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MOTHERS AS DISTANCE LEARNERS: A PHENOMENOLOGY
BY
CRYSTAL MARIE ZAUGG

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Approval Page



The future of learning

Approval of Thesis

The undersigned certify that they have read the thesis entitled

"Mothers as Distance Learners"

Submitted by

Crystal Zaugg

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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The thesis examination committee certifies that the thesis
and the oral examination is approved

Co-Supervisors:

Dr. Cynthia Blodgett-Griffin
Athabasca University

Dr. Patrick Fahy
Athabasca University

External Committee member:

Dr. Gloria Filax
Athabasca University

May 6, 2014

Dedication

*For my husband Jeff
The one I laugh with, live for, dream with, love...
Thank you Sweetheart*

*For my children Timothy, Rebecca, and Jessica
"I loov you"*

*For my mother
Love You, Miss You, Kiss Kiss, So Proud*

Acknowledgement

From the very first I knew that Dr. Cynthia Blodgett-Griffin was meant to supervise the writing of this thesis. Not only did she understand the way I worked, but also the importance of what I wanted to say, and the daily challenges I faced in maintaining balance between all of my priorities as mother, student, wife, and teacher. Cynthia, thank you for your encouragement, patience, perseverance, positive outlook, and endless supply of happy face emoticons. Thank you for sharing your experiences and showing me a glimpse of the person behind the position.

I have spent the better part of my post-secondary years mulling over what would eventually become my thesis topic. Then within the last two years I came ‘up close and personal’ with the phenomenological research process. But it was not until I arose to Dr. Patrick Fahy’s challenge to defend my choice of methodology that I came to truly understand transcendental phenomenology, and the relative newness of Moustakas (1994) approach. Thank you for giving me the chance to rediscover what I thought I knew.

Dr. Gloria Filax, thank you for your contributions to this project and for introducing me to the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*. I look forward to reading many more research articles pertaining to motherhood.

I wish to express a huge thank you to my wonderful husband and helpmate. Thank you for embarking on this journey with me and for seeing it through together. As words are inadequate to express all that I want to say these few will have to suffice: I love you Jeff!

To my incredible children: Timothy, Rebecca, and Jessica. You were the inspiration behind my thesis. It was my desire to be both your mother and a student that led me to pursue this topic. Thank you for always being there and supporting me. I can’t say that I loved every minute of the experience... but I can say that I have loved you each and every minute!

Finally, thank you to the women who participated in this study. I appreciate your willingness to share your stories and your enthusiasm for this important topic. Best of wishes in your academic pursuits!

Abstract

This transcendental phenomenological study examined the social phenomenon of five mothers who are distance learners. The participants' stories and interview responses were analyzed for major themes or concepts using the process of successive approximation through which six main themes were identified, namely: collaborative group work and forums; help and support; the necessity of flexibility; organization; persistence; and personal versus professional life.

Keywords: women; mother; distance learner; collaborative group work; forum; help and support; flexibility; organization; persistence; personal life; professional life.

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Chapter I: Introduction

It is time for the voice of the mother to be heard in education¹.

Overview

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of female students enrolled in post-secondary institutions who are mothers. Currently there are only a few studies pertaining specifically to the experiences of mothers as distance learners. This phenomenological study examines the social phenomenon of mothers as distance learners, identifies the commonalities in each of five individuals' experiences, and explores the essence of what it means to be both a mother and distance learner in today's educational environment.

Introduction

Coffield (2011) and Findlow (2013) attribute women's access to education as a long standing cog in the wheel in the feminist quest for equal citizenship. As early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries feminist scholars such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Cady Stanton "grounded their broader arguments for democratic equality in the principle of women's access to education" (Coffield, 2011, p. 11). In more recent times "educators and researchers have been working toward expanding access to all levels of education for all women" (p. 11). Johnson (2004) expounds on the writings of Maher and Tetrault (1994) who postulate that:

Feminist pedagogy encourages students; particularly women, working-class students, and members of underrepresented ethnic groups, to gain an education

¹ Nel Noddings (as cited in Clinchy et al., 1973, p. 214)

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that would be relevant to their concerns, to create their own meanings, and to find their own voices in relation to the material. (Johnson, 2004, p. 155-156)

According to Cookson (2000), “an educational revolution” (p. 79) has taken place in North America. A woman pursuing higher education was once considered a “statistical rarity” (Kramarae, 2001, p. 4); however, over the past four decades the percentage of female students admitted into colleges and universities has undergone a “dramatic reversal” (Frenette, 2007, p. 5). Today, women comprise the majority of American post-secondary students (Kramarae, 2001, p. 4) and 58% of all Canadian university graduates (Frenette, 2007, p. 5). (Although these statistics indicate that there is still gender inequality in enrolment numbers, the purpose of the above statement is not to compare, nor gloat, but merely to indicate the significant increase of female enrolment over time).

This “demographic shift toward a predominantly female population” (Kramarae, 2001, p. 4) is not exclusive to the traditional classroom. Clerehan (2002) remarks: “[i]ncreasingly, students are completing their courses outside traditional face-to-face teaching environments and instead are relying on online course materials as a basis for their study (as cited in Owens et al., 2009, p. 53). The majority of distance education students are female adults who require flexible study schedules in order to accommodate work, school, and family responsibilities (Coulter, 1989; Faith, 1988; Howell et al. 2003; Kramarae, 2001; May, 1992; Moody, 2004; Muller, 2008; von Prummer, 2000; Werth, 2010). Furthermore, a growing majority of female students can be classified as ‘non-traditional students’ in one way or another: mature, low-income, minority, parent or single-parent, employed full-time, or living in remote areas (Faith, 1988; Moody, 2004; Muller, 2008). Many feminist distance educators promote distance education as being

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ideal for nursing mothers and mothers of young children due to factors such as flexibility, portability and learner control over study schedules and learning transactions (Clinchy et al., 1973; Coulter, 1989; Faith, 1988; May, 1992; Moody, 2004; von Prummer, 2000; Werth, 2010). In practice, however, these students face the greatest difficulty in juggling the demands of family, work, and school; as a result, their attrition rate is relatively high.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Moustakas' modification of van Kaam's model, which was based on Husserl's transcendental phenomenological research approach because the researcher had identified the phenomenon to study, but did "not know the important variables to examine" (Creswell, 2009, p. 18). In the interview process the researcher asked Moustakas' (1994) main questions: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?" in order to elicit responses from participants. These experiences provided the raw data for analysis from which a description of the "grasp of the very nature of the thing" (van Manen, 1997, p.177) was formed.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the many studies that tout the advantages distance education has to offer "too little is known and too much assumed about the nature of women's learning in distance education contexts" (May, 1992, p. 5). There is a surprising dearth of research exploring the experiences of mothers in online programs (Kramarae, 2001; Muller, 2008; Werth, 2010). This study builds upon the foundation laid by other researchers and provides "qualitative, in-depth studies involving gender" (Werth, 2010, p. 72) that are so desperately needed in the field.

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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of mothers in distance education, explore the essence of the experiences of five mothers as distance learners, and identify commonalities, if any, in each of their unique experiences.

Research Question

What is the essence of the lived experiences of mothers who are distance learners?

Sub-question: How does each mother express essence of her lived experience?

Sub-question: Is there essence of the lived experiences that is shared among the mothers?

Definitions of Terms

Distance education. The term distance is defined in the Merriam Webster dictionary as “the degree or amount of separation between two points, lines, surfaces, or objects” (n. p.). The term distance in distance education refers to “more than simply a geographic separation of learners and teachers. Distance education simply defined is a course or program that does not require face-to-face attendance. Although there are many forms of distance education for the purposes of this study the term is synonymous with online learning (see online learning).

Distance learner and/or distance student. For the purposes of this study the term distance learner will be defined as a student who has enrolled in (but not necessarily completed) one or more distance education courses within the last five years. Distance education courses can include individualized-study courses, individualized-study online courses, and group paced courses. It is important to note that distance learners may or may not live within close proximity to the post-secondary institution they attend. As

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stated earlier there are many factors that influence students need to enrol in distance education.

Elimination. Expressions that do not contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it are eliminated. “Overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions are also eliminated or presented in more exact descriptive terms. The horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

Essence. Husserl, considered to be the founder of phenomenology, described essence as ‘consciousness in the natural attitude in daily life to the ‘pure’, i.e. non-empirical, consideration of the essence of consciousness removed from all reference to factual reality (Moran, 2012, p. xv-xvi). Describing “phenomena and their essences is a common methodological goal in phenomenological research” (Dahlbery, 2006, p. 11). Dahlbery (2006) continues: “[w]hen we attend intentionally to a phenomenon, when we understand that phenomenon and what it is, we are involved with essences” (p. 12). “An essence could be understood as a structure of essential meanings that explicate a phenomenon of interest. The essence or structure is what makes the phenomenon to be that very phenomenon. That is, the essence or structure illuminates these essential characteristics of phenomenon without which it would not be that phenomenon” (p. 11).

Horizontalization. If the researcher is able to abstract and label a moment of an experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding the phenomenon than it is a horizon of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

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Lived Experience. This frequently used phrase coined by phenomenologist van Manen (1997) is defined by Holloway (2005) as “immediate, pre-reflective consciousness” (p.131).

Mother. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines the term mother simply as “a female parent” (n. p.). For the purposes of this study, the term mother will refer to a woman (single, married, divorced, or widowed) with at least one dependant residing with her that is under the age of eighteen.

Online learning. There are many ways to define this term but the researcher adopts that of Athabasca University, one of the largest providers of online courses in Canada. In the 2002/03 Calendar ‘online learning’ is described as offering “students access to Internet-supported delivery platforms that use interactive conferencing, phone, and chat-room sessions” (Ross, 2004, p. 3). Participants within this study were enrolled in online programs of study in which all instruction was received via an individualized-study course or an individualized-study online course. In an individualized-study online course all materials were delivered via the Internet (Ross, 2004). In both the individualized-study online course and the individualized-study course students received:

A course package that may include, but is not limited to, a student manual, a study guide (required reading, if included), textbook(s), CD-ROM, audio cassettes and/or video tapes, and home-lab kits. Students [were] assigned a tutor and [were] given a recommended study schedule within the time limits allowed for the course. Students determine[d] the actual timing of assignments and exams within the course contract period. (Ross, 2004, p. 4)

Reduction. According to Moustakas (1994):

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In the transcendental phenomenological reduction, each experience is considered in its singularity, in and for itself. The phenomenon is perceived and described in its totality, in a fresh and open way. A complete description is given of its essential constituents, variations of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colours, and shapes. (p. 34)

Transactional Distance. The term distance in distance education refers to: more than simply a geographic separation of learners and teachers. It is a distance of understandings and perceptions.... [a] physical separation that leads to a psychological and communications gap, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner (Moore, 1991, p. 2-3).

Moore defines this space as “transactional distance” (p. 3). Some factors that contribute to transactional distance may include but are not limited to: prior familial or professional commitments and/or obligations, time constraints, disabilities, illnesses, learning difficulties, age, race, gender, work experience, and other physical or psychological barriers, availability of programs, and so forth.

Moore (1991) notes that “in any educational program there is *some* transactional distance, even where learners and teachers meet face to face” (p. 3). However in distance education the “separation of teacher and learner is so significant that it affects their behaviors in major ways, and requires the use of special techniques, and leads to special conceptualization” (p. 3).

Limitations

In this study the sample size is small. Only five participants were selected using a purposeful sampling technique in order to achieve a heterogeneous sample population.

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Dobbert (1982) postulates that “it is generally preferable to include a sample with the widest possible range of variation in the phenomenon, settings, or people under study” (as cited in May, 1992, p. 16). Creswell (2007) asserts that “when a researcher maximizes difference at the beginning of the study, it increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives – an ideal in qualitative research” (p. 126). Neuman (2011) notes that “in qualitative research, the purpose of research may not require having a representative sample from a huge number of cases. Instead, a nonprobability sample often better fits the purposes of a study” (p. 267). Creswell (2007) remarks “[i]n phenomenology, I have seen the number of participants range from 1 (Dukes, 1984) up to 325 (Polkinghorne, 1989). Dukes (1984) recommends studying 3 to 10 individuals” (p.126). Sample size is dependent on a great number of factors. In this case it was important that it neither be too big (and therefore unmanageable for one researcher), nor too small (and focus on the experience of only one mother).

One further limitation is that many potential participants may have decided not to participate because they were too busy with the many responsibilities and time constraints implicit in being both a mother and student. As a result, these women, and their valuable experiences were missed.

Delimitations

Participants in this study included only those women (single, married, divorced, or widowed) who were responsible for the day-to-day care of a child (or children) under the age of eighteen, who resided with them during their study period. This criterion allowed for the inclusion of foster mothers, stepmothers, grandmothers, and other women

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who provided a mothering role regardless of their biological relation to the child in their care. However, it excluded expectant mothers without existing children, mothers whose children reside elsewhere, and mothers whose youngest child is over the age of eighteen.

Philosophical Assumptions

Husserl: Fountainhead of Phenomenology

German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938), “sought to develop a new philosophical method which would lend absolute certainty to a disintegrating civilization” (Eagleton, 1983, p. 54). According to Eagleton (1983) at the end of World War One (1914 – 1918):

The social order of European capitalism had been shaken to its roots by the carnage of the war and its turbulent aftermath. The ideologies on which that order had customarily depended, the cultural values by which it ruled, were also in deep turmoil. Science seemed to have dwindled to a sterile positivism, a myopic obsession with the categorizing of facts; philosophy appeared torn between such positivism on the one hand, and an indefensible subjectivism on the other; forms of relativism and irrationalism were rampant, and art reflected this bewildering loss of bearings. (p. 54)

It was within this framework that, Husserl developed phenomenology.

Groenewald (2004) notes that “[a]lthough the origins of phenomenology can be traced back to Kant and Hegel, Vandenberg (1997, p. 11) regards Husserl as “the fountainhead of phenomenology in the twentieth century” (p. 3). Creswell (2007) remarks that phenomenology “has a strong philosophical component to it [and] ...draws

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heavily on the writings of the German mathematician Edmund Husserl ...and those who expanded on his views, such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty” (p. 58).

Groenewald (2004) provides the following synopsis of Husserl’s philosophical assumptions:

Husserl rejected the belief that objects in the external world exist independently and that the information about objects is reliable. He argued that people can be certain about how things appear in, or present themselves to, their consciousness (Eagleton, 1983; Fouche, 1993). To arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored, and in this way the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness. Realities are thus treated as pure ‘phenomena’ and the only absolute data from where to begin. Husserl named his philosophical method ‘phenomenology’, the science of pure ‘phenomena’ (Eagleton, 1983, p. 55). The aim of phenomenology is the return to the concrete, captured by the slogan ‘Back to the things themselves!’(p. 4)

Finlay (2008) expounds: “[t]he ‘things’ here refer to the world of experience as lived. ‘To return to the things themselves is to return to *that* world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge *always* speaks’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962)” (p. 1).

Husserl: Transcendental Phenomenology and Epoche

According to Moran (2012), around 1905

Husserl’s phenomenology underwent a change of direction... [in which h]e now began to characterize his phenomenology in explicitly transcendental terms and introduced the notions of the epoche... as a way of leading from the consideration of consciousness in the natural attitude in daily life to the ‘pure’, i.e. non-

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empirical, consideration of the essence of consciousness removed from all reference to factual reality. (p. xv-xvi)

Methodology Options

As previously mentioned the essence of a phenomenon is that without which the phenomenon could not exist. This study explored the essence of the experience of mothers who are distance learners, a phenomenon that could only emerge from the participants' reflections; therefore, phenomenology was chosen as the appropriate qualitative methodology.

Other qualitative methodologies were considered, but none sought the essence of the experiences of mothers who are distance education learners. Case study, for example, requires researchers "begin to collect data, reviewing and exploring them, and making decisions about where to go with the study...and what to explore in depth" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 62), placing the researcher in a position to decide the nature of data to be revealed. Ethnography stems from anthropology through the framework of culture, from the study of "how individuals create and understand their daily lives" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 39) to produce thick description (p. 40). Grounded theory stems from sociology and "stresses discovery and theory development" (Charmaz, 1994, p. 96) through layers of coding to "label, separate, compile, and organize data (p. 97). In narrative research a focus is placed on "experiences as expressed in lived and stories told by individuals" (Creswell, 2007, p. 54). There are tellers in any story, whether it be research or fiction. In narrative research, the tellers include the participants and the researchers. Researchers "re-story" participants' narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

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This method is not consistent with the goals of this study. Phenomenology would seek the essence underlying a participant's narrative but would not restore the narrative.

Summary

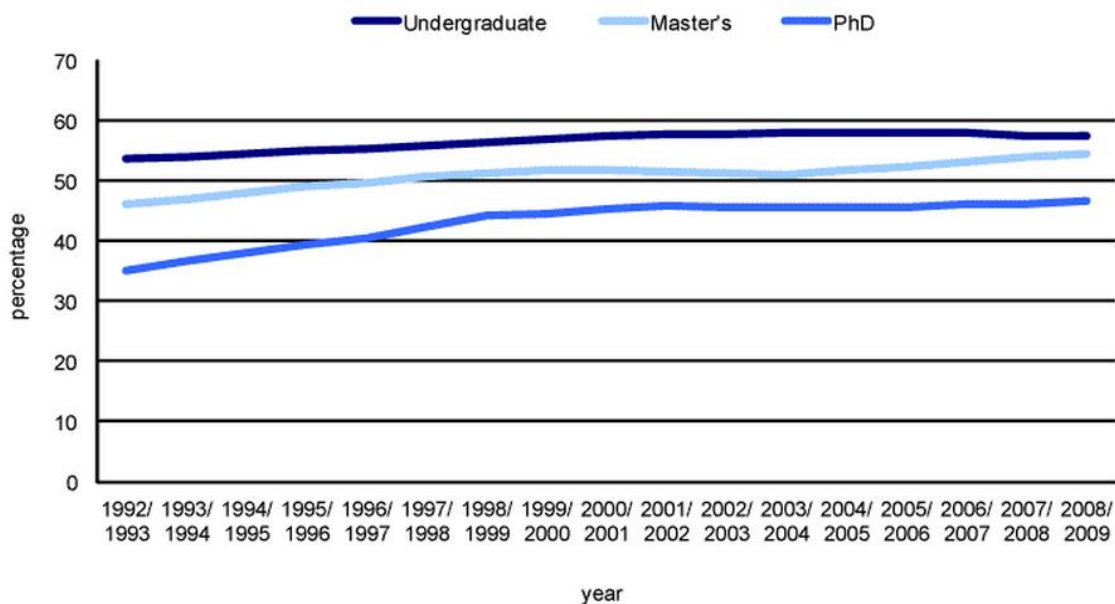
This study adopts Moustakas' modification of van Kaam's model, which was based on Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. It examines the social phenomenon of mothers as distance learners, identifies the commonalities in each of five individuals' experiences, and explores the essence of what it means to be both a mother and distance learner in today's educational environment where women comprise the majority of post-secondary students in both face-to-face classrooms and online settings.

Chapter II: Review of Related Literature

A Growing Majority

The intent of the following statistics is not to create an unwelcome comparison between men and women, but rather to showcase women's substantial growth in this area over time. According to Statistics Canada (2013a) "since 1992 women have made up the majority of full-time students enrolled in undergraduate university programs" (n. p.) and the numbers continue to rise (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Women as Percentage of Full-time Students Enrolled in Undergraduate University Programs



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As of November 2013 Statistics Canada reports that women accounted for 57% of all public post-secondary enrolments (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Public Post-Secondary Enrolments

	Total*	Percentage**	University*	Percentage**	College*	Percentage**
Both genders	1,996,200		1,263,750		732,450	
Female	1,116,735	56	721,704	57	395,031	54
Male	862,743	44	541,014	43	321,732	46

*Note: All counts are randomly rounded to a multiple of 3 by Statistics Canada.

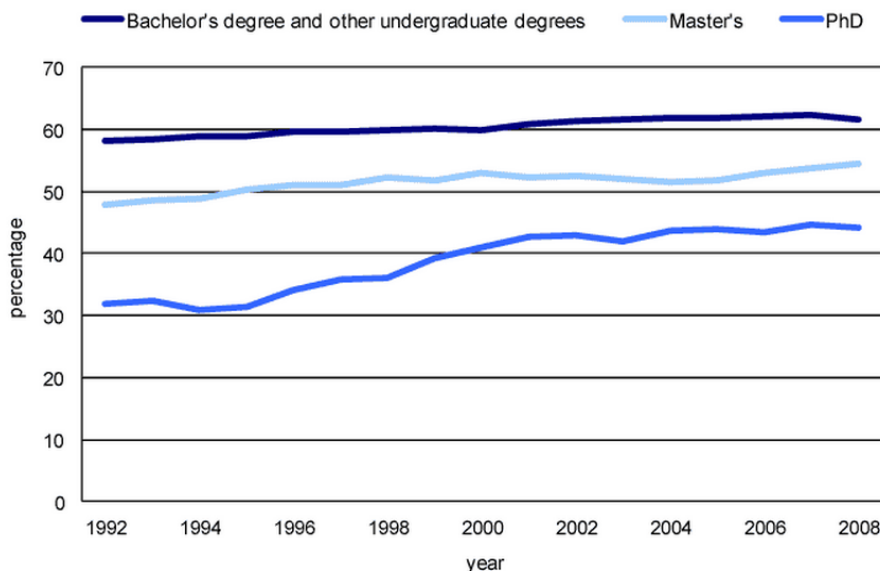
**Note: Percentage rounded to the nearest whole number.

Furthermore, the percentage of female undergraduate students who reach graduation has steadily increased. According to Statistics Canada (2013) in 2008 “62% of all university undergraduates were women” (n. p.). Additionally:

The proportion of female Master's graduates is also increasing: in 1997, it passed the 50% mark and in 2008, reached 54%. At the PhD level ... [the] proportion has increased even more than in the other two postsecondary levels. In 1992, 32% of all graduates with a PhD were women, a proportion that climbed to 44% in 2008 (see Figure 2). (Statistics Canada, 2013, n. p.)

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Figure 2 - Women as Percentage of Full-time Students Enrolled in Graduate University Programs



Women as Online Learners

A growing majority of female students can be classified as ‘non-traditional students’ in one way or another: mature, low-income, minority, parent or single-parent, employed full-time, or living in remote areas (Faith, 1988; Moody, 2004; Muller, 2008). One commonality amongst non-traditional students is that convenience is becoming an increasingly important aspect of their educational goals (Moody, 2004). For this reason distance education is often proclaimed as an ideal mode of learning for non-traditional students.

Distance education is commonly heralded as the ideal option for housewives and mothers of young children due to its flexibility and ease of access (Bray, 1988; Clinchy, Belenky, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1973; Coulter, 1989; Faith, 1988; Kramarae, 2001; May, 1992; Moody, 2004; von Prummer, 2000; Werth, 2010). Faith and Coulter (1988) explain that distance education is often seen as being “...especially appropriate for women who

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are homebound with children because it enables these women to further their education without compromising their family responsibilities” (p. 195). For example, Coulter (1989) notes that mothers find distance education “... a suitable option because it allows them to arrange study times around other schedules and activities in their lives... [which] means that a major crisis does not occur when a child falls ill, a school holiday occurs, or some other event takes a mother away from her books” (p. 13).

Moody (2004) addresses the specific needs of mothers when she states that “[d]istance learning seems to be particularly well suited to the needs of working women and mothers; allowing them to attend classes while not taking time away from their families and their jobs” (p. 5). Faith and Coulter (1988) propose that “...most mothers who are also employed outside the home would have little or no opportunity to pursue further education were it not for home study” (p. 195). Coulter (1989) describes distance education as “...something that allows [mothers] the opportunity to access university education while, at the same time, raising children at home or, more often, carrying the double burden of full-time paid employment and responsibility for home and children” (p. 12). Although this double burden is not experienced exclusively by women, von Prummer (2000) notes that “...men do not have to carry the multiple load of domestic labour and possibly childcare which women have to cope with in addition to their studies and employment” (p. 55). Regardless of whether education makes for ‘the second or the third shift’ in a day (Hochschild, 1989; Kramarae, 2001) the juggling act that mothers perform as they balance the roles of bread winner, mother, and post-secondary student is frequently mentioned in passing, but rarely looked at in depth.

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Even less frequently mentioned or studied are the challenges of distance education for students who attempt to juggle the many demands placed on them by the aforementioned obligations (Coulter, 1989; Moody, 2004). For instance, many feminist academics and activists are concerned with the home-study aspect of distance education, arguing that it further isolates women and endorses the traditional notion that a woman's place is in the home (Coulter, 1989; Faith, 1988; Thompson, 1983).

While distance education can make many women's educational goals attainable (Kramarae, 2001; Müller, 2008), few researchers recognize that these goals remain difficult to orchestrate (Coulter, 1989; Moody, 2004) or study the ways women handle their multiple responsibilities. Coulter (1989) asserts that, "[t]he need to develop a feminist or women-centered understanding of distance education can be seen as an essential task for educators in that field when we consider that distance learning is increasingly popular for women" (p. 11). Patricia Palmieri (as cited in Clinchy et al.) suggests that "in order to design an education appropriate for women we must learn about the academic experiences of ordinary women" (1973, p. 190). Tisdell (2001) states that in recent decades feminist pedagogy and adult education has been heavily influenced by Belenky et al.'s *Women's Ways of Knowing* which focuses "on women's individual empowerment and on helping women see themselves as constructors of knowledge, by emphasizing the importance of relationship and the significance of affectivity and shared story in learning" (p.273). Kramarae (2001) emphasizes that attention must be paid "to women's perspectives ...in distance education" (p. 5) reasoning that "...women are the primary users of online education, yet they are dramatically underrepresented in the high-tech sectors charged with producing technological solutions and designing technological

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delivery systems, software, and education packages” (p. 5); and “many women returning to college classes face significant barriers not usually experienced by men, or at least not experienced to the same degrees” (p. 5).

Motivating Factors

Once ensconced in the world of academia we turn to academic research to help educate our minds, formulate ideas, validate findings, and so forth. Yet prior to entering this world we are heavily influenced by the ideas and ideals of the media. Women entertaining the idea of becoming a post-secondary student most often find themselves turning to the latter for advisement. Therefore, the researcher unabashedly turns to both media and academia to identify two main motivating factors that contribute to a mothers’ pursuit of further education: economics, and personal fulfillment.

Motivating Factors: Economics

A significant factor influencing women’s decisions whether or not to return to school is the prevailing economic climate. Whether single, married, widowed, or divorced statistics indicate that post-secondary education plays a key role in improving women’s earning potential and contributing to an improved quality of life (Ministry of Advanced Education, 2008).

Working Mother columnist Renée Bacher (n. d.) wrote: “[i]n today’s economy and job market, many working moms see going back to school as a necessary step to greater pay and career advancement” (n. p.). Likewise, *Canadian Living* columnist Deena Waisberg (2008) wrote: “[f]or moms, the return to school and the desire to start a new career is often prompted by a divorce or grown ... children” (n. p.). In a 2007 press release The American InterContinental University included the following excerpt:

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The national survey of more than 1,000 mothers with children up to 16 years of age, reveals that three-fourths of them want to earn a bachelor's or a graduate-level degree. More than half of the women surveyed favour a career change and recognize that acquiring additional education serves as the key to achieving that goal. "This is especially true for mothers who are 18 to 29 years old and for moms who have some college education," says Dr. George Miller, chief executive officer of American InterContinental University. "For mothers of all ages, the chief motivation to acquire further education is a desire to increase their financial contribution to the household, especially for the sake of their children.... As for the personal benefits of furthering their education, mothers cite the likelihood of more career opportunities and greater flexibility in their job choices. Mothers with less education are more likely to think they will increase their confidence levels by returning to school. [Miller continues:] "By pursuing more education, today's moms understand that they are increasing their employment opportunities and improving their ability to provide a better life for their children. (n. p.)

Multiple researchers have identified the link between postsecondary education and increased earning potential (e.g. Bae, Choy, Geddes, Sable, & Snyder, 2000; Bernhardt & Dresser, 2002; Berube, 1988; Blau, 1998; Dixon & Rettig, 1994; Dunkle, 1988; Haleman, 2004; Katz, 1991; Mauldin, 1990, 1991; Mauldin & Koonce, 1990; Piven, 1986; Rocha, 1997; Smock, 1993, 1994; Thompson, 1993; Withorn, 1988; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). This link is also commonly known amongst women 'in the field'. In a 2007 study on teen mothers SmithBattle concluded that: "[r]egardless of their school status prior to pregnancy, the anticipation of motherhood led teens to re-evaluate their

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priorities and motivated them to remain in or return to school” (p. 348). Teen mothers within the study identified education as the key to enhancing both their futures and that of their child. Teen mothers goals “to return to or remain in school were framed by the larger goal of becoming good mothers and avoiding low wage jobs” (p. 365). “The transformed meaning and significance of school in the lives of these teens was apparent in improved grades, in their resolve to graduate, and in their new interest in attending college” (p. 348).

Motivating Factors: Personal Fulfillment

Haleman (2004) notes that “education was also frequently viewed by study participants as an avenue for personal growth that transcended economic benefits” (p. 777). As cited in Coffield’s (2011) study on the educational aspirations and expectations of women who are educationally disadvantaged, “a woman's decision to enrol in an adult education and literacy program is often intimately linked to her sense of self and to the formation of her identity (Horsman 1990; Luttrell 1997; Rockhill 1990; Tisdell 2001)” (p. 17).

Ghanaian scholar Dr. Kwegyir-Aggrey (1875-1927) coined the well-known African proverb: “If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family or nation” (n. p.). It is therefore not surprising that for many women, another aspect of personal fulfillment was found in the belief that their own educational experiences provided “important models of educational success for their children... [and] that the value they placed on post-secondary education modeled positive educational expectations for their children that might offset other risk factors” (Haleman, 2004, p. 778-9).

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Motherhood is often not a glamorous occupation. It does not come with a diploma to display in a prominent place, nor is it recognized with acclamation by others. This sentiment can be found in a poignant song written by Craig Carnella entitled “Just a Housewife” from the Broadway musical *Working* (1978) in which the character Kate laments:

All I am is just a housewife
 Nothing special, nothing great
 What I do is kinda boring
 If you'd rather, it can wait
 All I am is someone's mother
 All I am is someone's wife
 All of which seems unimportant
 All it is is, just my life

Do the laundry, wash the dishes
 Take the dog out, clean the house
 Shop for groceries, look for specials
 God it sounds so, Mickey Mouse
 Drop the kids off, pick the shirts up
 Try to lose weight, try again
 Keep the troops fed, pick their things up
 Lose your patience, count to ten

All I am is just a housewife
 Just a housewife, nothing great
 What I do is "out of fashion"
 What I feel is out of date
 All I am is someone's mother
 Right away I'm not too bright
 What I do is unfulfilling
 So the T.V. talk-shows tell me every night

I don't mean to complain at all
 But they make you feel like you're two feet tall
 When you're just a wife
 All they see are the pots and pans
 And the Pepsi cans of a person's life
 You're a "whiz" if you go to work
 But you're just a jerk if you say you won't
 People say that they think it's fine
 If the choice is mine

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But you know they don't
 What I do, what I choose to do
 May be dumb to you
 But it's not to me
 Is it dumb that they need me there?
 Is it dumb to care?
 Cause I do, you see
 And I mean, Did ya ever think,
 Really stop and think
 What a job it was-
 Doing all the things
 That a housewife does?

I'm afraid it's unimpressive
 Unexciting,
 Kinda dull
 Take the kids here
 Take the kids there
 I don't mean to complain at all
 All I am is busy, busy
 Everyday
 All I am is, like my mother
 All I am is, Just a housewife.

For many women who share the feelings described above "adult education is about establishing a credible, worthy self and public identity as much as it is about gaining a diploma" (Luttrell, 1997, p. 126).

In 1992 American country music singer Reba McEntire sang "Is There Life Out There" a song which tells of a young female protagonist who is running a household, raising two kids, juggling a career as a waitress at a local diner, and taking courses at the local college. It speaks of the stresses she faces and the sacrifices she makes in order to be both a mother and a college student.

... There's a place in the sun that she's never been
 Where life is fair and time is a friend
 Would she do it the same as she did back then
 She looks out the window and wonders again

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Is there life out there
So much she hasn't done
Is there life beyond
Her family and her home
She's done what she should
Should she do what she dares
She doesn't want to leave
She's just wonderin'
Is there life out there.
(Longacre and Giles, 1992)

This song was a huge success, reaching number one on the American country singles charts within three months, and leading to a made for television movie also entitled “Is There Life Out There?” on CBS in 1994, in large part because its message was familiar, it resonated with its intended audience. For many women, both then and now, the desire for personal growth and to be more than they currently are is motivation enough to obtain further education.

Implications

Lacking further research into the experiences of mothers as distance education students, post-secondary institutions speculate about the needs of a growing pool of potential students and play what Paul (1990) calls “a roulette game, an expensive hit-or-miss approach” (p. 85). Müller (2008) notes “educational institutions that recognize women’s professional, social, and academic needs are better prepared to create policies and services that address those needs” (n. p.). Furthermore, Müller observes that “[e]ducators who understand the complexity of women’s balancing of diverse roles can more effectively advise and prepare women to be successful in online courses” (2008, n. p.). It is clear that more research pertaining to the lived experiences of mothers as distance learners is needed in order to better understand the phenomenon and its

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implications for distance education (Bray, 1988; Coulter, 1989; Kramarae, 2001; May, 1992; Moody, 2004; Werth, 2010).

State of Knowledge

The amount of professional literature pertaining to distance education is staggering and, in the last decade, the amount pertaining to women in distance education has increased substantially (Bray, 1988; Clinchy, Belenky, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1973; Coulter, 1989; Faith, 1988; Kramarae, 2001; May, 1992; Moody, 2004; von Prummer, 2000; Werth, 2010). Although many researchers agree that distance education is well suited to housewives and mothers of young children due to its flexibility and ease of access, the data specific to mothers in support of such a claim are limited (Bray, 1988; Coulter, 1989; Kramarae, 2001; May, 1992; Moody, 2004; Werth, 2010). Feminists have made great strides in women's issues and in legitimizing the experiences of women; however, in their zeal they often distance themselves from the private or domestic sphere and, in so doing, often ignore the needs and experiences of mothers.

Summary

Women make up the growing majority of face-to-face and online learners. Distance education has long been touted as a viable option for women, especially mothers of young children. Yet despite the vast amounts of literature that support this claim too little is known about the lived experiences of mothers who are distance learners. Two factors influencing a woman's decision whether or not to return to school are the prevailing economic climate, and a sense of personal fulfillment.

Lacking further research into the experiences of mothers as distance education students, post-secondary institutions are forced to speculate about the needs of a growing

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pool of potential students. More research is needed in order to better understand the phenomenon and its implications for distance education.

Chapter III: Methodology

Phenomenology as Methodology

Regarded as one of the more frequently used traditions in qualitative research (Marques & Mc Call, 2005) phenomenology is “driven by a commitment of turning to an abiding concern” (van Manen, 1997, p. 31), a state of mind referred to as “thoughtfulness” (p. 12). “In the works of the great phenomenologist, thoughtfulness is described as a minding, a heeding, a caring attunement (Heidegger, 1962) – a heedful, mindful wondering about the project of life, of living, of what it means to live a life” (p. 12).

Phenomenological research can, therefore, be described as a thoughtful approach to inquiry “in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13) and attempts to describe, not explain or analyse (Moustakas, 1994), what all participants have in common as they experience the same phenomenon.

Blodgett-McDeavitt (1997) defines phenomenology as:

...a research design used to study deep human experience. Not used to create new judgments or find new theories, phenomenology reduces rich descriptions of human experience to underlying, common themes, resulting in a short description in which every word accurately depicts the phenomenon as experienced by co-researchers. (paragraph 10)

Marques and McCall (2005) define a phenomenological study as “research of a phenomenon [conducted] by obtaining authorities’ verbal descriptions based on their

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perceptions of this phenomenon” (p. 444) in order to “find common themes or elements that comprise the phenomenon. The study is intended to discover and describe the elements (texture) and the underlying factors (structure) that comprise the experience of the researched phenomenon” (p. 444).

Moustakas (1994) declares: “[t]he epoche is a necessary first step” (p. 34) which “requires the elimination of suppositions and the raising of knowledge above every possible doubt” (p. 26). It is achieved when the researcher “sets aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Moustakas includes this notion of the epoche in his approach to transcendental or psychological phenomenology although he “admits that this state is seldom perfectly achieved” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60).

Max van Manen: Hermeneutic Phenomenology

According to van Manen (1997) phenomenology is “driven by a commitment of turning to an abiding concern” (p. 31), a state of mind referred to as “thoughtfulness” (p. 12). Van Manen further expounds upon this idea:

This commitment of never wavering from thinking a single thought more deeply is the practice of thoughtfulness, of a fullness of thinking. To be full of thought means not that we have a whole lot on our mind, but rather that we recognize our lot of minding the Whole – that which renders fullness or wholeness to life. So phenomenological research is a being-given-over to some quest, a true task, a deep questioning of something that restores an original sense of what it means to be a thinker, a researcher, a theorist. (p. 31)

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Merleau-Ponty (1962) proclaims that “[p]henomenology is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences” (p. vii). Van Manen (1997) explained that:

The word “essence” should not be mystified. By essence we do not mean some kind of mysterious entity or discovery, nor some ultimate core or residue of meaning. Rather, the term “essence” may be understood as a linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon. A good description that constitutes the essence of something is construed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way. (p. 39)

Hermeneutic phenomenology, according to van Manen (1990) “is a human science which studies persons” (p. 6). It is “a philosophy of the personal, the individual, which we pursue against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the *logos* of *other*, the *whole*, the *communal*, or the *social*” (van Manen, 1990, p. 7). Van Manen (1990) gives the following example: “[h]ermeneutic phenomenological research is a search for the fullness of living, for the ways a woman possibly can experience the world as a woman, for what it is to be a woman. The same is true, of course, for men” (p. 12).

“Hermeneutic phenomenology, as conducted by van Manen follows no prescribed rules or methods, but rather utilizes a “dynamic interplay among six research activities” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59) which are:

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- Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
- Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
- Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- Maintaining a strong and oriented... relation to the phenomenon;
- Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (Holloway, 2005, p. 133)

Van Kaam: Phenomenological Psychology

Van Kaam (1959, 1966), part of the Dusquesne school “scientific phenomenology community from the field of psychology” (Dowling, 2007, chapter 7), “operationalized empirical phenomenological research in psychology” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 12). Van Kaam believed that “a preconceived, experimental design imposed on the ‘subjects’ of an experiment, and statistical methods...” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 12) “...may distort rather than disclose a given behaviour through an imposition of restricted theoretical constructs on the full meaning and richness of human behaviour” (van Kaam, 1996, p. 14). Van Kaam (1966) believed he could:

[Open himself] to the phenomena themselves in either a critical or an uncritical way. The critical method of observation implies the use of the phenomenological method. This method leads, ideally, to the type of description and classification of phenomena which can be affirmed by experts in the same field of psychology. Research performed in this way is pre-empirical, pre-experimental, and pre-statistical; it is experiential and qualitative. It sets the stage for more accurate

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empirical investigations by lessening the risk of a premature selection of methods and categories; it is object-centered rather than method-centered. Such preliminary exploration does not supplant but complements the traditional methods of research available to me. (p. 295)

Van Kaam's research approach employs a series of steps: "(a) the original descriptions are divided into units, (b) the units are transformed by the researcher into meanings that are expressed in psychological and phenomenological concepts and (c) these transformations are combined to create a general description of the experience" (Dowling, 2007, chapter 7).

Van Kaam (1996) believed that an empirical phenomenological approach to research "seeks to disclose and elucidate the phenomena of behaviour as they manifest themselves in their perceived immediacy" (p. 15).

Giorgi: Transcendental Phenomenology

Transcendental phenomenology draws heavily on the "...data analysis procedures of van Kaam (1966) and Colaizzi (1978)" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60) and the "*Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology*" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60) of Giorgi (1985) who considers "the operative word in phenomenological research is 'describe'. The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 5).

In Giorgi's terms, "by adopting a strictly descriptive approach, we can let the phenomenon speak for themselves, and when we do we discover that whatever appears suggests in its very appearance something more which does not appear which is concealed... (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Creswell (2007) further explains:

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In this approach, the researcher sets aside prejudgements regarding the phenomenon being investigated. Also, the researcher relies on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience and uses systematic methods of analysis as advanced by Moustakas. (p. 237)

For, according to Husserl (1859 – 1938), Kant (1724-1804), Descartes (1596- 1650), and Moustakas (1923- 2012) “knowledge based on intuition and essence precedes empirical knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26).

Moustakas: Modified van Kaam’s Method

Moustakas (1994) defines the term transcendental as a state “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (p. 34) where the focus “is more on the actual experiences of the participants and less on the interpretations of the researcher (Tuttle, 2012, p.18). Moustakas (1994) understood transcendental phenomenology to be:

The *first* method of knowledge because it begins with ‘things themselves’; it is also the final court of appeal. Phenomenology, step by step, attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by the customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experience. (p. 41)

Based on Husserl’s transcendental approach to phenomenology, and van Kaam’s series of steps in empirical phenomenology, Moustakas (1994) developed a more ‘user-friendly’ approach to transcendental phenomenology. Moustakas wrote that in order to

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appease human science researchers he “developed modifications of van Kaam’s (1959, 1966) method of analysis” (1994, p. 120) which includes the following steps:

1. Listing and Preliminary Groupings
2. Reduction and Elimination
3. Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents
4. Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application:
Validation
5. Construct *Individual Textural Description*
6. Construct *Individual Structural Description*
7. Construct *a Textural-Structural Description*

From the Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions, develop a Composite Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120 – 121)

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research it is imperative that the researcher be cognitively aware of the personal lenses or biases which she brings to the research in order to ensure that she accurately and fairly reflects the participants’ voices rather than her own (Blodgett-Griffin). Personal lens and biases are first explored and then bracketed so that the data can be acquired, analyzed, and presented in such as way that “everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). In addition the researcher must also be aware of the level of immersion required of her topic and chosen methodology. According to (Blodgett-Griffin) because of its cultural framework ethnography can lead

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to deep immersion whereas phenomenology employs a relative distance in comparison (C. Blodgett-Griffin, personal communication, January 2014).

Process of Bracketing

Finlay (2008) explains that “the bracketing process is often misunderstood and misrepresented as being an effort to be objective and unbiased (p. 2). Feminist theory “recognizes the fallacy of researcher objectivity and neutrality” (May, 1992, p. 14).

Lester (1999) notes:

More recent humanist and feminist researchers refute the possibility of starting without preconceptions or bias, and emphasise the importance of making clear how interpretations and meanings have been placed on findings, as well as making the researcher visible in the ‘frame’ of the research as an interested and subjective actor rather than a detached and impartial observer (e.g. see Plummer 1983, Stanley & Wise 1993). (p. 1)

Instead, the researcher aims to be open to and see the world differently. The process involves putting aside how things supposedly are, focusing instead on how they are experienced (Finlay, 2008). It accepts that the perspectives, assumptions and principles a researcher brings to her research (Meis, 1983) have the potential to provide the means for guiding “data gathering or creating and for understanding her own interpretations and behavior in the research” (Olesen, 1994, p. 165). Thus, said philosophies and opinions can be beneficial, provided the researchers “understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories” (van Manen, 1997, p. 47) are made explicit both to research participants and to themselves (May, 1992, p. 14).

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Blodgett-McDeavitt (1997) explains that “[e]poche clears the way for a researcher to comprehend new insights into human experience. A researcher experienced in phenomenological processes becomes able to see data from new, naive perspective from which fuller, richer, more authentic descriptions may be rendered (p. 3).

Husserl originally identified several variants of bracketing. Applied to research, these involve:

- i. the *epoche of the natural sciences* where the researcher abstains from theories, explanations, scientific conceptualisation and knowledge in order to return to the natural attitude of the prescientific lifeworld (i.e. return to the unreflective apprehension of the lived, everyday world).
- ii. The *phenomenological psychological reduction* where belief in the existence of what presents itself in the lifeworld is suspended. Instead the focus is on the subjective appearances and meanings.
- iii. Husserl’s *transcendental phenomenological reduction* - a more radical version of the epoche where a ‘God’s eye view’ is attempted – tends to be rejected as unrealistic by contemporary researchers. (Finlay, 2008, p. 2-3)

Neuman (2011) states: “researchers [are] ... fundamentally gendered beings. Researchers necessarily have a gender that shapes how they experience reality, and therefore it affects their research” (p. 117). It is therefore necessary to bracket, and make explicit the researchers’ experiences and bias in an epoche. With that in mind I share the following epoche.

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Epoche

Ten years ago I understood feminism to mean the necessary shedding of the traditional roles of daughter, wife, and mother that I held in esteem in pursuit of something very different. A decade later my understanding of feminism has evolved and I have come to a cognitive and emotional understanding of what it means to blend together the personal and the professional roles I lead. It is through this process that I discovered a topic that I was passionate about, so much so that I sought to pursue a professional thesis on the subject of something as personal as motherhood.

As a young mother with three small children, I re-entered the world of academia through a distance education undergraduate arts program. Along this path, I was exposed to feminist writers such as Virginia Woolf and was intrigued by what I read, despite my traditionalist leanings. The concept that "...a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf, 1984, p. 3) struck a familiar chord. As both a mother and a student, I came to long for a room of my own in which to work and study. I began pondering the ways Woolf's statement applied to my own academic pursuits, and I found myself wondering if her premise could still be true nearly a century later. Do women still need a room of their own in order to achieve their goals? Has distance education diminished or increased this need? Were all mothers experiencing similar challenges to mine? If they were, why did it feel like I was the only one? Where in the volumes of feminist research was a voice with whom I identified?

It was not until I began a graduate degree that I happened upon the words of Barbara Davis, a feminist and educator, who wrote:

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As traditional students learn from feminists how to analyze their lives as women, they also develop some respect – perhaps even admiration – for the feminists’ non-traditional choices. But the feminist students, however “advanced” their intellectual and emotional grasp of feminist issues, often lack empathy with or respect for the hard choices and important conflicts of traditional women... It is as important for feminists to learn to listen as to be heard – to understand the complexity of traditional women’s lives as to present the alternatives of their own. Otherwise, no one is “advanced”; we are all still in first grade. (Bunch & Pollack, 1983, p. 92- 93)

Over the course of my post-secondary education I have learned that feminism “starts from assumptions about the importance and validity of women’s experiences” (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p. 53). Using “innovative and radical” (Wine & Ristock, 1991, p. 17) techniques, feminist researchers conduct qualitative studies designed to learn from ordinary individuals rather than ‘experts’ or their quantitative data (Gaskell, 1987). One such technique is the use of storytelling, which provides “access to compelling and meaningful problems in an authentic context” (as quoted by Fahy, 2007, p. 46), although one must guard against the “uniquely American tendency to believe that everything is reducible to a personal experience or a story” (P. Fahy, personal communication, February 21, 2014).

As a graduate student I discovered that unlike its quantitative counterpart, the qualitative feminist researcher is not “objective or detached” (Neuman, 2011, p. 117) from the subject matter or its research participants. Instead, feminist researchers seek to “interact and collaborate... [to] **fuse their personal and professional lives**” (p. 117

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emphasis added) with the people they study in order to better understand and interpret the data they obtain. Feminist research is “not an unengaged study of women. It is an effort to bring insights from the [feminist] movement and from various female experiences together with research and data gathering to produce new approaches to understanding and ending female oppression” (Bunch & Pollack, 1983, p. 250).

This knowledge gave me the courage to let “the voice of the mother ...be heard in [my] education [experience]” (as cited in Clinchy et al., 1973, p. 214). In so doing, I hoped to validate the experiences of all mothers who double as distance learners and add our voices to the current gender and distance education literature.

Included below are my personal responses to the two main questions asked of the study participants. Like the study participants I first answered all of the interview questions (see Appendix C) in order to focus my responses and ground them in the details. I then used those answers to compile the broader responses included below. In providing these answers I make my own preconceived ideas and beliefs explicit both to research participants, myself, and you the reader.

1. What have you experienced being a mother and distance learner? *Being a mother has enriched my life by adding depth and scope to my learning experience. Being a distance learner has allowed me to be the type of mother I want to be: a smart, lifelong learner who is available and accessible to my children, and ultimately able to help provide financially for my family both now and in the future. Distance learning allowed me to have my cake and eat it too! The most valuable lesson I have taken from my time as a distance learner is the knowledge that motherhood is the greatest, noblest and most important thing I could ever do with*

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my life. Everything else comes second. While I like to get great marks and praise from my instructors, for me that takes a backseat to bedtime hugs, talks about boys over cookies and peanut butter, and helping my teenagers tackle algebra and Shakespeare. Nothing matters more than what I do as a mother.

2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences as a mother and distance learner? *In 2004, as a twenty-six year old, married, full-time stay-at-home mom to three children (ages three, four, and five) I decided to go back to school. In order to do so I needed the flexibility distance education provided. Over the years I have found that it was often extremely difficult to separate the spheres of school and home, especially since they occupied the same physical space. In order to accommodate the overwhelming study schedule that resulted from taking up to three courses per semester we, as a family, had to develop, implement, and enforce ways to show that I was “at the library and can’t be disturbed” even though I was often just in the other room. Along the way the kids have grown up into teenagers, I have completed an undergraduate degree, received a teaching certificate, and become a full-time teacher. In the last two years I have returned to school via distance learning to acquire a graduate degree, maintained a 3.8GPA, continued teaching full-time, and remained the hub of all domestic and familial goings on. My children don’t remember life without mommy being in school, and I couldn’t imagine school without them.*

Distance education can often be an isolating experience; to counteract this affect my husband has filled the role of loyal study partner. He is forever providing a sounding board for new ideas, discussing weekly readings, proofreading essays,

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providing much needed study breaks, speaking logic, handing out tissues and hugs, and redirecting my efforts when I get hopelessly lost in my own head. I have often thought that he deserves a degree by proxy for all of the countless hours he has put in behind the scenes. Distance education has brought us closer together as a couple and I could not imagine being a distance learner without the help and support of my husband.

Participant Biographies

Jennifer. At the time Jennifer decided to go back to school she left and divorced her husband, moved to a new home, worked full-time, and became the sole caretaker of her three year old son. Now a thirty-nine year old single mother, she has a six year old child and works two jobs; one, as a full-time curriculum designer for the police department and another as a part time computer teacher for the local college. Jennifer completed her undergraduate degree via distance education and is currently working on her graduate degree via an individualized-study online program. She receives no practical or financial help and support from extended family as they live across the country. During one particularly difficult semester she had a Bell's palsy attack brought on by stress from attempting to complete nine credits at the conclusion of her undergraduate degree. Jennifer is pushing herself in further education because it makes her feel that she's more credible so people will respect her more. Unhappy with the unprofessionalism she has experienced with the instructors at her current post-secondary institution she is unsure if she will continue with them or seek out other options in which to complete her graduate degree.

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Kathleen. Forty-two year old Kathleen is a native mother of three (ages sixteen, eighteen, and twenty) who lives in a small remote community with her husband. As the principal of an online school, distance learner, and mother of three children who have taken distance courses she has a lot of experience with distance education. Kathleen became a mother in the second year of her undergraduate degree. Her second child was born in the final year of her undergraduate degree and Kathleen brought her infant to classes so she could feed and take care of her. Shortly thereafter, Kathleen was hired on as a teacher at a private distance education school. Within three month she was made vice principal and by October was promoted to principal. Her third child was born with Asperger's syndrome which made it imperative that she be able to continue to work from home. A few years later she left her position at the private school to be a principal in the public school system. In order to do so she had to obtain a Master's degree within a five year timeframe. So in 2007 Kathleen officially started her distance-learning journey and completed her Masters in Distance Education in 2012. Shortly thereafter her mother passed away and Kathleen took a year off from her studies. Over the course of her graduate degree she has taken as many as three individualized-study, and individualized-study online courses a semester while working full-time, and raising three children including one with severe learning and health challenges, all while maintaining a 3.8 GPA and receiving enough scholarships and bursaries to pay for her entire education. She has considered a PHD but feels drained and like she had sacrificed too much already.

Linda. Linda is the quintessential hockey mom. At forty-three she is married with two children (ages fourteen and sixteen), employed full time in administration at the local community college, and pursuing a master's degree through distance education.

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Previously she was a self-employed contractor working with provincial and national non-profit organizations. As the economy began a decline in 2008 and contracts started to dry up she realized it was time to start pursuing her lifelong dream of completing graduate studies. Unwilling to compromise her commitment to her family and knowing the demands that competitive sports placed on their schedule Linda determined that distance education was her only option. She began the MAIS integrated studies program in 2009 and thanks to the help and support she receives from her husband, family, friends, and her faith she has maintained a 3.9 GPA and is one project away from finishing her degree.

Marnie. Marnie, a Métis twenty-five year old was working as a teacher when she had a mid-life crisis and realized she didn't want to teach anymore. She changed career paths and went to work as an instructional designer for the Government. In her latest performance review she was told that in order to keep her job she must increase her technical competency. Being that she was now a wife and mother Marnie needed to find a way to pursue a master's degree that didn't require her to be present for some or part of the learning experience. She concluded that distance education was her only option and reluctantly began graduate studies one individualized-study online course at a time. Now at the age of thirty she is halfway through her program but is increasingly frustrated with distance education due to the lack of flexibility it offers. Marnie's husband reluctantly supports her academic pursuits, but only because her employer pays for her education. With the help of her mother and a maid who comes once a week to clean, Marnie is able to juggle her many responsibilities.

Sarah. Sarah was a young stay-at-home mom to three children (ages 4, 2, and 10 months old) only two courses shy of completing her undergraduate degree through

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distance education when her husband walked out on her. Completely taken by surprise she withdrew from her last two courses and took a semester off to deal with the messy divorce. Sarah's parents offered to support her and her children so that she could finish her studies and remain a stay-at-home mom until her children were all old enough to attend elementary school. Faced with the daily challenge of choosing between time spent with her children and time spent on her studies Sarah struggles to overcome the guilt that accompanies the sacrifices she has been forced to make. Committed to putting her family first Sarah has dropped courses when needed, researched course requirements and time commitments prior to enrolling, and taken a full-time job which pays substantially lower than others so that she can work from home and be available to her children. Sarah is now a thirty-seven year old single mother to three children (ages 8-11), who has completed her graduate degree save for the required e-portfolio. Her greatest fear is that she will want to pursue a PhD.

Research Design

This phenomenological study relied on the retelling of personal experiences, through stories "to facilitate the discovery of new knowledge and understandings" (Wall, 2004, p. 35) of mother's experiences as distance learners. In qualitative research, stories are "increasingly recognized as a powerful research tool" (Cohen & Mallon, 2001, n. p.). This is particularly true in education research which is constructed and reconstructed out of stories in which learners, teachers, and researchers play the parts of both storyteller and character in each other's stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). "Narrative is fundamental for the construction of meaning on a personal as well as on a community level" (Gjedde, 2005).

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As a part of daily life, stories provide researchers with the necessary material to “examine the meanings people, individually or collectively, ascribe to lived experience” (Eastmond, 2007, n. p.), the “direct and primitive contact with the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962 p. vii). Within this context, stories offer “access to compelling and meaningful problems in an authentic context” (Coleman, Perry, & Schwen, 1997, as cited in Fahy, 2007, p. 46). “The narratives offer immersive experiences, which allow the user to engage at an emotional level and involve the user with different emotional states (Gjedde, 2005a).

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) explain it thus:

When persons note something of their experience, either to themselves or to others, they do so not by the mere recording of experience over time, but in storied form. Story is, therefore, neither raw sensation nor cultural form; it is both and neither. In effect, stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history. (p. 415)

A story is essentially a description of an experience and since any “experience description is an appropriate source for uncovering thematic aspects of the phenomenon it describes” (van Manen, 1997, p. 92), stories, provided they pertain to the topic at hand, are a useful and valid source of data collection. In other words the stories act as a collection of experiences from which the researcher, using the process of successive approximation, extracts generic themes that arise from the data contained within the text.

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Data collection procedures

On September 23, 2013 a letter requesting participation was distributed electronically to a University student alias list (Appendix A). Within twenty-four hours twenty-one applicants had responded expressing their desire to participate in the study. In total thirty-four applicants responded over a period of nine days. All respondents were volunteers. All of the applicants, and subsequently all of those selected to participate in the study were non-traditionally aged (or mature) students. Their experiences offer a unique perspective from those of younger female students who are not yet, or may never be mothers.

Given the nature of the study only five participants were selected, however many applicants expressed their desire to receive a copy of the final thesis as they found the topic to be of significant importance in their lives. Two applicants selected to participate in the study expressed their interest in the following ways:

This [study] resonated with people. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 13)

I just wanted to say to you, I think this topic is absolutely fabulous. Like, when I read that first email that came out, I usually ignore most of the requests for people to participate in students' thesis papers because I just find that nothing really spoke to me. But your topic I thought was wow! What a great great topic! So I wish you the best of luck in writing it because I think it's really really important!

(Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 10)

It was interesting when your study came out, I didn't ever think, I don't think I thought about myself before as a mother who was a distance learner. I thought of

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myself as a distance learner who happened to be a mother. So it's been interesting to think through. What is that distinction? Is there a distinction? (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 11-12)

Despite their desire to participate two selected applicants had to withdraw from the study due to unforeseen complications and personal issues that arose. In addition, as noted in the above limitations section many potential participants may have decided not to apply because they were too busy with the many responsibilities and time constraints implicit in being both a mother and student. Included in the appendix is the Possible Participants table (see Table 5) created to catalogue each of the thirty-four applicants who responded over a period of nine days.

Before beginning the interview process the researcher developed an interview guide (Appendix C) in order to ensure that all participants were asked the same questions. Using the interview questions as a template the researcher answered all of the questions being asked of the study participants in order to make clear to both myself and participants my own experiences, biases and backgrounds. Using these responses the researcher then constructed a detailed epoche of her experiences included in the epoche section of this paper.

The researchers provided study participants with the interview questions (Appendix C) and also a copy of her responses to these questions. Study participants were then asked to reflect specifically upon their experiences as a mother and a distance learner. In a 45-90 minute Skype or phone interview participants were asked to share their stories with the researcher.

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These interviews were recorded (audio only) in their entirety using a personal digital recorder. These recordings were then transferred and stored on a password protected thumb drive. A second copy of the recordings is stored on a password protected thumb drive in a secure secondary location as backup in case the main copy is destroyed. Interviews were then transcribed by the researcher and are stored on a password protected thumb drive with any and all identifying material removed. Upon completion of the thesis defence the original audio recordings and any printed copies of the written transcripts and/or notes will be destroyed to ensure participant anonymity.

Data analysis procedures

The participants' stories, responses, or "first-order interpretations" (Neuman, 2011, p. 177), were then analyzed for major themes or concepts using the process of successive approximation. Successive approximation "is a process that involves making repeated iterations. You cycle through steps, moving toward a final analysis" (p. 519). In other words after analyzing the transcripts again and again you move from "vague ideas and concrete details in the data toward a comprehensive analysis with generalizations" (p. 519). Building on this data, the researcher then constructed a framework of major themes, or "second-order interpretations" (p. 177). Using this framework, the researcher explored the commonalities amongst the participants' experiences and pertinent literature in order to identify the essence of the social phenomenon of mothers as distance learners.

The following illustrates how the researcher utilized Moustakas' Modified Van Kaam Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data to analyse the data. As qualitative research amasses considerable amounts of data this is but a very small sample and does not contain all of the data analyzed.

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Listing and Preliminary Groupings. To do this the researcher interviewed participants, recorded the participants' stories, and transcribed these stories into transcripts. The researcher then established meaning units, or the focus of a given part of the conversation, by reading aloud each transcript and marking when the focus shifted. Examples from Marnie's transcript include: why I became a student, why distance education, motivation, helps, my typical day, my place to study, my learning style, course load, time management, separate spheres, most valuable lesson, juggle schedule, illness, fiscal responsibilities, family/spouse, group work, best and worst moments, wishes, and persistence.

Reduction and Elimination. In this step the researcher removed all of the differing details and peeled back the layers of the text to identify what was being communicated but not necessarily said for the researcher becomes the teller of the participants' stories. In order to do so she must reduce the stories to the essence of the phenomenon. This is done by testing each expression for two requirements:

1. Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?
2. Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of experience.

Upon completion of this step the researcher then eliminated expressions not meeting the above requirements. Examples from Marnie's transcript now include: why a distance learner, helps and supports, organizing study times and places, course load, scheduling and time management, separate spheres, juggling many responsibilities, family/spouse, group work, and persistence.

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Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents. This was done by clustering the invariant constituents of the experience that were related into a thematic label. The thematic labels for the study were: help and support, organization, personal versus professional, necessity of flexibility, collaborative group work and forums, and persistence.

Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application. The researcher checked the invariant constituents and their accompanying theme against the complete record of the research participant to see if they were expressed explicitly in the complete transcript or were compatible if not explicitly expressed. Any that were not explicit or compatible were deleted. Included below are only a few of the many examples.

Me: Now you said your mom comes in and helps and stuff...

Participant M: Yes, my mom is an invaluable resource to us. Uhm... being that if uhm... usually the weekends that my husband does work I usually send my son with her because then I can just like get a ton of stuff done. It's crazy what I can read when they're all away. I definitely don't clean my house ever. I pay someone to do that. (p. 6)

Participant M: I have to say I kinda keep work separate from motherhood in that respect. But only because I think I have a lot of work experience from which to draw upon. But I think that being a mother has made me a better student because I do compartmentalize so much. So when I am being a mom I am in the mommy moment versus when I am a student I am in the student moment. And I

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find it so difficult to do both at the same time! I can't. So I think in that way I think being a mother has forced me to compartmentalize everything. So I don't get a lot of bleeding. Except for when I am actually at work then it's a whole different ball of wax 'cause I can't seem to get being a mom out of my head when I'm at work. (p. 4-5)

Participant M: I have learned that I have a stick-to-it-ness that I didn't know I had before. I wish that my vocabulary wasn't failing me right now 'cause I can't think of what that word is right now. (p. 11)

Individual Textural Description of the experience. This was done by including verbatim examples from the transcribed interview. Examples of this can be seen by comparing the above quotes with those found in later chapters.

Individual Structural Description. This was accomplished by constructing an Individual Structural Description of the experience for each co-researcher based on the Individual Textural Description and Imaginative Variation. Condensed Individual Structural Descriptions are included in the section entitled Participant Biographies.

Textural-Structural Description. The researcher constructed a Textural-Structural Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes. Examples of which will be found in later chapters.

Authenticity and Validity

In qualitative studies authenticity is achieved when the researcher presents “a fair, honest, and balanced account of social life from the viewpoint of the people who live it every day” (Neuman, 2011, p. 214). Creswell (2007) teaches that a phenomenological

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study is authentic or valid if it is “well-grounded and well supported” (p. 215). Creswell suggests the following five questions in order to assess the quality of a phenomenological study. Does the author convey an understanding of the philosophical tenets of phenomenology?

- Does the author have a clear “phenomenon” to study that is articulated in a concise way?
- Does the author use procedures of data analysis in phenomenology, such as the procedures recommended by Moustakas (1994)?
- Does the author convey the overall essence of the experience of the participants? Does this essence include a description of the experience and the context in which it occurred?
- Is the author reflexive throughout the study? (Creswell, 2007, p. 215-6).

In order to achieve validity within the study the researcher employed three strategies, namely: transparency with and accountability to study participants; transparency with and accountability to her thesis supervisor; and connecting findings to relevant literature within the field.

Prior to the interview process the researcher provided study participants with an invitation to participate which outlined the nature of the study (Appendix A), a form explaining the researchers’ obligations to them as participants (Appendix B), a copy of the interview questions (Appendix C) and also a copy of her responses to these questions. After analyzing the data the researcher provided each of the participants with a copy of her research findings and asked for their feedback. This member check was done to

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ensure that each participant agreed with the researchers' understanding of her experiences.

Thesis supervisor Dr Cynthia Blodgett-Griffin was present and involved throughout the research process and provided a second pair of eyes from the conceptualization to the conclusion of the thesis.

By discussing findings with other research from the field the researcher introduced the notion of transferability of findings. These connections are included in Chapter 4: Findings.

Emerging Themes

Throughout the data analysis process in which the participants' stories and responses were analyzed the following six themes were identified:

1. Collaborative Group Work and Forums
2. Help and Support
3. Necessity of Flexibility
4. Organization
5. Persistence
6. Personal versus professional

Each of these themes will be discussed in detail in the chapters that follow.

Summary

This study adopted a modified van Kaam's model based on Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and Moustakas' seven step plan. Data was collected in the form of personal experiences as told through stories in a personal interview. This data was then analyzed for major themes or concepts using the process of successive

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approximation and Moustakas' Modified Van Kaam Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data. Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling technique. Six main themes emerged: Collaborative Group Work and Forums, Help and Support, Necessity of Flexibility, Organization, Persistence, and Personal versus professional.

Also included in this section:

- an epoche, which according to Moustakas (1994), "...is a necessary first step" (p. 34), in which the researcher "sets aside their experiences, as much as possible, [in order] to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination." (Creswell, 2007, p. 60)
- participant biographies.

Chapter IV: Findings

Table 2 – Moustakas’ Phenomenology Model and Researcher Actions

Summary Implications and Outcomes Data Model	Researcher Actions
<p>Summary of Study</p>	<p>Collaborative group work and forums were disliked by all participants.</p> <p>Help and support came in many ways. Each participant had some form of help and support but felt that the actual work of being a student was a solo effort.</p> <p>Participants needed flexibility to manipulate schedule, work independently, adjust pace and so forth.</p> <p>Organization was the key to success for all participants. Plans had to be fluid and work around the needs of family and work.</p> <p>Persistence was of paramount importance. None of the participants quit despite a myriad of obstacles.</p> <p>Participants found it necessary to erect and maintain a degree of separation between their personal and professional lives.</p>
<p>Relate study findings to & differentiate from findings of literature review</p>	<p>This study helps fill the gap in the literature about the lived experiences of mothers who are distance learners.</p> <p>Despite the benefits of learning communities touted by many studies, participants found the work required to participate in, and maintain these communities far exceeded the benefits.</p> <p>Study results support Faith and Coulter (1988) and Coulter (1989) statements that distance education is often the only option for mothers who want to pursue post-secondary education.</p> <p>The study contests Moody's (2004) statement that distance education allows mothers "to attend classes while not taking time away from their families and their jobs" (p. 5). Study results indicated that each decision to study came at the expense of time with family.</p> <p>Study results correlate with Hart's (2012) factors influencing student persistence.</p>

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The above table was inspired by the work of Tuttle (2012). The researcher includes a summary as a visual representation of the findings portion of Moustakas' (1994) analysis framework as applied to this research study. The following sections discuss each of the themes indicated above in greater detail and include verbatim examples from the transcribed interview according to Moustakas' (1994) seven steps for data analysis.

Collaborative Group Work and Forums

Participants within the study unanimously declared their dislike for both mandatory group work and weekly forums.

I hate group work. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

I wish I knew that group work was going to be a requirement for every course! I don't know if I necessarily learn better by working in a group. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 11)

Marnie shared the following story illustrating the challenges she has encountered when compelled to participate in group work.

I hate all of this group work that they force us to do.... In one of my first courses I was [assigned to work with] a huge type A personality. She was a mom, and she was dealing with a custody battle so she was like crazy on the schedule. [At one point I emailed her]: "I am not ready to make any of these decisions yet, [and] you are ready to go and like write this whole paper on my behalf. I'm not prepared to do that. I can't even have a conversation with you about this yet. I told you I would have my reading done for Monday and I would be ready to discuss it

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then. I am not ready for all these emails. I am not ready to have this conversation.” Essentially I was telling her: “Lay off. Back off. I have ‘til Monday. Just leave me alone!” And she all of a sudden... dropped off the face of the earth. And then I got an email from the teacher saying: “She’s removed herself from [y]our group. Have a great time. Bye.” And I was like: “What just happened?” So now I’m emailing her and I’ve become her new stalker ‘cause I’m like: “What did I do? What’s wrong? What’s going on? How come you don’t want to be in a group with me anymore? You gave me a deadline. I’m meeting it. I told you to back off. I don’t understand. I thought we were communicating great. Like, I don’t get it.” And so I just felt like... I failed. I felt like I failed a student and I had no idea what I did wrong. And it was I think just like the gap. She was far away. She had a lot on the go. Like, I can’t imagine having, being a single mom for one, can’t imagine. I can’t imagine also having to deal with an argument with my husband of that magnitude. And then trying to schedule it so I don’t have to do homework when my kid’s here. Like all of those things, I can’t imagine working around that and then doing a group assignment on top of that. I don’t think I actually did anything wrong [in] hindsight. But at the time I was like “Oh my God this woman hates me and I don’t know what I’ve done wrong.”

(Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 8)

In addition to expressing her personal preference, Linda identified some of the logistical challenges inherent when working in a group at a distance, namely: coordinating different time zones, and communicating electronically.

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I like working independently so, while I respect the value of group work, I struggle with it personally. When group work has been a mandatory part of the course I've tried to be in a group with only one other person. That is often for a logistical reason. When you live in different parts of the country and different time zones, it's just easier to coordinate with one other person. When there's been an option about group work... I have tended to choose to do independent [work]... it just cuts down ...trying to coordinate time zones and how we're going to collaborate electronically. (Linda, personal interview transcript p. 3)

Group work required students to: rely on each other, work within each other's schedules, and meet deadlines together; all of which added complications to overburdened schedules and stress to group participants.

I think the biggest surprise ...was the number of requirements for interacting with others and being graded for that. In my previous experience ...they give you your materials and you were often left on your own. And that was my expectation going into distance learning in the master's program. But I quickly learned that participation with other students was mandatory. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

I didn't realize it was as collaborative as it is. That doesn't work. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 9)

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I had a forced time to complete things by and that made my experience tense.

(Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

Today I am trying to have this conversation with my group and I am definitely way behind in my reading. And one of the girls was very clear when she signed up for all this group work she really wanted to get a lot done this week. Well that's great for her, and I guess that she's busy, but she's a different kind of busy. She's not a mom. So her kid did not break his elbow this week, and she didn't have a zillion Thanksgiving dinners to go to, and she didn't decide to do all that and go to Saskatoon at the same time, and then get into the reading after. Like, I had already made the commitment. I'm like: "Yup, I will definitely be ready for this conversation today." I was not ready. But I didn't factor in my kid breaking his elbow. I definitely thought I would get to read more in the car to and from. Like, there were a lot of things, and I didn't think the readings would be this long. Every time I opened it I was like: "Seriously. Twenty more pages... You're killing me". Anyways, so I thought I did pretty good given the challenges I overcame, but definitely not good enough considering the commitment I gave to her. And I feel terrible about it. So, like that is making it difficult to be a distance learner. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 5)

Another aspect of distance learning that participants found frustrating were weekly forum discussions and postings.

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It has felt tedious at times. You know reading the weekly readings, reading the postings from students, synthesizing all of that and then regurgitating that in written typed format and then you know going through that cycle over and over again. Yeah many times I said “Oh if only I could just explain this ...verbally it would be so much easier and then that’s when I remind myself “Linda you don’t have a life that lends you to that kind of learning so this is the trade-off. (Linda, personal interview transcript p. 2)

I remember one time, mom was in the hospital and I wanted to be by her bedside. I actually took my computer and books up and hooked into the phone line so I could have dial up to connect and do my class. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 3)

I quickly learned that participation with other students was mandatory. And that... definitely made things harder to meet those posting and forum requirements because part of the reason I took this is so that it could be flexible to my schedule and yet there were very clear deadlines as to when that had to happen. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

I have appreciated the courses where the faculty has described the postings as being a true discussion. I find it very difficult when ...everyone is posting their answers on the same one or two questions because there’s only so many unique ways or unique perspectives that many of these questions lend themselves to. So

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...you're trying to figure out a new way of saying the same thing as the thirteen other people who have gotten on there before you who've already posted. (Linda, personal interview transcript p. 3)

When asked: "What do you know now about distance education that you wished you'd known before you began?" all but one participant (Kathleen) identified the abundance of mandatory collaborative group work and the volume and time commitment of the weekly forum posting.

Not that that would have changed anything, but maybe I would have been more prepared. Do I wish that I knew that? I mean yes, I might have been a bit more prepared and had strategies to deal with it. But at the same time if I'd have known that, it might have deterred me from moving forward with distance learning. So, yeah juries out on whether I actually would have wanted to know some of those things. The only thing was my eyes were wide open as I went through the program. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 11)

Participants within the study found that collaborative group work brought logistical challenges such as: coordinating different time zones, and communicating electronically. Further complicating matters were the requirements to: rely on other group members, work within each other's schedules, and meet deadlines together. Mothers involved in this study were already "multitasking like [they've] never multitasked before" (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 9) in order to juggle the needs of school, family, and work schedules. Mandatory collaborative group work added additional

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complications to these delicate balances without offering much in return and weekly forum postings compounded the problem of time management for all.

Help and Support

Whether just beginning their graduate degree, or on the cusp of completion participants shared the sentiment that although they may have received help and support from others along the way, the actual work of being a student was done independently.

[My mom said:] “I’ll help you. We will do this!” I’m like “oh God there’s no we in student.” (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

[It’s] been a pretty solo effort outside of the emotional and the practical support I’ve received from my husband. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 9)

Whilst wading through the required coursework alone study participants received help and support in one or more of the following three areas: motivational, financial, and physical.

Motivational. Whether in the form of high fives, an encouraging word, or a timely text participants found emotional and motivational support from friends, spouses, children, parents, and colleagues at work.

My hubby and kids were great. Each time I got my mark back I would get a high five or some knuckles. Their faith in me made me keep going. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

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I certainly have some friends who are you know cheering me from the sidelines.

(Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 9)

I get support, it's like "you can do it", like motivational support. [I] have friends, my employer... a boyfriend ... [and] family. It's just people. Like my dad will say "I'm really proud" and some of those things that keep me going. So in regards to supporting me and helping me... it's just more moral support I guess. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p.8)

... If I was stressed I could just go outside (out of the office is considered outside) and I could do something childish and fun with [my kids] to just get my mind off of it. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

My biggest support was through my parents. There were so many times where I wanted to quit ... and it was so funny because all my dad would have to say to me is "well, then you should quit" and for some reason that would motivate me to just push through. So there was that support. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 5)

[My boss] ...actually became a friend [as we went] through the program [together].... That was another really big lifesaver. Having that person who knew what it was like. It was one thing for me to complain to my parents about how hard it was but really at the end of the day they didn't get it. But when you have

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someone who's going through it, we took all the same classes, we were always you know going through the motions together. When I explained where I was frustrated she knew exactly what I was talking about. And we always had this kind of catch phrase: that we would pull each other back off the ledge. And so whenever we'd get to that point in the course where it was so overwhelming and crazy and timelines were just unbearable we'd text each other... "I'm on the ledge and I'm ready to jump". So then we knew that we had to talk to each other just to kind of smooth it out and encourage us to go forward again. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 5-6)

Financial. Kathleen managed to pay for her entire graduate degree through scholarships and bursaries.

I managed to get enough scholarships [and] bursaries to cover the entire degree and more! (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

Throughout her graduate studies Marnie received financial support from her employer. Whereas Sarah's parents supported her and her young children whilst she attended school.

Work handles my fiscal responsibilities... They pay for my school. 100% of it. So I don't have to. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 7)

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I was lucky enough that when my ex-husband left my parents helped support us in essence so... I could stay at home and raise the kids until they were in school.

(Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

Physical. With the exception of Jennifer all of the mothers in the study received physical help in some form or another such as babysitting, house cleaning, meal preparation and so forth.

Turns out my hubby can cook better than me. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 4)

[My husband] lost his job about a month ago so he's even more, I mean I feel like I'm a very privileged person right now because I don't make meals, I don't clean the house.... At the best of times he was supportive and now by virtue of his circumstances I am pretty freed up to focus on what I need to get with this course.

(Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 7)

My husband was always very supportive. You know, "I've got this essay due tomorrow [so]... you're on kid duty, or on house duty" and he could just pick up and take over so it was nice. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

If I needed help then I would either contact my parents or contact my sister and say... "I'm going to need some help with the kids for this" or "Can you give them a ride to this?" But really, [for] the majority of it I try not to fall back on them too

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much because they've been so great. I just didn't want to take advantage of that.

(Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

[My mom] comes and rescues me from my child when I need to study, write a paper, and my husbands too busy.... She just like helps us manage the schedule because it's intense. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

I definitely don't clean my house ever. I pay someone to do that.... She came today. I love her. Love her. We started this when I started going to school and having a kid. I was like: "That's it! Something's gotta give. It's cleaning. Why? Because I hate that the most!" So yeah, [she] comes and cleans everything my husband's not willing too. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

Unsupportive. Jennifer and Sarah both became divorced single mothers while pursuing post-secondary degrees. Neither one received help nor support from their spouse during this time period.

When I started this I was just singly divorced, my son was two years old, and I decided to go back to school and people told me I was crazy. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 5)

It was in my last semester of the undergrad when my ex-husband walked out.... Given that I'm a single mom... I guess my philosophy has been kinda to never give up is a good way to put it. And I think that had I even dropped out of the

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master's program at any point in time or just been overwhelmed by it getting too hard, I just don't think I could have lived with that decision very well because I survived so much stuff through a very messy divorce. That I just figured if I could just keep my head up and keep going forward than I was doing well. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 4-5)

Of the married participants Marnie was the only one to express that her husband was unsupportive of her being a student.

Well my husband doesn't really care. He's not really into that. He would prefer I didn't go to school at all actually. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 7)

My husband grudgingly helps me... I think it's more of a monetary thing 'cause he knows that if I fail I have to pay back all of this money and he is not into that. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 9)

Kathleen and Sarah expressed their dismay at the lack of understanding and unsupportive attitudes some of their friends have had.

My friends were jealous because it looked like I had it all. This only complicated things. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

I think simply that you really find out who your friends are when you're in school and when you have kids. And when you mix those two together you have people who will be your biggest advocates, and other people will drop off the face of the

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earth because they just don't understand. They don't understand the balance that you're trying to maintain between your family and your school. And when there's a paper due or something like that it's... there just isn't an understanding around the importance of getting that done. So I would say that I lost a small handful of friends while I was doing my masters because when I wasn't studying my kids were the priority and there wasn't a lot of extra time for anything else. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 5)

Kathleen, Jennifer, and Linda expressed dismay at the high level of transactional distance they experienced with some faculty members, which they interpreted as a lack of support from instructors.

That final thesis defence really tore me down to a point that I even believe I did not deserve it.... I left the call feeling deflated and beaten down. I wondered why on earth I put myself through all the pain of the past few years so that three people could berate my thoughts and ideas. I basically finished my degree feeling degraded.... It's funny just how that final wrap up that was supposed to build your confidence and you know congratulate you on everything that you've accomplished had the exact opposite impact. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 4-6)

I ...didn't know that there was going to be a spectrum of support from faculty. So I've had some faculty members that have been extremely responsive and

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supportive. And I have had others that have reinforced or made the isolation feel even greater by not being available. You know I had one faculty member... who never uploaded a picture. I have no idea what they look like and they were a bit combative when they would respond to posts and negative. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 11)

I'm not really enjoying [T] University to tell you the truth I'm really debating if I am going to continue with them. I just find, like I did my first undergrad through [W] University and it was just, it was really professional, and it was very interactive, and the instructors were really engaged. So I find with [T] university... the instructors are ...brutal. She hasn't really responded to anything, she's not engaging in the conversation. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

Study participants experienced both supportive and unsupportive relationships from their family, friends, colleagues, and faculty throughout their educational journey. Both the positive and the negative experiences helped motivate them to continue their pursuit of a post-secondary degree.

Necessity of Flexibility

Overall I found distance [education] to just be the solution and not really have a lot of negatives associated with it. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

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I choose distance learning so I would have the flexibility to continue to be the kind of mother and parent and employee that I wanted to be. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 8)

Being able to do it at home was exactly what I needed to do. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

Each and every participant indicated that the main reason they choose to pursue a post-secondary degree via distance education was the flexibility it offered. Of paramount importance was flexibility in scheduling. Each situation was unique, but each case was similar in that they were all attempting to balance the demands placed on their time by: work - at one or more jobs; family – including juggling multiple extracurricular activities, team sports, and children with special needs; and school course loads.

I had to choose distance education because it was the only program offered in this country that had anything to do with education... that didn't require me to be present for some or part of the learning experience, and being that I have a whole life now, I am not just a student anymore, this was really my only option.

(Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

The only possible way I could work fulltime, be a mother of three fulltime and go to school was via a distance [education] option. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 7)

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I have a little man, little guy here who can't take care of himself obviously.... I have no family living here.... So the only possible way I can go to school is through distance education. I have no one to take care of my son so it is impossible for me to go to classes. I work two jobs and I have a very busy life. So the only possible way I could ever go back to school is through online or distance education learning. So like if there was no program I wouldn't be able to go back plain and simple. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

Distance education just made sense to me in terms of flexibility. Really that's what it came down to. When I first started I was still working on a few consulting projects. I didn't have standard hours so distance education became important to me from that perspective... I didn't know that I was always gonna be in town or be available every Thursday you know for a three hour class in the afternoon. But I could certainly be available and work my schedule around what was needed to do a distance program. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

[I choose distance education] ...simply because of the flexibility of when you could learn. I could work from home. I didn't have to physically attend classes. Leaving the house required babysitting. I could really work it around my schedule. So, if the kids went to bed then I could study at night. I could get up early in the morning. So it was really primarily the flexibility around it that was really key for me. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

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Kathleen identified additional areas, in which flexibility proved to be an asset, including: location, program pace, personal learning styles and preferences, and individual levels of comfort with the disclosure of personal information and social interactions.

I live in the middle of nowhere so commuting to a city for night classes was not going to happen either. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 8)

When I could work I would work and I pushed through at the speed that I could. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

I am also very independent and really did not want to sit through classes for two hours when I could have things covered in half the time... no one knows how little or much time I spent. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 8)

I like to do things my own way. So distance [education] allowed me to do that. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

[In a distance education setting] no one sees me as “the native chick”. They have no idea what my background is unless I tell them. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

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Part of what I like about [distance education] is that you can be anonymous and for me that's very important because unfortunately I've come across too much racism and people that look down on you because of your parenting style, you know... "What did you do to get your kids this way?" For me it was very important that I could keep that separate. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 4)

I'm not a huge social person either. I [don't] want to hang out with 18-22 year olds. I can't fake being interested in someone's party life. I'm so sorry. And distance [education] allowed me to just remove that social aspect that I wanted to have nothing to do with. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 1-2)

The flexibility that distance education proffered students was exactly what the mothers involved in this study needed in order to pursue their education. The freedom to manipulate their schedules, work independently from home, adjust the pace with which they completed the program, and maintain varying degrees of anonymity made distance education a very attractive, and often the only viable option.

Organization

Organization has been an issue of paramount importance to study participants as they have attempted to juggle their many responsibilities as mothers, employees, students, and so forth.

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I mostly juggle it by being you know uhm... anal retentive when it comes to organizing my life and organizing my family. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 7)

Regardless of their individual circumstances all five mothers found that creating a plan of the upcoming weeks' events helped them to fit in their study schedules around their family's timetable.

The big thing that I find is just creating a plan. Pretty much every Sunday night I sit down and I look at the week ahead and say: "Okay what is everything I have to get done?" ...and I have a big wipe board on my wall for my kids and me to look at it and I would jot down everything that everyone has that week. Preplanning what was going to happen. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

I think having a family calendar is also really important because without my family calendar I would die. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

Part of what makes our family life work in all its busyness is I'm a planner and I'm a scheduler and so everything is fairly regimented that way so that everything can fit in and nothing falls through the cracks. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 5-6)

Even Jennifer, who repeatedly expressed her preference to keep her life as unstructured as possible, looks ahead and tries to plan each week in order to fit her schooling in around her sons' schedule.

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...I don't know if I have a real structure in place and that's the other thing, I'm kinda unstructured in my life, so it's kinda like whenever I can fit it in. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 3)

I'm unstructured. I know that kinda seems silly but I just kinda make it work. Like I kinda think okay what have I got to do this week? What's important? Like my son's in karate so I just really try to look at the big picture and say okay what has to happen this week and what can give? So like I said I look at the big picture, I mean my son has to go to school, he has to go to karate, I have to go to work. Those are the musts that have to happen. The rest of it, socializing, going out, things like that, that will go around what I have to do for the week in homework and life stuff... (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

Despite carefully crafted plans, participants often found it necessary to rework or adapt their plans, particularly if illness became a part of the mix.

I would attempt to have long range plans, but the fact is life is very spontaneous and my long range plans typically did not work out as I would like them too. So I found that every day I had to re-evaluate what I could get done that day and what could possibly be put off. (Kathleen, personal interview, transcript, p. 2)

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I like to remain ahead ...because ... you cannot predict people breaking their arms. You just have to deal with that aftermath. If you're on schedule rather than ahead you just can't. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

My biggest challenge being a single mom is when I've made the plan and something unexpected happens. That's always really hard. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 7)

If mommy gets sick the whole thing falls apart. (Marnie, personal interview, p. 7)

A common sentiment shared by all of the study participants was:

There was no typical for when and where you studied, you just fit it in around everything else that had to be done. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

In order to accommodate the necessity of "fitting it in around everything else" (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 4) these mothers became adept at studying anytime, anywhere, and anyplace.

I feel like there is a country song here, "I study everywhere man....." I shifted locations to shift my focus. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

I have my books and my reading list with me everywhere I go.... So if my kids have a practice I'm in the arena with my books open. If there's a swimming pool

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I'm at a table there. When they were on the soccer field in the summer I was out on the field with my book. So every single second that I had open so to speak I would be studying. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

I read everywhere now for school. That includes on the road. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 3)

There would be someone running to somewhere every night so we'd be getting ready for that, go to that, grabbing what materials I needed to take with me to study, go to that event. And I always had a rule that when my kids played games I didn't study. So I would, when they were warming up, or if they were at a practice then I would study, but if they were actually playing a game I wouldn't because I felt I needed to be present for them. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 4)

From my very first course [I] had a very thick zippered binder and in it are... dividers for all the postings, assignments I have often printed things out but not always depending on the format of the course. My textbooks, if there are any for that course, fit in there. I zip it up and there's a pouch in the front which has you know my post it notes, my markers, my highlighters, my pens. And that's always at the front door so I can just grab it and go. My degree in a box. As I'm heading out the door I'm grabbing that and taking it with me. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 5)

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Fitting schoolwork in around the family schedule works for “keeping on top of the weekly readings and the weekly postings” (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 4) but allows insufficient time and an inadequate study environment with which to tackle bigger projects and assignments. Study participants found that in order to complete bigger assignments they had to schedule specific blocks of time where they could work uninterrupted.

When there are assignments I typically try and block off time on my weekends. So I guess I am a little bit different in terms of my Sunday pattern. Church in the morning and family time is really important to me. But I tend to apply that rule more to my work.... I still would do school work at some point on a Sunday, but I will have spent as much of Saturday as I can depending on whether there's a road trip somewhere for hockey. I find two-hour blocks are the most productive. So I will plan a two-hour block, as many two-hour blocks as I can with breaks in between so you know maybe two two-hour blocks, or if I really need to three two-hour blocks spread out, you know morning, noon, and night. I can't power work for a long time but I find I can you know convince myself to commit to something for two hours as long as I know that I can walk away from it at the end and then come back to it later. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 4-5)

[The kids] spend time with their dad every second weekend, [so] pretty much every second weekend was what I designated to nonstop study time. I would just go like morning to night, all day, all night kinda thing starting Friday night ending

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Sunday night on the weekends the kids were away. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

I really like to do homework on the weekends. That really works for me and the way I think and stuff like that. So Saturday and Sundays I try and hit the books for at least three hours each day 'cause that's how long it takes unfortunately.... How I describe it to my husband is: "Listen. If you let me just go in here for like three hours and close the door I will be free the rest of the day to hang out with you. However, if I need to read while all this is happening around me it's just going to take me longer. But I can do it. Now I'm gonna need six hours to read the same thing that would have taken me three." So it just saves time if I can close the door and shut out the world. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 2-3)

I work a four day work week, so I teach on my day off which is Friday. So what I've asked my part time employers is if I could have one Friday off a month. So that allows me the opportunity to ...do papers and things like that. I'm so busy at my other work like I don't get any time during my working day to do anything, so it's primarily evenings... weekends and then my one Friday off a month. It's the day that I like really go through it hard and try to get it done. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 3)

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November was usually good because [the kids] were always hunting. I knew I could get more done then so I would take more classes during that time. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 3)

Most of the mothers in this study had a designated place within their home in which to study: a home office, a desk in their room, an island in the kitchen and so forth. But the majority found that they often preferred to study elsewhere, usually a spot where they could feel comfortable while working.

[My] bed is kinda where I do [the] most [studying]. Like I lie in bed, I get on my blankets and I just prop [my books] up and stuff like that... 'cause I'm tired. So that's probably number one, or probably just like I have an island in my kitchen and my computers there so that would probably be my other place that I primarily – I don't have like an office or a desk or anything. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 4)

My peace and quiet spot was my office. I spent my entire day there working as a [distance education] principal though and I got sick of the room. I would bring my books when my daughter was dancing, I would crash on the couch. There was no typical and I really liked that. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

When I first started... I would often work in my home office. But laterally I found actually, and it's not ergonomically correct and no one would recommend this, but [I study] in my bed because I can spread everything out right. So I've got my

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laptop on my lap, pillows propped up behind me and the articles or you know my textbooks or what have you spread out right in front of me. So it's not ideal on many levels but that's what's been working for me. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 4)

I sometimes hide in my bedroom where my kids won't come and do school work. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

Finding and maintaining balance between work, family, and school was a continual challenge for participants. And although mothers had purposefully selected a distance education option in order to lessen certain aspects of the challenge, the daily decisions they were faced with often left them filled with regret.

Part of the reason... I choose distance learning [was] so I would have the flexibility to continue to be the kind of mother and parent and employee that I wanted to be and still you know get my credential. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 8)

I regret the time it took away from my family. I regret the stress that it put me under and the fact I did not recognize the impact that was having on the family. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

There have been times in some of the courses I've taken and some of the assignments particularly that I know that I'm capable of (in a perfect situation

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where I'm not a mom, I'm not a spouse, I'm not an employee) I would produce something that was far superior. And there's been... a couple of times like: "You know what? That's as good as it's going to get. This is all I can do!" and I've had to really struggle to let myself just submit the assignment rather than agonize over it when I know that I don't have the time, the energy, the capability to do more towards it. So that's been a personal struggle and I've regretted that there's been some assignments I've submitted where I know that I could have done a better job in different circumstances. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 9)

I'm missing out on time with my son who is very little. I fear that he will not want to hang out with me when I finally do have time 'cause him and my husband are very close and I'm the rule guy. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 10)

...I felt so guilty and so, so terrible that that's what it had come to... I was actually choosing my school over my kids.... The next day I withdrew from one of the courses because... I knew that what these courses were asking of me I couldn't keep the type of balance that I wanted in my family with the level of stress just in these two specific courses. And so I dropped the one. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 7)

Beginning each week with a plan, albeit a somewhat fluid and flexible one, mothers found pockets of time in which to study amongst the busyness of family life. Although necessity dictated that they learn to study anytime, anywhere, and anyplace in

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order to keep on top of the weekly readings and postings, larger assignments required that students set aside a specific time and place to work without interruptions from family life. Participants found that the task of maintaining balance was not only a continual struggle physically but emotionally as well.

Persistence

Quitting was a common theme shared by four of the five study participants.

“I’m on the ledge and I’m ready to jump.” (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

“I kinda doubted myself at a couple of points, [and started thinking] that I could quit.” (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 5)

There were so many times where I wanted to quit, and I was so prepared to quit courses, just quit the program, thinking I just couldn’t do it, it was just too hard. I just didn’t know what I was writing about, like all these reasons I had as to what would justify my reason to quit. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 5)

“I definitely would have quit.” (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 11-12)

Yet, despite a myriad of personal and professional challenges none of these women quit their pursuit of a post-secondary education. Some had to delay for a time, or lighten the load, but none of them gave up.

[In the] last semester of my undergrad my ex-husband walked out and so I withdrew from my last two courses because it was an absolute and utter shock. At

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that time my kids were only four, two, and ten months old. So I withdrew from the two last classes I was in, took a semester off and then came back and finished them and graduated that way. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 5)

Being part of a public school, I could not be principal unless I had a master degree. I was given five years to get it or resign. The only possible way I could work full-time, be a mother of three full-time and go to school was via a distance [education] option. I started by taking one undergrad class at a Christian university as I did not know what I wanted to do my masters in.... During this painful first attempt at distance [education] my mother was dying. This complicated things. I wanted to spend time with her but also knew I had to get my masters. I completed that class to a point that I had a passing mark and did not finish it off. I did not return to school the next year. Two of my five years to get my masters was gone in a flash. I started researching other ways to get my degree from a distance. When I heard... [about the] M Ed program I thought, this is what I need. After all, I was the principal of a distance education school. It seemed applicable and the answer to my prayers. That first year... I took one class each trimester....The next two years I took two or three classes each trimester and worked full-time and mothered full-time. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 7-8)

When finishing my [undergraduate degree] I was doing two courses at once and I got Bell's palsy from... too much stress... I looked like I had a stroke. So sometimes you can get permanent damage from it. So that was probably my worst

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moment. I just wanted to get it done. I took on too much. I did two courses and I ended up getting really sick. I mean I was off work for a couple weeks 'cause I couldn't close my eyes. It was horrible.... That was ...the last part of my degree.... I had two courses left and I thought I gotta get them done so I'm gonna do them both at the same time.... And one was a double credit course, a six credit and one was a three credit so... that was essentially three courses at once.

(Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 7)

I had two really large assignments due at the same time and things had completely gone off the rails with everything in terms of the kids schedules are busy, kids are getting sick, I was struggling to keep myself from getting sick, I had these assignments due, lots of pressure. And I remember one night my son came in to talk to me and I was in my bedroom. I had the door closed because the kids had the run of the house and I said: "Okay I'm in my bed. I'm working on an assignment; I have to stay up until I get this done." And it was ...really late at night, and he knocked on my door and came in and he just said: "Mom when are you going to be done?" And I said "Son, I just can't deal with this right now. I just have to focus. You know if you need something just tell me what you need and I'll get it for you, but I just need you guys to stay out of this room until I get this done." And so he left and at that moment I felt so guilty and so terrible that that's what it had come to. I was actually choosing my school over my kids. You know and here he just had a simple question, and I just completely flew off the handle with him about it because I was under so much pressure. And the next day

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I withdrew from one of the courses because I just, I knew that what these courses were asking of me I couldn't keep the type of balance that I wanted in my family with the level of stress just in these two specific courses. And so I dropped the one. I explained to my kids that I decided to drop one of the courses because it was a little too hard to take it at this time. And that I really wanted to have enough time to spend time with them as well. So that was kinda the breaking point. And even though I took two courses after that I was really careful in talking to other students, researching the demands of the courses before I registered in them because I also didn't want to be in a situation to have to withdraw again. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 7-8)

What was it that motivated these women to continue despite the many obstacles thrown in their paths?

1. The imminent threat of job loss and the desire to provide a better life for their family.
2. An understanding of the value of education, and a love of lifelong learning.
3. The desire to set a good example for, and be a role model for their child or children.
4. A sense of personal fulfillment.

Threat of Job Loss. For Marnie and Kathleen the threat of losing their job was motivation to pursue a graduate degree.

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What motivated me to start was the fact that I wanted to keep my job. I didn't want to get sent back to what I was doing before. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

It was the threat of the job loss and that I really needed to be able to work from my home because I did have a kid with special needs and I mean without that job my life would have fallen apart so it was the end goal that kept motivating me. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

Sarah and Jennifer, both single mothers, were motivated by the desire to provide a better life for their family and believed that education was the way to achieve this.

I do hope it pays off in terms of work, but it hasn't yet. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

Being a single mom I think my son is number one. I mean I don't get any support from anybody it's just me. So I just want to make sure that I give him the best possible life I can. And I just feel - I guess because I've worked in this industry for a long time - I think that education is the best chance at making yourself. So the more education you have the better lifestyle to provide for your family.

(Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

Value of Education. A love of lifelong learning was the motivation that prompted many of these mothers to pursue an education.

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I think part of it is just the value of education. I think that that comes from my own family placing a high priority on getting an education and being educated.

(Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

Now that I only have one child at home, the love of learning motivates me.

(Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

Added to this was a desire to pass along this ideology to their children, a task they felt required that they persevere regardless of the obstacles they faced.

Learning is the most important thing we do. So whether you're three like my son or you're thirty like me, learning is the most important thing that we do. And so I'm hoping that what he will gain from me in the times that I am away from him... is that you never stop learning, learning is one of the most important things that we do, and we need to do it the best that we can do it. So whether that means having to be a student at thirty, or it means that you have to go to speech therapy, in his case, learning is the most important things we do. And so I try via my distance learning... to help him learn better in his life, so maybe he won't have to go to school till he's thirty, physically, like in terms of having to take courses. But I think there is value in learning something from everything and so I'm just hoping that he gets that from me that learning is one of the most important things we do whether it's at school, at play, whatever. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 5-6)

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I want [my children] to know that my husband and I really value post-secondary education.... I want them to see that education doesn't just happen sequentially.... I want them to see that... you have the option to take your courses online. So you know if life, you know if you want to travel, or your sport takes you somewhere, I want them to see that this is an option for them. They don't have to put post-secondary education on hold, there are different ways that they can maintain their lifelong learning. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 10)

Setting a Good Example. All of the study participants understood that not only were they undertaking the difficult task of completing a degree, they were doing it under scrutiny. They knew their children were watching and forming their own beliefs and ideals based on the examples their mothers were setting.

My daughter was sitting on the floor of the office working on her distance education [high school material] and I was working at my desk on my distance education [graduate material]. I do not recall what I was studying but it sucked! I hated the material. [My daughter] was sitting on the floor working on her material and it sucked! She hated the material. I do not know who started to cry and then bawl first but we both supported the Kleenex Corporation that day. Why is it the best moment? It allowed me to bond with my teenage daughter. She got what I was going through and I got what she was going through. We understood each other. Understanding your teenager... priceless. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 5)

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The desire to set a good example and be a positive role model for their child or children was therefore an integral part of obtaining their undergraduate or graduate degrees.

I think ...being a role model for my own children and wanting them to see that education isn't only important but it's obtainable with hard work [motivates me].
(Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

I want to show my son if you want it you can do it. It's gonna be tough and it's not easy, and it's a lot of work, but it's worth it.... You can do it all if you want. Some other things have to give, but you can do it. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 5-6)

I want [my children] to see [from my experience] that just because you don't necessarily want to do something doesn't mean you shouldn't. Sometimes you have too much on your plate and you still have to get it done. I think of my oldest daughter right now who is in university. She's working two jobs and she realizes the fact that you need to just put things in order.... I mean there are times in your life that it's a means to an end and you just have to hunker down and get it done.
(Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 6-7)

In a touching tribute Linda highlighted the positive role her husband has played in supporting her educational dreams, and hopes that their children will also learn from his example.

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I ...want [my children] to take away from this experience watching how my husband has supported me and take away from that an understanding of the give and take and the support and caring that happens in a marriage when you're supporting someone to reach their goals. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 10)

Personal Fulfillment. Obtaining a post-secondary degree provided these women with a sense of accomplishment, empowerment, and personal fulfillment which they can take and apply in both their professional and personal lives.

I think it's just a sense of accomplishment in myself that I've been able to do it even though it's been really challenging. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 2)

I think [education] adds credibility to you as an individual.... I am doing my masters now, I'm going back, I've just started, but I don't need it. But it gives me credibility. It makes me feel that I'm more credible in what I do so people respect you more. And again it's kinda one of those, I like to push myself further than I think I can go. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 1)

[It's] a lesson of empowerment. I can do this. I am so pleased that... I set a goal, and here I am. It's like four years later, four and a bit years later by the time I'm done, and I did it. You know I persevered. I know there were compromises for me and for my family along the way, but here I am I did it. And there will be other

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opportunities to push myself and stretch myself and I will be able to do those too because look what I've accomplished through this goal. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 6-7)

I'm a single mom, I own my own house, you know I have a good job and that means I can take care of myself. That's my biggest accomplishment. That I don't need anybody to take care of me I can do it myself. And I think that ties back to education and whatnot. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 9)

Quitting was not an option for these women. Despite the many challenges they faced they remained committed and motivated in their pursuit of post-secondary education. For some the threat of job loss and the desire to provide a better life for their family motivated them to begin their degree and to stay the course. For others the pursuit of further education came from a love of lifelong learning. Regardless of the reason they became mothers as distance learners, all of these women desired to set a good example for their children and to instil within them an understanding of the value and attainability of higher education.

Personal versus Professional

Mothers who participated in this study unanimously insisted upon the importance of keeping their professional life as student separate from that of their personal life as mother. While each had her own unique experiences and reasoning for making this decision, each was adamant that the boundaries she had erected in order to compartmentalize each sphere of her life be maintained in order to successfully manoeuvre betwixt them.

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I keep it totally separate.... I never bring up my personal life. I keep that completely separate. (Jennifer, personal interview transcript, p. 5)

I... keep work separate from motherhood... but I think that being a mother has made me a better student because I do compartmentalize so much. So when I am being a mom I am in the mommy moment versus when I am a student I am in the student moment. And I find it so difficult to do both at the same time! I can't. So I think in that way I think being a mother has forced me to compartmentalize everything. So I don't get a lot of bleeding [between the separate spheres]. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 4-5)

I kept [my personal and professional life] incredibly separate. Part of what I like about [distance education] is that you can be anonymous and for me that's very important because unfortunately I've come across too much racism and people that look down on you because of your parenting style, you know: "What did you do to get your kids this way?" For me it was very important that I could keep that separate. (Kathleen, personal interview transcript, p. 4)

...I keep my professional and my personal [life] very separate. I think the reason for that is those ten years that I was self-employed I worked from home, and work and home were one and the same location. So I needed to really clearly define [each sphere] 'cause I didn't want my work life to bleed over and fill my personal life. And I also needed ('cause my kids were quite small for the first little while) to be able to create distinctions so that my personal life was distinct from my

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professional life. [For example] how was I going to handle it when I had a professional call to answer and there's a baby crying in the background? [I had to structure] my life to be able to deal with that dichotomy. So I brought that with me into my first couple of courses. I really focused on the professional side of who I was 'cause I saw my degree as an extension of my goals professionally. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

One way study participants ensured there was no "bleeding" from one sphere to another was they choose to never share any of the knowledge they had gained from their experiences being a mother with their fellow students, but rather relied on knowledge from the worlds of academia and their professional careers.

I've always tried to keep my experiences as a mother out of [it], like somehow I've just felt like being a student was kinda like being an employee where you have your professional life and your family life. And I always kinda thought that my professional life being a student is separate from my family life and there wasn't a lot of cross over between the two in terms of sharing information. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 5)

Likewise few of the students shared with their families what they were learning through the course of their university degree, and those who did sought to do so in unobtrusive and carefully monitored ways.

I don't really talk it out with [my husband]. However, I have been known to carry conversations about... I find interesting ways to connect what I'm learning and that kind of stuff. I definitely... apply what I learn to my son because he is at an

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age where like everything is fascinating to him.... So I apply a lot about what I learn to the conversations I have with him. And I change the ways that I ask questions based on what I have learned. And I try like different learning techniques. So I'm lucky that what I am learning about I can apply to my life. (Marnie, personal interview transcript, p. 7-8)

If... I've found a passage that is particularly obtuse in some academic journal or textbook that I'm reading, I will read it out to [my family]... so they can sympathize a little bit about this particularly horrible reading that I'm trying to make my way through. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 7-8)

Over time Sarah and Linda noticed that other students were including information regarding their family in the required introductory forum posts and choose to follow suit.

The only time that I talk about my experiences with my kids or being a mom is my introduction post or my profile post. I'll just say, you know I've three kids, so I'm busy running them around, just very vague. (Sarah, personal interview transcript, p. 5)

I started noticing other people making references to their families and I decided that you know my family is who I am. They define me. I didn't want to hide who they were. So they come up, they crop up you know in that obligatory first week email or posting where you describe who you are and stuff like that. I make reference to the support of my family and who my family are. That kind of thing

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but on a weekly basis there's probably not much of a connection that people would know much about my family or that I'm a mother. (Linda, personal interview transcript, p. 6)

Keeping school work professional and home life private was of paramount importance to all of the study participants. To achieve this, participants erected boundaries between the two spheres in order to compartmentalize their many different responsibilities and eliminate (or at the very least reduce) bleeding from one sphere to another. Whilst learning from the academic world occasionally spilled over into students' private lives, very rarely did knowledge admittedly flow in the opposite direction.

Summary

Included in this chapter are participants remarks as they pertain to each of the six themes identified in the previous chapter. A more detailed summary of the findings constitutes the following chapter.

Chapter V: Summary of Findings and Conclusion

Collaborative Group Work and Forums

Collaborative group work and weekly forums are now a standard component in many distance education programs. Studies show that online universities are developing learning communities that “prioritize learning “through interactions among students” (Stahl, Koschmann, & Suthers, 2006, p. 2) and contribute to the development and practice of teamwork competencies” (Myung Hwa and Hill, 2009, p. 2) to address the issues of quality requirements and student assessment. Case studies, problem-based learning, group work and weekly forums are some of the many online collaborative activities now considered a vital part of the online learning experience. While research conducted when online education was in early development indicated that gender influenced online behavior, a recent study reported that gender “was not found to be a significant factor” (Fahy, 2007, p. 53). Fahy’s findings continue with the observation that women were not as affected by “online group interaction patterns, effects, and dynamics” (p. 56). However, despite the many benefits that such learning communities provide, participants within the study disliked the added complications and time restraints that working with others inevitably brought.

Help and Support

According to Cragg, Andrusyszyn, and Fraser (2005) studies show that “any social role, marital, occupational, or parental, can serve as both a source of support and a source of stress” (p. 23). In order for a distance education student, especially a woman, to “overcome burdens and succeed in professional education programs... supports from

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family, friends, employers, and educational institutions are essential” (p. 22). Cragg, Andrusyszyn, and Fraser (2005) refer to a hierarchy of support in which study participants identified which relationships they considered most important. “Spouses scored highest, followed by children and immediate work supervisors, [and] least important... were university administration, [tutors and instructors], other students, and friends” (p. 27).

Unlike Cragg, Andrusyszyn, and Fraser’s study where 71% of participants were married and only 48% had dependent children, all of the participants in this study were mothers of dependent children, and two were divorced single mothers. Rather than identifying a ‘hierarchy of support’ study results indicated three areas of support: motivational, financial, and physical. Each participant identified at least one person from whom they received motivational support. For some this was a spouse or parent, others a co-worker, friend, or fellow student. A few participants received financial support from their employer, extended family, or through scholarships and bursaries. Four out of five mothers identified a source of physical support, most often manifested in the form of help with childcare, or housework.

Participants also identified instances where they have felt a lack of support. All of the participants have encountered at least one unsupportive friend, family member, or university tutor and instructor along the way.

Regardless of the amount of help and support participants received each felt that the actual work of being a distance learner was done alone.

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Necessity of Flexibility

Coulter (1989) describes distance education as "...something that allows [mothers] the opportunity to access university education while, at the same time, raising children at home or, more often, carrying the double burden of full-time paid employment and responsibility for home and children" (p. 12). Results from this study indicate that distance education is particularly well suited to working mothers due to its flexibility. Faith and Coulter (1988) put forward that "...most mothers who are also employed outside the home would have little or no opportunity to pursue further education were it not for home study" (p. 195). Participants within this study indicated that distance education was their only viable option. Distance education offered them the freedom to manipulate their schedules, work independently from home, adjust the pace with which they completed the program, and maintain varying degrees of anonymity. Without the flexibility that distance education proffered students would have been unable to pursue further education at this time in their lives.

Organization

Distance education is the only available option for many wishing to obtain further credentials whilst continuing to work, raise a family, and run a household. Numerous studies tout the flexibility distance education offers. For example, Moody (2004) states that "[d]istance learning seems to be particularly well suited to the needs of working women and mothers; allowing them to attend classes **while not taking time away** from their families and their jobs" (p. 5 emphasis added). This particular statement and many more like it tend to idealize distance education and leave students with the false impression that they can and should be able to fit time in for an education without taking

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time away from an already heavily burdened schedule. Bunn (2004) notes that a heavy workload is not necessarily a problem provided that the student has a “realistic expectation of what will be involved” (Hart, 2012, p. 31).

Without exception each participant shared multiple experiences in which they had to take time away from either their family or their job in order to fit in time for their academic commitments. Each expressed deep concerns, fears, regrets and guilt about the choices they were forcing themselves to make. In order to minimize these instances participants turned to various organization techniques. Many began each week with a plan which enabled them to study amongst the busyness of family life. This required that they become adept at studying anytime, anywhere, and anyplace. In order to complete larger assignments and projects that required their undivided attention participants had to schedule specific times in which they could work with fewer interruptions. This block of time undoubtedly came at the expense of something else. So while organization was the key to their success, study participants unanimously agreed that the task of maintaining a balance between their family, career, and educational responsibilities was a continual physical, mental and emotional struggle.

Persistence

According to Hart (2012) “lack of persistence in online education and its’ consequence of attrition, is an identified problem within the United States and internationally” (p. 19). Factors believed to be associated with student persistence in an online program include “satisfaction with online learning, a sense of belonging to the learning community, motivation, peer, and family support, time management skills, and

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increased communication with the instructor” (p. 19). Hart conducted a review of the relevant literature and deduced that the following are also facilitators of persistence:

- Proximity to program completion
- Flexibility
- Education seen as a career or financial investment
- Higher GPA
- Amount of positive and encouraging feedback from instructors and tutors
- Satisfaction with the learning experience
- Relevance of the material being studied
- Self-efficacy
- A sense of belonging within an online learning community
- Emotional and technological support

Hart claims that “if persistence factors are not present in sufficient quantity, the student may be at risk of withdrawing from an online course” (p. 19).

Results from this study correlate with Hart’s in that study participants persevered due to: proximity to program completion; flexibility of the online learning environment; career advancements or the threat of job loss; the desire to provide a better life for their family; good grades and positive reinforcement; emotional, practical and financial support from others; and personal satisfaction with the learning experience and a love of lifelong learning. Despite a myriad of personal and professional challenges none of these women quit their pursuit of a post-secondary education. Some had to delay for a time, or lighten the load, but none of them ever gave up.

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Personal versus Professional

Maintaining separation between their professional life as student and their personal life as mother was of paramount importance to all of the study participants. Each erected boundaries between the two spheres in order to compartmentalize their many different responsibilities and eliminate (or at the very least reduce) bleeding from one sphere to another. Study participants insisted that it would be too difficult to manage both spheres at the same time. As a result whilst learning from the academic world occasionally spilled over into students' private lives, very rarely did knowledge admittedly flow in the opposite direction.

These results surprised me and left me pondering the significance, especially since they were so very different from my own practices. Why did these mothers insist upon compartmentalizing their lives, keeping school and family separate? Was it merely a matter of personal preferences, a desire for privacy, learned behaviours, or coping strategies? Or is there something more behind it?

Further study of the pertinent literature shed light on this particular finding.

In her study of mothers in academy Raddon (2002) found that “women academics with children often feel a need to disconnect from their mothering role and responsibilities while at work in the academy” (p. 387). Lister (2003) notes that multiple researchers have found “that student-mothers have to straddle the worlds of two ‘greedy institutions’ of family and education... and that the pressure to create balance between these worlds often leads to women withdrawing from education” (p. 129).

In both her own research, and that of Lynch (2008), Brooks (2012) found that:

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The few studies that have been conducted in this area have suggested that female student-parents continue to experience considerable pressure to downplay their 'student' identity while at home and to retain their role as main caregiver irrespective of the demands of their university course. On the basis of her work in the USA, Lynch (2008: 595) argues that student-mothers engage in complex 'identity practices', through which they 'manage their conduct in interaction with dominant cultural conceptions about what it means to be both a "good mother" and a "good student"'. She contends that as the symbolic nature of both roles is often in conflict student-mothers adopt strategies to minimise such conflict. This involves downplaying their maternal role when they are at university and concealing their student role when they are outside the university. While such identity practices may help student-mothers feel they are conforming to dominant expectations of the diligent student, who is unswervingly committed to her studies, and the attentive mother, whose time, energy and money is devoted to raising her children, they result, Lynch (2008) argues, in significant stress (p. 444).

Separation between professional life as student and personal life as mother was not just a result of this study, but is a common theme reoccurring throughout the pertinent literature.

Conclusion

Each participants experience was unique and varied, yet despite these differences a common essence emerged. In order to effectively navigate through the often turbulent waters of what it is to be a distance learner these five mothers: embraced the flexibility

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that distance education offered; organized their learning around the family schedules; avoided group work when possible, whilst finding pockets of time in which to tackle a never ending stream of forum postings and correspondence; found their personal and professional motivation; and relied on the emotional and often physical help and support of friends and family, though each felt that the actual work of being a student was done in isolation.

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Appendix A: Letter Requesting Participation

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a graduate student in the Master of Education in Distance Education program at Athabasca University. The purpose of my letter is to request your participation in my thesis research entitled: “Mothers as Distance Learners.”

I am proposing to explore mothers’ experiences as distance learners. There is an assumption that distance education is the ideal option for housewives and mothers of young children due to its flexibility and ease of access. Yet despite the many studies that tout the advantages distance education has to offer there is a surprising lack of research exploring the experiences of mothers in online programs. The advantages of distance education are often assumed rather than grounded in data. This study will investigate the social phenomenon of mothers in distance education, exploring the essence of the experiences of mothers as distance learners, and identifying the commonalities in each of their unique experiences.

Participating in this study will give you the opportunity to share your stories and experiences of being a mother and a distance learner. Your stories are personal and precious, and as such will be treated with respect and professionalism. The purpose of this study is not to judge or criticize but to provide understanding and validate our experiences as mothers and distance learners.

Five participants will be selected for this study. If you have taken (not necessarily completed) a distance education course within the last five years and are interested in participating, please respond by email to cmzaugg@gmail.com with a short introductory

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paragraph. I will then contact you to set up an interview either in person or via telephone, Skype, or email conversations.

Thank you for considering my request. If you have any questions I would be pleased to discuss them with you. I can be contacted by email: cmzaugg@gmail.com. You may also wish to contact my thesis supervisor Cynthia Blodgett-Griffin by email: cynthiablodgettau@gmail.com

Sincerely,

Crystal Zaugg

Appendix B: Consent to Participate in Research Project

I, _____, have read and state that the purposes and procedures associated with this research project have been fully explained to me by Crystal Zaugg, a thesis student at Athabasca University. Specifically, I understand that:

1. All information I give to Crystal Zaugg will be held in confidence. I understand that all research data will be stored indefinitely.
2. Data from interview sessions will be used for research purposes only.
3. Data from interview sessions will be included in the thesis, but I, the participant will not be identified in the thesis document or any subsequent publication.
4. My participation in this project is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time, or withdraw my answer to any question without imperilling my status in the project.
5. Direct quotations from the interviews will not be used without the participants' permission in order to ensure both confidentiality and anonymity.
6. My participation, or withdrawal of participation, has no effect on my student status or my grades.
7. I may be asked to voluntarily participate in an interview, but have no obligation to do so. If I decide to participate in an interview, I understand that it will be done in person or by way of email, by telephone, or via Skype. I will be contacted to set up two 45 min interviews, with an optional third interview if needed. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. The recording will be stored for a period of five years and then destroyed. However, the transcripts will be stored by the researcher indefinitely.

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Name of participant _____

Signature of participant _____ Date _____

Participant contact information:

Email address: _____

Phone number: _____

Preference for correspondence: _____

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Introductory Paragraph

I would like you to share your thoughts, feelings, apprehensions, stresses, struggles, successes, joys, lessons, and insights on what it means to be you, a mother and a distance learner. This is a creative reflective process that gives you permission to construct knowledge from your own feelings, thoughts, ideas, and observations. Responses should be authentic, spontaneous, and focused on the main idea or topic. There are no right or wrong answers. Just tell your story in your own way. Feel free to include photographs, music, poetry, journal entries, or any other medium that may help you tell your story.

Main Questions:

1. What have you experienced being a mother and distance learner?
2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences as a mother and distance learner?"

Follow up Questions

1. What prompted you to become a student?
2. What motivates you to continue?
3. Why distance education? What do you find most appealing (or repelling)?
4. When and where do you typically study?
5. How would you describe your learning style?
6. Describe a typical day.

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7. How do you think your experiences as a mother shape your experiences as a distance learner?
8. Describe the most valuable lesson you have learned as a mother and distance learner.
9. How do you juggle your many responsibilities?
10. Do you include your family in your studies? If so, how? If not, how?
11. Share your worst moment.
12. Share your best moment.
13. Where do you find support and help?
14. Share your greatest regret, fear, or accomplishment.
15. What do you hope your children take from your experience?
16. What do you know now about DE that you wish you knew before you began?

Appendix D: Possible Participants

Included on the following page is a portion of the Possible Participants Table which was created to catalogue each of the thirty-four applicants who responded over a period of nine days. Only those applicants who provided sufficient information were catalogued. Based on the information given applicants were given a rating of 0-10, zero being no relevant information and 10 being enough relevant information, enthusiastic response, and some special circumstances that made them stand out compared to the other applicants. Applicants selected to participate are highlighted in purple. The two participants highlighted in grey had to withdraw from the study and two of those highlighted in purple were selected in their stead. All participants' names, email addresses, and schools have been removed from this list.

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Table 3 - Possible Participant

Name	experience	# kids	age of kids	marital status	occupation	Special	special - 2	Other	rating 0-10*
	recently complete	2	??	Married	works full time and assist in our family owned business	volunteer as the President of the Manitoba Speed Skating Association.	primary caregiver for aging parent in LTC and one living indepent.		Selected but had to withdraw
	Completed all the courses (Masters) correspondence based courses	3	under 5 now teenagers	single/divorced	working, mom	when husband walked out dropped courses,	dropped again to spend more time with kids	working on e portfolio	10
	1/2 done.	1	3	married	Employed-full time.	Metis	Has had a very bad experience		8
	Started DE 2007 working on my Masters.	3	16, 18, 20	married	principal at online school	16 year old has Asperger's Aboriginal	Her 3 kids have taken DE courses.	mother died when taking courses.	10
	completed my undergraduate online in 2010	1	6	single/divorced	full time for police department	works part time second job	left her husband at beginning of post-secondary	currently working on masters	7
	Masters	2	12, 10	married	work full-time.	very supportive husband	Kids heavily involved in team sports.	Religious	9
	6th and 7th course now	2	6, 7	??	work part time at university	both kids in school full time 1st time	works at the school she attends.		6
	completed Masters of Nursing via distance in 2013	4	9, 11, 14, 16 (in 2008)		employed full-time	began in 2008 had to abandon it due to familial responsibilities.			5
	last year of a 3 yr part-time bachelor of social work	3	13, 11, 7	?	?	my oldest is disabled. take my course work to the hospital	I have MANY challenges (and successes)	love to share	5
	DE courses for the last 12 years	1	masters of his own	?	running a farm,	drastic changes in my own life situation	taking PhD	older mother	n/a
	completed two degrees DE	4	?	?	Senior Instructor –	lives in Yellowknife			4
	recently graduated	2	(2009) 2, 3	married	college as an instructor	son was diagnosed with a disability	recent grad		6
	BEd and Masters DE	2	13, 17	married	Works	husband is "Rock"			6
		2	15, 18	?	work full-time and have a part-time business			available for a telephone interview limited hrs	4
	2 degrees	1	9	single/divorced	?	split up after my 2 nd course			had to withdraw

Appendix E: Modified Van Kaam Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data

Use the full transcription of each participant:

1. Listing and Preliminary Groupings

List every expression relevant to the experience. (Horizontalization)

2. Reduction and Elimination

To determine the Invariant Constituents: test each expression for two requirements:

- a) Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?
- b) Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of experience.

Expressions not meeting the above requirements are eliminated. Overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions are also eliminated or presented in more exact descriptive terms. The horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience.

3. Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents

Cluster the invariant constituents of the experience that are related into a thematic label. The clustered and labeled constituents are the core themes of the experience.

4. Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application: Validation

Check the invariant constituents and their accompanying theme against the complete record of the research participant.

- a) Are they expressed explicitly in the complete transcript?
- b) Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed?
- c) If they are not explicit or compatible, they are not relevant to the co-researcher's experience and should be deleted.

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Using the relevant validated invariant constituents and themes, construct for each co-researcher an *Individual Textural Description* of the experience.

Include verbatim examples from the transcribed interview.

5. Construct for each co-researcher an *Individual Structural Description* of the experience based on the Individual Textural Description and Imaginative Variation.
6. Construct *for each research participant a Textural-Structural Description* of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes.

From the Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions, develop a Composite Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120 – 121).

Appendix F – Athabasca University Research Ethics Approval



MEMORANDUM

DATE: August 30, 2013

TO: Ms. Crystal Zaugg

COPY: Dr. Cynthia Blodgett- Griffin (Research Supervisor)
Alice Tieuilié, Acting Secretary, Athabasca University Research Ethics Board
Dr. Vive Kumar, Chair, Athabasca University Research Ethics Board

FROM: Dr. Marguerite Koole, Chair, CDE Research Ethics Review Committee

SUBJECT: Ethics Proposal #CDE-13-08: “Mothers as Distance Learners”

On behalf of the CDE Research Ethics Review Committee, I am pleased to confirm that this project has been granted **FULL APPROVAL** on ethical grounds, and **you may proceed with recruitment as soon as AU Institutional Permission has been received** (see below).

AU Institutional Permission: Prior to recruitment, for file purposes only, provide a copy of Athabasca University Institutional Permission, issued from Vice-President Academic, enabling access to AU systems and student or staff contact for research purposes.

The AU Research Ethics office will assist in requesting the institutional permission by forwarding a copy of the final revised/approved ethics application, along with a request on behalf of the researcher. The researcher will be cc'd on all correspondence in that regard.

This approval of your application will be reported to the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) at their next monthly meeting. The REB retains the right to request further information, or to revoke the approval, at any time.

The approval for the study “as presented” is valid for a period of one year from the date of this memo. If required, an extension must be sought in writing prior to the expiry of the existing approval. **A Final Report is to be submitted when the research project is completed.** The reporting form can be found online at <http://www.athabascau.ca/research/ethics/>.

As implementation of the proposal progresses, if you need to make any significant changes or modifications, please forward this information immediately to the CDE Research Ethics Review Committee via rebsec@athabascau.ca for further review.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Committee Chair (as above), or the Research Ethics Board secretary rebsec@athabascau.ca.