

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXAMINING THE CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES
OF STUDENTS WHO ARE PARENTS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SETTING

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the challenges of student-parents, or those students who are also parents, in higher education and discover the strategies that this student population has found to overcome such challenges. Participants included student-parents who attended residential classes, online, and/or in hybrid formats at a public institution. Tinto's (2012) theory of student persistence guided this study with the abundance of trials student-parents encounter through their student career. Knowles' (1990) theory of adult learning and views on self-directed learning also contributed to this study examining how students learn as adults who take accountability for their own learning experiences, goal setting, and managing their resources. The central research question is how do student-parents describe their challenges, as well as their strategies, while enrolled in higher education? Data was collected through individual interviews, a photo journal of experiences, and a focus group. The data analysis process was completed using the steps outlined by Moustakas (1994). The themes found in this study include roles, time, and support. The findings of this study may be beneficial for institutions seeking to raise students' graduation rates, professional test scores, and preparedness of future professionals through finding a deeper understanding of this growing student-population.

Keywords: student-parents, higher education, challenges, strategies, Tinto, student persistence.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, James, and our son P.J. Without the two of you I would have never been able to make it this far. James, you were always there to support me on my long nights and stressed-out days. P. J., you are the reason mommy worked so hard through the end of my pregnancy and your first few years. I love you both.

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List of Abbreviations

All Saints University (ASU)

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Parental Stress Scale (PSS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges that student-parents, or students who are also parents, enrolled in higher education face during their experience, and the strategies they have used to overcome such challenges to succeed and continue towards their graduation. The instructional approach of higher education is extensive and has evolved throughout the decades alongside the needs of society. With the overwhelming amount of changes made, there have been an increasing amount of new types of students who have been enrolling in higher education. Theories of student persistence, like the one Tinto (1975) created, established a basis for understanding what engages students to become successful and graduate, and what makes students drop out of the higher education system all together. Student-parents can be any age, in any city, from any socio-economic level, and can attend in any instructional format. The difference between these students and the rest of the student population is that they have additional stress on top of the typical student workload with the duties of being a parent. If administrators and educators knew the strategies that successful student-parents used to overcome the challenges that arose while attending school, would they be better suited to train their faculty members and build reasonable support systems in their institutions to help these students towards a successful graduation? This chapter introduces the background of the topic, the situation to self, the problem and purpose statements, the significance of the study, the research questions, definitions, and ends with a summary of chapter contents.

Background

The background section provides information relating to the historical, social, and theoretical context of this study. However, I found little to no information relating to the challenges that student-parents experience while attending classes in high education institutions or how they appropriately overcome the challenges. While some studies have been completed that relate to this student population, there is little data that relates to all student-parents and more information that relates to small or specific ranges of the student-parent population (Brooks, 2015; Kulp, 2016; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Many of these studies focus only on the education of these students, or just their challenges (Peterson, 2016; van Rhijn, Lero, & Burke, 2016; Hinton-Smith, 2015). This provides me with the opportunity to build upon the past research and fill the gap by examining both challenges and strategies of these student-parents in multiple settings (Galvan & Galvan, 2017). Below is an overview of the historical context of this study as it relates to student-parents enrolled in higher education.

Historical Context

Student-parents have always been involved in the history and alteration of higher education throughout the years due to their responsibilities outside of the classroom setting, and their high need for flexibility within the higher educational system (Morreau & Kerner, 2015). The history of higher education stems from traditional medieval universities where the student population was limited to male individuals who were preparing to serve as either lawyers or clergy (Bastedo, Altbach, & Gumport, 2016). As new knowledge and learning strategies came about, curriculum expanded, and new program areas were brought into the higher education systems. These changes allowed the student population to expand to include women and other student groups (Bastedo et al., 2016). With these new student populations and a growing

diversity in academic studies, higher education institutions took a turn to be shaped into what is known today. When these changes occurred, and student-parents began enrolling in the higher education system alongside the evolving society, it brought about a need for further study (Bastedo et al., 2016; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Peterson, 2016; van Rhijn et al., 2016; Sallee, 2015; Hinton-Smith, 2016).

Currently, the college decision usually is made in high school, and at sometimes as early as middle school (Selingo, 2013). The growth and expansion of technology, as well as its accessibility in higher educational settings has permitted more students who were unable to attend traditional classroom lectures and course layouts to now attend in the comfort of their homes with minimal interruption to their daily routine by attending online programs, or so they thought (Bastedo et al., 2016). The process of learning and adapting to values in current society is taught in the 21st century by face-to-face relationships as well as personal relationships via online routes such as social networks and learning communities. This has not only changed the way of living, but also connecting to one another in present day society (Morais, Alves, Miranda, & Arellano, 2019). These new ways of connecting, and newer learning communities allow students to connect with peers, as well as educators to become successful in their area of study without attending a class on campus.

As more students enrolled after the creation and expansion of the internet, and the student population grew more diverse, higher education systems had to adapt to accommodate these new groups of students, including student-parents. Although it may be easier to attend, there were still obstacles in their way to become successful students, while remaining attentive parents (Bastedo et al., 2016). Although students attending night courses or online courses do not need to accrue additional expenses such as room and board costs, there are many other costs such as commuting

expenses and childcare during the times they are not home. In addition, the cost of living and along with the cost of attending have risen through the last decade that has created a series of new problems for those with children who choose to attend higher education. The changes that have been made throughout higher education institutions, including the multiple formats for attending, have created opportunities for new student populations to have higher educational attainment. There have been numerous changes through history that restrict personal support such as formats of attending higher education that create even larger barriers for student-parents due to their family responsibilities (van Rhijn et al., 2016).

Social Context

This topic was chosen as a transcendental phenomenological study to gather information first-hand from those in different settings of higher education. Understanding student-parents' hardships and the strategies they use to be successful and persevere through their schoolwork is imperative for future students and faculty members. More than 25% of undergraduates are raising children while also attempting to complete their full-time coursework resulting in an increase of 256% of the student-parent population between the years of 1971 and 2011 (Crispin, 2019; Wilsey, 2013). Community colleges, specifically, have a higher number of student-parent enrollments and lower completion rates than four-year institutions (Troester-Trate, 2019), although student-parent enrollment is still increasing across all institutional settings (Scharp & Hall, 2019). As the student-parent population is growing with the new forms of higher education formats, their success rates and scores are imperative to the entire school's success, let alone their own. Understanding what can be done to help assist this student population achieve success should be a goal that many administrators, stakeholders, and decision-makers have to enhance their training, instruction, and curriculum.

Studies have shown that student-parents, especially women, view their higher education institutions as a site of safety and self-fulfillment where they can escape their more confining roles (Brooks, 2015). However, these mothers also have a large emotional investment as a result of having to spend time studying, doing schoolwork, attending lectures, or watching videos that they could have spent with their children and family (Brooks, 2015). Combining the roles of being a mother and a student creates a change in behavior that contradicts the traditional mothering role these students wish to fulfill due to their need to focus on their academic duties (Moghadam, Khiaban, Esmaeili, & Salsali, 2017). These contrasting behaviors create a larger burden on all of those involved with caring for the child. Unfortunately, with the academic community mainly focusing on success, development, and making themselves better than their competitors, there is little to no focus on support to ensure the success of student-parents (Moghadam et al., 2017). To manage the familial guilt, student-parents have claimed to confine their academic studies during times of the day that would have the least impact on their children or partners (Smith, 2019). Finding a balance between these social roles creates a greater number of challenges along with increased stress levels for these student-parents.

Some of these challenges in finding balances can be related to culturally and ethnically specific ideologies of what the parenting role consists of for each member of a family. For instance, collective mothering is a historically and culturally present form of child rearing related to those of African-American descent where communities often share the responsibility of the child or children (Lockwood, Smith, & Karpenko-Seccombe, 2018). Those who are involved with or practice this type of parenting may have a larger support system than those who practice a more intensive form of parenting such as with nuclear family members, or parents and their children who are together for the majority of their time. Theories on gender roles have been

created and adjusted to understand these effects (Connell, 1987; Lee, 2019). For instance, Lee, (2019) stated that there are two levels of gender structure: the gender order, or the whole society, and the gender regimes, or institutions such as in the family, school, and workplace that affect how one acts in different settings and sets priority levels. Single student-parents have a feeling of guilt more commonly than those who have a counterpart at home to care for the children while they are attending courses, or completing schoolwork (Brooks, 2015). To understand the experiences of these student-parents and their social challenges, researchers, policy makers, and colleges may need to adopt new changes. Some may include adjusting course schedules, provide different or an increased number of child-care offerings, and/or the possibility of adjusting the traditional educational model (Crispin, 2019). Single student-parents also tend to have more concerns and stress while attending higher education due to their employment status and their financial situation in affording their school tuition, the supplies related to their coursework, textbooks, their basic necessities, and the needs of their children (Brooks, 2015; Scharp & Hall, 2019; Herzog, 2015; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

Another study has shown that student-parents are less likely to develop strong social interactions in their academic departments (Kulp, 2016). This could be due to the amount of responsibilities they already have or because of the amount of time they spend on other responsibilities. When students feel as if they do not have something in common with others, they will not make an effort to gain a relationship with their peers (Holtrop, Born, & de Vries, 2018). Student-parents tend to keep to themselves and stay focused on their work since they have more to focus on than just their academics. These concerns tend to be tied to their emotional well-being and lack of a greater support system, both of which have been proven to be effective in the essence of persistence and success (Holtrop et al., 2018). The purpose of this study will be

to analyze and explain the challenges current student-parents face and the strategies they have used for academic institutions to better meet their needs. Administrators could find patterns and commonalities between student-parents who may have younger children, or those who may be attending night classes for example. This information could be a key aspect in providing knowledge to different higher education settings when supported by reputable theories and research.

Theoretical Context

Tinto's (1975) study of student persistence is important in this study to understand what motivates students to persist through their higher education coursework to reach completion. Because student-parents have more responsibilities and obligations, the relationship of motivations and persistence can be viewed as meaning much more for the amount of extra effort and time that they place into their education than traditional students. Tinto (1975) reviewed what it was that encouraged students in higher education to persist through their educational career and reach graduation. This information can be directly related to the current study in finding common strategies student-parents can use to aid in their success. Tinto's (1975) study found that multiple factors such as school culture, finances, and support were all contributors to the stress that students felt while in attendance. For instance, when a student felt as if they did not belong due to the strong focus on the traditional students and the lack of events or focus on students that commute and are non-traditional in nature, their attention in class and encouragement to persist through their degree programs fell (Tinto, 1975).

In Tinto's (2012) updated work, he suggested that schools place more emphasis on the students' first year of college to provide strong expectations, summer bridge programs, seminars, learning and tutoring centers, and an emphasis on study skills that will help to diminish student

drop out. Schools should also provide more social supports for students on campus such as counseling, faculty and peer advising, and mentoring to increase the feeling of belonging among all student populations (Tinto, 2012). The findings reported in this study will aid in determining if there is a connection between Tinto's (2012) theory, and the challenges presented by the student-parent population. Student-parents who attend higher education already made a strong commitment to themselves and their future by enrolling into higher education. Tinto's (2012) work encouraged higher education institutions to play a larger role in understanding and supporting students, which is directly related to my current study. Researchers, instructors, administrators, professionals, and students would find a study that focused not only on the challenges, but also on the strategies used to overcome such challenges useful for decision making and adapting to societal changes.

For institutions to comply with continuous adaptation of society and learning strategies, it is useful for higher education institutions and their faculty members to be as familiar as possible with adult learning (Glennon, Hodgkinson, & Knowles, 2019). Knowles' (1975) theory of adult learning, also called andragogy (Knowles, 1990), states that self-directed learning takes place where the learners take accountability for their own learning process. These adult learners must know why they are learning the topic being taught and how it is helpful for them before they invest in learning it (Knowles, 1990). When an adult learner is placed in an experience where they perceive themselves as being treated as an adolescent, it is bound to interfere with their learning (Knowles, 1990). The pursuance for increased learning and attending an institution of higher education is guided by internal motivators and self-directedness to use experiences and learned knowledge by applying it to new information (Knowles, 1990). With the number of

challenges and distractions student-parents have on their mind outside of their academic realm, understanding how they learn is a key component in student-parent success rates.

Situation to Self

At the beginning of my studies, I was still pregnant with my son. Throughout my coursework I was trying to balance full-time work as a preschool facilitator, now public-school teacher, raise an infant, and accommodate graduate level schoolwork. This process presented a whole new challenge for me. The challenge of attending online higher education courses has created a lot less time with my husband, and with my son. My husband, although a strong support, must carry on many of the burdens of housework that I am unable to contribute to due to my attention in free time being focused on schoolwork. My day includes getting myself and our toddler-aged son ready to go, leaving for work, getting home to prepare dinner, and having some time to play with our son. Then when our son goes to sleep, I start my coursework. With my past educational and professional experience I bring to the table an ontological philosophical assumption with the understanding of the nature of reality or the understanding that different categories are used to divide the broader world for easier understanding (Samostienko, 2019). Ontological assumptions are based on the idea that all individuals have their own beliefs and views on reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When studying student-parents, there are multiple views seen in many ways from each participant which requires participants presenting their perspectives in their own words for clarity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I will use the actual words of the participants and present their different perspectives relating to the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2015).

The second assumption being used in this study is an axiological assumption that allows me to bring forth my positionality in relation to the context of myself since I am also a student-

parent (Creswell & Poth, 2015). In this study, I will gather data that will be highly beneficial for the success of student-parents as well as for institutions to create an atmosphere that meets this student populations' needs. Using research-based interviewing techniques and analytic strategies will aid in the findings reported in this study.

Paradigms are defined as a philosophical stance that provides a basic set of beliefs that guides action done by a researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These are not theories but are rather ways of thinking or patterns for research to follow that can lead to the development of a theory (Knowles, 1990). The paradigm used in this study is a post positivism paradigm. Post positivism is grounded in understanding that there is not one reality in a study relating to people, therefore research consists of validity approaches and multiple levels of data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm was chosen for the study because it is not focusing on methods but the problem being researched and the questions that are related to this issue (Creswell & Poth, 2015). This pragmatic paradigm allows for a deeper understanding of the experience of the participants and their relationship to the challenges and strategies utilized by the student-parents participating in this study. The connection of these same struggles with other student-parents is what intrigued me to do more research into this population and the topic of their useful strategies in being successful graduates. Since this study used a belief system grounded in post positivism with a deeper insight into the experiences of the participants, a social science theoretical lens was used to engage in the qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Being aware of my writing and research, as well as the reports in the findings of this study are important to the reliability and credibility of the information collected. Since I am a student-parent myself, my biases and experiences are not reflected in my findings, and all information is from the participants or resources without any personal reflection added. A pragmatic post positivism paradigm was used

with this study, with a social science theoretical lens to guide the study. This aided in assessing the truth and the meaning of theories and participants' beliefs through their application, as identified by the participants through the data collection process (Queloz, 2019).

Problem Statement

Students-parents have an increasing number of challenges than the other student populations (Wladis, Hachey, & Conway, 2018). The challenges of balancing roles, managing time, having personal time, a strong support system, and managing financial hardships, are just some of what these student-parents must concern themselves with daily (Wladis et al., 2018; Brooks, 2015; Bastedo et al., 2016). While many studies focus their attention on students and their challenges, this population is often overlooked (Moreau & Kerner, 2013). Very little research has been published to understand the emotional responses of this student population, and the effects of such on their school success and personal lives (Brooks, 2015; Louie, Cromer, & Berry, 2017). Some studies have sought to find a connection between higher education students and parenthood, however they only focused on the challenges that have been faced and not on strategies student-parents used to ensure their success, (Sallee, 2015). The problem is that student-parents experience a unique set of challenges in higher education and are not aware of or must create strategies to prevail and succeed in their academics.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the challenges of student-parents in higher education and discover the strategies this student population has found to overcome such challenges. At this stage in the research, students attending higher education who are also parents will be generally defined as student-parents (Brooks, 2014). The study has determined and described the challenges as well as the

prospective strategies to overcome such to assist the entire population of student-parents. The first theory guiding this study is the theory of student persistence by Tinto (2012) in which he theorized that there were multiple factors that higher education institutions could improve upon to increase student morale and success. This theory ties into my study by understanding the experiences of student-parents and how they relate to the institutions they attend in relation to challenges and strategies for successful completion. The second theory guiding this study is Knowles' (1990) theory of adult learning which is based on the principle that the experiences of an individual are what guide the way adults learn in a unique manner. This theory relates directly to the student population of my study due to their needs of learning that are much different than the traditional formats of teaching.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study to future research is important for all administrators and researchers to understand, interpret, and analyze the experiences of the student-parent population in higher educational settings. The challenges they experience, as well as the strategies they utilize have practical significance in that they are effective in real circumstances. Theoretically, this study not only utilizes the theory of student persistence from Tinto's 1975 research study but builds upon it by focusing on one targeted group of non-traditional students in higher education. Knowles (1970) adult learning theory will be able to provide tools and understanding to those interested in understanding the needs of adult students and incorporate what is learned into the educational system of adult learning. This will aid in providing stronger relationships for student-parents with peers and support to create a better educational experience while strengthening the graduation rates of institutions who seek to serve student-parents.

Theoretical

The significance of building upon and using Tinto's 1975 theory of student persistence is important considering the differences that society and higher education have made since this theory was created. There were no online classes to assist or hinder in student persistence, time management, or in building relationships. The students in Tinto's (1975) study were not student-parents, so this student population could bring to light new information that could benefit his original findings. In a more recent study by Tinto (2012), there were additional student populations that included those who work and have families but are unable to meet the extra-curricular guidelines of institutions such as being part-time students or unable to make meetings on a regular basis. Encouraging involvement begins with institutions evaluating their current practices and finding ways they could include a larger portion of their student populations, including those with other obligations such as having a family (Tinto, 2012). Gaining a deeper insight into the relationship of commitment between students and their institutions including those involved with their learning process provides a larger understanding to interpersonal relationships in all learning environments (Savage, Strom, Hubbard, & Aune, 2019). Having a sense of community for students in higher education between the institution itself, between institutional staff, and between peers is an important concept of Tinto's (1975) theory of student persistence. Also, the addition to the strategies proven effective by the experiences of the student-parents can add to the information regarding student persistence within the student-parent population and can contribute to their success in completion of their coursework.

Knowles' (1990) theory of adult learning is significant to the study of student-parents. Adult learners, such as student-parents, have a readiness to learn that other students do not. This group of students choose to enroll in school and better themselves academically with the experience they have developed in social roles (Knowles, 1990). Another important concept of

Knowles' (1990) theory is the self-concept of a person as they mature and how it changes over time and through experiences. This aligns directly with how student-parents must navigate being a student, most often a full-time employee, a parent, and many other social roles to learn the balance needed. Knowles (1990) added four principles that are applied to adult learning including: adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction, experiences provide the basis for learning activities, adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their professional or personal life, and adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented. Knowles (1990) explained that un-programmed experiences such as marriage, child rearing, and occupational activities produce firmly established changes in the ways adults approach problems, handle risk and organize their thinking. Student-parents as adult learners must have these principles met to feel accomplished in their learning through higher education. In having a deeper understanding of experiences from participants and relating their opinions and views to these principles, educational facilities will be better prepared to train staff to meet the needs of their students.

Empirical

The significance of this study provides useful research and information for students, educators, administration, stakeholders, sociologists, psychologists, and many more researchers who would be intrigued to understand the positive and negative dynamics of student-parents in higher education and the effects of their experiences both positive and negative. The mental effects of student-parents is a topic that many researchers could find useful in relation to experiences. Finding strategies such as time management, setting clear motivators and priorities, and creating or maintaining relationships, that have been proven effective from those who have gone through the struggles of attending higher education and being a parent allows for other

students to be better prepared. Wladis et al. (2018) stated that a bachelor's degree in the United States, compared to a high school diploma, increased earnings by 68% and almost cut the unemployment rate in half. Parents who have even some college education were shown to be more involved with their own children's schooling, which could explain the improved outcomes of their children (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008; Wladis et al., 2018). By increasing the graduation rate, the student-parents' children will know first-hand how much effort their parents have put into their success and have them to look up to regarding perseverance.

With a diverse and increasing number of students enrolled in the higher education system, it is important to examine this varied population from different types of higher education institutions for reliability in the findings (Joyner, Rouse, & Glatthorn, 2013). Also, in having multiple students from different formats (i.e. online, night classes, and in-class only) and settings, it is possible to find patterns and experiences between students that would assist administrators and stakeholders in their decision-making processes and in their planning strategies for future classes. Many institutions state that reading and scoring students' work is part of the institution's professional development and training to be sure they are assessing student learning appropriately and efficiently for entering the work force (Clark & Eynon, 2012). By maximizing professional development of this topic, educators can be more prepared to teach their specific student populations and in a much more meaningful way.

Practical

Student-parents are not the typical college student. More often than not, they are full-time workers, live off-campus in their own housing, and have many more responsibilities than just completing their assignments (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Student-parents with responsibilities

such as ensuring a roof not just for themselves but for their children, child care costs and scheduling that could hinder their academic schedules, as well as working schedules are just a few of the characteristics and concerns of student-parents, single or married (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). All of these responsibilities may result in feelings of stress and concern that could easily weigh on ones' shoulders. When this group of students do not receive enough support inside or outside the classroom setting, their morale drops as do their grades (Louie et al., 2017). Support usually does not come when needed even if it is sought out in times of need (Scharp & High, 2016). However, without knowing where to look, many student-parents resort to giving in to their stress rather than pursuing ways to overcome it (Scharp & Hall, 2019). These are a just a few challenges that are faced by this group of students in past years, as well as current. In understanding the challenges student-parents have from their own words using interviews, educators and administrators can be better prepared to help incorporate some of the strategies that are found through the study to assist students to be successful. The higher education industry is evolving with the growing needs and demands of their students, and in order to keep up with the competition of other institutions, many are adapting to a 'student as a customer' approach in the delivery of the curriculum being taught (Latif, Latif, Sahibzada, & Ullah, 2019). With these changes being made to the higher education system including online class formats and night classes, or even blended formats, there has been a rise in the number of students that are non-traditional in nature and faculty members as well as administrators need to be knowledgeable on how to approach their education, just as they would with a traditional student (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014).

For-profit institutions have aggressively been pursuing online programs to provide more access and convenient instruction for employed students to meet the demand of this growing

population of student-parents (Bok, 2013; Money & Dean, 2019). Individuals, groups, and organizations all have needs that must be satisfied, especially relating to economic costs and profits (Morgan, 2006). This attention is drawn to the fact that they depend on a wider environment and customer population to meet these economic needs (Morgan, 2006). Like any other business or company that relies on customer satisfaction and success, associations between workforce representative structures are strong indicators of a successful systematic approach to workplace health and safety management (Lyons, 2016). In properly training, preparing, and hiring appropriate and well-trained employees, higher education institutions can create a positive learning atmosphere that encourages all student populations, including those who have much else on their minds than their academics.

Research Questions

This study has sought to understand and answer the question of how student-parents describe their challenges, and their strategies in relation to their experience of support. The three sub-questions assist in having a deeper understanding of how relationships and institutional support systems are related to the persistence and success of student-parents in higher education settings. In answering these questions, experiences of student-parents living through these challenges and identifying their personal strategies will provide institutions, future, and current student-parents the opportunity to learn from their peers and raise graduation and success rates. The questions are explained and outlined in detailed as followed beginning with the central research question.

The central research question is as follows:

How do student-parents who are enrolled in higher education describe their challenges and the strategies they use to help them successfully navigate their course work?

Student-parents who are from different cultures, backgrounds, socio-economic level, or are raising children at different ages have different experiences relating to challenges relative to the support they have while doing so (Brooks, 2015). Student-parents who care for young and dependent children in the home setting on their own may have more stress and greater responsibilities than those who care for children who are in their teenage years or those who are co-parenting. Research shows that student-parents suffer from a loss of academic momentum, which is linked with educational attainment (Wladis et al., 2018, Troester-Tate, 2019, Herzog, 2015).

The sub-questions are as follows:

1. How do student-parents who are enrolled in higher education describe their challenges relative to their personal needs and the strategies used to resolve these kinds of issues allowing them to successfully navigate their course work?

Including responses from student-parents who attend higher education courses in multiple formats there may be a recognizable pattern in determining which format shows a larger connection with peers and those who do not have a connection with their peers. Meeting their own personal needs poses more of a challenge than keeping and gaining motivation to persist (Pizzolato et al., 2017). This could provide information relating to different outcomes in their challenges and strategies. Students who attend school online, may be able to make their own schedule for completing assignments, however they also need to do so in the home setting around their children and family members which could pose its own issues (Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

2. How do student-parents who are enrolled in higher education describe their experiences of academic support from university staff and faculty as it pertains to their persistence to successfully navigate their course work?

Tinto's (1975) theory of student persistence outlined motivators for educational attainment such as student support systems and time management strategies. Having a strong support in school and in the home setting are seen to be important factors in persistence and completion (Graff, Ridge, & Zaugg, 2019). This will assist in guiding this study to identify the relationship between academic and peer support with student-parent success in their areas of study (Graff et al., 2019).

3. How are student-parents' strategies for success in higher education related to their learning experiences as adult learners?

The learning experience and maturity level of students in primary school and higher education are much different from one another, which was explained by Knowles (1990) using the term andragogy. The main principles of this theory explain that adult learners must want to learn, and that their learning experiences are internally motivated rather than extrinsically (Knowles, 1970). Student-parents, a small population of adult learners, are frequently facing challenges that hinder their educational success.

Definitions

Terms pertinent to the study are listed and defined below. Terms with abbreviations are included. All terms are cited for reliability and validity reasons.

1. *Adult Learning*- a practice in which adults engage in sustained self-directed activities to gain knowledge (Knowles, 1990).

2. *Andragogy*- based on at least four main assumptions that are different from those of pedagogy (Knowles, 1990).
3. *Online Learning*- Consisting of asynchronous learning that can be done on the students own time with discussions, prompts, and assignments and synchronous learning with scheduled assignments done at the same time as the rest of the class (Panigrahi et al., 2018).
4. *Persistence*- continuance in a course of action of completion despite difficulty (Tinto, 1975).
5. *Student-Parents*- Student-parents are students in attendance of an academic institution that are also parents, more commonly of children that are dependent (Brooks, 2014).

Summary

Student-parents enrolled in the higher education system have been on the rise as there have been more access to courses geared for the busy working adults (van Rhijn, Lero, & Burke, 2016). These various formats have allowed for those who work full-time jobs and balance regular adult responsibilities the opportunity to attend higher education courses with little to no interruption to their regular routine like driving to a campus and sitting through guided lessons. With the added responsibility and role of being a student mixed into the routines this population must balance comes with greater stress and higher drop-out rates than any other student population (Sallee, 2015). Some studies have been done in small settings to find the motivators and the stressors for this student-parent population (Singh, Matza, & Latham, 2017; Pizzolato, Olson, & Monje-Paulson, 2017; Savage et al., 2019), however, there is a gap in understanding what can be done on the institutional level to assist these students to prepare them to gain their degree, and even less that look at the patterns of the formats and the differences in age groups of

the dependents of these students to see what has a greater effect. This study was done as a qualitative narrative for researchers to gain knowledge and perspective first-hand from those who are going through this situation currently and what they do to persevere and succeed. In finding these patterns and understanding this group of non-traditional students, institutions could be more prepared to utilize different resources on and off their campuses to support the student-parent growth, and better prepare their faculty to help aid the student-parents academic success.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter begins with a discussion on the theoretical framework that relates to this topic of student-parents. The first theory being discussed is Tinto's (2012) theory of student persistence in higher education. The second theory is Knowles' (1990) theory of adult learning. Following the theoretical framework, the related literature section focuses on the challenges that other authors have discovered pertaining to student-parents. Topics that discuss the challenges of student-parents in this section include emotional and gender differences, the balance of responsibilities, educational attainment, institutional support and structure, and personal needs. Strategies that have been used by student-parents include relationships and experiences, motivation and setting priorities, time management, institutional support and training, and family engagement. The chapter concludes with some strategies and topics that motivate student-parents to overcome their challenges.

Theoretical Framework

The relationship between student-parents and higher education is a topic that requires a deeper understanding of development and human interaction (Lucchini-Raies, Marquez-Doren, Herrera-Lopez, Valdes, & Rodriguez, 2018). There are many factors that relate to how a student persists through their educational programs to eventually graduate (Tinto, 1975). Some of these factors include both physical and psychological health, as well as support-seeking factors (Scharp & Hall, 2017). These factors change from student to student, which makes it difficult to understand exactly which factors relate to the success of the individual in their higher education setting. Other factors include how the students attend their classes such as in a classroom setting, online in either an asynchronous or synchronous format, or a blend of the two (Theisen,

McGeorge, & Walsdorf, 2018). Both Tinto (2012) and Knowles (1990) have extensively sought for an understanding of the development of human beings and their educational growth, as well as the relationship of the institution and the individual. This relationship has the power to either promote educational success, or the counter in having student drop out of their degree programs (Lucchini-Raies et al., 2018). In studying these relationships and theories, one may find a common factor relating to the success or decline of student-parents in the higher education setting relating to the topic and experience of this phenomena.

Theory of Student Persistence

Tinto (2012) conducted research of the individual and institutional practice as it relates to persistence, or to dropping out. Tinto's (1975) theory of student persistence and the research he collected to support his theory, has been a basis for many research topics. In his study he evaluated several college students who were non-traditional in nature including those who were commuters, over the age of 24, and who were not enrolled full-time. Tinto (1975) attempted to formulate a theoretical model that explained the "process of interaction between the individual and the institution that lead differing individuals to drop out from institutions of higher education" (pp. 90). The social constructs of an educational system have a great effect on how a student's educational expectations match their results (Tinto, 1975). Tinto's (2012) research in understanding the relationship between an institution and the social connections made within the non-traditional student population found that there is a very strong relationship between the two that results in either a student's success or ends in a student dropping out from withdrawal or from failure. The findings of Tinto's (1975) theory and the strategies of student-parents in their perseverance to success could be helpful in finding determining factors in a modern-aged higher education system and society.

The multiple factors that play into this theory of student persistence in higher education, as defined by Tinto (1975), included individual characteristics such as family background, grade persistence, personality differences, sex of the student, goal commitment, financial responsibilities, and most important to the topic at hand, family responsibilities. These individual factors affect each student differently, but all lead to the same result of persistence in their educational careers or eventually dropping out of the program completely. Interactions between students to feel a sense of community plays a large role in students' happiness and ease of stress that allow for a more successful higher education experience (Tinto, 1975). Findings showed that non-traditional students have a harder time feeling like they belong in the college community due to their schedules, their lack of ability to utilize college resources, and their work-school-life balance (Tinto, 1975). The relationships between faculty members and students creates a sense of belonging in their academic focus areas and have a large connection with their academic success rates (Tinto, 1975).

In a more recent publication, Tinto (2012) explained that the best place for student success and a feeling of belonging begins with the classroom setting. Tinto's (2012) theory has a strong relationship to the topic of student-parents and the challenges they face while enrolled in higher education, and what they could do to persist through their programs to be successful scholars. This (Tinto, 2012) theory highlights the mentioned factors that are common for students who succeed, and the ones that lead to students dropping out. He outlined numerous ways that institutions can help students succeed including interventions, training, and involvement. The factors that contribute to the success of the students studied by Tinto (2012) that were non-traditional could have commonalities with student-parents who attend higher education institutions presently.

Other researchers have used Tinto's work to comprehend different understandings of student persistence such as prioritizing (Peterson, 2016) and how relationships are related (Zahl, 2015). Peterson (2016) studied community college student-parents' priorities for persistence and used Tinto's (1997) writing as a way to understand what motivates students and how they fill in the gaps of their learning experiences. This study found that there were common themes for persistence such as support, study strategies, methods for addressing stress, and self-awareness (Peterson, 2016). Utilizing information from Tinto's (1997) writings allowed for a deeper understanding of learning community efforts that encourage self-awareness, self-efficacy, and self-authorship as they persisted through their educational journeys (Peterson, 2016). Another study completed by Zahl (2015) was related to the impact of community with part-time doctoral students and the effects for student persistence. This study used Tinto's (1993) publication on student attrition that provided a foundational lens to view social and academic systems as the primary community for graduate students (Zahl, 2015). Tinto (1993) found that becoming a member of a collective group and building meaningful relationships with others was one contributor to persistence. Zahl's (2015) participants stated, "a sense of belonging stems from finding a common purpose, developing mutual respect, and feel that 'we are all in this together'" (pp. 306). Both of these studies used Tinto's (1993; 1997) writings to substantiate their research and add to the existing body of literature.

Theory of Adult Learning

Knowles' (1990) theory of adult learning is relevant to this study due to student-parents non-traditional higher education status and the differences in learning they face that causes them to have more struggles in the adjustment of being a student-parent. This theory has been known to assist in broadening and shifting leadership mindsets, to build upon skills, and engage faculty

members as well as their student population in meaningful work (Cunningham, VanGronigen, Tucker, & Young, 2019). Knowles (1980) developed four assumptions relating to his theory and of how adult learners differ to younger learners. They include self-concept, adult learner experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning. Four years later he added a fifth assumption, motivation to learn (Knowles, 1984). The first principle states that adults should be involved in the planning and evaluation of their learning process. The second relates to the experience of learning to provide the basis for the learning activities.

Next is that adults are most interested in their academic focus if it has immediate relevance to their job or impact in their personal life. The following is centered on the thought that adult-learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented, so they must be taught in this same way. Lastly, motivation to learn is internalized as students mature. Adult learners enrolled in college learn in a different format than others and it is an educator's responsibility to understand the students' needs and learning processes to encourage success. In a higher education system that is informed by theory it enables educators to, "understand the complexity of the teaching and learning process, encourages graduate students to explore the ways in which power shapes our personal and social learning contexts, and fosters development of a more critically literate and engaged citizenry" (Gouthro, 2019, p.60-61).

Self-concept adjusts as a person matures and moves from being a dependent person towards their own individual (Knowles, 1990). The adult learner experience relates to the things one encounters throughout their life towards becoming an adult that they utilize as a resource for learning (Knowles, 1990). Readiness to learn relates to one being oriented on his or her social roles relating to developmental tasks (Knowles, 1980). Orientation to learning is how a person views how to approach their learning and shifts from being subject-centered to becoming

problem-centered and focused on finding solutions (Knowles, 1980). Finally, Knowles believed with maturation comes an internal motivation to learn, expand, and be an all-around healthier person (Knowles, 1980). Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin (2005) found that the percentage of students enrolled in higher education who have families with dependent children to care for represents roughly 10-11% of the total enrollment of student populations. This percentage, in recent years has almost doubled to 19% of the total student enrollment (van Rhihn et al., 2018). Due to family responsibilities, this student population has a great amount of pressure placed on them to succeed and meet their higher goal relating to their coursework. The adult learning theory will be helpful in creating a larger understanding of how this group of student-parents relate to the learning strategies noted by Knowles' (1990). This will assist in providing stronger relationships between the educational climate student-parents experience and the tools they may need to create a positive learning experience through adult learning.

There are many studies using Knowles (1975) theory to support developmental changes of the higher education system. Servant-Miklos and Noordegraaf-Eelens (2019) used Knowles (1975) study to conduct an ontological critique of self-directed learning. Knowles (1975) is noted throughout to assist in understanding what self-directed learning is and what higher education institutions are doing to adapt to increase students' skills that align with his findings. Knowles (1975) suggested using a learning contract in which the teacher and the student listed learning needs and goals that would result in a grade based on the students' performance of these goals (as cited in Servant-Miklos & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2019). Although this study was not about student-parents, the research related to the ability of institutions to meet the educational needs of individualistic self-directed principles is valuable for understanding how higher education institutions are able to adapt to the needs of their student populations.

Choudhury and Freemont (2017) conducted a study relating to assessments and approaches higher education institutions utilizing andragogy and the information provided by Knowles (1973). Although this study has a different focus than my own, the findings related to institutional plans for assessing students appropriately in a format that can be comprehended and utilized in their area of study is related to adult learning strategies. Choudhury and Freemont (2017) also explained the importance of intrinsic motivation to learn without limitations placed on them. Adult learners will learn if the subject has meaning to them and they can see its' applicability in their future careers or academic goals (Knowles, 1973). This information was useful for this study to compare what institutions have been doing, compared to what the students need as adult learners.

Related Literature

The related literature section provides the reader with information from previously recorded and peer-reviewed research. The student population will be reviewed to determine the knowledge gathered thus far in research. Also, the information, as followed, allows for a deeper understanding of the topics relating to the phenomena of student-parent challenges, as well as strategies that are used and collected in the literature. This will be critical in understanding what is missing from the collected literature as well as what may need more attention throughout the current study.

Student-Parents

The student-parent population has substantially grown through the last decade alongside the growth in technology with a total of close to one-fourth of the undergraduate student population having at least one child (Scharp & Hall, 2017). This amount reported does not include the graduate student-parent totals. Unfortunately, studies show that only 26% of this

undergraduate student-parent population alone will attain their degree within six years after beginning their coursework, with the rest dropping out of their programs entirely (Scharp & Hall, 2017). Research shows that students who come from low-income backgrounds enroll in community college settings to assist in boosting their wages in their fields or in hopes of entering into new fields with higher pay to support themselves and their children (Pizzolato, Olson, & Monje-Paulson, 2017). Due to the number of roles and responsibilities student-parents maintain many schools are attempting to find the best way to educate this student population. One popular form of education is self-directed learning where the student does most of their education on their own with minimal guidance from their educators (Servant-Miklos & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2019). This type of learning opportunity is beneficial to those who are driven and have the time, however for those who need more support it could do more harm than anything else. Learning is viewed as a function of the activities being used to learn, the context of the learning process, and the learning culture established (Rovai & Gallien, 2005). These three things all benefit social interaction between peers and educators for student-parents. Social interaction is imperative to learning and having a sense of a community feel, although many student-parents feel as if they do not fit in with the rest of their peers due to their time, money, and role restrictions (Roy, Bradecich, Dayne, & Luna, 2018).

One of the largest problems with social and academic interactions is the limited amount of time student-parents have to focus on their children, while also focusing on their schooling. Some universities are adopting a new approach to attempt to meet the needs of this group of students with a family-friendly room equipped with playsets, a fenced play area, nursing rooms, and study areas that provides student-parents an opportunity to bring their children with them to study (Graff, Ridge, & Zaugg, 2019). These types of modern-day learning spaces could provide

less stress in relation to time and role combining, while providing a space for student-parents to build relationships with those in similar situations with themselves. With teenage pregnancy on the rise in recent years, there are also more students enrolling into higher education who are pregnant, or already young parents who have to multi-task and balance the roles of becoming a developed young adult aging into full adulthood responsibilities (Mora-Cancino & Hernandez-Valencia, 2015). In understanding how to support this group of higher-education learners, institutions and educators will be better equipped to meet their needs while still encouraging high standards and academic achievement.

Challenges Faced

Challenges are common for all students in higher education. However, challenges are much more complex for student-parents for many reasons. Critical thinking skills have been proven to be the most needed skill set for students in higher education (Siefert, 2012), however this is difficult to attain if student-parents are too distracted by their challenges outside of the classroom and in the classroom, which could eventually lead to low student-parent success. The responsibilities and time constraints that student-parents have prevent them from investing their all into their education. The challenges reviewed for the purpose of this research includes the differences student-parents feel individually relating to their emotions, gender roles, balancing time and responsibilities, their past history of educational attainment, academic structure and support, financial obstacles, and the pressures they have for success.

Emotions and gender differences. Emotions play a key role in the challenges of students enrolled in higher education, especially those who have other emotional obligations outside of the institutional setting (Roy et al., 2018). The effect of students' emotional health while attempting to attend classes could potentially have a great negative effect on their grades

depending on their mental state (Estes, 2011). Some may see the university setting as a place they can get away from the stress of life and focus on something else, whereas others may believe that the time spent away from home gives the feeling of guilt for not caring for the children and family in the household (Brooks, 2014). Higher education degree programs contain a great deal of information that require a significant amount of time spent on studying and scheduled class time, which takes time away from a student-parent's other responsibilities. Online asynchronous learning provides learners with the opportunity to access content anytime and anywhere, whereas there are more time constraints placed on those attending online synchronous formats that require specific times to meet virtually (Panigrahi et al., 2018). Crispin (2019) found that on weekdays 30% of student-parents attend class while 44% of student-nonparents attend class. During the weekdays, 40% of student-parents did homework or at-home school related tasks, compared to 50% of student-nonparents (Crispin, 2019). On the weekends, 31% of student-parents completed schoolwork at home while 37% of student-nonparents worked on their assignments (Crispin, 2019). This information shows that in all settings and timeframes, student-parents have less time to complete their schoolwork and attend class than those who do not have children. The reason for this may be due to the challenge of balancing a school-family conflict in roles and responsibility (van Rhijn et al., 2018).

Ageism and age discrimination are apparent in both the professional realm and the student sector. Many student-parents enter the higher education system to further their career and gain higher pay, especially when there are challenges placed in their way to success such as being passed over for recruitment and promotion (Taylor, McLoughlin, Meyer, & Brooke, 2013). Workers under the age of 30 report age discrimination three times more than those who are over the age of 50 (Taylor et al., 2013). Students who are young feel they are treated as if they have

not obtained the amount of knowledge or are disregarded due to their lack of experience, whereas older students feel as though they are past their time and cannot keep up with the technology and needs of today's society (Stypinska & Turek, 2017). This age discrimination is a large motivator for student-parents to further their knowledge and build their education to in turn assist in furthering their career and earning more to support their family.

Student-parents are usually older than traditional students or have had to mature quickly due to having a child at a younger age (Wilsey, 2013). Most students are emerging adults, however student-parents possess an additional adult role whether they are parents at the age of 18 or 30 (Wilsey, 2013). These biased attitudes can easily lead to discrimination which can easily be problematic for one's psychological health and productivity (Stypinska & Turek, 2017). Student-parents are at increased risk for these types of psychological health problems due to their high amounts of emotional stress (Brooks, 2015). Lone student-parents suffer from emotional stress more than those who have a spouse that can help to meet the needs of the family and the household (Madden, 2018). These feelings of loneliness, shame, stress, and not belonging can create more hurdles for student-parents by negatively impacting their academic grades and performance (Madden, 2018). With too much being on one's plate of responsibility, grades and performance will drop with the lack of focus and will ultimately create more challenges.

Wilson, Beyer, and Monteiro (2014) have shown that students prefer and learn best when they have a younger female professor or educator compared to an older female or a male because they can relate to them more easily while others show alternative findings such as Zacher & Bal (2012) who find that older professors and educators become a figure of guidance and support for students. The problem that student-parents face in regard to the ages of their professors or educators is related to the amount of support and respect that is given to them in regard to their

other obligations, and their need for academic care and flexibility in contact hours (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). These age-related studies show that psychological emotional preference and biases have a credible effect on student-parents' learning and success.

A study was completed in relation to the feeling of guilt in student-parents attending higher education which resulted in students feeling more stress due to their attendance in higher education than any other emotion (Brooks, 2014). Women, more so than men by a substantial amount, were affected by this feeling because of their motherly duties being pushed aside (Brooks, 2014). The pressure that is placed on mothers is extreme in social settings with the cultural and societal expectations that a mothers' role holds (Lockwood et al., 2019). Role challenges, such as attempting to meet the needs of being a student while maintaining the responsibilities of being a parent, cause many women to abandon one role for the sake of the other (Moghadam, Khiaban, Esmaeili, & Salsali, 2017). Studies reported that 40% of mothers in higher education will drop out of their schooling to care for their children (Eckerson, Talbourdet, Reichlen, Sykes, Noll, & Gault, 2016; Snyder, 2017). Student-parents completing their certificate or degree program within six years of enrollment are low with only 33% obtaining completion in that time span (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014). This is due to the challenges of time with 56% of single student-parents spending more than 30 hours a week to caring for their children, let alone working their job and completing school assignments (Gault et al., 2014). Although every family and every student-parent have a different situation, this information is helpful in understanding the challenges that are faced for the population of student-parents as a whole.

It is presently most common for women, in the United States, to become a mother and have children before the age of thirty with the largest increase in women having children in their

early to mid-twenties (Mathews & Hamilton, 2016). The mean age of women bearing their first child has rose from age 24 in 2000 to age 26 in 2014 (Mathews & Hamilton, 2016). With this data, it is only practical to assume and anticipate that more women are making the transition to motherhood while enrolled in a postsecondary educational institution (Roy, Bradecich, Dayne, & Luna, 2018). A recent study by Madden (2019) found that 43% of parenting students are single mothers. In reference to the differences of men and women enrolled, “mothers are more negatively affected by parenthood and marriage than married men with children and single women without children” (Kulp, 2016, p. 82). Although men with children and women without children have the same responsibilities in the classroom, mothers are deemed to have a harder time in handling the guilt that comes with the amount of time spent on their program (Kulp, 2016). This is due to the cultural expectation of good mothers or intensive parents to sacrifice their own wants and needs for their children (Kulp, 2016). The time spent on coping with the challenges they face, with the twenty-two hours a week required students formally must meet for school, finding motivation is a larger hurdle (Pizzolato et al., 2017). This has a great effect on how student-parents perform in their classroom setting and their grade performance, which could ultimately lead to failure or dropping out of their program completely (Marfo, 2017).

Balancing responsibilities. Responsibilities for student-parents are substantially greater and more complex than those who do not have children. These responsibilities accumulated can lead to student-parents having an increased amount of stress, and with that comes the same effects of having negative emotional feelings that were studied previously. Berry and Jones (1995) created the Parental Stress Scale (PSS) to statistically document both the positive and the negative effects of parenting as they relate to stressful situations (Louie, Cromer, & Berry, 2017). Louie et al. (2017) conducted international research regarding student-parents and their

relationship with stress. The research found that student-parents have a higher amount of stress than those who were just full-time workers with dependent children due to their struggle with balancing all responsibilities while still trying to be successful with all roles (Louie, et al., 2017). Estes (2011) wrote that student-parents commented on feeling pulled in opposite directions with the time needed to focus on schoolwork, while wanting to be there for family times and outings that ends in an increased amount of stress and tension in balancing their roles. This is connected to the challenges of student-parents due to their struggle with balancing their roles and wanting to create a strong family bond while also attempting to be successful students.

One study that used Berry and Jones' (1995) PSS was focused on the stress levels of parents who have premature children that are in the neonatal intensive care unit (Turner, Chur-Hanson, Winefield, & Stanners, 2015). This study wanted to determine parental stress levels and compare it to the supports provided by the hospital to help lessen those levels (Turner et al., 2015). Considering the differences of grown children and infants in the neonatal intensive care unit, the PSS was adjusted to meet the needs of these parents in a hospital setting. The findings of this study, while not directly related to student-parents, did have a significant number of findings related to lower stress with an increase of support by peers (Turner et al., 2015).

Financial struggles are included in these challenges due to the lack of time spent working and more time spent on academics. Higher education is more expensive than ever, even with financial aid. Student-parents must handle being able to afford their classes, supplies, books, housing, food, transportation, utilities, and all the expenses to care for their children. Crispin (2019) found that student-parents work, on average, 43 minutes more a day than student-nonparents. This suggests that student-parents may substitute time away from their schoolwork to engage in paid work during the week days (Crispin, 2019). Single student-parents are the ones

who are most affected by these costs because they must support themselves, their education, and their children. A study on single student-parents found that 90% of the participants were women (Hinton-Smith, 2015). Findings concluded that the stress of debt increased by attending a higher education institution that negatively impacted students' scores as well as their amount of stress (Hinton-Smith, 2015). When needing more money, parents are forced to work more, which is harder to do when also trying to be a parent and a student. The term "role strain" is used often when discussing the addition of schooling with other responsibilities such as working a full-time job or being a parent (Sallee, 2015). Those who are single parents struggle in paying their bills for basic necessity while balancing the roles of being a parent, a student, and finding adequate childcare while more than likely being a full-time employee (Troester-Trate, 2019).

Due to the concerns of finances and affordability, more and more student-parents are relying on federal student aid and loans to attend and complete their schooling. The reliance of these loans is so great, that the total amount of loans for students in the United States is in the trillions (Herzog, 2018). The stress of taking these loans and understanding that they must be paid back relate directly to a student's persistence to complete their program (Herzog, 2018). In order to pay these loans off, and sustain a family's well-being, many student-parents do not have any other choice but to work as many hours as possible. Woolnough and Redshaw (2016) claimed that parents of dependent children must adjust their working schedule hours to accommodate the needs of their children and busy lifestyles. Student-parents have been shown to have a significantly lower income than students without children (Wladis, 2018). It has been suggested by Wladis (2018) that federal and financial loan companies or institutions consider applications based on more than current earnings and take into consideration the need for both

reduced paid and unpaid work hours to allow time for student-parents to pursue educational goals.

Factors such as food insecurity, transportation, and childcare are large areas of concern for student-parents (Troester-Trate, 2019). When a student-parent does not have childcare established for their on-campus lecture or class, they have no choice but to either bring their child with them or skip the class. Extending beyond the concerns of childcare, those with children and from low-income backgrounds have a hard time in finding transportation solutions and rely on a support network of family and friends for transporting themselves as well as their children (Combs, Shay, Salvesen, Kolosna, & Madely, 2016). In an attempt to minimize these concerns, some student-parents may enroll in online learning opportunities. Panigrahi, Sricastava, and Sharma (2018) found that the primary factors of using online learning are to improve one's access to education and the quality of the education, while reducing costs of education. Student-parents often struggle with keeping each of their roles separate, while still fulfilling the responsibilities of a student, an employee, a parent, a spouse, and so on.

Educational attainment. Increasing wages is a significant reason for single parents to enroll in higher education since they are usually categorized as low-income families (van Rhijn et al., 2016). However, the gap between student success in higher income families and lower income families has only grown larger over the last decade (Ziol-Guest, Duncan, & Kalil, 2015). Student-parents who were raised in a single-parent household have a statistically smaller chance of graduating from college than those who were raised in a two-parent household with a higher income (Ziol-Guest et al., 2015). Understanding the roles that individuals surrounding student-parents play, such as siblings, family, and/or friends who provide encouragement, guidance, and resources could support a solution in academic achievement and collegial success

(Mwangi, 2015). In addition, Mwangi, (2015) found that parental supports can be hindered or enhanced by factors such as income and their own educational level, which creates inequities for student-parents and their navigation of the higher education process.

Minorities such as Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians have the lowest educational attainment as well as educational enrollment rates with 32% of Hispanics enrolled, 38% of African Americans, and 62% of Asians enrolled in higher education (Singh, Matza, & Latham, 2017). At the same time, these are the populations that are rising in single parenthood enrolled in higher education (Miller, 2012). Some students claim to fall victim to discrimination in higher education setting with differential treatment of minority sub-populations (Assari, 2018). With these social groups within the student-parent population, chances to mobilize resources, navigate the system, and turn their potentials into tangible outcomes are heightened (Assari, 2018). Minority groups, especially those who are in the process of caring for their children while attending higher education, face many struggles in attempting to climb the social ladder and care for their family. Psychological and physical health are both affected by the resources that are accessible, or lack of resources entirely (Assari, 2018). Assari's (2018) study showed that the health effects of student-parents who are in minority social groups are higher than those who are in the majority, especially with mental health problems such as depression. This study concluded that those who are from wealthy backgrounds, or backgrounds with more than one source of income, were three times as likely as those from a low-income background to be successful in completing higher education (Bowen et al., 2005).

Institutional support and structure. With the societal changes made throughout the years, it is expected that higher education institutions also change to meet the needs of the students who attend including students with children. Some of these changes include the

different institutional settings and options that are available for their students including evening classes, hybrid classes that are partially on campus and partially online, and complete online both synchronous and asynchronous programs for all student populations to have access to the world of higher education (Tieben, 2018). Higher education institutions have more pressure placed on themselves to commit to providing greater accessibility and social and economic relevance by national policy bodies due to these changes in society (Doyle & Brady, 2018). More often than not, student-parents, especially those with dependent children, are likely to attend a community college than a four-year college or university (Cox & Sallee, 2017). The amount of knowledge that stakeholders want in all institutions require the same amount of skill sets that are valued by employers, no matter the setting (Burke & Butler, 2012). Since a community college is the primary source of postsecondary education access for student-parents, it is crucial for these institutions to form and implement organizational level responses to support this student group and ensure their success to continue on in their educational and professional careers (Cox & Sallee, 2017).

In order to meet these specific needs for higher education institutions, advisors as well as educators need to be properly prepared to assist this group of students. Instruments that should be used in measuring student learning, evaluation practices, improvements, and student-educator interactions have increased attention amongst administrators and stakeholders to determine what is the most needed and most appropriate for all student populations (Rickards & Stitt-Bergh, 2016). Online courses may cause students difficulty in relating to feedback provided due to the lack of personal interactions between educators and students. Many tools for learning require direct instruction and practice for proper understanding of post-grading feedback (Jones, Allen, Dunn, & Brooker, 2017) which creates larger hurdles for those attending online formats due to

design of courses and time restraints. This challenge creates more need for authentic measures of student learning that are performance-based and focus on the work students produce that are realistic and have no particular right answer (Lopez, 2002). These opportunities for faculty and student-parents to develop the ability to reflect on and expand their knowledge to apply it and adapt it to various areas of their academic and professional focus (Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, Pant, Toepper, & Molerov, 2017). Social-constructivist views argue that knowledge is shaped and evolves through participation within different communities and allows for students, especially those with other obligations, to understand the requirements and criteria needed for success in their area of profession (Price, O'Donovan, & Rust, 2007). Higher education leaders must take the time and provide the support needed to engage their student populations successfully with school improvement plans in order to grow their graduation rates and lower their retention (Wildly, 2013).

Student-parent personal needs. The personal needs of student-parents must not go without attention due to the effects of these in reaching personal gratification and increased awareness and confidence as a student. Pregnant and parenting students often encounter negative peer attitudes that leave them feeling invisible in the classroom and on campus (Madden, 2018). These feelings hinder both social growth and educational outcomes (Madden, 2018). High and Crowley (2016) found that among any other type of support, students desired more social presence but received the least of it from their institutional system. With an increase of social and peer support, positive outcome including an increased psychological and physical well-being were present with less stress and higher confidence levels (Scharp & Hall, 2019).

The support from student-parents' homes and familial structures are at most importance as those in their academic pursuits. Finding care for children while student-parents must attend

school lectures or while completing course related tasks is at the top of this student populations' concerns. The question of who will care for the children can be an immediate challenge for student-parents across the board, and even more so with those student-parents who are single (Lockwood et al., 2019). Maintaining the responsibility for arranging, managing, and often paying for the care of children is stressful and can be quite costly for many (Lockwood et al., 2019). Finding a supportive environment is a challenge, let alone ensuring that children are also in the same type of care. The support of family and friends are the most common and most encouraging forms for student-parents enabling them to continue through the process (Moghadam et al., 2017). Student-parents' spouses have also been deemed essential in assisting with financial affairs, childcare, and routine domestic tasks that help to relieve the workload imposed on student-parents (Moghadam et al., 2017). In combining the efforts of peer, institutional, family, and spousal support, student-parents are more capable of completing their program with less stress and a lighter workload knowing their children and themselves are cared for. However, when family is not supportive due to the lack of belief in the importance of the education and the attitude of the spouse concerning the education, there could be greater negative feelings and additional stress components that hinder success (Moghadam et al., 2017).

Other personal needs for student-parents include time to oneself in forms of hobbies, time, sport, and rest. Lindsay and Gillum (2018) found that oftentimes student-parents, especially those without the assistance of a spouse or significant other, lack the time, energy, and resources to care for themselves beyond their family. Single student-parents reported that extreme fatigue and feelings of not being good parents were commonly found due to the balancing of roles and putting themselves last (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Many mothers in the study done by Lindsay & Gillum (2018) noted that personal or free time was non-existent with limited social life.

Strategies Used to Overcome Obstacles

Even with the challenges presented, there are those who continue their success and complete their schoolwork to receive their degree. This shows there are strategies that are used to overcome these obstacles that student-parents have learned and adapted to that can be utilized by others to succeed as well. Relationships, positive experiences, accessibility, motivators, clear priorities, and time management techniques are a few strategies that will be analyzed further in this section.

Relationships & experiences. The standard projection of college students who leave their programs range from 30% to 70% (Zahl, 2015; Toester-Tate, 2019; Savage et al., 2019). One of the largest factors of a student leaving is not having a sense of community in their higher education setting (Zahl, 2015; Scharp & Hall, 2019; Theisen et al., 2018). For example, when students build a relationship with their classmates, and utilize the faculty contact information provided to them for support and guidance, they tend to increase their chance of following through with their program (Zahl, 2015). For students to be successful, they must be motivated to take their programs and assignments seriously, and instructors must take the time needed to properly assist and assess their students (Banta, 2006). Developing the skills needed to interpret and use student work allows for faculty to be better equipped to engage with and respond to student's needs (Bourke & Mentis, 2014).

In the instance of students, especially one with as many things on their mind as a student-parent, receiving support and guidance rather than just grades on a rubric, they feel as if they are being steered in the right direction rather than being criticized. Universities and colleges with a large sports program, clubs, activities, and student organizations have a much higher success rate than those without due to the sense of belonging that the students feel in belonging

to or attending these activities (Zahl, 2015). This is where student-parents struggle with having a sense of community due to the lack of time and accessibility they have in their personal lives to be a part of these types of activities. Research shows the area of familial capital also acknowledges the importance of a healthy connection within the family and community (Mwangi, 2015). Familial capital is defined as cultural knowledge nurtured among family members that carry a sense of community history, memory, and culture that expands the concept of family to include a broader sense of belonging (Yosso, 2005). Social capital, however, is concentrated on networks of people, and community resources that can help to provide instrumental and emotional support to navigate post-secondary education (Yosso, 2005).

Through a combination of these two capitals, student-parents can have resources, knowledge, and skills that can be used to move them towards educational success (Mwangi, 2015). Interactions and a sense of community among peers and faculty is not the only important concept of feeling included for higher education students. A sense of community within academic departments is just as important, if not more so (Zahl, 2015). Student-parents are largely affected by this trend due to their differences among their peers, and their busy schedules that hold them back from having open communication with their faculty members. Feeling as if they are part of the academic culture largely ensures them that they are contributing to the greater cause and encourages their commitment to their programs.

An important aspect of achieving academic success for student-parents is having a strong support system within their school setting and in their home setting. Studies have concluded that emotional support was the dominant theme throughout many forms of collected research in student-parents of all ages (Mwangi, 2015). Although this was the main support represented in the findings, researchers also found that a range of institutional support such as, direct, active,

and tangible involvement, was also present (Mwangi, 2015). This type of support included assisting in academic preparation, an advocate in addressing school officials if needed, and checking in with the student-parent to ensure deadlines were being met in a timely manner (Mwangi, 2015). Instructors who provide effective student support through ongoing observation of student-parent learning and feedback on formative assignments is crucial in all settings of higher education to adapt to the needs of the students as they continue through their educational journey (Baleni, 2015).

Bryan et al. (2018) named four factors in engaging students online and especially those with multiple role responsibilities include a positive learning environment by building a sense of community, giving appropriate and consistent feedback in a timely manner, and using the appropriate teaching tools to achieve a full comprehension of the course content. Bryan et al. (2018) found that having a strong support system and relationships that can be maintained and strengthened through the higher education process provides student-parents with a greater opportunity to be successful in their academic activities. Work-family conflict usually occurs between work roles and family roles that conflict with one another from demands that are too high to be met (van Rhijn, Acai, & Lero, 2018). The three forms of conflict relating to this type of struggle are time-based, strain-based, and behavior-based (Carlson, Kacnar, & Williams, 2000). Time-based conflict happens when time devoted to one role competes with time spent in another role, which is more than familiar for those who are student-parents (van Rhijn et al., 2018). Strain-based conflict occurs when strain caused by one role interferes with another role (van Rhijn et al., 2018). Lastly, behavior-based conflict is the result of specific behaviors that are required for one role, are not compatible with another role (van Rhijn et al., 2018). When these conflicts occur, student-parents cannot focus on their schoolwork and could have a negative

impact on their performance in class or with assignments. Likewise, if school is taking up too much time or altering home roles that causes conflict with those in the home setting, relationships could be damaged or even destroyed.

With the growing changes in higher education relating to accessibility, there have been multiple initiatives aiming to offer alternative routes for adult students, especially those with families. Classes that are fully online, or ‘hybrid’ courses with partial online coursework, have become increasingly popular among the student-parent population and these changes in program development have increased the completion rates in students that are non-traditional (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Studies show, “one-third of further education and higher education students care for a dependent with a large majority being women and mature students” (Moreau & Kerner, 2015, p. 218). This group of students has a much different experience than those who do not have dependent children, and their needs are also much different. With the changes that have been made in higher education, accessibility has grown. Students are finding it easier to have a sense of community while attending from their computers more and more, but there is still a large need to connect these students with their school than there was before there were these alternative forms of education.

Motivations & priorities. Motivations for enrolling and attending higher education are different for each and every student. However, there are similarities that can be described that relates to all students and falls in two categories: economics and respect (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). Motivators for student-parents to enroll and continue an academic focus include having respect for oneself, respect from others, respect for one’s children or families to provide them with more or higher pay, fulfilling one’s career, and less stress with an ease of paying bills with

higher pay (van Rhijn, et al., 2016). Student-parents have their own motivations that encourage them to overcome their challenges.

Motivations for this population mainly include “setting a good example for their children and hoping to increase their wages to support their families” (van Rhijn et al., 2016, p. 16). These motivations should mean more to the students than the risks they must take to commit to their programs. Through research of institutions and discussing their plans with institutional advisors, the students make their choices on where to attend, and how to attend that best suits their schedule and their life choices. This includes those who attend online learning institutions or programs. This format of education allows for the use of electronic media that range from add-on functions to full substitution of traditional delivery by instructor-led courses (Roberts, 2019). Online learning has become so popular in recent years that enrollments are outpacing traditional methods (Money & Dean, 2019). Money & Dean (2019) also note that the lower cost, higher quality, and ease of options provide opportunities to those who might not have otherwise been able to pursue higher education in the past with traditional routes.

Priorities for student-parents differ from students who are not parents. Due to the responsibilities that student-parents face, their focus is on much more than just their schoolwork. Numerous research studies have found that setting priorities is a strategy that has helped student-parents to succeed (Sallee, 2015; van Rhijn et al, 2016; Peterson, 2016). Student-parents must demonstrate a level of maturity to manage all responsibilities provided through circumstances and roles related to life experiences. Setting priorities in a reasonable manor, and setting achievable goals is a way that many student-parents are able to balance their work life, their school life, and their home life. Peterson, (2016) noted that, “experience and practice in decision-making and problem solving may enhance confidence and contribute to reduced stress with

improved time management with student-parent responsibilities” (p. 374). Enabling students to be open and able to communicate with their peers inside and outside of the classroom creates an opportunity to change the course of students’ lives in a broader sense than just in the classroom setting (Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2014). Having a stronger sense of community not only increases persistence in courses but increases satisfaction among group efforts and motivation to learn with less feelings of being burnt out (Rovai, 2002). This student population has a lot of experience and in learning what needs to be done first and what cannot wait with others, which is very useful in combining the roles given to these students when they are attending a higher education institution.

Time management. Qualitative research methods have been used in multiple research studies relating to how student-parents use time management to their advantage in higher education (Cox & Sallee, 2018; van Rhijn et al., 2018; Crispin & Nikolau, 2019). A recent study has shown that, “student-parents, on average, are older, more likely to be married, more likely to be women, more likely to have a postsecondary degree (associate’s or higher), and more likely to be part-time students” (Crispin & Nikolaou. 2019 p. 4). Another study relays that part-time enrollment is the best answer for balancing all duties within the allotted time provided (Burrow et al., 2016). With all that is on one’s plate as a parent, a caregiver, and a provider, adding ‘student’ to the mix is an additional challenge.

Although parents have plenty of experience in managing their time when caring for a child, adding the responsibility of completing a degree program adds complexity to the task of raising children. Parents with young children have been shown to “have lower academic motivation and attainment goals than parents of older children, potentially due to the more time and labor-intensive nature of childcare for young children” (Wladis et al., 2018 pp. 808-809).

Timely feedback also is related to student commitment in that they feel that their instructors, who they view as a person to look up to, takes their learning just as seriously as they do (Savage, Strom, Hubbard, & Aune, 2019). A study was completed using student-parents and student-nonparents in a time analysis, and for the student-parents who engaged in limited childcare averaging from 112-122 minutes a day, that could be time spent for attending classes, or completing assignments (Crispin & Nikolaou, 2019). The problem in the higher education setting is trying to find a strategy that works best for each class and each professor. Some students find that what works well for one professor, does not work well for others (Haber et al., 2016). The differences between teaching strategies and student learning styles differ for each, which creates the need for a different time management technique for each. This tactic needs more attention due to the change that occurs every semester with each class on an individual and department level (Haber, et al., 2016).

Institutional support & training. Colleges and institutions that explore approaches, practices, academic support, and faculty development encourage student success and are enhanced by on-going collaborative inquiry and evidence (Tinto, 2012). Those institutions that do use self-evaluation instruments to determine key obstacles in the resources and supports they use find that faculty behavior, dialogue and reflection among educators, professional development activities, and functioning all improved after the fact (Wildy & Clarke, 2011). Bourke and Mentis (2014) determined that supporting educators to develop deeper understanding of practices had the potential to result in improved learning conditions for the students, especially those that are non-traditional in nature. In having stronger faculty engagement, they will be more educated and prepared for the needs of student-parents as they enter into the higher education realm and need the faculty's assistance for continuance. High-impact practices are

effective due to their required dedication and time commitment from students and the communication between their peers and professors about meaningful topics of their focus areas (Kilgo et al., 2014). This type of practice allows students to become exposed to diverse ideas and people with different backgrounds as well as opening education to be applied beyond the classroom in a variety of ways which prepares them for their career path (Kilgo et al., 2014).

Other resources provided by educational institutions include building a sense of community enhancing student-parents' satisfaction and commitment (Rovai, 2002). More recent studies such as those done by Scharp and Hall (2019) and Savage et al. (2019) support this by providing information with to the same findings. Savage et al. (2019) states that, "students' satisfaction, alternatives, and investment predicted their initial institutional commitment" (pp. 243). The feelings that a student-parent has about the institution impacts different types of commitment, both negative and positive (Savage et al., 2019). If a student-parent feels as if their institutional choice cares about them as an individual and shows effort in assisting them through their academic journey, they will in turn have a stronger commitment to the education that is being provided. Kilgo and Hall (2019) examined how universities offer support for student-parents. Seeking help is typically viewed as failure to reach academic goals, which can ultimately be viewed as a failure of the whole-self in which a student-parent feels flawed (Kilgo & Hall, 2019). Having strong support within the institutional setting for student-parents allows there to be a stronger focus on the future and more of a communicated social presence between the school, and the student (Kilgo & Hall, 2019). With strong supports, a larger sense of community, and properly trained faculty members, student-parents are much more capable of reaching their completion.

Family engagement. Although many student-parents, especially women, face the feeling of guilt when pursuing a higher educational degree or certification program due to their lack of focus on their family (Webber, 2016), there are many ways family engagement can be a supportive factor. Webber (2016) suggested that through engagement with higher education while experiencing a strong family bond and connection, students may experience identity change and transformation that help them to become more self-aware. Family engagement helps to build upon skills and encourages students to gain knowledge and pursue their completion (Hye, Ah, & Song, 2018). In addition, Webber (2016) found that having a family that supports one's educational pursuits and attainment can alleviate the feelings of guilt of student-parents and provide additional time, motivation, and the incentive to succeed. For student-parents who do not have a supportive family by their side, guidance should be through friends, distant family members, or from staff at the institution.

Summary

Student-parents are a growing population in the higher education field that does not have enough focus in the higher education system to encourage a higher graduation rate. With more relationships, a sense of community, and an increased amount of emotional support, there is a large possibility that this group of non-traditional students would have a higher chance of completing their degree programs (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). The dramatic change in program development having "hybrid" programs, night classes, and fully developed online coursework has shifted the relationships built in higher education which have also changed completion rates (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Having an online school schedule has its' drawbacks including lacking a sense of community, no real student or instructor relationships, and a stronger responsibility of completing the learning and the assignments on one's own. Student-parents

have these struggles while also trying to be a parent and care for a dependent child (ren) financially, emotionally, and physically while juggling work and school. Meeting personal needs such as social time, hobbies, rest, and maintaining relationships is a challenge that many student-parents do not have the time to commit to while enrolled in higher education courses (Scharp & Hall, 2019).

Motivations are important factors to understand and determine how this population of students is able to complete their tasks and succeed. Other strategies that have been discussed such as the importance of relationships and setting priorities are beneficial for student-parents to find the motivation for completion. Also, in having institutional support and trained staff allows for deeper and more meaningful connections to be made in class and in the profession students are preparing for (Tinto, 2012). Family engagement was also mentioned in to include a larger sense of community and broader sense of understanding personal behaviors. It is just as important to understand the challenges that are faced as well as the strategies to discover what factors restrict success to understand how higher education administrators can reshape the program layouts to encourage success in all student populations, especially non-traditional students.

A gap in the literature exists. There have been studies on small and random populations, part-time students, community college students, and those in other countries. Although, there are only a few studies done that relate to the topic of student-parents specifically to understand the details of the challenges, and the strategies those use currently, or have used in the past to contribute to increasing the success rates of student-parents. With this being said, the following proposed study is a contribution to higher education administrators and stakeholders in providing their students the tools needed to complete their programs and to contribute to their development

as future professionals and contributors to their community. With a very small amount of research studies completed focusing on this student population, or a combination of challenges and strategies, this study will be a great addition to aid in the research realm.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the challenges of student-parents in higher education and to discover the strategies this student population have found to overcome such challenges. Understanding the commonalities between student-parents in higher education alongside the challenges and strategies used to overcome the challenges is important for future students, educators, researchers, and administrators. A transcendental phenomenological study format provided a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and their thought processes. The participants in this study were enrolled in all types of formats of higher education including online and traditional face-to-face at a public or private university. Five participants were from ASU, a public university. The other five participants were from other public or private universities. The diversity of the participants was varied to ensure dependability and credibility in the research findings. The study includes narrative components to provide the reader with a direct example of what student-parent's struggles are and how this student population copes with them in a professional format. The data was collected using one-on-one interviewing, a photo journal, and a focus group. This chapter begins with the description of the design followed by the setting, participants, procedures, researcher's role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Design

This study used a qualitative transcendental phenomenological research design. Qualitative inquiry is described a personal form of research design (Patton, 2015). The researcher's background, capacity for empathy, professional skills, and engagement in the

fieldwork add to the credibility of the findings (Patton, 2015). Qualitative researchers are the instrument used to gather, analyze, and interpret the data. With the research topic of student-parents enrolled in higher education, the challenges they face, and the methods they use to overcome such challenges, a qualitative format was the most suitable. Qualitative methods provide the reader with what has happened, to whom, when, and with what consequences (Patton, 2015). Since this study was focused on challenges faced and strategies through experiences of student-parents in higher education, qualitative methods were more fitting for understanding.

Phenomenology is the study of an experience, described only by those who are experiencing the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This form of qualitative research is grounded in understanding what makes an experience an experience and relies on the first-hand knowledge from those who have come in contact with the phenomena on a daily basis. Moustakas (1994) explained that in order to achieve a true phenomenological research process the researcher must put aside their biases, be present in the research, and remain with phenomenon until it is understood. Having a format that allowed me to dig deeper into studying about the experience rather than the information of an individual granted me to gain a deeper understanding of the student-parents' needs and struggles in balancing their roles and responsibilities.

Having used a transcendental phenomenology qualitative approach, I was able to collect data from the student-parents' first-hand experiences and relate to their personal feelings that connect with the topic. This type of information, provided from those who participate in the research in a phenomenological form, built the credibility of the data collected for future purposes and findings (Patton, 2015). Transcendental phenomenology is based on the study of the experience of the participants involved with the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Capturing the

essence of these connections is at the center of transcendental phenomenology, and phenomenological research. The purpose of a transcendental phenomenological research study is to reach an understanding of how something is experienced or lived (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design of this topic regarding student-parents is meant to provide readers with a deeper understanding of the challenges and strategies that student-parents use from their own personal experiences. Personal experiences allow for opportunities to understand how, “health-related issues, emotions, negative rumination and distractions, and heteronomy are all factors that negatively influence the optimal functioning of the brain, and specifically, the student’s cognitive processing and goal-directed behavior” (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014 p. 45). By including this information in my study and using a transcendental phenomenological approach, I was able to understand the phenomena, student-parents, and their experiences on a level beyond basic comprehension.

Research Questions

The central research question is as follow:

How do student-parents who are enrolled in higher education describe their challenges and the strategies they use to help them successfully navigate their coursework?

The sub-questions are as follows:

1. How do student-parents who are enrolled in higher education describe their challenges relative to their personal needs and the strategies used to resolve these kinds of issues allowing them to successfully navigate their coursework?
2. How do student-parents who are enrolled in higher education describe their experiences of academic support from university staff and faculty as it pertains to their persistence to successfully navigate their coursework?

3. How are student-parents' strategies for success in higher education related to their learning experiences as adult learners?

Setting

The United States has many different institutions of higher education from which to choose. The institution used for this study was All Saints University (ASU) (pseudonym), a public university that touts an enrollment of around 56,000 students with 18% of them being out-of-state. This higher education facility offers a large number of extracurricular activities, athletic teams, community resources, and a varied age of student population as well as locations for students to attend. ASU offers all types of settings for students including on-campus, online, and hybrid learning opportunities. In having a deeper understanding of the experiences from participants of this higher education institution, results show the patterns in experiences, especially the challenges, of students who attend a larger public higher education facility.

Participants

There were five student-parents chosen from ASU, and 5 from other public or private institutions. These participants were voluntary and recruited from different formats. The sample was diverse in nature with different ethnicities and cultures, different genders, ages of children, and ages of students with maximum variation to ensure credibility in research findings determined through a screening survey. Five participants were recruited using snowball sampling, or the process of the participants recruiting others that they know who fit the requirements (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on the screening survey using purposeful sampling, selected participants were asked to complete the Parental Stress Scale (PSS) as a way to further describe those who have agreed to participate in this study. The PSS is a transactional model, or an exchange of information between two separate individuals, of stress that Berry and

Jones introduced in 1995. In recent research Berry along with other colleagues (Louie, et al. 2017) viewed “parenting stress as being stemmed from an interaction between parents and children” (p. 361). This method was a useful measure because it identified the stress of parental experiences differently than other measures by capturing the demands of parenting, the costs and limitations on personal resources and the rewards of parenting for personal growth (Louie et al., 2017).

Procedures

The first step was to contact the potential setting and speak with a contact at the institution to discover the requirements to conduct research with their students. Their process was included in my Institutional Review Board (IRB) application. Once I was granted a provisional approval, the school involved with the data collection process was given the correct applications for their own approval process. When they approved my study; my IRB application was re-submitted with the proper documentation from the site school to complete the approval process (Appendix A).

Once this happened, a pilot study was completed using two participants who met the same criteria as the study participants. The purpose of the pilot study was to practice using the data collection tools and ensure accuracy in relation to the research questions. The pilot was conducted with just two volunteer participants using the data collection tools and are not included in the findings. I found through the pilot study that when describing the photo journal to the participants, they need generalized examples to understand the expectations. I also found that it was important to send out reminder emails prior to scheduled meetings such as the interview and focus group to ensure prompt attendance.

After the pilot study was completed, I contacted the individual associated with ASU. I had provided the staff member who agreed to have me present in their class with a recruitment letter (Appendix B) and screening survey (Appendix C) information to provide to interested student-parents. The professor also encouraged her students to send anyone they knew who fit the qualifications, as a snowball sample procedure, to reach out to me via my contact information attached to the recruitment letter (Appendix B). Five student-parents were received through the professor at ASU, the other five were found through snowball sampling. After reviewing the screening surveys, I contacted those student-parents selected as participants. They received an email (Appendix D) stating that they have been selected with a link to the consent form (Appendix E) and the PSS to provide more information about the participant (Appendix F).

Data collection began as soon as all participants were selected, and consent forms were signed. I contacted the participants to schedule their individual interview via the email address provided on the screening survey. Interviews were held via Microsoft Teams and recorded for transcription purposes. After the interviews were completed participants emailed me daily with a short description of the photo attached and how it related to the topic of being a student-parent. Faces were blurred, if included in the photos sent. A focus group was scheduled after all photo journals were complete via Microsoft Teams and recorded for transcription purposes. After all data was collected, I began the data analysis process.

The Researcher's Role

As the researcher in this study, I ensured that all information was kept private, all consent forms were signed and filled out correctly, and that all information was completed in a reasonable amount of time. The PSS was used, with permission from the author (see Appendix G). I was careful to set aside my biases and assumptions throughout this study by utilizing a

reflexive journal (see Appendix H). I have not attended the institution student-parent participants attend, and do not know any member of the faculty. Five participants of this study were provided by the contact established with the institution selected, the other five were found using snowball sampling with the established participants. To ensure trustworthiness of the findings and limited biases no student-parents that I know have been chosen. This is a personal topic for me due to raising a child while working a full-time position and being enrolled in a doctoral-level university program. As I examined the results of this study it was important for me to report not only the challenges, but the strategies that student-parents found to be successful in overcoming those challenges. It is hoped that the results of this study will assist other researchers, future and other current student-parents, and faculty members who are looking for ways to improve the college experience for other student-parents.

Data Collection

The importance of transcendental phenomenological research is to collect information through interviews, and first-hand, written dictation (Husserl, 1954). In this study, individual interviews, photo journals, and a focus group was used to gather data from the participants since they are living in the experience being researched. The only ones who can explain the essential qualities to determine intentional meanings, or the essence, of their experience in present time are the participants themselves. Capturing information from the perspectives and voices of the participants, who are currently living through this phenomena was imperative in gathering reliable data for the purpose of this study.

The data collection process for this study was oriented around the testimonies and responses of the participants and their experiences. The data collection tools provided

information about the experiences of student-parents and included their thoughts, challenges, and the strategies they have learned to accommodate their lifestyles.

Individual Interview

An important part of building a rapport and gaining knowledge about first-hand experiences was the individual interview between the participant and me. Each participant's interview was held at an agreed upon time, date and online through Microsoft Teams where the conversation was not able to be accessed without an invitation. The purpose of the individual interview was to allow the participants to openly discuss their experiences, expand on the PSS, and to discuss the strategies they have found or have used to be successful and continue their education. This interview was used to understand the ways student-parents find to propel themselves over their obstacles to complete their daily tasks and occupations while still succeeding in their education.

Standardized Individual Interview Questions (Appendix I)

1. Please introduce yourself.
2. Please walk me through your interest in enrolling in higher education.
3. What were your original concerns as a student-parent when you decided to enroll in higher education?
4. How did these concerns grow when you began your courses? Please explain.
5. How did these concerns subside when you began your courses? Please explain.
6. During your time here, what strategies have you found that have helped you to keep your education a successful experience relating to the challenges you provided earlier?
7. What do you find to be the main reason for your stress or challenges in regard to your schoolwork as a student-parent?

8. While balancing your role as a student-parent how have your personal needs been affected?
9. What are some experiences related to your challenges as a student-parent that is connected to the institution you attend? (i.e. faculty support, community feel, class culture)
10. How do you feel about your support in relation to your studies in the home setting?
11. How do you feel about your support in relation to your studies at your institution?
12. Ideally, what would you want more of to make your learning easier to achieve as a student-parent?
13. What would you say is the reason you are still here and not choosing another option for education considering your challenges as a student-parent?
14. If you could give advice to another student-parent, or future student-parent, what would it be? Why?
15. One last question, thank you for being patient. What else would you like to share relating to your experience of being both a student and a parent in higher education?

The first two questions are introductory in nature and provide a foundation to build a rapport between myself and the participant. Building a strong rapport with participants allows for trust to be built for emotions and true experiences to be shared (Dempsey, Dowling, Larkin, & Murphy, 2016). These two, although important for the purpose of analyzing the data and understanding more of the background leading to the topic, are not the focus of the open-ended interview.

Question three was an introduction to the challenges parent-students in this study have and allows for them to openly discuss what their concerns were at the time of their enrollment into

higher education. Understanding the social contexts of decision making in adult learners, especially those with many roles and responsibilities other than enrolling in the higher education system (Gouthro, 2019).

Question four allowed me to distinguish if their original concerns are still there, if they have grown, or if they have receded with an opportunity for extension by the participant. Knowing where a concern originated, allows for the connection between fears and realities to be found (Husserl, 1954).

Question five allowed for an opportunity for the participants to discuss if anything has subsided and describe how they have since enrolling. Negative effects like the feeling of loneliness or not belonging can occur in the higher education setting for student-parents, and this was a good opportunity to discover if participants felt these effects in their institutional setting (Madden, 2018). Allowing this question to introduce how the participants' challenges subsided is a great introduction for the strategies they have found to help overcome the stressors they have been introduced to through their educational process.

Question six created a foundation for self-reflection for the participants to think about all of their challenges and name their largest or "main" concern as a student-parent. This was important for me to be able to see where they were being challenged, how or if they have adapted, and to determine where their largest hurdle is in this student population. The harmonization process of conflict resolution provided a better understanding of issues and why they are critical to each party (Nguyen, 2019).

The following question was focused on ruling out any factors that may contribute to the challenges mentioned by the participants, and to see if their setting or school culture plays any part in their academic challenges as a student-parent. Studies such as the one done by Cox and

Sallee (2018) have been completed to determine if colleges are prepared to meet the needs of student-parents, and in asking about their personal experiences in their own institutions, valuable information can be shared.

The information from questions three through seven could be extended upon depending on the information provided in the PSS that was used to describe each participant in more detail. This also allowed for the participant to open more about their stressors or challenges if they did not bring them to light during the PSS. Having allowed the participants to self-reflect on their past and the causes of those stressors provided a deeper understanding for myself and the reader to determine where the problem truly was and help to determine how to come to a true understanding.

Question eight directly related to sub-question one pertaining to personal needs. Many student-parents, especially mothers, have stated that there is no time allotted in their day for personal time or a social life which is shown to increase stress levels (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Distinguishing the strategies that student-parents used to overcome challenges with meeting their personal needs is important to the findings of the study.

Question nine was the transitional question that brought the participants to think about any strategies they may have created to help them overcome their challenges while being student-parents in higher education. Motivational factors have been proven to be successful in the completion of schooling and show an increase when being a parent (Roy, Bradecich, Dayne, & Luna, 2018).

Question ten related to the research question and provided a deeper insight to the support student-parent participants have in the home setting. Student-parents prioritize their families and children over their educational duties, but they have less stress when there is a support system at

home to take care of some of the responsibilities (Moghadam et al., 2017). Understanding how each participant considered their home and family support contributed to the strategies as well as the challenges of student-parents while enrolled in higher education.

Question eleven is also related to the research question but is centered on institutional support rather than home support systems. Student support programming is increasingly becoming a strong focus of institutions to grow intellectual, social, and emotional development of students (Tinto, 2012). With this student population of student-parents, it was helpful to understand if there were programs set in place or personnel that adhere to student support and contribute to overcoming challenges or assisted in student-parent academic success.

Question twelve allowed for the participants to think outside of the box and voice their belief in what they thought would help them to succeed as a student-parent in their educational setting. This helped to have the participants view inside their consciousness and decipher what it was that encouraged their perseverance and made their experience easier to maneuver (Husserl, 1954). This information aided me in finding possible commonalities in the answers of the participants that assisted in answering the research questions.

The next question was related to the student-parent's persistence to continue their higher education and their reasoning. This information was related to Tinto's theory of student persistence (1975) and helped me to find a tie or find no relationship to literature from the experiences and answers of the student-parents.

Question fourteen was another self-reflection strategy used to have the participants think about what they would tell another student-parent in a similar situation having thought back to their original concerns when enrolling, the challenges they have encountered, and the strategies

they have learned or created to overcome the challenges to persist. Encouraging those who may be struggling due to being a parent will help to influence student-parents not only attending college but be prepared to tackle any obstacles that come across their path to success (Singh, Matza, & Latham, 2017). Looking at the whole, through parts, to create a new whole was important for the analysis of this transcendental phenomenological study (Husserl, 1954).

The last question provided one last opportunity for the participants to discuss any remaining thoughts, concerns, or guidance in an open format in their own words after reflecting on the interview questions and their answers. Opening the minds of the participants to new ideas and connections produced more connections and findings, especially through the reflection process and an increased amount of trust (Dempsey et al., 2016).

Photo Journal

The photo journal was a task for the participants to photograph one picture a day in the course of a week that captured an experience of the challenges they were experiencing, or a strategy they have exhibited to overcome a challenge with a paragraph that explained how each photo related to this study. At the conclusion of their individual interviews, participants were given instructions (Appendix J) for the photo journal portion of the data collection process. The consent form (Appendix E) included permission regarding photos of themselves or their family and friends to be shared for the purpose of this study, even though all photos of individuals were blurred. The purpose of this photo journal was to capture the participants' focus of their experience for the day related to a challenge they may have been facing connected to their student-parent status, or a strategy they were using to overcome a challenge. This information was beneficial in the findings of this study, as well as the discussion of the focus group.

The participants' short explanation of each photo provided a deeper understanding for me to understand how the photo related to the topic and how it was helpful in relation to a strategy or stress-inducing when related to a challenge. This journal with a photo and a brief description was emailed to me by the participant daily. With the ever-growing use of social media, capturing moments and memories through photos is a popular form for individuals to share their experiences every day (O'Hara & Higgins, 2017). While photography has been a popular format of capturing a moment, the ease of access in recent technological advances has created a form of providing greater insight for researchers into shared behaviors and information of experiences of individuals than ever before (Carr, Zhang, Ming, & Siddiqui, 2019).

The photo journal was analyzed prior to the focus group since there were discussions in the focus group relating to what the student-parents chose to photograph and what it signifies for them. In sorting these photos and grouping them, it created a natural flow of discussion between the participants (Bryan, Lutte, Lee, O'Neil, Maher, & Hoflund, 2018).

Focus Group

The final method for collecting data was a focus group in a format that was designed for the participants to discuss their experiences with peers. The focus group meeting occurred at an agreed upon time, date and online via Microsoft Teams with an invitation needed to join the meeting with all ten participants. During the focus group discussion, the participants were asked to discuss their experiences in higher education as a student-parent. Questions asked them to talk about the challenges that have arose, as well as what they have done to overcome these challenges and keep their school and their children as a top priority. This format of data collection allowed for the participants to be open to the influence of their peers to help them achieve their goals and coordinate their actions, as well as self-reflect in an open and engaging

format (Johnson & Johnson, 2012). Having a focus group to collect the experiences and build dialogue between the participants created a better understanding as to how the higher education system is experienced for student-parents. The questions and topics were dependent on the participants and their personal experiences, although the following questions guided the focus group discussions.

Standardized Focus Group Questions (See Appendix K)

1. Let's begin by discussing your feelings and emotions when you were thinking of applying to your institution. What were your concerns?
2. Now that you are in attendance, how have these concerns subsided or have they increased?
3. What worries you the most while attending school and caring for your child or children?
4. How do these challenges hinder your performance in the classroom?
5. How do these challenges help your performance in the classroom, if at all?
6. What strategies have you learned to assist you in overcoming these challenges? Please describe them.
7. How have you been able to meet your own needs despite the amount of roles you have to balance?
8. What type of resources, or faculty members, have assisted you to manage the challenges that have arose as a student-parent at your institution?
9. What could future student-parents do to better prepare themselves for managing these challenges?
10. How do you feel that this experience will aid you in your area of study and career?

The first question was related to sub-question one pertaining to the participant's personal relationships as well as their academic relationship. To enroll into higher education is a large decision that one makes and having discussed the participant's concerns in relation to this enrollment process gains a deeper insight to their emotional thought process. Concerns such as familial separation and/or attempting to keep up with academic mobility are just a few of the thoughts one with children may contemplate while enrolling (Brooks, 2015).

Questions two and three pertained to the challenges the student-parents were experiencing relating to their roles as students and as parents as they related to their combined roles. The responsibilities of a parent to meet their child's needs while contributing to their psychological health with emotional nurturance are difficult to fulfill while trying to also focus on their own psychological fulfillment (Mullin, 2016). As this topic was discussed in the focus group, the student-parents had an opportunity to voice their opinions, thoughts, views, and experiences in a comfortable setting with people who could relate to them (Nguyen, 2019).

Question four was related to both challenges and is a follow-up to question three. The answers provided by the participants related to this question assisted in determining what has not helped them throughout their engagement in higher education.

Question five pertained to what has helped this group of student-parents through their educational journey. Understanding the motivators of this student population assisted in having a clear representation of the experiences had and how they alter dependent on factors involved (Savage et al., 2019).

Both question five and six were related to the strategies participants have found to overcome their challenges and have encouraged their persistence as adult learners. Question six brought forth a new task for participants to list the strategies they have found useful and allowed

for a larger discussion between peers. In having the participants list their strategies, it was easier for me to determine the direct and indirect effects of the experiences being shared which will helped to answer the research question (Scharp & Hall, 2019).

Question seven related to sub-question one in meeting personal needs during the process of being a student parent. This question allowed for an open discussion between the focus group participants to communicate how they were able to meet their own needs, if at all possible. Peer communication was important for this question to understand both retention and persistence (Troester-Trate, 2019).

Question eight moved to define what strategies related to their academic and institutional support noted in sub-question two. Institutional support in the form of instructors, resources, and practices are key in active and intentional learning opportunities that can severely increase or hinder a student's completion (Dean, 2015).

Question nine provided the participants an opportunity to discuss what they would tell other student-parents to assist in their future experiences regarding to persistence and success managing the challenges. Peer support, clear obligation boundaries, time management, and academic preparation are all contributors to success (Tieben, 2020). However, without understanding these boundaries and goal settings, the opposite such as academic drop out or academic failure could occur.

The last question was related to how the participants felt about using the hurdles they have met while being a student-parent in higher education in their field of study or in their future career. This information was useful in relating to Knowles (1990) study of adult learning and the relationship between what they have experienced and how they will utilize their new knowledge in real-world application.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) described the steps needed to analyze the data collected from a phenomenological study to provide valid and reliable findings. The first step began before even conducting research by the placing my biases and opinions aside and focusing strictly on the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Keeping the reflexive journal allowed a place for my own feelings to be voiced without interfering with the data collection and analysis process (See Appendix H). In accomplishing this, all data collected and analyzed was authentic and strictly related to the experiences of the participants. After all data had been transcribed by me and the participants have reviewed them for accuracy, I then read through them again thoroughly (Moustakas, 1994). I labeled or coded with repeated words or sections, found to be surprising, or that may be related to the research questions. Some of the information was discarded due to repetitive nature or relation to the topic, while others were categorized into meaningful structures that captures the experience as it pertains to the individual (Moustakas, 1994). I was able to interpret the information collected to form a clear and concise analysis of the experiences as they related to the phenomena. Using the Microsoft software program (i.e. Microsoft Word) aided in identifying and organizing themes and creating visuals such as charts and tables for data. In following these steps, I was able to reach trustworthy findings through deep analysis and by establishing connections.

Reading through the data collected from the individual interviews, photo journals, and the focus group provided me with a global sense of the whole collection (Kleiman, 2004). I re-read the transcripts one-by-one and line-by-line and used horizontalization to find and code important information related to the phenomena before moving onto the next step. Grouping the codes is a technique commonly used in phenomenological work that allows the researcher to sort relevant

information from irrelevant information for the purpose of the study to organize the information in a logical format (Moustakas, 1994). Dividing the data into more meaningful sections for challenges and stressors allowed for me to integrate the sections that have a similar focus. During this step, I developed the themes by using the codes from the transcriptions to create meaningful units. The sub-themes also emerged at this point. Elaborating on the findings, followed by revisiting the data to justify the interpretations provided in the results allowed me to substantiate the accuracy (Kleiman, 2004).

Using the themes made connections between the information provided and the phenomena being researched in a textural description of what the participants have experienced. The textual descriptions included verbatim examples from the transcripts. Discussing how the experience happened, or structural descriptions occurred when I reflected on the setting and the context of the experiences themselves (Moustakas, 1994). With this, the essence of the phenomena was discussed in greater detail using imaginative variation to have a deeper understanding of the structures of the experiences for distinctiveness from various perspectives of the participants involved.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is important to evaluate the worth of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The four components to achieving a trustworthy research study include: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By using techniques such as reflexivity, triangulation, thick descriptions, and prolonged engagement it was possible to achieve complete trustworthiness in the study. Outlined below are the ways these steps were made throughout this research study to reach trustworthy findings and the importance they have to the topic.

Credibility

The credibility of the study relied specifically on the accuracy of the data analysis completed by me. By including three types of data collection procedures I ensured that triangulation was established. Using purposeful sampling from participants that fit the most diversity allowed for the results and findings to be as accurate as possible without any assumptions being made based on one group being larger than the others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation, or using multiple sources of data collection methods and sources, helped to build the confirmability of the study to facilitate a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility of messages can at times be influenced by non-source factors such as the way the message is delivered, how it is being delivered, or by whom it is being delivered by (Appelman & Sunder, 2016). Having had numerous sources and delivering the student-parents' experiences in their own words, using photos and descriptions they took and wrote themselves, and by using recordings of the focus group to transcribe the participants' responses diminished non-source factors and increased the credibility of the findings. Member checking, or having the participants review what was written using transcripts from the recordings of the individual interview and focus group, was another technique to increase credibility. Identifying issues within each participant's data and looking for common themes that transcend to the purpose of the study was beneficial for the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dependability and Confirmability

In increasing the dependability and confirmability of the research in this study, each of the procedures for determining the results were as consistent as possible. Collecting data in a consistent manner allowed for dependable findings and a repeatable source of data. To ensure

dependability of the data an external audit was completed using two peers who were not involved in the data collection process. They reviewed my initial findings to ensure that my interpretations and conclusions were supported by the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, the reflexive journal (see Appendix H) presented an outlet for me to acknowledge my thoughts and feelings related to the phenomena without interfering with the data collection or analysis process. This built dependability by allowing myself and my views and perceptions about this topic to not be intertwined within the study itself and provide an alternate outlet to ensure that any biases are not connected directly with the research.

Transferability

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the challenges of student-parents in higher education and discover the strategies this student population have found to overcome such challenges. Keeping an audit trail or a running record of steps and events along the way of my doctoral journey was one form of transferability used in this study (See Appendix H). Having the same process for each step of the collection of data, I ensured that the provision of detail and contextual information was accurate and able to be reconstructed in the future by other researchers who may want to perform their own study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consistency allowed for the research study to be re-created in the future by others interested in the topic or the process. This type of opportunity for transferability of information from one context to another was also beneficial for future studies that may stem off the findings of this one.

Ethical Considerations

The most important ethical consideration for this research study was the protection of the participant's confidentiality by using pseudonyms for the institution and for the participant's

names. This ensured that no information shared in their experiences, answers, or in the study were related back to their life and negatively affected them or put them at risk in any way. Protecting the institution also decreased any risk of information being shared that would have put them in any negative situations. All participants have signed a consent form stating they were participating on their own accord, their own free will, and were able to leave at any time during the study. The screening survey and the PSS were completed via electronic form with password encryption. All data was saved on a zipped file on a password encrypted computer and will be stored for three years, after which all information will be deleted to comply with IRB requirements.

Summary

The design of the study, transcendental phenomenology, was most appropriate for the purpose of this study due to the need to understand the essence of the experiences of student-parents in higher education with their challenges and their strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This chapter has described the detailed process of the research study. The topics covered include: the design, re-stated the research questions, the setting, participants, procedures, the researcher's role, as well as the data collection and analysis. The chapter ends in discussing the trustworthiness of the study including the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and the transferability of the research study. Although the topic is personal to me being a student-parent as well, the reflexive journal and my openness to my own biases and beliefs within the study ensured that there was no lapse in personal assumptions in the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the challenges of student-parents in higher education and discover the strategies this student population have discovered to overcome such challenges. In the following chapter, research questions are answered. Each participant is introduced briefly by their pseudonyms to provide a deeper understanding of their demographics and a background of who they are, while still seeking to provide confidentiality. The thematic results of the data analysis are presented including roles, time, and support. The conversations discussing the experience of the listed themes while being a student-parent in higher education are presented using the words of the participants. This highlights the essence of the experience centered on the challenges of student-parents and the strategies to overcome and persevere to completion.

Participants

As described in Chapter Three, all participants were adults over the age of eighteen, attended a higher education institution either full or part-time, and had a child age twelve or younger. Five students attended ASU while the other five attended other universities. The following provides a profile of each participant using their pseudonyms.

Sarah

Sarah is a Caucasian mother of a 4-year-old boy and is in her early twenties. She is a full-time student at ASU and attends online, although there are a few hours twice a week she needs to attend her courses in a video chat room live. Presently she is a full-time employee with a school district as a paraprofessional. She relies heavily on the help of her mother to assist in caring for her son, as well as her boyfriend. Sarah's stress level, according to the Parental Stress Scale, is a

38. This score indicates a low amount of stress. However, most of the stress does come from the financial strain of being a parent. Sarah also finds it difficult to balance all of her responsibilities and have flexibility with time for other things. With these challenges, Sarah still feels satisfied as a parent and sees the future as being brighter because of her son.

Bailey

Bailey is a Caucasian mother of four. She has three daughters who are ages 12, 10, and seven. She also has a 13-year-old stepson who is home with her part-time. She is a full-time administrator for a private duty company, or company that provides in-home services to senior citizens, and handles the scheduling. With her position, she is on call practically 24 hours a day, seven days a week. She is enrolled full-time online for her master's in business administration to heighten her career. Bailey is very honest in her opinions and does her absolute best to stay on top of things at home and school so everyone knows the routine. Bailey's score on her PSS was a 41 showing stress being on the lower end of the scale. Bailey noted that she sometimes worries whether she is doing enough for her children, but she would never go back in time and change her decisions about having her children. She is completely satisfied with her role as a mother and does not believe that being a parent is too overwhelming. However, Bailey does note that it is difficult to balance different responsibilities, including her schooling, because of her role being a parent.

David

David is a Caucasian male in the older age bracket of mid-thirties to mid-forties with some health issues. He is retired military and does not currently work since he is attending school full-time with the GI Bill. He is working towards his bachelor's in accounting. David and his wife have three children ages six, eight, and 10-years-old. His wife is a special needs

educator and hopes to open a coffee shop in the future employed by those with special needs so they can learn real-life skills and be prepared for the future. David wants to earn his accounting degree so he can eventually help his wife achieve her dream. David's PSS score was very low at only 23. His outlined challenges according to the PSS include having little time for flexibility, balancing his responsibilities, and the financial strains of having three children to care for. David notes that he feels overwhelmed with the responsibility of being a parent and that it at times takes more energy and time than he has to give. David feels very satisfied with his role and gives him optimistic views for the future.

Tiffany

Tiffany is in the mid-thirties to mid-forties age bracket and is a Caucasian woman with seven children in all. She was married at the age of 19 and had her first child when she was 19. Her oldest is now almost 18-years-old, and her youngest just turned two. Tiffany not only juggles her full-time enrollment for her nursing degree and being a mother of seven children, but she is also a full-time employee at a local hospital as a monitor check/secretary. After suffering a tragic loss, she decided to pursue nursing because of the assistance she received first-hand from the hospital staff. The largest struggle she has is trying to find the time for everyone because everybody wants her time and she does not want to deny them any of it. Tiffany scored a 47 on her PSS which is in the mid-stress range. Tiffany is undecided if she is satisfied as a parent, although she feels optimistic about the future. She strongly agrees that caring for her children sometimes takes more time and energy than she has to give and that having her children provides little time and flexibility. On one hand, she feels her children's behavior is often stressful or embarrassing for her, and on the other hand, there is nothing she would not do for them.

Kelly

Kelly is a Caucasian female in the mid-twenties to mid-thirties age range. She is a single mother of a nine-year-old daughter and attends ASU online full-time for education. Kelly previously went to school but did not find any employment related to her courses, so she re-enrolled to focus on education. She works full-time as a server and bartender so her schedule varies. Kelly's PSS was fairly low at only a 35. She does agree that having children leaves little time and flexibility in her life, and she worries about whether she is doing enough for her daughter. However, unlike the other participants, she noted that it is not difficult to balance different responsibilities due to having a child, she does not feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of being a parent, and that caring for her does not take more time or energy than she has to give.

Shannon

Shannon is in the age range of mid-thirties to mid-forties and has three children ages 11, nine, and six. They are currently in the process of building a home so they have been living in their 34-foot RV for the last several months. During the process of this study, she was completing her bachelor's program in nursing, which she has since completed. She will begin her master's program for nursing education in the next semester. Shannon's PSS was scored at a 47 which is on the higher end of those collected for stress level. She agrees to feeling overwhelmed with the responsibilities of being a parent, and that caring for her children can sometimes take more time and energy than she has to give. Shannon believes that having children has not left her with little time or flexibility, finds that her children are a financial burden, and she does not find that it is difficult to balance different responsibilities because of having children. Shannon is truly hopeful that her future will provide her with the ability to train future nurses effectively and

prepare them for real-world scenarios. Shannon has 14 years in the field already before beginning her education.

Michelle

Michelle is a Caucasian woman in the mid-twenties to mid-thirties age group. She has one three-year-old son and attends ASU full-time and does not currently work. Michelle is very grateful that she has a supportive family that allows her the opportunity to stay home and just focus on her schoolwork and her son. Her score on the PSS was a 34, one of the lowest measures of parental stress out of all the participants involved. Michelle agrees that having a child provides fewer options and control over her own life and that she is overwhelmed as a parent. She finds it difficult at times to balance different responsibilities, but she only sees an optimistic future with her son in her life. Michelle is a very caring and very involved mother but having a toddler instead of an infant has created some new challenges for her with his energy level and his demand for attention from her.

Allison

Allison is a student at ASU. She is a Caucasian/Hispanic or Latino female in the mid-twenties to mid-thirties age bracket and has two children, ages five and four years old. Her oldest just started Kindergarten and her youngest stays with family while she works full-time as a Kindergarten para-professional at a local school. She is attending school to earn her bachelor's in education so she can be a full-time certified teacher. Allison's score for the PSS was a 40, putting her in the middle to low end of the stress scale. Allison agrees that caring for her children sometimes takes more time and energy than she has to give, and that they can be financially straining. She enjoys spending time with her children and finds that they are an important source of affection for her. Allison does not believe that her children leave her with too few choices, and

she does not feel overwhelmed by them. Although, she does have less time and flexibility in her life due to being a parent.

Kayla

Kayla's ethnicity is a Caribbean Islander and in the mid-twenties to mid-thirties age bracket. She has three children, ages nine, six, and three. Kayla works full-time at a daycare center. She is attending ASU for education full-time online so she can teach first or second grade in an elementary school. Her PSS score was a 41 with most of her stress stemming from being overwhelmed with all of her responsibilities taking more time and energy than she has to give. Unlike some of the other participants, though, she states that she does not find it difficult to balance her responsibilities because of her children and she does not agree that having her children leaves her with less time or flexibility in her life. She also notes that she does not feel overwhelmed being a parent or find that she has fewer choices or control in her life.

Ashley

Ashley is a female Caucasian and Hispanic or Latino mother of two children, six and three-years-old, in the mid-twenties to mid-thirties age range. Ashley works full-time as a florist and attends her institution full-time online for accounting. She is currently engaged, so she also plays the role of wife full-time. Ashley's oldest son is special needs, so there are additional stressors in her life due to his doctor's appointments and specific needs. She scored a 41 for the PSS, which is about mid-level for parental stress. Ashley agrees that having children is a major source of stress in her life and leaves her with little time and flexibility in her life. She finds it difficult to balance different responsibilities because of her children and their behavior is sometimes stressful or embarrassing for her. With all of these feelings, however, they are an important source of affection for her and she is happy in her role as a parent.

Results

Data collected from the ten participants in the form of individual interviews, a focus group, and photo journals from each, were analyzed through descriptive analysis as explained by Moustakas (1994). The completed analysis resulted in three themes of roles, time, and support. These also addressed the central research question and sub-questions as they relate to being a student-parent in higher education. Finally, the themes of roles, time, and support were supported using quotes from the participants that were derived from all data sources. These narrative examples assisted to expand on the understanding of the experience student-parents have in higher education regarding their challenges and the strategies they found to complete their learning.

Theme Development

During the data analysis process a number of codes emerged. I developed the sub-themes and themes of roles, time, and support (see Table 1) using meaningful statements from the transcripts analyzed by hand to justify the data presented. All quotes from participants are presented verbatim, which includes verbal ticks and grammatical errors in speech and writing to accurately depict the participants' voices. These responses provide a clear understanding of the phenomena with participant perspectives highlighted throughout the findings. This allows for a genuine, accurate, and deeper understanding of the experience of each individual involved.

Table 1
Codes, Themes, & Sub-themes

Codes	Themes	Sub-themes
Haven't been to school	Roles	Getting tasks completed at home
Family		Organization & scheduling
Finding motivation		Being a parent as a motivator
Never too late		
Helping kids		
Prioritize		

Do better		
Sick children		
Handle everything		
Attention		
Work schedule		
Plan	Time	Providing attention to children
Schedule		Full-time employee constraints
Just do it		Virtual schooling
Options		Time management
Not enough time		
Rushing		
Routine		
Hurrying		
Free time		
Prepare yourself		
Multi-task		
Good relationships	Support	Lack of support
Communication		Support as a strategy to success
Keeps me on track		Academic support
Face-to-face		Lack of support
Conversation		
Clarification		
On-time		
Family		
Finding help		

The themes are explained below. The first theme of Roles and its' sub-themes are explained in detail as follows.

Roles. The roles that the participants had to balance was the first topic that was spoken about during the interviews and was a frequent topic throughout. Student-parent participants were concerned about not doing as well with one role because of another. There was also a frequent struggle relating to how roles have changed since enrolling in higher education and finding the ability to complete the tasks of both successfully. Many student-parents related their roles to attributing to their success, for instance without being a parent, they may never have been a student.

Getting tasks completed at home. One of the largest problems, repeated by participants in the interviews and the focus group was getting things completed due to having multiple roles.

Tiffany was not only a student-parent but a wife as well. In her interview, she stated that

Sometimes my husband acts like one of the kids. He whines about not getting his one on one time with me and my attention and all that too. You know, he'll complain that 'you're not even staying up late with me because you're always too tired and you always have schoolwork to do' and I'm like 'yes, but this is what we signed up for so it's only going to be this bad, or we only have a year left'. (November 17, 2020).

With the demand of being a wife, a student, and a mother, Tiffany had plenty on her shoulders and had faced difficulties attending to all of her roles equally.

David was a retired military veteran, so although he did not have a full-time working position any longer, he did have other roles he carried. In addition to being a student, a husband, and a father to three children, David was also a coach. He explained in his interview,

I'm part of the Board of Executives for the soccer club, so my Saturdays are pretty much at the soccer fields all day. I have to plan for that, and I have one course this semester where everything is due on Saturday, so I have to try and get myself motivated to get that all done during the week so it doesn't come time to do it on the weekend. (November 22, 2020)

David brought a different view of a challenge that was common for many student-parents who do not work but he had many distractions in the home setting due to the responsibilities of their other roles.

Bailey, being a full-time employee, had another experience of difficulties when trying to balance her roles and complete her schoolwork. She noted in her interview that with her family's schedule,

I have to get them fed, make sure their homework is done, or their schoolwork for the day, and they do everything on their laptops so I have to check them on there, get them to bed, then do my homework too. It's kind of stressful to get all of that done when I only have two hours before their bedtime after I get off work. I have just those two hours to get everything done with them. (November 18, 2020)

Bailey had less time in the day to complete regular tasks, caring for her children, and trying to complete her schoolwork with a minimal amount of time since she worked a full-time job.

Other participants, like Kelly, also felt as if there was too much on her plate with trying to care for her child and completing schoolwork. Kelly truly struggled with missing time with her daughter, especially as a single parent. She stated in the focus group that she worried the most about,

Missing the moments I have with my child. I only have eighteen years with her which seems like a long time, but it's really not. She's already ten, I only have eight left.
(December 5, 2020)

Caring for her child and just being in the moment with her, was very vital to Kelly. A photo she included in her photo journal was of her and her daughter watching a TV show, while also folding laundry so she could still be productive and spend time with her daughter.

Shannon had a similar experience during her time in higher education combined with being a nurse and working twelve-hour shifts. Shannon noted in the interview that,

All of the kids do after school activities and sports, and my husband is self-employed.

When I went back to school I was working twelve hour shifts at the hospital which left my husband responsible for the kids. Before that I was drop-offs, pick-ups, doctor appointments, after school activities, I was home on all the weekends, and now I'm not.

(November 16, 2020)

Although Shannon had the assistance of her husband to help with caring for the children. She had a huge change to her schedule that resulted in her not being able to be there for the kids like she used to be. She felt like she missed out on many different memories.

Kayla, another participant also discussed her difficulty completing schoolwork at home during her interview in describing how she attempted to balance her roles. Her routine was described in a brief explanation stating,

I try to get all of my schoolwork done Monday through Friday, if not by Friday night, then I'll wake up early Saturday morning before the kids wake up and get it done. That way the kids have my full attention Saturday and Sunday. Sunday night, if I really have to catch up on something, I'll wait for them to go to bed and do it then. Most of the day Saturday and Sunday I try to be fully committed to the kids so they know they have my attention and we can go do stuff. (November 4, 2020)

Although Kayla struggled during the week trying to accommodate her three children among her other roles and completing schoolwork, she still managed to find a way to meet her children's needs and attention so they knew she was committed to her school and them.

Organization and scheduling. Many of the participants mentioned their strategies in handling their multiple roles including both organization and scheduling skills, which they noted

would then carry forward into assisting with their future careers. For instance, Bailey had provided advice during her interview for future student-parents stating,

Get a routine down because once you get that down and you don't stray from it, then it's easy as pie. It'll just get a lot easier. You won't have as many struggles or be distracted because you'll know what to expect and when. (November 18, 2020)

Bailey went on to explain how this would help her in her future career by saying, "I'm going for business administration, so you have to multitask all the time. This experience is preparing me to multitask a lot better".

With Allison, her most helpful strategy was scheduling. When asked during the interview about what helped her the most she said,

I have learned to become very organized and anal when it comes to my time. I used to not be big on scheduling at all, but it has become very helpful to have a calendar and saying 'okay this is my allotted time for homework and this is my allotted time for family'. Also, scheduling with my husband so I know he has parenting duty for this, this, and this, and I'll have it for this, this, and this. (November 3, 2020)

Having two young children, a full-time job, being a wife and going to classes full-time she had no choice but to find a strategy. Allison included a photo of her and her son's schoolwork side by side and wrote that "in the mornings I do my work while I make sure that he does his" to ensure that they both stay on top of their assignments and to keep on schedule.

Other student-parent participants, like Shannon, have found other scheduling strategies. Shannon's response in her interview was,

I think having the days off during the week while the kids are at school and using the time I have alone to do my schoolwork and really trying to save my family time just for

the family and not really do the schoolwork unless it was really needed. I have been known to write papers sitting poolside on vacation if that's what I need to do, but I really try to make it so I don't have to do that. (November 16, 2020)

Shannon's work schedule helped her in the long run having some time, while her school-age children were in class, to be home alone. She did her best to plan for when, and where, to do her assignments so she could easily stay organized with her work and home schedule.

Being a parent as a motivator. This significant statement was created with the participants' abundant use of describing their children as the student-parents' main motivator in completing schoolwork. Sarah's photo journal included a few photos of her son and she wrote that "when he is happy, I'm happy" and that was her strongest motivator for her schooling.

During the interview portion of the data collection process, student-parents were asked about why they were still enrolled despite their challenges such as balancing their roles and completing schoolwork at home. Bailey responded with, "My kids. I want to show them that no matter what happens in your life, you can still complete school and achieve your goals".

Another student-parent participant that related to their parenting as being the biggest motivator was Allison who stated in her interview,

That goes back to my kiddos. I feel like they're driving me to set up a better life for them. If I can get this career and this degree done, then that means more income and more benefits to my children in the long run. (November 3, 2020)

Allison went further in her explanation because her reasoning for continuing was not related necessarily for her gain at all, it was strictly just to provide more for her children. Kayla also answered that, "My biggest motivation is my kids. Not just my own, but the kids I teach at Head Start too. Knowing they're going into elementary school, and knowing what they're going into, I

want to be that support for other kids too. How I am with my Head Start kids, I want to be that for older kids too”.

The second theme of Time is discussed below along with the sub-themes that emerged.

Time. Time was a constant topic of discussion for every student-parent participant in all data collection tools. One sub-theme included the participants finding time to provide attention to their children. Another challenge included being a full-time employee with time constraints related to their careers or current positions. Virtual or online schooling was added since COVID-19 had altered the format of many institutions. The last sub-theme, time management, began as a challenge for most participants but became a strategy.

Providing attention to children. Student-parents had the concern of focusing their attention on their schoolwork instead of their children. David responded that “I try to get my work done before the kids get home from school or before the weekend” so he did not have to mix school with family time as much as possible. When the kids were home, he liked to assist them in their schoolwork. David included a photo of a science experiment he helped his children within his photo journal showing how he managed to attend to their needs.

Another participant, Sarah, responded that, “I worry about not being able to be there for my son as much as I want to. I feel like there isn’t enough time in the day to do schoolwork and take care of his needs. As a parent, it feels like I am running myself too thin”.

Michelle had a similar response, referencing her son, in saying that, “splitting my time is something I’m constantly worried about. I don’t know if I’m giving him the attention he deserves because I have other things to do”. With Michelle’s son being so young, she was constantly reminded of how much attention he needed and how much time was taken away from him with her schooling.

Ashley was surprised to find that after she began her courses she was, “able to spend a lot more time with my son that I thought, same with my daughter. Like, I am able to put them to bed every night, and that’s something I didn’t think I would be able to do when I started school”.

Tiffany, as a concerned mother, stated during her interview that the main reason for her stress was,

Really it’s that the kids are always saying they’re not getting enough time because, you know, I have to push for having my classwork time. I have deadlines that I have to meet and I know they want time with me too....Not being able to do enough with them makes it more challenging. (November 17, 2020)

Tiffany found a strategy that helped with her time by providing each child with different time increments. However, she still felt overwhelmed by dividing her time.

Full-time employee constraints. Many student-parent participants attended school full-time and worked as full-time employees. Bailey included a photo in her photo journal of her computer and described that she was working but was attempting to squeeze in some schoolwork during her downtime. Ashley included a similar photo of her working on homework during her break at work.

Kayla faced many challenges concerning full-time positions. Between her work schedule and her husband’s, Kayla mentioned in her interview that her largest worry was,

Finding help with my kids. I have a husband, but he is both military and law enforcement. He leaves for work at six o’clock at night when I’m getting them ready for bed, and he’s going to work. When he gets home and goes to bed, we’re getting up to leave so that’s been hard. (November 4, 2020)

For Kayla's situation, she was often left with the parental responsibilities on her own when her husband was working. She included a photo of her kitchen sink with the dishes piling up having stated, "The weekend had caught up to us" after having class and balance all other roles.

Kelly shared in her interview that the reason for enrolling into higher education, as a single mother, was based on her current full-time position in that,

I want to do hopefully better by us. So that's the goal is to, you know, not have to work so much week-by-week and to have an expected pay and hours and my hours are always changing. (November 5, 2020)

Kelly's main motivation and reason for enrolling was to financially assist her daughter more so than she currently does due to the position she currently holds.

Virtual schooling. As the COVID-19 virus spread across the world in the process of this study, many changes have been made to the higher-education system to alleviate any risk to students or staff. Institutions changed their learning platforms to only being online. Some student-parents viewed the online setting as being beneficial for them and their learning, while other participants viewed it as being more of a challenge and increased their stress. Sarah recalled that "I feel disconnected because of COVID. I feel like if we were to be in the class it would be a little different".

When I asked Tiffany about her support online during the focus group, she referenced how professors grade and communicated online by saying,

There is more of a disconnect with it being all virtual rather than in person, so I feel like they lost some of the personal connection and the ability to understand students.

(December 5, 2020)

Tiffany was struggling with the ability to feel a connection with faculty, and it affected her when working on and turning in assignments.

Michelle, being new to the online format, felt differently since she has been attending her institution virtually. During the interview, Michelle found that,

For the situation I have in my life right now, I do think Zoom is the best way to go because I don't have to pay for a babysitter and I don't have to put [my son] in daycare...I feel like I am able to juggle both instead of being in in-person classes.

(November 2, 2020)

In being enrolled at her institution virtually and attending her classes all through her computer, she was able to save on daycare costs and spend more time with her son. There were still challenges in being online while watching her son though. A photo Michelle included of her son playing being a ghost and knocking over a plant while she was working on an assignment.

Kayla also felt that online has assisted with time and with care for her three children. When asked about concerns subsiding when courses began, Kayla responded in the interview that,

Personally, being online helps me a lot more for not having to drive and not having to find someone to watch the kids because I'm home and they can hang out at the house. I would love to be in class if I didn't have children, but that's not going to work.

(November 4, 2020)

Kayla shared that she would much rather be at school and in class rather than be online but added that being online was best for her currently.

Another participant, Kelly, was not completely content with being online, or with the option of being in school. Kelly began to explain the shift in her courses by sharing in her individual interview that,

Now that we're online, yes I can be home more and it has helped part of it, like half and half. So, I can make dinner and stuff and I don't have to take my daughter to my sister's house, and she can be home in her own environment. But online also brings what I consider to be a lot more busy-work, so you're spending even more time on your computer than you would have before. (November 5, 2020)

Kelly clearly showed frustration with the online format provided by her institution.

Time management. Time was a main concern for all participants and managing the time the participants all had equally was a challenge. Shannon responded to a question relating to strategies in the focus group stating,

I think we can all agree on time management. That's definitely the biggest. Knowing that, you know, I have Monday and Tuesday off work and my discussions are due on Wednesday, and my assignment is due on Sunday. I try to get it all done Monday and Tuesday then so I don't have to worry about weekend plans. You can still have a life and do things with your kids and plan around it. (December 5, 2020)

Shannon managed to find the best way to balance her time to accomplish all role responsibilities with the assistance of her work schedule. In her photo journal, she included a photo of meat on a grill and noted that she "always has to make sure I designate plenty of time for family and friends".

Allison's main stress was, "time. Yes because it's trying to do a lot in a short amount of time". Allison continued when asked about what she would want more of to make her learning

easier to achieve as a student-parent with, “Time. Time for sure. Yes if I can multiply the hours in the day that would be ideal. More time to accomplish assignments, something!”

David admitted that he was commonly concerned about “finding the time”. Although he stayed home and was free to complete work when his children were at school, “at the same time I have laundry and I like to take care of housework so when my wife gets home she doesn’t have to worry about it”. Even with having the extra time at home and not having a full-time position to be concerned with, David still struggled to manage his time with his other roles. David went on in the focus group to add, “Sometimes there just isn’t enough time in the day, you know? I need to prioritize [my kids] and soccer is kind of our thing that we do together, but I also have tests or assignments due those days”. David’s largest concern was managing his time with all roles he played a part in, while still managing to keep everyone around him happy.

Melanie added to the topic of time management in the form of a challenge. She also noted that her main reason for stress or challenges was “time management. Like I said, I’m trying to figure out what time is best to do what and still live a normal life”.

Ashley learned through her experience that her most useful strategy was “really just time management, and coffee. Lot of coffee”. In the long run, her experience has taught her, “that I can take on multiple projects at once and handle it like a champ”.

Bailey added something similar to Ashley in her response to how her experience could aid her in her future career. Bailey commented that “This experience is preparing me to multitask a lot better”. Multitasking and being able to manage all roles and responsibilities in a limited amount of time was a skill that Bailey was thankful to have learned for her business administration degree as a student-parent that could assist her for the future.

Kayla added a photo in her photo journal of her sink with dishes collected stating, “the weekend caught up to us”. For Kayla, managing her time effectively included doing tasks such as a weekend’s worth of dishes before being able to sit down and focus on schoolwork. Another student-parent, Shannon, also included a photo of other responsibilities that she had to manage with her time. Shannon included a photo of laundry being folded on her bed with a statement saying, “Balancing daily laundry for 5 people after working a twelve-hour shift in the ER while thinking of what I will say in my last discussion reply for my BSN”. It was difficult for Shannon to manage her time between all of her roles, but she found that multitasking was the most time-efficient way for her to manage everything at once.

The last theme of Support is presented below. Each sub-theme is then discussed in more detail.

Support. The support system of student-parent participants could aid in their success or provide them with more hardships. A support system could extend from one person to many and be in the home setting or the academic setting. For those that did not have any support and have the amount of responsibility as a student-parent, they carried their stress alone. The three significant statements that came about through the transcripts collected include lack of support, support systems as a strategy for success, and academic support.

Lack of support. Many participants noted that they had someone that would be a support system but may not have been as supportive as they had hoped. When asked about concerns subsiding, Tiffany responded that “It’s hard to find people in the same support system, you know? Everybody is constantly doing their own thing”. About her husband as a support, Tiffany confided in the interview that,

A lot of the time I feel like that support is not as good as it could be because I feel like he should have pitched in more to do more of what I was doing before I started school.

Especially since I work, just so that some of my mental load could be relieved.

(November 17, 2020)

Without having the support of her significant other to pick up on some of her duties as she tried to complete her schoolwork successfully, she felt more overwhelmed than anything else.

Shannon, also married, was very quick to note during our interview when asked about the support that she, too, had trouble finding a support system in her home setting. Taking into consideration that she and her family recently moved, when asked in the interview she stated,

We used to live four hours south and we have always been down there. There I had my mother who lived close by and an amazing babysitter who would come at the drop of a dime. Since we moved here, I have no one. I have one friend, who I've known for years, but she has her own life so she isn't always available. Here it's just my husband and I.

He's been my only support, really. (November 16, 2020)

For Shannon, she had great support from her husband in caring for her children, but being away from family and friends created a challenge.

Sarah had mixed feelings about her support systems at home. Sarah explained that she thought she had good support, "probably more than I think. Sometimes you just feel so overwhelmed you feel like you don't have anything, but they're there for you". Some of the advice she provided for future student-parents included, "making sure you have family support first" referring that she may not have had as much as she would have preferred.

Kelly, in response to her support in the home setting, replied that her family members helped when she used to have to go to class, but now that classes are online and she is home

more, her family wanted to, “come and drop off their kids” and left them for her to watch. She added about this topic in the focus group advising future student-parents to, “Get somebody behind the, some sort of support system. If you don’t have one, it’s no good.”

Support systems as a strategy for success. Support systems could be a barrier to success or lead a student-parent on the path towards completion. Relating to Kayla’s support in the home setting, she stated “my husband, on nights that he’s off, always asks if there is anything else I need to work on or if he needs to take the kids for me to get some stuff done and double-checks with me”. She experienced hardships with her support due to her family being far away and being alone with the children often but was grateful that when her husband was able to help, he never hesitated to do so.

Bailey also felt as if she had strong support behind her education. Not just with her significant other, but she felt that her children were also included in her support system. Bailey commented, “I think everybody’s supportive. My children are like, ‘oh, you’re going to school like me’. So they give me the, you know, the time to do it...My husband is pretty supportive, too”. It was interesting to see that Bailey included her children as a support for her schooling and encouragement to succeeding through her degree program.

David was one that felt as though he had a strong support system behind him too, including his children. When asked about his support concerning his studies in the home setting, his response was, that he and his family are “kind of doing this as a family thing”. At the end of the interview, David wanted to add that,

I’m proud that [my children] are seeing me do this and they’re supportive. It puts me in the mindset that I can help them and I can show them it’s never too late to start, and you just have to put your best foot forward and do what you can. (November 22, 2020)

David's entire reasoning, other than loving to learn, was to help his wife achieve her dream to open her coffee shop, so it only made sense that his schooling included his whole family.

When speaking of family as being a strong support system for student-parent participants, Allison had much to add. Discussing her support with her studies in the home setting in the interview, Allison responded,

Yes. Luckily, I have a supportive family and they're all local. The grandparents kind of divide and conquer with helping with the kids. On the weekends they pick them up for a few hours, so I have some homework time. My husband has kind of had to switch roles and start cooking dinners, and he has been really helpful too. (November 3, 2020)

Having grandparents on both sides of the family provided more flexibility with who could help with the children and where and provided a stronger family unit.

In discussing extended family members, Michelle also added that her family unit had been a large support for her and her education. Towards the beginning of the interview, Michelle said,

I will say family has been the biggest help for everything. I mean, they take him when I'm studying, they take him, you know, I live with my mother and she is just the best grandmother you could ever ask for. So that has been my biggest support, my family.

(November 2, 2020)

Michelle was truly grateful that she had her family to assist her in caring for her son and giving her the time she needed to complete her assignments and have some time to herself.

Academic support. Academic support was a common significant statement among student-parent participants because it assisted them in navigating their coursework or made them feel less supported through the process overall.

Ashley remarked that her “advisor is actually local, like a few houses down from me. There have been a few times I would just knock on his door because I needed help”. During the focus group, Ashley added that “my advisor is amazing. He is super supportive and helps me anyway he can”. Although she felt supported by this faculty member regarding her schooling and when needing assistance, Ashley did have a challenge in having access to her professors and believes that with more communication things could be better.

Michelle felt similarly about her advisor when asked about her support with her studies at her institution. Michelle responded during the interview that,

Oh yeah, if I definitely needed it I would. I know recently we were doing the schedule for next semester and my advisor reached out to me before I had a chance to question anything. (November 2, 2020)

Michelle had help from her advisor with her courses but was finding it difficult to connect with her peers. She stated, “I think it might be different if we were physically in class, I think Zoom is weird. It’s different. It’s hard to make connections”. Without having the barrier of being completely virtual, Michelle strongly believed she would be able to connect better with her classmates. Michelle found that the professors at her institution were not as understanding relating to time constraints and other obligations that student-parents have compared to the rest of the student population. This sparked quite a conversation with other participants such as Kelly, Tiffany, and Sarah in agreement during the focus group.

Tiffany also struggled with feeling as though faculty understood the hurdles of meeting deadlines. When asked about support concerning her studies at her institution during the interview, Tiffany felt that,

With faculty, I don't really think that there is. They don't give leeway with things, so if you're having some kind of family crisis that isn't necessarily pertaining to yourself, they don't really give you extra time to do stuff. (November 17, 2020)

Tiffany had difficulty in finding the time to focus completely on her schoolwork due to these obligations, and in turn, had more trouble with the lack of communication she was having with her professors. Tiffany discussed that the students had created groups online to help one another which had helped her with peer support. One of the photos Tiffany submitted for her photo journal included a picture of her two sons playing pool. She said she "ran away for some time with my boys, even though I had class at one p.m." and she was grateful her classmates were sharing notes with her on what was missed. She was happy to just be "present with my kids".

Sarah felt that her classmates were her strongest academic support. Her professor, Dr. Robs (pseudonym), is a parent also, so she felt as if she could contact Dr. Robs when she needed to because she could relate to what she was going through.

With her academic support related to the faculty Allison says, "The professors are very hands-on and make a point to get involved with your personal life". Allison also felt that with her cohort only having 13 students, including herself, it made things a lot more close-knit so, "if I'm struggling, assignment wise, there are people to reach out to". Having had the support from her family, the faculty at her institution, and her peers created a stronger sense of assurance in her education.

David also felt that his academic support was strong with his classmates and with his professors. David explained in the interview that,

I've had really good support with the teachers. Every once in a while if family things come up, I think my professors really appreciate it because I let them know ahead of

time, like right away. I feel like they don't get that a lot with the younger students who probably just ask for forgiveness afterward. (November 22, 2020)

Regarding his peers, David had mixed feelings. He found that the faculty and facility were welcoming and supportive. However, David found that the institution was a bit small and was oriented to the working-class, which wasn't negative, but there was "not a lot of school enthusiasm" which he wished there was more of since he had never experienced that.

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the challenges of student-parents in higher education and discover the strategies this student population have discovered to overcome such challenges. The central research question of the study was designed to understand how student-parents in higher education describe their challenges and strategies. This question, as well as the sub-questions, are answered and explained using narrative examples from participants below.

CRQ: How do student-parents who are enrolled in higher education describe their challenges and the strategies they use to help them successfully navigate their coursework?

The student-parent participants described many of their experiences as being challenging but noted what they have found as strategies that have aided them in their educational and personal success. Balancing caring for children and completing school assignments caused difficulty due to the attention the children demanded from the student-parents, especially when their attention was elsewhere. Many student-parent participants were concerned about providing their children with enough attention. Organizing and scheduling seemed to assist with the struggles of balancing roles the most. Another found strategy included having a strong support system either in the home setting, in their academic setting, or both.

The first sub-question for this study was:

SQ1: How do student-parents who are enrolled in higher education describe their challenges relative to their personal needs and the strategies used to resolve these kinds of issues allowing them to successfully navigate their coursework?

Student-parent participants noted that time strongly affected their personal needs and that there were challenges associated with not being able to meet their personal needs. Allison's answer to meeting her personal needs was, "I've had to sacrifice on 'me' time and turn my 'me' time into school time". Allison also joined the conversation in the focus group about this topic to go further saying, "I honestly don't tend to my own needs often. The most 'me' time I get is when the kids go down for bed and I lay out on the couch and watch a movie or a show."

Ashley shared her experience on a personal level. With all of the roles Ashley had to balance, she shared during the interview that,

I'm pretty sure the last time my eyebrows were done was like, six weeks ago. Nails, probably the same. Nothing has been waxed or shaved because I'm way too busy doing homework. Oh, and this may be too much information, but my sex life is awful because I'm always in bed with my laptop. (November 17, 2020)

No other student-parent participant went into further personal detail than Ashley, but it was useful to note because her time was split in many directions which played a large role in her relationships.

Michelle had difficulty meeting her needs since beginning higher education. She went on during the interview to say,

Oh yeah, that shower I just took was a whole thirty seconds. I think my eating has been a lot worse because I eat whatever I can find. I just snack and go. I live off of energy

drinks, as unhealthy as that is. I'm constantly just going, going, going...The only thing I do for myself is the gym, other than school, I guess. Every day I have to fit that in or I'll feel like I haven't done anything for me. (November 2, 2020)

Since Michelle did not work, she could fit in some time for herself by going to the gym and was able to socialize with other adults.

Tiffany felt similarly in not taking care of herself, as well. She stated that she, "ends up giving up caring for myself to do all those other things", referencing things around the house that may need to be done. If she did try to rest more, she said those things just piled up and were "a bigger mess than they were before". Any extra time that Tiffany may have had was spent trying to relax.

Kelly noted her health and personal needs were directly affected by her role as a student-parent. She commented in her interview,

Well, having to sit here at a computer for hours and hours is not doing well for my physical health. If that's a personal need, then that's going downhill because, you know, I'm just sitting here trudging along and drinking coffee and energy drinks to stay awake when it's midnight and I'm trying to get some more work done. (November 5, 2020)

With Kelly's daughter staying home and doing school virtually as well, she did not have the time to herself that she used to have.

David, not having been to school in twenty years, was very excited to be giving higher education another chance. When I asked him about his personal needs being affected during his interview, his response was,

I don't know how to answer that because I don't know that they have been. I mean, my school is a part of my personal needs. It's something I wanted to do for myself. It's just a matter of keeping up with all my normal needs. (November 22, 2020)

This response was not something I was expecting, but it was nice to see a different perspective to what someone else viewed as being a “personal need”.

The second sub-question for this study was:

SQ2: How do student-parents who are enrolled in higher education describe their experiences of academic support from university staff and faculty as it pertains to their persistence to successfully navigate their coursework?

This sub-question focused on identifying the effects student-parents in higher education have had related to their academic support. Many of the student-parents noted that they felt assisted by at least one staff member from their institution, and those that did had an overall more positive outlook on their experience as a whole. Having a strong academic support system assisted in helping student-parents persist through their experience. Those that did not feel that they had support such as Kelly, Tiffany, and Michelle had more difficulty in handling their stress and the lack of support contributed to the number of challenges they encountered. Tiffany found that she had more support from her peers through an app the students communicated with than she did with her faculty members. With her peer support, Tiffany stated that “I kind of rely on them at times”. Faculty, however, she felt did not connect well with students, as she mentioned in the focus group, and that “they lost some of the personal connection and the ability to understand students” while teaching virtually.

Kelly also felt a disconnection from the faculty at her institution. She explained during the focus group that she felt that staff, “don’t really care, or really understand that there may be more challenges for some students”.

Michelle noted during the focus group that the professors were “not very supportive” at her institution. She commented that “I don’t think the teachers are, I don’t want to say helpful, but I think they’re not as understanding as they could be if it were face-to-face”. When asked about what Michelle would want more of to make her learning easier to achieve as a student-parent, she responded,

I mean more, definitely more, guidance and assistance when it comes to strategies for us specifically. I know it’s more generalized when everyone else in the class is able to do it and they’re like seventeen or eighteen years old fresh out of high school and they don’t understand, you know, the struggles that I’m dealing with. (November 2, 2020)

Michelle believed that if her institution were to provide more guidance and support for “us”, referencing to student-parents, it could help with the whole student-parent population in completing assignments effectively because their responsibilities were taken into consideration.

The third sub-question was:

SQ3: How are student-parents’ strategies for success in higher education related to their learning experiences as adult learners?

This question was only centered on the strategies student-parents in higher education have found to have assisted in their success. Shannon found strategies balancing her roles by managing her time efficiently with her career as a nurse, and ensuring that “I had plenty of time with my kids and worked hard to keep school-life and family-life separated as much as possible”. Shannon managed this by creating plans with specific time goals and prioritizing.

Allison felt that asking for help was important and having someone there, “watching the kids for a few hours so I can get homework done”. In having the assistance of another adult taking over her parenting role temporarily, Allison was more capable of fulfilling the needs of her role as a student.

Bailey found that she had to schedule everything so she had a visual of what needed to be done and when. This also served as a reminder for her. She also used “free time at work, that’s when I do some extra schoolwork”. Bailey used any extra time she had, even if it used to be time for her to relax, to do her schoolwork.

Summary

This chapter’s purpose was to provide a clear description of the findings of this transcendental phenomenological study about the challenges and strategies of student-parents in higher education. Participants were introduced using demographic information and with the Parental Stress Scale responses. The data collection and analysis process was described to ensure clarification of the process. After I completed my data analysis the themes and sub-themes emerged. The three themes included roles, time, and support. The sub-themes for roles included getting tasks completed at home, organization and scheduling, and being a parent as a motivator. For the theme of time, the sub-themes included providing attention to children, full-time employee constraints, virtual schooling, and time management. With the theme of support, the significant statements were lack of support, support as a means to success, and academic support. Participant quotes were used throughout to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena, or the experience, of each participant relating to the themes. More statements were then added from the data collection tools to answer the central research question and the sub-questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the challenges of student-parents in higher education and discover the strategies this student population have discovered to overcome such challenges. This chapter includes a summary of the findings with a discussion using my interpretations and ideas of the data collected. The findings are also discussed with the theories that guided the study. Implications of the study are explained, both methodological and practical, as well as any delimitations and limitations. Lastly, this chapter concludes with recommendations for future research related to the topic of student-parents in higher education.

Summary of Findings

The phenomena of this study is based on the experience of student-parents in higher education and their challenges and strategies. The data collection process was centered on attempting to capture the participants' experience. Data included an individual interview, a photo journal, and a focus group. I used the phenomenological data analysis process outlined by Moustakas (1994) to establish three themes. These themes included: roles, time, and support. In utilizing the codes, themes, and sub-themes, the central research question and sub-questions were answered.

The study's central research question was:

CRQ: How do student-parents who are enrolled in higher education describe their challenges and the strategies they use to help them successfully navigate their coursework?

This question was answered through the data collection process using the information provided by student-parent participants through the individual interview, using their photos and descriptions in the photo journal, and through discussion in the focus group. Student-parents faced many challenges relating to balancing their roles while still attempting to complete their schoolwork. Many student-parent participants voiced concern for providing their children with the attention needed as they felt that their attention was always placed elsewhere. Finding and managing time to complete all responsibilities was also a challenge for student-parents. Strategies included having a strong support system to assist them in caring for their children and to encourage them during difficult times either within their institution or in their personal lives. Using scheduling techniques was also noted frequently by participants as being a strategy to manage their time more appropriately.

The first sub-question for the study was:

SQ1: How do student-parents who are enrolled in higher education describe their challenges relative to their personal needs and the strategies used to resolve these kinds of issues allowing them to successfully navigate their coursework?

Personal needs were a topic that, for the majority of the participants, were not close to being a priority. Student-parent participants responded during their individual interviews as if personal needs were not even on their minds. Since nine of the participants were women, most commented that they had not been getting their nails done as often, or at all, after starting their higher education journey. A few also noted that their showers were their only “me-time” during the day if they took them every day. One participant mentioned that she still puts a trip to the nail salon at the top of her list once monthly and would even bring her laptop to do her schoolwork

while she was getting them done. This made her trips less time for herself and more of a strategy for managing her time not for meeting her needs.

There were three who discussed their health as being affected due to their schooling concerning their personal needs. These participants voiced that their eating habits had been affected since they were constantly on the move so snack and food that was made quickly was what they would choose. These participants had also been relying heavily on energy drinks to get them through the day. Difficulty in exercising was discussed because they were always on the computer doing schoolwork and joining live class meetings for hours at a time. I found that it was an intriguing topic to add to the conversation of personal needs relating specifically to the health of those who have seen a difference in the way they feel mentally and physically after beginning their courses.

One participant was not quite sure how to answer the question relating to meeting his personal needs because he found that his schooling was a personal need. I thought that this was an interesting perspective on the topic. The choice of enrolling in higher education is for personal gain and personal benefit. This relates to why student-parents enroll in higher education. Whether student-parents enroll for personal gain to pursue a new career or to heighten their salary it is still their choice and ultimately to better themselves for the future. While it may still be a personal need for this participant, he also noted that he tried to have at least one day to himself to do something just for him not related to housework or schoolwork to reset his state of mind.

The second sub-question was:

SQ2: How do student-parents who are enrolled in higher education describe their experiences of academic support from university staff and faculty as it pertains to their persistence to successfully navigate their coursework?

Academic support was commonly noted as being something that helped the student-parent participants feel comfortable when their workload was becoming too much to handle. Student-parents who had at least one person at their institution to contact for questions or guidance responded to the question related to the topic of academic support in a much more positive manner than those who did not. These participants also had more positive things to say about communication, class culture, and school environment. Peer support was also added to academic support, although not faculty or staff, due to the relation to the class culture affecting student-parent persistence. When participants had peers to rely on for support through their institution they noted feeling more of a sense of community and they did not feel as alone.

The lack of academic support was also frequently mentioned as adding to the participants' stress level and left them with more confusion. Communication was a common challenge with faculty members for student-parents who needed extensions due to sick children or who just needed some guidance with assignments. Being online left student-parents with a larger feeling of disconnection from their professors since they have never met them face-to-face. Without being in the classroom to talk to one another or ask questions, participants were only left with emailing their professors with questions and had to await a response that did not always provide clarification.

The third sub-question was:

SQ3: How are student-parents' strategies for success in higher education related to their learning experiences as adult learners?

Student-parent participants' strategies were much different due to the roles they need to balance, responsibilities that need to be met, and altered from one person to the next. Each strategy may work for one, but not for the other due to other factors such as family support, work schedules, financial responsibilities, and the ages or number of children each student-parent has. Balancing roles was a challenge for all student-parent participants, however, there were a few who found ways to manage these roles.

Participants wanted to ensure that family time was just for family and school time was only for school. It was a challenge for all, but for those who found how to manage this praised their support systems. Those who had significant others had the assistance of another parent caring for the children while the participants were able to complete assignments or attend video conferences. Even without significant others, some participants were grateful to have their family members close-by to take the child or children on nights or weekends. This gave the student-parents a break and provided them with the ability to focus solely on their academics.

Other strategies mentioned included time management with work schedules. One participant was able to change her work schedule to accommodate her schooling and with having more time at home. While this is not possible for all student-parents, others found ways to meet their deadlines with school and keep their family time just for family by utilizing any extra time for their schoolwork. A couple of participants took advantage of their breaks at work or slow times to complete some assignments. Others waited for when their children were sleeping to complete tasks for school. This ensured that participants were able to provide their children with the attention they needed and had fewer feelings of guilt doing tasks while their children were sleeping.

Discussion

Data from this study contributed to both empirical and theoretical components of challenges and strategies of student-parent experiences. Student-parents as a population, challenges, and strategies were discussed thoroughly through the data collection tools.

Theoretical findings through the experiences of the student-parent experiences also contributed to the study's findings with a strong connection to Tinto's theory of student persistence (2012) and Knowles' theory of adult learning (1990).

Empirical

Research has been conducted previously about understanding the characteristics of student-parents (Scharp & Hall, 2017; Pizzolato et al., 2017; Roy et al., 2018; Graff et al., 2019). Student-parents have many challenges that have been identified including emotions and gender differences, balancing responsibilities, educational attainment, having enough institutional support and structure, and meeting their personal needs. The challenges that were found from the student-parent participants align with the themes found through the data analysis process including balancing roles, finding time, and having support.

Participants noted that it was difficult to balance roles. Participants were trying to be supportive parents, students, employees, and a significant other for some. Many student-parent participants chose to enroll in higher education to excel in their careers and improve their pay so they could be better providers for their children. As noted by van Rhijn et al. (2016), the main reason many student-parents enroll in higher education, especially single parents, is to increase their wages. Increasing wages were mentioned frequently by student-parent participants throughout the individual interview and focus group to provide more for their family.

With enrolling in higher education all of the student-parent participants began to realize that their schedules would no longer be the same as they once were. The participants voiced that they were having a complicated time trying to balance being a parent and being a student. Two out of the ten participants did not work full-time, so they had more flexibility in completing their schooling while still maintaining their family time. These findings aligned with Estes (2011) study in finding that student-parents felt that they were pulled in opposite directions wanting to be present for family time while still trying to focus on assignments. Allison wrote in her photo journal that she wanted to attend a family outing with her parents and her children and instead chose to send her children while she stayed home to complete schoolwork. Allison noted that she felt guilty about missing the time with them but placed them above her feelings and let them go knowing they would enjoy themselves more at the event than staying home with her. This is a great example of how more stress is placed on a simple weekend event for a student-parent trying to balance being a good parent and a successful and responsible student. The research found by Louie et al. (2017) supports these findings in that student-parents struggle to balance all responsibilities while still trying to be successful with each of them.

The feeling of guilt that Allison mentioned as well as a few of the other participants regarding time are aligned with Brooks (2014) study with student-parents. The feeling of guilt was the most common emotion found through Brooks' study especially with mothers due to their motherly duties having to be pushed to the side (2014). There were nine mother participants for my study, and all had mentioned feeling guilty related to their studies. The participants felt guilty in having spent their time on something other than their children and with feeling distant when they were with their children thinking about the schoolwork they had to complete later that night or that week.

Personal needs for practically all student-parent participants were set aside to focus on schoolwork. Student-parents rely heavily on finding care for their children and this created more challenges for them, especially for single student-parents (Lockwood et al., 2019). Student-parent spouses and family members are deemed as being essential to aiding student-parents with having a supportive environment (Moghadam et al., 2017). Having more on their plate, student-parent participants struggled with trying to manage all regular tasks in addition to their schoolwork let alone trying to find time to care for themselves. Having the support of family members or significant others assisted student-parent participants so they could have time to themselves or have less to do around the house. Participants voiced difficulties managing responsibilities after enrolling because the spouse did not pick up any extra duties to relieve the student-parent participants. Others, like Kayla, struggled to manage her schedule with her husband's work schedule and relied on his days off to assist with the children to provide her with some time to herself or to do her schoolwork. Although there were a few student-parents such as Shannon, David, and Michelle who found ways to still have some "me-time", the rest of the student-parent participants were very clear that any extra time they used to have for themselves had to shift to being time for their school. Although there were three who said they found strategies, they still all voiced that there could be improvement with the topic of meeting their personal needs. For instance, David used to have one day a week he would go out and do something for himself but had not been as attentive to that. Shannon would take her schoolwork with her to the nail salon, so her time was not necessarily just for herself. Michelle was able to go to the gym daily for herself but took her son and had him stay in the daycare provided by the gym so she never was really on her own.

Strategies were also found throughout the study to assist student-parent participants' to succeed and to overcome the challenges they have faced. One of the most common reasons for a student-parent to leave their higher education program is due to having a lack of community feel (Zahl, 2015; Scharp & Hall, 2019; Theisen et al., 2018). Student-parent participants felt that since their school format has shifted from being in-person to being online only that their feeling of community has dramatically changed. Many of the participants felt that being online left them feeling more alone since there was little socialization for them. Also with being online, all of the student-parent participants were completing their entire schooling process without seeing any of their classmates or professors face-to-face. Some of the participants were already enrolled in an online format before institutions began being solely online, so those participants did not see as much of a change, but they still felt somewhat of a struggle in communicating with staff. The participants found a way to overcome this challenge through the use of social media. Multiple student-parents said they had never met their peers, but felt supported and assisted by them through discussions, chat rooms, and exchanging phone numbers through social media groups or pages. This form of peer support provided, at least virtually, a sense of community for many student-parents who were feeling a lack of support elsewhere.

Motivations and setting clear priorities were other strategies that kept participants on the right path. Previous studies showed that there were two main reasons for enrolling in higher education which were described as economic reasons and to earn respect (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). The motivation for many of the participants was their children. However, finances were also included as being a main motivator. Each of the student-parents wanted to better their lives by advancing in their career or into another career to make more money so they could, in the long run, be able to provide their children with more and have less stress. Advancing in careers,

such as those who were attending for education degrees and were at the time paraprofessionals, or for Bailey who wanted to have her degree to eventually run the business she works for one day, was also a significant motivator. Kelly wanted to have less stress related to finances and in caring for her daughter, especially as a single mother who only had one source of income.

Setting priorities, especially with time, was a frequently discussed strategy amongst the student-parent participants. Although previous research (Burrow et al., 2016) has shown that student-parents who are enrolled part-time perform better in all areas due to having less schoolwork overall and more time for other responsibilities. None of the participants for this study were enrolled part-time. Being enrolled in the number of credit hours to be “full-time” created more time constraints for student-parents and encouraged participants to find better ways to prioritize their time and manage their schedules. Many of the participants found that organizing and scheduling were helpful to create a better sense of what was due, when it was due, and have a visual aid to assist in keeping track of their responsibilities. Using a planner or a calendar, student-parents were provided with the opportunity to see what they needed to do first and what could wait a little longer to set a list of priorities.

Managing time between responsibilities was a skill that student-parents also learned when attempting to provide their children with needed attention. Wladis et al. (2018) found that student-parents with younger children had more stress and less time due to the labor-intensive process nature of raising young children. However, the student-parent participants in this study who had younger children took advantage of their schedule to play with them while they were awake, and complete schoolwork while they were asleep which was much earlier than those who had older children. Melanie noted that now that her son is getting older things are more complicated because of the attention he demands, whereas when he was an infant she could

entertain him easily and do her schoolwork without as many disruptions. Each professor also has different requirements, which encouraged many participants to be flexible with managing their time from semester to semester. Each class and each professor, as well as different programs or departments, have their requirements, which change frequently (Haber et al., 2016). These changes created more stress for each participant when classes and semesters changed, however, they were able through time to learn what to expect and be better prepared as each class was completed.

Having strong relationships within the institutional setting was another strategy that encouraged student-parent participants to move forward through their education and have a more positive outlook on their experience as a whole. One student-parent mentioned that their institution used to have an on-campus daycare for their students that was employed by students who were attending for education. This program allowed for student-parents to have childcare while also allowing students to have first-hand experience in their field of focus. With the changes that have been made in having virtual schooling, this option is no longer available for student-parents or education students. It was a large success and built a strong sense of community within the institution system, especially for those who relied on them for childcare to pursue their education. Kilgo et al. (2014) said in their study, that this type of high-impact dedication from institution personnel can provide dedication and commitment from students while building meaningful relationships. Other studies, such as Savage et al. (2019) showed that student-parents who felt their institution cared about them as an individual were more committed to the student-parents and had a stronger relationship with staff. The student-parent participants who also felt supported by faculty members had a much more positive view of their experience and felt that they had someone to lean on when they were feeling overwhelmed. Bourke and

Mentis (2014) found that supporting educators who developed deeper understandings of their practices provided improved learning conditions for their students. This is the same for the experiences participants had with faculty members whom they did feel communicated properly and would guide them. Professionally trained staff members who encourage their students' education to be applied to real-world circumstances and who relate to their students as individuals prepare them for success in the long run (Kilgo et al., 2014). Student-parent participants who described having positive experiences did note that their professors and advisors were their largest school support system and encouraged them to persist through their educational journey.

Theoretical

This study was based on two theories. The first was Tinto's (1975) theory of student persistence that discussed an understanding of what encourages students to persist through higher education. Tinto (1975) found that students who had stronger relationships with faculty members were more likely to continue their education than those who felt disconnected. Tinto's more recent publication (2012) included more information relevant to this era of higher education with technological advancements. With these changes and advances, Tinto (2012) found that faculty members will need more training and encouragement on how to interact with students effectively to encourage persistence. By studying student-parents, this study was able to understand what encouraged this group of participants to persist through their challenges and continue their educational journey building upon the findings of Tinto (1975, 2012).

The participants' experiences aligned with Tinto's (1975, 2012) theory of student persistence based on the strategies they had found to overcome their challenges and their motivations to continue their education. Strategies included: time management, organization and

scheduling, school or class culture, and having clear support in and out of the classroom setting assisted participants to have a more positive outlook on their student-parent experience. Factors that encourage a student to persist in higher education include both physical and psychological health and support-seeking factors that were present in this study (Scharp & Hall, 2017). Theisen et al. (2018) also mentioned the format of the classroom setting being either asynchronous, synchronous, or a blend of the two is a factor that affects a students' willingness to continue, which was also found to be true for this study. The student-parent participants found that having more support in their educational process from their professors were a large factor in their happiness with their institution overall. Those who did not feel that their professors were easy to communicate with or supportive used words such as “frustrated”, “overwhelmed”, and “stressed” more often than those who felt supported by faculty. Other students felt that their experience was more difficult to manage because they felt the institution was directed towards instructing those that were right out of high school or who did not have as many other responsibilities. This aligned with Tinto's (2012) research into institutions training faculty, stakeholders, and administrators to broaden their practices for the non-traditional student population.

The second theory driving this study was Knowles' (1990) research on adult learning. Knowles' (1980) four assumptions including self-concept, adult learner experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn was added as a fifth in 1984. These five assumptions have real-life connections to the experiences of the student-parent participants from this study. The participants were mostly older except for Sarah who was in her younger twenties. All of the other participants had reached a point in their life that they understand who they were and what they wanted to do in life. The adult learner experience was apparent in all participant discussions. David explained how his life experience has led him to where he was during the

time of the study and prepared him for his future career. Others such as Allison, Kayla, and Sarah who already work in a similar field as what they are pursuing in higher education believe that their past in their area of study assists them in their learning. Adult learners' readiness to learn is also oriented around participants' social roles relating to developmental tasks (Knowles, 1980). The participants of my study all enrolled on their willingness to take on further challenges and continue their learning despite the fears and concerns they had when contemplating their decision. Although all of the student-parent participants in this study shared concerns before enrolling regarding balancing their roles, having support, and managing their time, many found that their concerns subsided once they found a routine. Since many of the student-parents responded that their main motivator was their children, their education was more than something just for them and became a solution to providing for their family. This is not what Knowles had in mind when he was conducting his research, it was found through the study that the solution to many challenges was to complete their higher education program and pursue a career to assist their family and themselves in the long run. Lastly, the ten participants of my study wanted to enroll and wanted to learn about their area of study because they have already been interested in their program and many voiced that they enjoyed learning.

Implications

The implications of this study resulted in theoretical, empirical, and practical data shared by the student-parent participants. The largest implication with this study was the format attended by student-parents being only online due to the changes institutions made as a safety protocol when the research was conducted. Other implications related to population, challenges, and strategies reported in the finding are discussed in further detail below.

Theoretical

This study was centered on the specific population of student-parents in higher education. Tinto's theory of student persistence (1975) was not centered on any specific student population, although there was mention of non-traditional students. Although the student-parent participants still fit the non-traditional student description of being over the age of 24, commuters, and not enrolled in school full-time (Tinto, 1975) they also have other obligations that expand this description. Since student-parents were not specifically researched, the implications for this study are related to the specific student population and how they differ from the participants studied in Tinto's study (1975, 2012). My study focused solely on student-parents in higher education rather than just any parent. This group of students have different priorities than those who do not attend because they are responsible in raising and caring for their children as well as other responsibilities. My participants all had other obligations outside of their schooling such as finding care for children, working full-time positions, being a parent, and being a provider responsible for many financial requirements. These other obligations caused many issues with being able to focus on assignments while being successful in their other roles. The challenges met by student-parents complicated participants' motivation for persisting through their education experience. The overall motivator for the student-parent participants involved was not heavily based on support. The largest motivator for my participants was the children. Student-parents wanted to be a role-model for their children and set an example, as well as provide them with more opportunities in the future.

In Knowles' (1980) study of adult learning, student-parents were also not included as a population being studied. The student-parent participants met all requirements to be considered adult learners, as described by Knowles (1980). However, because each student-parent participant was different from the next and each experience was altered dependent on many

factors, it was difficult to understand exactly how each of these participants related to each assumption. Participants had matured and adjusted through time and their experiences had led them to enroll in higher education. What led these student-parents to enroll and persist through their educational career may differ compared to those that Knowles studied in the past. Knowles (1984) found that adult learners wanted to learn for themselves and their self-growth. The student-parent participants wanted to expand their knowledge for their area of focus, however, they mainly enrolled and persisted through to increase their wages. Time has also changed since Knowles' (1990) research was completed which creates new changes to the assumptions with the increased use of technology and multiple formats that have been added to the higher education system. With the increase of technology and the growth of online learning, adult learners were capable of learning independently when enrolled in an online format that was asynchronous or synchronous and having a deeper sense of control over the pace at which they learned.

Empirical

This study aimed to add to the existing literature and attempt to fill the gap regarding strategies that student-parents use to overcome the challenges they experience based on student-parents' own words. The existing research about student-parents mainly focused on the challenges that were faced by this student population, however, they did not identify how these student-parents overcame these challenges (Scharp & Hall, 2017; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Roy et al., 2018; Pizzolato et al., 2017; Brooks, 2014; Panigrahi et al., 2018). This study addressed the challenges that student-parents were experiencing and expanded on those challenges to identify what the participants found to rise above those challenges. Strategies found included having a strong support system outside of the school setting for childcare, housework, and mental health purposes. Some student-parents went into the process of being a student-parent with the mindset

that this was not more work, but something they were doing for themselves which was an intrinsic motivator when times were becoming stressful. Other participants found that having a set schedule and routine with themselves, their family, and their work allowed for tasks to be completed easier. Student-parent participants found that when their children and significant others already knew what to expect and when that things were not as hectic than if they did not have a schedule at all.

Although there was literature regarding ageism within the higher education system amongst the student and professional sectors (Taylor et al., 2013), the participants of this study did not reference this topic often, and some did not talk about it at all. Some participants noted feeling an increased amount of stress due to their age and having had a longer hiatus in being enrolled in a school than some peers. Other participants mentioned resentment towards younger students in their classes because of the ease those students have without the number of responsibilities such as caring for children, working full-time jobs, and having living expenses. These feelings, however, did not create any challenges with psychological health or productivity as noted in Stypinska and Turek's 2017 study about discrimination.

Another implication was connected to the strategies of the student-parent participants and their experiences with relationships. Banta (2006) discussed that for students to be successful, faculty members must take the time to assist and assess their students to motivate them to learn. The difficulty with any study about experiences is that not every student is the same and their perceptions will never align with one another. My study had ten participants and they did not all attend the same institution or have the same professor. This created an implication with having a clear understanding of the relationship between institutions, faculty, and student-parent experiences. The study was also done during a time when the format for learning shifted to being

completely virtual creating more stress for some student-parents and altering the communication between student-parents and staff.

Practical

The student-parent participants of this study had numerous challenges as many of them were full-time employees, all lived off-campus in their housing or living with family members and had responsibilities other than simply just completing their school assignments. This was directly related to Moreau & Kerner's 2015 study regarding student-parents in higher education. These participants had many concerns beyond their schooling and had children that relied on them for more than just basic needs while also demanding their time and attention. Concerns such as childcare costs, transportation, bills, and scheduling were just to name a few for all participants even for those with significant others. Lindsay and Gillum (2018) found that these responsibilities could highly affect student-parents' stress levels and their overall academic performance, because they are not typical college student. The participants of the study supported this through the findings of the data collection tools voicing that they did not feel fully supported as a group within their institutional settings. There was a discussion during the focus group regarding how the participants felt that there was not an abundance of understanding or support for those who were not recently out of high school and who did not have spare time. Student-parent participants claimed that they were not fully prepared because many had not been in school in quite a few years before enrolling in their programs with the highest span being twenty years. These students had the most difficulty adapting to the newer requirements, curriculum formats, and teaching styles. This information seemed to be agreed upon by nearly all participants, not pertaining to any one specific institution involved.

Another implication included the formats for student-parents to learn online being disengaging and providing feelings of disconnection from the staff members. There were some participants such as Shannon and Ashley who were enrolled in online schooling from the beginning of their program, but the rest were originally enrolled in face-to-face learning programs before they had no choice but to attend online only. This became a challenge for many of the student-parents to feel connected to their peers as well as their professors and advisors. ASU included live class meetings for a few hours each week to encourage more discussion with peers. Although, these students still felt they were not getting their full educational experience in this form. These students also sang the praise of one professor who was understanding when they needed assistance because that professor was a parent as well but did not feel the school as a whole was as understanding or supportive, especially in a virtual format. Since higher education institutions have been actively pursuing online education programs for higher student enrollment rates and broadening their programs (Bok, 2013; Money & Dean, 2019) it was surprising that when all institutions had to be completely online temporarily, they were not prepared to meet students' needs. The information provided by these student-parents regarding how they felt with their institution can provide information for all higher education institutions. With these findings, institutions can become more aware of how to support this group of students and encourage faculty to differentiate their teaching and communication techniques to encourage all students to succeed.

Delimitations and Limitations

Due to this study being completed with qualitative research using experiences of student-parent participants, some limitations were taken into account. The sample size of this study being only ten participants presents a limitation to only a small group of student-parents compared to

larger studies that can be completed on a larger scale. The sample was also taken from a small region and not whole states or nation-wide which could also produce different results. All participants were voluntarily recruited with no compensation. This did not present a large number of inquiries in interested persons and it is possible that other student-parents from other institutions, formats, or settings could have presented new perspectives or engaged in further discussion of the topics. All student-parent participants were currently enrolled at the time of the study and met the requirements of the screening survey to ensure that participants would provide credible information that fits the study's purpose. As a student-parent myself, my biases were acknowledged and set aside outlined by Moustakas (1994) in the reflexive journal (Appendix H). Having also included participant responses verbatim ensured that findings were from the experiences of the participants themselves and completing member checking ensured accuracy.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the challenges of student-parents in higher education and discover the strategies this student population has discovered to overcome such challenges. Participants included ten student-parents who had children under the age of twelve and who were enrolled in higher education. Five of the participants were recruited from ASU and the other five were recruited using snowball sampling. Future research could expand the research to a larger setting with multiple institutions on a state-wide or nation-wide level for greater understanding. Lockwood et al. (2019) mentioned the pressure placed on mothers with cultural and societal expectations. My study included a father and did not study any cultural perspectives. The research could go further into understanding how culture could affect student-parent experiences in higher education and their relationship to the challenges created by these expectations. Future studies could also expand on gender and age

differences with how student-parents approach their challenges in higher education. My study only included one male and ages were varied which presented differences in past experiences and maturity in approaching challenges. Wilsey (2013) noted that student-parents mature quickly due to having a child, or are much older than traditional students, so more information could be expanded regarding this to determine if age has any impact on how a student-parent interacts in higher education relating to challenges or strategies.

My study was completed in a rural area with participants who lived in rural or suburban-rural communities. There are possibilities for future studies to expand research into other geographical settings such as only urban, rural, or suburban areas. These factors could lead to different results in relation to support, time, and with access to resources or facilities. Many institutions with access to a variety of resources are more capable of providing supporting systems within the institution to provide stronger interactions than those who do not have the same resources (Doyle & Brady, 2018). Student-parents who live within and attend institutions located in more urban areas could have a very different experience due to resource availability and many more factors than the student-parents involved in my study.

Quantitative studies have not been completed related to this topic because many are interested in the experience of student-parents. However, there is an opportunity in the literature for there to be a greater understanding of student persistence with the student-parent population which could directly be related to Tinto's (1975) theory of student persistence. While my study was not large it did find that there needs to be further research regarding how student-parents are supported on an institutional level. Since there was not a large sample size, having a larger scale study into this topic could prove beneficial for professors, administrators, stakeholders, and

faculty members to be better prepared to meet the needs of all student populations including student-parents.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the challenges of student-parents in higher education and discover the strategies this student population have discovered to overcome such challenges. The two theories that guided this study included Tinto's (1975) theory of student persistence and Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning. The findings aligned well with Knowles' (1980; 1984) assumptions, as well as Tinto's (2012) research on student motivations and support as a means for persistence. One central question and three sub-questions were answered using individual interviews, photo journals, and a focus group.

The participants of this study found that balancing their roles and managing their time were the largest struggles they had as student-parents in higher education. Having to juggle all roles without having any extra time prevented the student-parents from meeting their personal needs and hindered their relationships with their significant others in some situations. Others relied heavily on others to assist with regular house chores and caring for children because of the increase in the number of tasks needed to be completed by the student-parent participants while in their area of study. Those who did not have family support relied on their peers for assistance and guidance related to their stressors. Due to being online, some found this to be helpful to manage time and roles because they were able to stay home with their children, while other participants felt that this altered their connection to peers, their relationship with their professors, and did not provide them with the instruction they needed to fully understand the material provided.

Strategies found through the study included having strong support whether that be online via social media platforms with other students, in the home setting, or having at least one person with their institution they could reach out to for assistance. Those who felt they had guidance from their institution had a larger sense of community and a more positive outlook on their institution as a whole. Participants also found that organizing their schedule with a routine or having a schedule set with their children or support system made things more manageable so they did not feel overwhelmed. Splitting up their tasks between different times provided these student-parents with the opportunity to still have time with their children and family while still being able to meet the deadlines for their school assignments. Since spending time with children was a priority for all of the participants, managing their time was effective in being able to be a parent while also having the time to focus on schoolwork and be successful in their educational program. Overall, the motivation for the student-parent participants was the children whether that be to set a good example, to encourage the children to value their education, or just to be able to provide the children with a better life by having more finances and furthering careers.

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APPENDIX A: IRB Approval Letter**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

2020-10-22

Amy Dewitt
Gail Collins

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-40 A Phenomenological Study Examining The Challenges And Strategies Of Students Who Are Parents In The Higher Education Setting

Dear Amy Dewitt, Gail Collins:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46: 101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any

modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B: Recruitment Letter

Dear Recipient:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a PhD degree. The purpose of my research is to understand the challenges of student-parents in higher education and discover the strategies this student population have found to overcome such challenges, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to consider joining my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, be a full-time or part-time student at a higher education institution and have at least one child under the age of twelve. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete the Parental Stress Scale prior to participating in an online interview conducted through Microsoft Teams, complete a photo journal where you will be asked to email me a photo daily for 7 days with a brief description of the photo and its relation to a challenge or strategy in your role as a student-parent, and participate in a focus group through Microsoft Teams with other participants. The Parental Stress Scale will take about 10 minutes of time to complete. Individual interviews should take between 30-60 minutes. The photo journal will require 10 minutes each day over the course of a 7 day week. The focus group will take approximately 45-60 minutes. You will also be asked to review the transcript of your interview and your part of the focus group for accuracy. This should take about 60 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To be considered for participation, please complete the screening survey by clicking on the link or entering the web link provided below into your browser and click the submit button when finished. Results will be sent to me via email. After I have reviewed your screening survey responses, I will send an email to let you know if you've been selected to participate in the study.

Link to Screening Survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/658MT2P>

If you are selected to participate in the study, a consent form will be emailed to you as an attachment to your acceptance email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. You will be asked to sign the consent document and return it to me by email prior to participating in the study or any study procedures.

Sincerely,

Amy DeWitt
352-270-1081
ajdewitt@liberty.edu

APPENDIX C: Screening Survey

1. What is your age?
 - 1) 17 or under
 - 2) 18 to 24
 - 3) 25 to 44
 - 4) 45 to 64
 - 5) 65 to 74
 - 6) 75 or older
2. In your household, how many children are under the age of 18?
 - 1) 1
 - 2) 2
 - 3) 3
 - 4) 4 or more
- 3.. Are you a full-time student or a part-time student?
 - 1) full-time
 - 2) part-time
- 4.. Please choose the format in which you attend your higher education institution.
 - 1) online only
 - 2) attend on-campus lectures
 - 3) attend both online and on-campus lectures

Please provide me with your preferred email address:

The following optional questions will help me to select participants with greater diversity. Feel free to leave them blank if you do not wish to answer them.

- 5.. In order to make sure all groups are represented in this survey, are you...? (Can select multiple)
 - 1) White or Caucasian
 - 2) African American
 - 3) Hispanic or Latino
 - 4) Asian or Asian American
 - 5) Native American
 - 6) Other (Specify) _____
- 6.. Which of the following income categories best describes your total annual household income before taxes?
 - 1) Less than \$30,000
 - 2) \$30,000 to \$50,000
 - 3) \$50,001 to \$75,000
 - 4) \$75,001 to \$100,000
 - 5) \$100,001 to \$150,000

6) \$150,001 or more

7.. Which of the following statements best describes your involvement in decision making regarding being a parent?

- 1) I am the sole decision maker
- 2) I share decision making with others
- 3) I give input, but someone else usually makes the final decision
- 4) I am not usually involved in decision making

8.. Do you or does any member of your household work for any of the following:

- 1) ASU
- 2) HTC
- 3) Liberty University

9.. What county do you reside? (At your primary residence)

- 1) Hernando
- 2) Citrus
- 3) Marion
- 4) Other: _____

10. Gender

- 1) Male
- 2) Female

APPENDIX D: Acceptance/Declination Email**Acceptance Email**

Thank you for completing the screening survey and agreeing to be a participant in this study. You have been chosen to be included as a participant. Please click the link below to take the Parental Stress Scale just to provide me with more information about you and your child(ren). Also, the consent form is attached. Please sign and return this to me via email prior to the individual interview and prior to accessing the Parental Stress Scale.

[Parental Stress Scale](#)

[Consent Form](#)

Sincerely,

Amy DeWitt

352-270-1081

ajdewitt@liberty.edu

Declination Email

Thank you for completing the screening survey and agreeing to be a part of this research study. At this time, you have not been chosen to be a part of the study. I will keep your information in case anything changes.

Sincerely,

Amy DeWitt

352-270-1081

ajdewitt@liberty.edu

APPENDIX E: Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: STUDENT-PARENTS' CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SETTING: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Principal Investigator: Amy DeWitt, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years or older, a student enrolled in higher education, and a parent of one child or more. You may be in attendance part or full time, online, taking some online courses, or fully enrolled in on-campus classes. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges student-parents, or students who are also parents, enrolled in higher education come into contact with during their experience, and the strategies they have used to overcome such challenges to succeed and continue towards their graduation.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete the Parental Stress scale, approximately 10 minutes, to provide more information about you and your family for descriptive purposes.
2. Participate in an interview online via Microsoft Teams at an agreeable time. This will be recorded and will last approximately 45 minutes to one hour.
3. Complete a photo journal for 7 days. Each day for one week you will take one photo and write a short paragraph description of the experience of a challenge or strategy that is depicted in the photo. You will need to save this as a zip file and send this to me via email before the focus group. This procedure should take approximately 10 minutes each day for 7 consecutive days.
4. Participate in a focus group at an agreed upon time with all participants via Microsoft Teams. This will be held after photo journals are completed, so that we can discuss your experiences as a student-parent and those depicted in your photo journal. This will last approximately 45 minutes to one hour and will be recorded.
5. Review a transcript of your interview and your part of the focus group to ensure accuracy. This should take about 60 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, you may benefit from taking part in a collaborative conversation with other student-parents during the focus group.

Benefits to society include assisting future and current student-parents who read this study to find ways they can overcome the challenges they encounter throughout their higher education experience and to possibly find strategies that could work for them as they embark on their higher education.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. I am a mandated reporter, and any information that meets the requirements needed of reporting child abuse, neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm oneself or others will result in the proper parties to be notified.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be held at a public place in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked personal computer and will be used only for the purpose of this study. Emails sent to the researcher will only be sent to the school-affiliated email address and stored on a private zipped-folder. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked personal computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with your institution.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Amy DeWitt. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 352-270-1081 or

ajdewitt@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gail Collins, at glcollins2@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study. Please check one of the following statements, then print and sign your name and date at the bottom of this form. Please email this to me at the address given above or bring it with you to your scheduled interview.

- ☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and use photographs of me as part of my participation in this study. All photographs of individuals other than myself must be blurred.
- ☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and use photographs of me and individuals I photograph as part of my participation in this study.
- ☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and use photographs submitted as part of my participation in this study. All photographs of individuals must be blurred.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX F: Parental Stress Scale & Permission**Parental Stress Scale**

The following statements describe feelings and perceptions about the experience of being a parent. Think of each of the items in terms of how your relationship with your child or children typically is. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following items by placing the appropriate number in the space provided prior to each question. 1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Undecided 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly agree

- _____ 1. I am happy in my role as a parent
- _____ 2. There is little or nothing I wouldn't do for my child(ren) if it was necessary.
- _____ 3. Caring for my child(ren) sometimes takes more time and energy than I have to give.
- _____ 4. I sometimes worry whether I am doing enough for my child(ren).
- _____ 5. I feel close to my child(ren).
- _____ 6. I enjoy spending time with my child(ren).
- _____ 7. My child(ren) is an important source of affection for me.
- _____ 8. Having child(ren) gives me a more certain and optimistic view for the future.
- _____ 9. The major source of stress in my life is my child(ren).
- _____ 10. Having child(ren) leaves little time and flexibility in my life.
- _____ 11. Having child(ren) has been a financial burden.
- _____ 12. It is difficult to balance different responsibilities because of my child(ren).
- _____ 13. The behavior of my child(ren) is often embarrassing or stressful to me.
- _____ 14. If I had it to do over again, I might decide not to have child(ren).
- _____ 15. I feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of being a parent.

_____16. Having child(ren) has meant having too few choices and too little control over my life.

_____17. I am satisfied as a parent

_____18. I find my child(ren) enjoyable

APPENDIX G: Permission for the Parental Stress Scale

Berry, Judy <judy-berry@utulsa.edu>
Tue 12/3/2019 8:31 PM

- Dewitt, Amy J

□

[EXTERNAL EMAIL: Do not click any links or open attachments unless you know the sender and trust the content.]

You have my permission to use the Parental Stress Scale for your research.
Judy **Berry**

Sent from my iPhone
Berry, Judy <judy-berry@utulsa.edu>
Fri 3/19/2021 5:14 PM
Yes. You also have permission to publish with appropriate citation.
Judy Berry

APPENDIX H: Reflexive Journal

Dates	Entries
2/13/2020	Holidays are the most difficult time to be a student-parent. Assignments do not take breaks for holidays, and professors do not give extensions because you may have a family dinner. With children, schools and daycares have parties where they ask for treats and goodies or party favors. Then there are work parties where things are needed to be made or brought in. This does not include personal obligations for holidays to say the least. All of it put together can lead to an easy mental breakdown. It is during these times when managing ones priorities is imperative to accomplishing goals and not becoming overwhelmed.
3/13/2020	One of the largest strategies I have found that work best for me through my schooling is having a strong support at home. Luckily, I have a husband who encourages my education and understands that when the baby goes to sleep I need to spend that time doing schoolwork and not doing house work. He does the laundry, the dishes, cleans up, and lets me focus on what I need to do. The hard part with this is that I am a wife and a mother, so there is a part of me that feels as if I am distancing myself from the responsibilities involved with the traditional role. At times I look around when I am finished with my school work and feel guilty that I don't fulfill all of these tasks at the same time, but honestly there is not enough time in the day to do everything and be successful.
4/20/2020	Working from home is a challenge when having a young child to care for that wants your attention every second of every day. With the stress of having to complete work for my job, and my school work, and get my usual household chores completed, all while trying to entertain a toddler I find it hard to find any time for myself. My personal needs are falling short of the rest of the needs of my family, my school, my work, and my home.
5/24/2020	With work being temporarily over, I now have the time to commit all 'free time' to my school work. I thought I would have more time to get things done around the home, but that is not always true having my son home with me all day demanding my attention. Unfortunately for me, my free time surrounds my son's schedule. Usually at night when I'm getting tired and worn out from the day is when I have the most time uninterrupted to focus on getting my proposal ready.
6/21/2020	Things are moving forward with school I am doing my best to find joy in the time I am spending to make memories with my son as much as possible. We have gotten into a routine, which helps with stress levels for everyone involved. I do my best to make the home welcoming before my husband returns, but there are days where I need to put the work aside and focus on my mental health being stuck home day in and day out. Any trip to the store has become an exciting adventure for both my son and I.

7/15/2020	<p>Luckily I have gotten to go back to work for summer school. This has given me something to look forward to and provides an opportunity for my son to be socialized with his classmates again. I did not enjoy staying home all day, although I did enjoy spending time with my son when tantrums were not present. I find joy in staying busy and with my job. There is pleasure within having my life back to normal a little, and with short days so I can still have time with my son because I have learned to appreciate every moment as he grows.</p>
8/31/2020	<p>Today was the first day of school. Although there were many changes, I made sure to give my work my all and was granted a few leadership roles this year. I agreed to them, thinking I should be done with my dissertation soon, so I will have extra time. What I didn't know is that it would take a substantial amount of time for approval, and that it would be so difficult to find schools willing to participate due to recent circumstances with public health and safety concerns. I hope to be able to juggle all of the roles I have been given successfully, especially with all of the extra waiting time I have.</p>
9/19/2020	<p>Things have been a struggle to keep up with. I have found one university willing to participate, however they need to run it by the board in their next meeting which is not until the beginning of next month. In the mean time I have been trying to find new schools to also participate, but things are not looking very optimistic. The stress of working again with extra duties while maintaining my home and my family are certainly piling up, not to mention the stress of trying to get to the next step of my assignment.</p>
10/23/2020	<p>This last month has been exceedingly stressful. I have had a lot on my plate at work being in charge of a school event with little help from the rest of the faculty. I have gained approval from the college, and I just heard back from Liberty that I was granted approval from the IRB and can move forward. I have contacted the professor about scheduling a time for me to speak with her classes and we are arranging a few meetings online, since they are not on campus for this semester. I am happy to be moving forward with the process, but now I have to come to the realization that the waiting period is over and I will have less time to get things done now for work and at home because I will have to commit my time back to my dissertation.</p>
11/19/2020	<p>I have truly enjoyed the data collection process thus far and gaining a deeper insight into the experiences of the participants. I have to remind myself to stick closely with the researcher's role and remove any biases when interviewing. I record the conversations so I can properly transcribe the interviews for review, but I also take notes during the interview so I stay on track. I am coming to the end of the interviewing process and some photo journals are already completed. Once everything is done I will schedule the focus group. I look forward to this</p>

	<p>opportunity for each of the participants to talk with one another and discuss the questions as a group.</p>
12/24/2020	<p>Although it is a holiday break for me as a teacher, my time is not spent relaxing or going out to do fun things. I am busy spending each night for two hours at a time, after my son goes to bed, going over the data collected and sorting everything out so I can attempt to finish typing up my findings chapter. My goal is to submit the chapter the first day classes resume again. When I submit that chapter for review, I will begin typing the next. If I want to make the graduation deadline for this Spring, I have no time to sit around and wait. I need to take advantage of all the time I have to work on completing my work and scheduling my defense.</p>
01/16/2021	<p>Today is a very bad day for me. I received an e-mail because I am on the list as a possible 2021 graduate that the commencement ceremony will be hosted virtually this year due to COVID-19 regulations. Considering I am on Milestone Four of Five for my dissertation, this is hear-breaking news. I have worked tirelessly for three years and spent the first two years of my son's life stressing over schoolwork to walk on stage and be a part of the hooding ceremony. I have never even seen Liberty's campus before, or met any staff face-to-face. I wanted to shake my Chair's hand and thank her in person. I wanted my son to see me on stage, even if he wouldn't remember it, and know that it was all worth it. I did not work as hard as I have and as long as I have to hear my name on a video conference. One e-mail later, and my mental state-of-mind has been set back several steps.</p>

APPENDIX I: Interview Questions

Standardized Individual Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself.
2. Please walk me through your interest in enrolling in higher education.
3. What were your original concerns as a student-parent when you decided to enroll in higher education?
4. How did these concerns grow when you began your courses? Please explain.
5. How did these concerns subside when you began your courses? Please explain.
6. During your time here, what strategies have you found that have helped you to keep your education a successful experience relating to the challenges you provided earlier?
7. What do you find to be the main reason for your stress or challenges in regard to your schoolwork as a student-parent?
8. While balancing your role as a student-parent how have your personal needs been affected?
9. What are some experiences related to your challenges as a student-parent that is connected to the institution you attend? (i.e. faculty support, community feel, class culture)
10. How do you feel about your support in relation to your studies in the home setting?
11. How do you feel about your support in relation to your studies at your institution?
12. Ideally, what would you want more of to make your learning easier to achieve as a student-parent?

13. What would you say is the reason you are still here and not choosing another option for education considering your challenges as a student-parent?
14. If you could give advice to another student-parent, or future student-parent, what would it be? Why?
15. One last question, thank you for being patient. What else would you like to share relating to your experience of being both a student and a parent in higher education?

APPENDIX J: Photo Journal Instructions

The photo journal is an opportunity to provide readers with a visual insight of the experiences of student-parents in the challenges they face throughout the day, and the thankfulness they have for the strategies they have had. The photo journal will be one photo daily over the course of one seven day week that will be emailed to myself at ajdewitt@liberty.edu with a short description of what the photo is relating to in connection with student-parent challenges and strategies. In the publishing of this study, photos with persons that must be blurred will be depending on the consent forms collected.

APPENDIX K: Focus Group Questions

Standardized Focus Group Questions

1. Let's begin by discussing your feelings and emotions when you were thinking of applying to your institution. What were your concerns?
2. Now that you are in attendance, how have these concerns subsided or have they increased?
3. What worries you the most while attending school and caring for your child or children?
4. How do these challenges hinder your performance in the classroom?
5. How do these challenges help your performance in the classroom, if at all?
6. What strategies have you learned to assist you in overcoming these challenges? Please describe them.
7. How have you been able to meet your own needs despite the amount of roles you have to balance?
8. What type of resources, or faculty members, have assisted you to manage the challenges that have arose as a student-parent at your institution?
9. What could future student-parents do to better prepare themselves for managing these challenges?
10. How do you feel that this experience will aid you in your area of study and career?

APPENDIX L: Photo Journal Example**Allison****Day 6**

Today was an overwhelming day with homework. Finals are quickly approaching, and my large assignments are coming close to due. When I get discouraged or overwhelmed by all my responsibilities, I fall back on my faith and rely on prayer and guidance from the bible to get me through. I am reminded of a tattoo I have, which is the same as the image below. My tattoo stands for, "God is greater than the ups and downs".

**Day 6: 11/09/2020****Bailey**

We are doing school work together #collegebound #studentparent #advanceclasses #avid



Kelly

My day, until I go to work. The struggle IS real. On my computer trudging away to stay on time with my submissions. Kid is taking a test for her online schooling. Note the sprained fingers. That happened in the middle of my midterm presentation.



Shannon

Balancing daily laundry for 5 people after working a 12 hr shift in the ER while thinking of what I will say in my last discussion reply for my BSN!

