the complex array of responsibilities. In addition to emotional support, the tangible contributions of extended family, including mate-

rial assistance, significantly improve the adaptive strategies and overall well-being of student mothers.

Substantially, addressing the challenges faced by student mothers requires a holistic approach that acknowledges the intersectionality of their roles. Enhancing time management skills, providing financial assistance, and fortifying family networks can collectively culminate in a more supportive and inclusive academic environment. It is essential to acknowledge and address these challenges, not only to benefit student mothers but also to promote a diverse and equitable higher education landscape.

For enhancing student mothers` quality of life in general, various approaches are able to be applied at a micro level. It is essential to provide student mothers with personalized assistance and specialized tools to enhance their capacity to overcome obstacles. Furthermore, institutions should establish workshops, counselling services, and peer support groups to instruct individuals on effective coping strategies for balancing academic responsibilities with parental obligations.

Moreover, the creation of peer support networks and mentorship programs enables student mothers to form connections and share knowledge. By doing so, solidarity groups can be established to provide emotional support, facilitate the sharing of experiences, and exchange practical advice for effectively managing the challenges associated with being a student mother.

At the mezzo level, institutional support mechanisms should be established within institutions to fully address the requirements of student mothers. Institutional support systems for student mothers may comprise childcare facilities, adaptable academic policies, financial aid programs, and dedicated staff members who provide guidance and support.

Collaboration with families, communities, and local organizations is also essential in creating a supportive environment for student mothers. By fostering partnerships with family members, spouses, and community leaders, student mothers can receive academic support through childcare assistance, household help, and motivation.

At the macro level, it is necessary to promote policy changes and institutional reforms at both national and institutional levels to provide greater support for student mothers in higher education. Civil organizations should advocate for policies that address structural obstacles, including limited availability of affordable daycare, inadequate maternity leave legislation, and discriminatory educational practices that disproportionately affect female students who are also mothers.

Furthermore, research programs and networks should be promoted to facilitate knowledge sharing and generate evidence-based insights into the experiences, challenges, and support needs of student mothers. The research findings must be disseminated extensively through academic publications, conferences, and policy briefings, providing essential information for policymaking, program development, and advocacy initiatives aimed at improving support for student mothers.

As a result, the experiences and challenges, coping strategies, and support systems of student mothers are discussed in this qualitative research. By conducting semi-structured interviews, the three main issues are held and studied in depth. In the light of findings, the authors identify three key issues and provide actionable recommendations at the individual, community, and societal levels. The findings offer valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders to better understand and address the needs of student mothers.

References

Adams, R. V. & Blair, E. (2019). Impact of time management behaviors on undergraduate engineering students' performance, *SAGE Open*, 9(1), 215824401882450.

Adu-Yeboah, C. (2015). Mature women students' experiences of social and academic support in higher education: A systematic review.

Alhajjuj, K. K. (2016). Learning to manage: How Saudi female doctoral students in education manage academic and motherhood roles in US universities (Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas).

Charmaz, K. & Belgrave, L., (2012). Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. In J.F. Gubrium et al. (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of interview research: The complexity of the craft*, 347-365.

Dokes, K. (2020). The Challenges Graduate Student Mothers Face and the Strategies They Use to Overcome and Persist (Doctoral dissertation, Saint Louis University).

Dunwoodie, K., Macaulay, L., & Newman, A. (2023). Qualitative interviewing in the field of work and organisational psychology: Benefits, challenges and guidelines for researchers and reviewers. *Applied Psychology*, *72*(2), 863-889.

Estes, D. (2011). Managing the student-parent dilemma: mothers and fathers in highereducation, *Symbolic Interaction*, 34(2), 198-219.

Findling, Y., Barnoy, S., & Itzhaki, M. (2023). Burden of treatment, emotion work and parental burnout of mothers to children with or without special needs: A pilot study. *Current Psychology*, *42*(22), 19273-19285.

Gaganis, A., Gelz, M., Setyabule, I. & To, A. (2021). *Understanding the experiences of graduate students with children at UBC: A campus planning*

and policy assessment. Social Ecological Economic Development Studies (SEEDS) Sustainability Program, 1-48. Retrieved from https://open.library.ubc.ca/soa/cIRcle/collections/undergraduateresearch/18861/items/1.0398380

Hillier, K. M. (2020). Experiences of maternal guilt and intensive mothering ideologies in graduate student mothers, faculty, and sessional instructors, *Journal of Mother Studies*, 5.

Hillier, K. M. (2021). Academia and motherhood: a narrative inquiry of ontario academic mothers' experiences in university graduate programs, *Journal of Family Issues*, 44(6), 1597-1621.

Hillier, K. M. (2023). Academia and motherhood: A narrative inquiry of Ontario academic mothers' experiences in university graduate programs, *Journal of Family Issues*, 44(6), 1597-1621.

Hoban, E. & Liamputtong, P. (2013). Cambodian migrant women's postpartum experiences in Victoria, Australia, *Midwifery*, 29(7), 772-778.

Hwang, W. Y., Choi, S. Y., & An, H. J. (2022). Concept analysis of transition to motherhood: a methodological study. Korean journal of women health nursing, 28(1), 8.

Ibrahem, R. A. L., & Abdel Raouf, S. Y. (2022). Commitment to COVID-19 Protective Measures in Schools and among School Children, Egypt. *The Egyptian Journal of Hospital Medicine*, *89*(1), 4332-4339.

Jiménez, H., & Oliva, N. (2017). Latina student mothers' trenzas de identidades in the community college. Association of Mexican American Educators Journal, 11(2), 111-132.

Kasymova, S., Place, J. M. S., Billings, D. L. & Aldape, J. D. (2021). Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the productivity of academics who mother, *Gender, Work and Organization*, 28, 419-433.

Kisanga, S.E., Matiba, F.M. (2023). Coping strategies student-mothers employ in pursuing higher education studies in Tanzania: A qualitative study. *Curr Psychol* 42, 4143-4154.

Kulp, A. M. (2020). Parenting on the path to the professoriate: A focus on graduate student mothers, *Research in Higher Education*, 61, 408-429.

Liung, S., Marchira, C., Supriyanto, I., Agusno, M., Soewadi, S., & Sumarni, S. (2019). Association of religious coping use with psychological well-being of mother of mentally retarded children, *Journal of Community Empowerment for Health*, 2(2), 181.

Madinah, N., Michael, B. & Rose, N. (2021). The husbands' support: the experiences of off- campus married Muslim student mothers in private and religious institutions of higher learning in Uganda—a case of Islamic university in Uganda (iuiu), *World Journal of Educational Research,* 8(2), 69.

Mahabir, B., Swain, S., Hernandez, J. & Cheung, H. K. (2023). Changing times, changing resources: Starting a family as a graduate student, *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 16(2), 242-247.

Meilani, N., Barasa, S. O., & Setiyawati, N. (2020). Factors influencing Adolescent Attitudes towards HIV/AIDS Prevention in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Meyer, T., Bergmark, R., Zatz, M., Sardesaı, M., Litvack, J., & Acosta, A. (2019). Barriers pushed aside: insights on career and family success from women leaders in academic otolaryngology, *Otolaryngology*, 161(2), 257-264.

Minello, A., Martucci, S. & Manzo, L. K. (2021). The pandemic and the academic mothers: present hardships and future perspectives, *European Societies*, 23(sup1), 82-S94.

Mirick, R. G., & Wladkowski, S. P. (2020). Women's experiences with parenting during doctoral education: Impact on career trajectory. International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 15, 89: 89-110.

Moghadam, Z. B., Khiaban, M. O., & Salsali, M. (2017). Motherhood challenges and well-being along with the studentship role among Iranian women: A qualitative study, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 12(1), 1335168.

Mottarella, K. E., Fritzsche, B. A., Whitten, S. N., & Bedsole, D. (2009). Exploration of "good mother" stereotypes in the college environment. Sex Roles, 60, 223-231.

Munyua, M. J., Were, D. & Amunga, J. (2022). Influence of student motherhood on academic performance in public universities in western Kenya, *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 108-117.

Navarro-Cruz, G. E., Dávila, B. A. & Kouyoumdjian, C. (2021). From teen parent to student parent: Latina mothers' persistence in higher education, *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 20(4), 466-480.

Daniel, R. O., & Madugu, D. L. (2023). Balancing motherhood and academic pursuits: Challenges and opportunities for nigerian women, *Wukari International Studies Journal*, *7*(1), 25.

Phiri, T., Nyamaruze, P. & Akintola, O. (2021). Stress and coping among unmarried pregnant university students in South Africa, *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*, 21(1).

Prikhidko, A. & Haynes, C. (2018). Balancing graduate school and mothering: Is there a choice?, *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 13.

Sicam, E., Umawid, M., Colot, J., Dagdag, J. & Handrianto, C. (2021). Phenomenology of parenting while schooling among Filipino college student mothers in the province, *Kolokium Jurnal Pendidikan Luar Sekolah*, 9(2), 83-97.

SmithBattle, L. (2007). "I wanna have a good future": Teen mothers' rise in educational aspirations, competing demands, and limited school support, *Youth & Society*, 38(3), 348-371.

Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study, *Nursing & Health Sciences*, 15(3), 398-405.

Woodley, X. M. & Lockard, M. (2016). Womanism and snowball sampling: Engaging marginalized populations in holistic research, *The Qualitative Report*, 21(2), 321-329.