

Original Article

Guilt, Grit and Graduation Euphoria: Exploring the Emotional Labour of Lactating Student Mothers at Teachers' Colleges

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ABSTRACT: *The study examined the guilt, grit, and graduation euphoria of student mothers as they navigate emotional and financial dysphoria. Balancing the dual roles of student and mother is a persistent struggle that defines the daily lives of many lactating student-mothers. A collision between their roles remains unavoidable. Using a qualitative constructivist approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth narratives about the student mothers' personal, academic, and social lives. Twelve student teachers were purposively selected for the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The study established that there is constant negotiation between academic and parental obligations for student mothers. For many lactating student-mothers, the ability to balance these demands may accurately reflect their resilience but also speaks to an urgent need for institutional recognition and accommodation along this challenging path. Practical solutions for the ways in which all stakeholders can better support student mothers were indicated by this study, with a particular emphasis on developing support systems that directly acknowledge and resolve aspects of the realities facing lactating student-mothers.*

KEYWORDS: *Dysphoria, Fortitude and Determination, Academic Pursuits, Student Mothers, Coping Strategies.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Student mothers are one of the fastest-growing statistics of the student population in most higher and tertiary institutions across many countries in the Global South. The experience of motherhood, a heavy measure of sacrifice plus her fortitude and determination with monumental hurdles, can become one that defines a woman's emotional, psychological, and social identity, particularly when pursuing academic aspirations (Delgado-Herrera et al., 2024; Duffy et al, 2026; Patel & Zhang, 2024; Queeny, Baluyos & Angelita, 2025). Breastfeeding is recommended for infants. According to Koletzko et al. (2020), breastfeeding is universally recommended as the sole mode of infant feeding. An increasing number of students are mixing parenthood and university education even student mothers, who give birth while picking up their diplomas and degrees. There are several challenges that female student teachers face. Even more, they face additional challenges on top of the rigorous theoretical caliber in training due to lactation rotations. Little is known about the experiences of nursing students who are also breastfeeding during college, and very few studies have examined their clinical experience. This revealed a limited number of articles focused on the challenges nursing student teachers face when they breastfeed while studying their theoretical and clinical components.

More recently, lady student teachers have opted to pursue higher studies while also being mothers. And this is especially true for students who are mothers and have children while studying, which usually gets them behind in their studies. The challenges of nursing or expressing milk while studying are just the tip of the iceberg among the many hurdles these student mothers must overcome to balance responsibilities of parenthood with their academic goals (Finkelstein, Glick, and Heifetz, 2024; Ifeoluwa & Peju, 2020; Shange & Maharaj, 2025). Many teachers' colleges lack clear breastfeeding policies regarding breastfeeding breaks. Other studies have identified additional hurdles, such as the constraints on breastfeeding time during the study, difficulties experienced before and during examinations, and learning at night while attending to childcare responsibilities (Anibijuwon & Esimai, 2020; Fadrique & Baez, 2026). Student mothers often struggle to find suitable accommodation in their academic surroundings, which can have a negative impact on their breastfeeding duties and objectives (Liebl & Josefson, 2024). Nursing student teachers also face physical and psychological burdens beyond those of rigorous theoretical academic coursework (Quansah, Aboagye & Osuman, 2026; Prastita et al., 2025).

The existing qualitative and quantitative research does not address the specific challenges of nursing student teachers who are coping with postpartum status and need to express breast milk in academic discourse. Other cultures have even worried that breastfeeding makes a woman feel bad about her body, triggering unkind responses from onlookers. Among the obstacles mentioned in a study by Aloysius and Jamaludin (2018) was that students preferring to breastfeed on campus were usually

victimised by shyness, embarrassment, shame, and experiencing exposure from perverts. This is a qualitative study to investigate individual student mothers' experiences of breastfeeding during their studies. Therefore, this study attempts to shed light on the actual challenges faced by such lactating student mothers. A primary limitation of current research is that the cultural and socioeconomic contexts informing lactating student mothers' lived experiences are often overlooked. Yet, there is a considerable knowledge gap, specifically for young student-mothers in Zimbabwean context at secondary education level, where very few are taking up higher education, such as primary school teaching. Existing studies do not focus on certain challenges and ways to deal with them. The research aims to examine the dual experience of student-mothers in mothering and schooling to fill this gap in our understanding.

1.1. THE THEORY

This research is rooted in the theory of Emotional Labour, first introduced by Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983). Emotional labour, or emotion work, is the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display in response to an institutional or societal role expectation. Hochschild described surface acting as modifying outward expressions of emotions without attempting to change the feelings behind those expressions. In contrast, deep acting refers to making a conscious effort to modify inner feelings so these are more in line with desired external displays. For student mothers who are lactating, daily practice expresses itself as emotional labour. They have to be torn between contradictory emotions and regulations, viz., they need to be a present and nurturing mother on one end, and at the same time a diligent student who is focused. This cognitive dissonance causes pressure, guilt and fatigue. Another reason that Emotional Labour Theory is especially applicable here is that it goes beyond structural role conflict and explores the internal emotional labour carried out daily and often invisibly by these women to sustain their double identity. It then also contextualises coping strategies like prayer, family support and management of time as types of emotional regulation. Using this theory, the research reveals an area of emotional scrutiny in the study of motherhood and teacher education as an under-researched area in both emotional labour and higher educational studies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies repeatedly emphasise the challenges student-mothers face as well as their determination, and recommend support systems to improve their retention and success in higher education. If Jefferson et al. (2025) methodology explains anything, it is that juggling motherhood and academia at the level of higher and tertiary education is an uphill struggle for many women. Student-mothers experience challenges attending to their dual identity as caregivers and learners frequently lacking time, resources and institutional reinforcement. The proportion of student-mothers (STMs) in postsecondary education has increased among Asian countries (Jefferson et al, 2025; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2022). Anderson, Brown and Clark (2021) conducted a study which placed motherhood as a prominent role in women's educational goals, showing that education was emphasised to provide for the children. Thompson, Green, and Lewis (2022) found that the experience of being a student and mother is a two-sided coin where one influences personal growth, resilience and vice versa (Bhardwaj et al., 2025).

This increase is indicative of changing yet progressive perspectives about family and education, which the Filipino culture places significance on. Balancing the responsibilities of a parent and a student negatively impacts achievements such as academic performance and family life, and further reduces psychological well-being. Many student-mothers feel stressed, especially related to their participation, testing and coursework education outcomes while caring for offspring (Briegel et al., 2023). These challenges go beyond the classroom and interfere with their participation and relationships (Blanton, 2021). The parental and student expectations to live up to can also lead you to feel guilty or inadequate at times. Nonetheless, self-reliance and individual esteem plus external support networks may help student-mothers navigate these hurdles (Farrell, 2021; DeWitt, 2021; Andrade et al., 2024). In this sense, the balancing act between parenting and academic work is a tricky one which calls for emotional, financial and intellectual resources (Chhetri, 2024; Duffy et al., 2026).

Many participants found the shift from student to student-mother brought a change in identity (Fatima et al., 2025). Role conflicts are more than scheduling problems; they involve emotional and moral dilemmas in which choosing one role means giving up another (Blake, 2020). Motherhood in the context of education is a controversial and deeply personal dilemma that does not receive policy, academic or feminist attention (Queeney, Baluyos & Angelita, 2025). Motherhood changes what the self-demands (Jefferson et al, 2025). They are confronted with a divided focus. Divided focus also means sacrificing personal time and often leads to feelings of guilt. Student-mothers may be studying while worrying about their child's well-being or attending to their children while thinking about unfinished schoolwork. Even though they can support their education and children, it remains a pressure with worries. Education is more than just a goal for these women: it is an act of redemption, self-respect, and inner peace (Kirkpatrick 2023). Informed policy that is inclusive in higher education can only be achieved if we seek to understand the realities of student-mothers (Adliyani et al, al., 2026; Li & Thompson, 2022).

The struggle of balancing motherhood and academics contributes to the development of student-mothers, but it also acts as an obstacle (Dogani, 2023; Queeney, Baluyos, & Angelita, 2025). Student-Mothers are commonly seen facing financial insecurity and not having adequate support systems, with higher dropout rates (Lopez, Sanders & Brooks, 2020). The commitment to

caregiving together with socioeconomic pressure results in poor academic performance and mental health of student-mothers (Kisanga & Matiba, 2023; Duffy et al, 2026).

2.1. PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research sought to investigate the lived experiences of student-mothers studying in a teacher training college, especially the challenges that these mothers face, how they cope with these challenges and where they see themselves heading career-wise as student-mothers at a Teachers' College located in the Shamva District of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe. The study was guided by two research sub-questions, which were

- a. What are the experiences and struggles of student-mothers during balancing academics academic performance and motherhood?
- b. What coping strategies do student-mothers utilise to balance academics and parenting?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative design using a social constructivist framework for thematic analysis was used because of its power to unravel the rich complexities of user perceptions and experiences (Oranga & Matere, 2023). Creswell and Creswell (2023) explain that the results and findings from this research design are interpreted by recognising the themes within the data sources. This design facilitated the collection of empirical data to help answer the two research sub-questions. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted between February 2026 and May 2026, and data were analysed using thematic analysis.

3.2. SETTING, POPULATION, AND SAMPLE SIZE

The target population consisted of twelve student mothers at Madziwa Teachers' College in Shamva District. The researchers selected the practitioners based on their unique experiences, ensuring the participants were qualified to participate in the study. The convenience sampling technique informed the selection of practitioners from more than 400 female student teachers on campus. The convenience sampling technique is a type of non-probability sampling method that enables investigators to select primarily the members of the target population who are readily accessible within the timeframe of the study (Babbie, 2023). This technique enabled me to select only practitioners with relevant experience, facilitating the smooth completion of the data collection fieldwork (Scholtz, 2021).

3.3. INSTRUMENTATION, VALIDITY, RELIABILITY, AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

The target population consisted of twelve student mothers at Madziwa Teachers' College in Shamva District. The researchers selected the practitioners based on their unique experiences, ensuring the participants were qualified to participate in the study. The convenience sampling technique informed the selection of practitioners from more than 400 female student teachers on campus. The convenience sampling technique is a type of non-probability sampling method that enables investigators to select primarily members of the target population that they can easily reach within the timeframe of the study (Babbie, 2023). This technique enabled us to select only practitioners with relevant experience, facilitating the smooth completion of the data collection fieldwork (Scholtz, 2021). The researchers prepared a semi-structured interview guide for qualitative data collection. To ensure instrument validity and reliability, the researchers incorporated expert suggestions to refine the instrument's final version (Fulk, 2023). Finally, the researchers pilot-tested the instrument on a different sample of student-mothers (n = 12) with characteristics similar to those of the actual study sample. To ensure qualitative trustworthiness, the researchers aligned the procedures closely to the principles of reflexive subjectivity (Adu & Okeke, 2022), face validity (Creswell, 2021), catalytic validity (Babbie, 2021), and methodological triangulation (Noble & Heale, 2019) in generating knowledge that can be valuable and trustworthy.

3.4. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The researchers approached the Tertiary Education Services Council (TESC) for permission to access the selected Teacher's College. With permission from the TESC officials, the researchers created a WhatsApp group platform and added the cell numbers of each child minder at the infant drop-off centres used by the student mothers. This enabled the researchers to have information about the student mothers at the college. This approach enabled the researchers to avoid visiting the infant drop-off centres at times that could have encroached on official hours, when the centres would have been busy with children. The researchers took some time to read the interview guide for the student mothers to ensure clarity. The student mothers signed the consent forms. The researchers conducted one interview at a time for each student mother. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio recorded (Fulk, 2023).

3.5. DATA ANALYSIS

The researchers followed the thematic process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to organise and analyse the qualitative data. Organising data entailed coding the transcripts, which gave voice to the research participants, as many of the coded words were used in the actual presentation of the findings.

3.6. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researchers obtained permission from the Tertiary Education Services Council (TESC) (Permission letter dated 15/01/2025). Once it was obtained, the researchers visited the research sites. The researchers took responsibility for explaining all aspects of the research protocols and assurances, as mandated by the bodies that had provided ethics approval. Participants were informed of anonymity and the use of pseudonyms in place of their real names. Pseudonyms S1 to S12 were used to identify the participants.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS: CHALLENGES CONFRONTING STUDENT MOTHERS

Participants (n = 12) were engaged to respond to the two main issues that informed the research sub-questions. Table 3 below shows that interviews with lactating student mothers elicited three subthemes: time management, internal struggle of divided focus, and constant negotiation between academic and parental obligations. These were identified by participants as the major impediments confronting student mothers in teachers' colleges. These constraints are discussed using the student mothers' verbatim responses to give credence to our discussion.

TABLE 1 Challenges Confronting Student Mothers

Main theme	Sub-themes
Challenges confronting lactating student mothers	Time management
	Internal struggle of divided focus
	Constant negotiation between academic and parental obligations.

4.1.1. TIME MANAGEMENT

Most of the student mothers lamented the issue of time management, and they pointed out that instances where time is not properly managed lead to serious dysphoria.

According to Student 1 (S1), time management is crucial to navigating this rugged, uneven terrain.

S4 weighed in, highlighting that time management helps us complete our academic tasks while still fulfilling our caregiving responsibilities.

S9 did not mince her words when she said that we cannot avoid the struggles that come with juggling the responsibilities of being a mom and a student at the same time.

Adding a layer of complexity to the matter, S11 candidly pointed out that time is divided between being a student and caring for my child, especially when my child gets sick and needs immediate attention, yet missing lectures and the academic routines leads to a diminished performance in both coursework components and even the examination.

4.2. INTERNAL STRUGGLE OF DIVIDED FOCUS

It was established that raising a child while attending college is one of the most difficult barriers to a student's ability to complete a university degree. This effectively requires a delicate balance between family and college responsibilities. The participants pointed out that it is extremely difficult to be a student and a mother at the same time, without compromising one's activities.

S1 indicated that, whilst I enjoy being a mother, it is not without its own fair share of challenges. For instance, attending an important lecture may clash with a child's medical needs or a school deadline for handing in assignments, which may have to be delayed due to the taxing demands of parenting.

S2 pointed out that this issue of a divided focus requires both fortitude and determination. This balance is far from easy, often requiring careful planning, sacrifice, and mental discipline. Sometimes I feel like I am not coping, especially with the taxing demands of semesterised academic work.

S5 pointed out that most student mothers agree that having a child alters their priorities and perceptions of life. She stated that as young mothers, we have to make compromises, and that the pressures of academic work and motherhood leave little or no time for socialising with fellow students, causing us to lose some helpful friends.

S7 highlighted that, as student-mothers, we face the unassailable internal struggle of divided focus. This internal conflict is emotionally taxing, as we often have to choose between our child's needs and school obligations.

S8 did not mince her words when she said that. At the end of each day, I will be affected by tiredness and stress from handling many demanding responsibilities. Providing for their academic needs and childcare has become one of the most challenging parts of my life. Securing enough funds to meet both educational and familial needs compounds my daily stress.

The student mothers' friends who did not have children struggled to grasp their friends' new role as mothers. P9 had this to say: "I have an extremely hectic schedule, making it impossible for me to spend time with friends or participate in social events like sports and wellness activities." Going out after hours requires me to find someone to look after my child since the child minders only provide their services during the daytime.

S12 openly lamented that being both a student and a mother comes with an overwhelming set of responsibilities that are difficult to manage.

4.3. CONSTANT NEGOTIATION BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND PARENTAL OBLIGATIONS

Mothers as students are constantly balancing multiple and duelling demands; working with high volumes of coursework, institutional structures that force them into work that lacks flexibility, and immense emotional strain, often plagued by feelings of frustration or guilt, potentially digging into burnout. However, this is offset by their conviction in the power of education to transform lives, which gives them resilience and much job satisfaction.

S1, sounding frustrated and exhausted, argued that there are days when academic deadlines cannot avoid slipping into the same timeframe as caregiving crises a sick child, for example or a child who needs emotional support, which, if delayed, would leave one in a nasty position in most cases that will not just consume hours but cause mental burnout. We often experience massive academic burnout.

Being both a student and mother at this stage in your life comes with many burdens to bear. The pressure of their education and the maternal role often leads to unavoidable conflict, S2 said. Managing being a mother and a student at the same time is something really difficult to escape.

S3 emphasised the emotional and physical burden student-mothers are forced to carry each day. This tension causes us emotional stress, as we struggle to balance two high-value priorities.

The biggest thing that speaks against education for mothers is motherhood itself, and being a mother is definitely the hardest balancing act I see them having to do with their education. S4 explained that the illness of either himself or his child made it difficult to concentrate on his academic commitments or attend lectures and complete assignments.

S4. Indicated that I often must wait until my child sleeps before starting my schoolwork, leading to late nights and early mornings. This results in a big burnout.

S5 said that being a young mother is not easy and it is far more challenging than I initially thought.

S6 said that balancing academic tasks with childcare duties often leads to exhaustion, emotional stress, and time constraints.

S7 had this to say: It is difficult to manage her time, particularly when no one is available to look after her child during classes.

S8 had this to say: Life is different now, especially since I have a baby to take care of. My daily routine will be fundamentally altered by the new role.

Most of the student mothers go through academic struggles such as inability to attend face-to-face lectures regularly because of tiredness, sickness of a child, taking a baby to the clinic, and lack of lactation for breastfeeding of babies.

TABLE 2 Mitigating the constraints confronted by student mothers

Main themes	Sub-themes
Building resilience	Time and resource management Developing a concept of success based on resilience rather than conventional achievement
Effective time management	Management of dual roles Meticulous planning Offering flexible learning spaces Flexible class scheduling Child support Counseling services Academic accommodations

Sustainable coping strategies	Providing moral and financial support Counseling services Offering institutional, mental health services, and societal support
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In Table 2, most participants' views are grouped into three themes, which we discuss below.

4.4. MITIGATING THE CONSTRAINTS CONFRONTED BY STUDENT MOTHERS

Student mothers encounter numerous challenges that hinder their academic success and performance. Without effective time management, student mothers risk falling behind in school or compromising the quality of care they give at home (Bustillo et al., 2024). Thus, it is necessary to develop culture-contextual suppression-management training complemented by better institutional support in order to alleviate mental work burden (Mukhlis et al., 2026; Porath & Erez, 2019). This research explores the experiences of student-mothers leading up to, during and after motherhood, how they cope with this situation, and how their thoughts changed along the way as they pursued teacher education at teachers' colleges. These reflections reveal a profound change in their mindset; education and motherhood are no longer mutually exclusive but rather interwoven facets of their identities as they transform. Student mothers pledged to persevere with their studies, motivated by a sense of purpose and commitment to fulfilling the dual roles. It was discovered that not having enough time to fulfil academic requirements and caregiving actually puts more stress on mothers, which is causing them to burn out. The chronic pressure of sleep deprivation and tiredness affects academic efficiency and quality of life. Furthermore, they had to choose consistently between their academic work and their children sacrificing personal comfort in the process.

4.5. BUILDING RESILIENCE

Builds resilience. Participants were unequivocal in what they needed to build resilience. These people learnt to value time, managing the resources as they appeared and conceptualising success through tenacity instead of standard production.

S1: My family helped me a lot; they were my emotional support and encouraged me to continue working harder as a mother and a student. Being a single student mother brings with it shyness, restlessness, absenteeism, failure in some examination modules, and an inability to join social groups.

S4, I now have new roles which encompass being a nurturer, provider, and role model. I must change my goals, habits, and what I want long-term for myself and my family. Our kids are the number one reason why we can find that motivation again, and with enough encouraging power through education, to make everyone possible proud of us (especially our parents) and believe that our children deserve a better future.

S9, Becoming a teen parent was very difficult for me. The constant struggles I face without a partner to support me have hardened me into a resilient and versatile mother.

S11, whilst the experiences of parenthood are challenging, taking into consideration the emotional and physical exhaustion that comes with the responsibilities, this experience has helped me grow and become more mature

Though they get tired of all the tasks given to them at college, they still have the strength to take care of their children when they arrive home after lectures. Colleges should develop strategies to address society's judgmental tendencies toward student mothers effectively.

4.6. EFFECTIVE TIME MANAGEMENT

Generate stories for colleges on how actually to deal with society's judgement of student mothers.

S2 I Knew Indian Express The limited number of hours that we have in the day has to be shared not only for coursework, lectures and exams, but also for caregiving chores like feeding them (our children), bathing them or helping with their other requirements.

S5 A life that I thought would be full of strategic academia and social connectivity is now fused with the stark, sobering realities of being a parent.

Student mothers face a tremendous strain and inadequate support in juggling the responsibility of raising their children with the demands of academic life, which affects their educational results S10.

4.7. SUSTAINABLE COPING STRATEGIES

Campus-based support groups for student mothers decrease isolation and help them voice their fears and worries regarding their experiences both on campus and off (Calumag et al., 2023).

S7: There is always ongoing negotiation of academic vs parental duties.

S9: I have also realised that, without careful planning, there would be no focus in the class and our children's needs cannot be addressed. This celebrates our ability to be resilient and demonstrates that if something is important, we can find a way where we do have the best of both worlds without having to sacrifice either role.

The S11 prayer and trust in My Father, as well as the ability to regulate my emotions, even during the most testing times, helped me.

S12: My experiences as a student-mother have taught me about the challenge of being resilient, efficient with time, and how to be a role model for my child.

A qualitative analysis identified three themes informing the experiences of nursing student mothers throughout their studies. The research highlights the benefits of breastfeeding for babies' health and bonding. The student moms have a lot to manage while breastfeeding during studies. Positive attitudes from lecturers foster support during breastfeeding. The researchers admire the student mothers for their ability to maintain persistence as students and be good mothers, while fully embracing and experiencing all aspects of their lives.

5. DISCUSSION

The themes above reflect the complexity of navigating motherhood while pursuing educational goals. The academic path is also affected by parenthood; they have to deal with children, housework and studies (time management), and have strong support systems. The need to care for children, meet financial commitments and manage household tasks places everyday stress on competing responsibilities of home and studies (Todd, 2023). Being a parent affects not only their everyday lives but also the way academic performance changes as they struggle to keep up with lectures, assignments and tests (DeWitt, 2021; Tight, 2020). The additional barriers of time pressure, stress and fatigue complicate their academic experiences in ways not seen by traditional students. Student-mothers tend to use some coping strategies, such as time management, social support and using institutional resources like child care services or flexible academic schedules (Sarker et al., 2024). To juggle the demands of their academic work and parental expectations, time management is less a skill and turns into a survival tool. The struggles that many student-mothers face to get it all done in the face of such competing demands are testament to their strength; however, this struggle highlights an urgent need for more understanding and flexibility from institutions on their incredibly difficult journey (Fatima et al., 2023). Time management is presented as a cornerstone strategy for student-mothers balancing the dual challenges of education and motherhood (Williams, 2024).

These role conflicts not only lead to operational issues but also unleash anxieties of guilt and feeling incompetent. Constantly negotiating the mind, to either be a good student or an available mother, can lead to stress and fatigue (Phiri, 2021). They are doing great because what they want to achieve is so dear to their hearts, and that passion keeps driving them forward. Student mothers felt differently after becoming mothers, acknowledging the burden of responsibilities and sacrifice inherent to motherhood. We have student, wife and sometimes job roles which give us chronic fatigue, problems with focus on studies and lack of fulfilment.

6. CONCLUSION

For student-mothers, juggling several responsibilities that require time, effort, and dedication may be both fulfilling and overwhelming. The dual demands of parenting and studying deeply influence the personal and academic lives of student mothers. Balancing the dual roles of student and mother is a persistent struggle that defines the daily lives of many student-mothers. A collision between their roles remains unavoidable. Student mothers have to devise a survival mechanism to keep both academic and parenting commitments afloat. That means the discipline involved when adhering to a schedule becomes an emotional investment in their academic goals as well as in the future of their child. However, many breastfeeding women still face serious challenges such as balancing lack of time and energy with financial pressures and caregiving responsibilities. As the results of their research indicate, student-mothers exhibit tremendous resolve and adaptation. Despite the overwhelming challenges, the participants demonstrate amazing resilience and perseverance towards both their own educational pursuits and a better future for their children. This results in fairly high levels of pressure, but can also increase student-mothers' capacity for adaptability and strategic problem-solving. Student-mothers who struggle with managing time and energy often rely on their coping strategies and support systems.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given these findings, the study highlights the necessity of developing more targeted support systems, which consider and respond to the unique realities faced by student-mothers while contributing to a growing dialogue on inclusive educational practices. Academic institutions need to involve and apply a vision of an inclusive and supportive environment for nursing student teachers. Theoretical frameworks such as role theory and counselling services emphasise support systems in helping student-mothers cope with multiple roles. They are heavily influenced by both institutional and social support, which would

have more resources available if learning were flexible, parental leave was more common (Smith 2023), and they worked online. Notably, participants navigated their two roles with almost complete reliance on faith, family (particularly familial assistance), work plan and a newly formed idea of success premised less on conventional achievement but rather on perseverance. To better accommodate and empower student-mothers to reach their academic potential, the study further recommends that teacher-training colleges implement holistic support systems for them. Our study revealed that having adequate support systems (family help, flexible academic frameworks and easy access to mental health services) is fundamental for their academic completion and wellbeing. The importance of perseverance, adaptability and strong systems of support in ensuring we navigate these challenges well cannot be overstated.

Flexible class scheduling, providing childcare services or vouchers for cheap daycare facilities, as well as access to counselling and academic accommodations should be made available. Educational institutions can assist in alleviating role strain—by offering flexible schedules, e.g. hybrid learning formats that allow students to balance their roles and responsibilities. Educational institutions could also have flexible course schedules like evening, online or hybrid classes, recognising the unique needs of student-mothers. With these measures in place, schools can alleviate the pressure that student-mothers have and help them manage their time and energy more efficiently between academic tasks and caretaking duties. Research in this line is needed to understand how educational institutions can design and implement holistic support systems especially tailored for student-mothers. Such resources might include mental health counselling, academic advising for parenting students, class hours that can accommodate their new schedules, and on-campus child care. Research may evaluate the efficacy of these programs to promote student-mothers' academic achievement, wellbeing, and persistence.

8. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

These gaps highlight the need for further phenomenological exploration so that we can secure strong educational policies and support frameworks. Another gap is evaluating future perspectives and implications to inform recommendations for colleges to support better and adopt inclusive practices. Future research may examine how different sources of financial aid and flexibility in educational institutions impact students, especially student-mothers with their studies, shining then on the still present problems as well as what further supports could be put in place.

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