2020

Factors Affecting the Successful Completion of Online Graduate Programs Among Single Mothers

Kimberly Ann Palermo-Kielb
Walden University

Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Kimberly Palermo-Kielb

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee
Dr. Silvia Bigatti, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty
Dr. Robin Friedman, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty
Dr. Melody Moore, University Reviewer, Psychology Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2020

Abstract

Factors Affecting the Successful Completion of Online Graduate Programs Among

Single Mothers

by

Kimberly Palermo-Kielb

MS, Walden University, 2011

MS, The College of New Rochelle, 2005

BS, Marymount College, 2001

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

General Psychology, Research and Evaluation

Walden University

May 2020

Abstract

An advanced degree is a step toward career aspirations, access to affordable healthcare, and financial goals. For single mothers, a population most vulnerable for living on the brink of poverty, an advanced degree can be a means toward ending intergenerational poverty. Single mother students face serious barriers to advance their education which impede their ability to pursue and complete their degrees. The purpose of the present study was to explore graduate student single mothers' experiences attending an online education program. The conceptual frameworks guiding the study are Pintrich's motivational self-regulated learning model for achievement and Duckworth's model on the psychology of achievement called grit. The study explored the lived experiences of 10 single mother students who are working on their online graduate degrees at Walden University to describe factors that influence their academic success, with a focus on their academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support. The study also identified barriers to their success and ways they cope to overcome barriers. The study used a phenomenological research design, in-depth interviews, and Moustakas's transcendental phenomenological model for data analysis. Overall, the findings indicate that single mothers in this study were motivated to complete their graduate degree in order to be better in their roles as mothers, providers, and career professionals. The results from the study will be significant for university administrators, government policymakers, and state social service agencies to develop effective programs and policies that support single mother graduate students studying online.

Factors Affecting the Successful Completion of Online Graduate Programs Among

Single Mothers

by

Kimberly Palermo-Kielb

MS, Walden University, 2011

MS, The College of New Rochelle, 2005

BS, Marymount College, 2001

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

General Psychology, Research and Evaluation

Walden University

May 2020

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation research to my mom who spent a large portion of her life struggling because she raised me alone. As I grew older, she often spoke about how important it is for me to go to college to become self-sufficient. Unfortunately, she did not live to see me pursue a college education, but when times were tough, and I thought of dropping out, it was her wish and her memory that kept me going.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my committee members, Dr. Silvia Bigatti and Dr.

Robin Friedman for their thoughts, insight, and care for my success writing this

dissertation. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Christy Fraenza and Dr. Karen

Milheim for their mentorship, friendship, and overall support for my dissertation journey.

Without the support of these wonderful women, I don't know if I would have made it this

far. Thank you!

Table of Contents

iii

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Per the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016), there is consistent data from 1995 through 2015 that shows that as an individual's level of educational attainment increases, so does their annual full-time earnings. The U.S. Census reported that individuals with advanced degrees have close to triple the earning potential of those without (Julian & Kominski, 2011). For women, the impact may be lower; young adult women with a bachelor's degree or higher earn close to double the salary compared to women with only a high school diploma (NCES, 2016).

Because single mother households have lower income rates and higher poverty rates than single father and married households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), this may be a group for which advanced degrees are especially important. Single motherhood is often associated with welfare dependency, low education, low employment, and a lack of motivation for betterment. Researchers typically characterize single mother households as working families that live on the poverty line (Shriver, 2014).

Despite their financial limitations, time management challenges, and childcare burdens, single mother students' enrollment in college has increased (Goldrik-Rab & Sorenson, 2010; Katz, 2013; Lovell, 2014). Factors motivating single mothers to enroll and persist in graduate school are their children, autonomy, economic well-being, self-worth, as well as to challenge social stereotyping (Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Patton, 2012; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Lunde, 2017).

However, there is sparse research on single mother students because of their nontraditional nature as college students. Most research on single mothers focuses on their disadvantaged backgrounds instead of factors such as motivation, which may help increase the success of single mothers in college. Also, recent literature on motherhood and graduate school involves more married women with children or focuses on the issues of gender disparity and employment outcomes for women in academia.

In the present study, I explored factors that impact single mothers' success in their online graduate programs, with a focus on their academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support. I also explored barriers to their success and the methods they employ to cope and overcome barriers. The educational environment can be an additional source of stress for graduate student single mothers if it is not designed to meet their individualized needs (Hinton-Smith, 2016; Katz, 2013; Lynch, 2008; Robinson, 2016). The findings from this study may be beneficial to key stakeholders in academia in terms of the needs of single mother graduate students for developing standard practices to foster their success. Furthermore, understanding the lived experiences of single mothers who are graduate students in online programs provides information for policymakers and administrators that could lead to better support for these students. Positive social implications could result in an increase in retention and graduation rates for this population.

Chapter 1 begins with a brief background section involving pertinent literature regarding factors surrounding the topic. Next is the description of the problem, purpose, research questions, conceptual frameworks, nature of the study, assumptions, scope and

delimitations, and limitations. Chapter 1 concludes with a discussion of the significance of the study and a summary.

Background

In the present study, I explored graduate student single mothers' beliefs about factors that impact their academic success, with a special focus on their motivation, self-efficacy, and social support. I also examined graduate student single mothers' perceptions of how their educational achievement is affected by barriers to meet their academic goals. The motivation to achieve includes an individual's personal goal orientation, affect, and task value (D'Lima, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014). Motivation can be intrinsic (to gain mastery), or extrinsic (to gain achievement) factors (Brouse et al., 2010; Lynch & Trujillo, 2011). Kirmizi (2013) found that among undergraduate college students enrolled in a distance-learning program, academic motivation was an important predictor of their success in continuing their online education.

Motivation is related to academic self-efficacy (Kim & Frick, 2011). Self-efficacy beliefs regulate the motivational side of human functioning in terms of determining an individual's capabilities for goal setting, effort, perseverance, and resilience (Bandura, 1997). Academic self-efficacy is students' belief in their ability to perform academic tasks in combination with their perception of control over their learning environment to achieve success (Lynch & Trujillo, 2011). Robbins et al. (2004) examined psychosocial factors related to undergraduate college students' GPAs and found that academic self-efficacy was the best predictor of college GPA. Ultimately, when students have confidence they can succeed in academia, they perform better.

One factor related to high academic self-efficacy is social support. Social support is characterized as receiving help, attention, or care from individuals within one's social network (Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013). Social support networks are built out of trust and created through interpersonal relationships (Freeman, 2014). For nontraditional female students, such as single mothers, their social support relationships come from the multiple roles (i.e., parent, daughter, student, friend, employee, significant other) that they play (Lundberg, McIntre, & Creasman, 2008). However, because of these multiple roles, it is difficult for single mothers to balance the time to maintain social relationships, which may lead to isolation (Killinger, Binder-Hathaway, Mitchell, & Patrick, 2013; Lynch, 2008).

Among undergraduate students, social support, academic self-efficacy, and academic motivation together influence students' ability to achieve (Jackson et al., 2012). Rosen et al. (2010) found that students with a greater sense of academic self-efficacy are more apt to have positive social relationships that provide them access to resources to enhance their learning. This growth in social connections and resources in turn promotes their self-efficacy to meet academic goals. Further, Jackson et al. (2012) found that academic self-efficacy and academic motivation mediate the relationship between social support and student success among a sample of undergraduate students attending brick and mortar universities. Jackson et al. concluded that students who are involved with their community, have positive support from family and friends, and have high academic self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation are more likely to have higher college GPA scores. This study highlights the importance of social support, self-efficacy, and motivation on

academic success; however, it does not examine these factors in the online setting among graduate student single mothers. Social connections are lacking in online education (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Gatta, 2004) and single mothers struggle with time to socialize, which makes it difficult for them to be able to get the support they need for school (Killinger et al., 2013).

Among graduate student single mothers studying in the traditional brick and mortar setting, other factors external to themselves and the university environment may impinge on their opportunities for academic success. These include financial constraints, childcare problems, time stressors, social stressors, physical and emotional health problems, and role-identity conflict (Duran, 2008; Hinton-Smith, 2016; Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Katz, 2013; Lynch, 2008; Robinson, 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). There is a gap in the literature as researchers have yet to examine these factors among graduate student single mothers who are online learners. Due to the popularity of online learning for nontraditional students such as single mothers, and since motherhood is associated with attrition among female graduate students, a study was needed on single mothers who are also online learners regarding their experiences to identify barriers, challenges, and successes to understand how to better accommodate and retain them.

Problem Statement

Graduate student mothers have far less successful degree completion rates. (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Theisen, McGeorge, & Walsdorf, 2018). Single parenting interferes with their ability to have consistent periods of enrollment (Robinson, 2016) and obtain the grades they need to advance in their education (Hinton-Smith,

2016). There are many barriers to educational attainment among graduate student single mothers. One significant barrier for single mothers is their children and the limited access to affordable quality childcare (Hinton-Smith, 2016; Robinson, 2016). A second barrier for single mothers is identity conflict (Robinson, 2016; Rockinson-Szapakiw et al., 2017), from having to juggle multiple roles, such as maintaining a household, meeting the emotional and physical needs of children, and meeting their own educational needs. A third barrier for single mothers is financial (Hinton-Smith, 2016); women are more likely to fund college through financial aid and tend to borrow in higher amounts than men (Katz, 2013). Rising tuition and student loan debts have made graduate school an economic issue, especially for single mothers with financial struggles (Katz, 2013; Robinson, 2016).

Online learning allows for more flexibility for single mother students, and yet challenges still exist. Graduate student single mothers reported that while they attempted to participate in online courses to help save money on childcare, they felt guilt and were conflicted over doing their coursework and not caring for their children (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). Even in a more flexible environment, such as the online learning environment, single mothers are struggling to complete their education. It was imperative to conduct more research on motivation, self-efficacy, and social support, which are factors that may help these mothers complete their higher education training. Due to the limited research on graduate student single mothers, most of the research has been conducted with traditional undergraduate single mother students. It is not clear how much of this research can be generalized to graduate student single mothers who have

additional academic, financial, and childcare stressors. There is a gap in the literature regarding exploring graduate student single mothers' motivation, self-efficacy, and social support in an online education program, as well as factors influencing or impeding their academic success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of graduate student single mothers attending an online education program. The intent was to describe factors influencing their academic success, with a focus on their motivation, self-efficacy, and social support. I also explored barriers to their success and methods they employ to cope and overcome barriers. I interviewed students who were in good academic standing and progressing through their graduate programs as well as those who were not in good academic standing. Graduate student single mothers are not well-represented in the research literature; therefore, this study was a way to extend the literature and generate new conceptual ideas regarding the achievement and progress of these women.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program?

RQ2: How do graduate student single mothers in an online program describe their academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support, and the role of these factors in facilitating their academic success?

RQ3: What are the barriers to academic success identified by single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program?

RQ4: What coping methods do single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program describe as useful to overcoming barriers to success?

Conceptual Framework

Pintrich's (2004) motivational self-regulated learning framework is one of the two frameworks that guided the present study. Pintrich's framework has a social-cognitive orientation as it encompasses personal (the self's mental cognitions, motivation/affect), behavioral (social), and environmental (contextual) factors (Zusho, Pintrich, & Coppola, 2003). The overall framework posits that self-regulation activities are a synergistic function of student motivational, behavioral, and contextual elements that interact to facilitate cognitive processes in a reciprocal fashion. Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) defined three main components of self-regulated learning that lead to student achievement: metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, and modifying), cognitive strategies (rehearsal, elaboration, organization), and self-management strategies (effort control and attention).

The Pintrich model is distinct from other self-regulated learning models due to the integration of cognition and motivation and to the extent that student motivational beliefs are the key component to either hindering or facilitating self-regulation activities. Pintrich developed his model from empirical studies with secondary and postsecondary students learning in face-to-face classroom environments. Because of the autonomous setting of online education, students who use self-regulated learning strategies are more

likely to be successful in the online classroom environment (Artino & Stephens, 2009; Cho & Shen, 2013). In addition, self-regulated learning is necessary for students to meet the academic expectations associated with the rigor of graduate school (Dunn et al., 2014; Miedjiensky & Lichtinger, 2016).

Pintrich's framework may be limited when examining single mothers in online education settings, given the special challenges that they face. Therefore, an additional conceptual framework called grit was applied to help further interpret the resilience of these women. Grit is a character construct rooted in aspects of the Big Five personality traits of conscientiousness and measures of self-control, but distinct in that it emphasizes long-term stamina rather than short-term intensity (Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

Grit has two facets that facilitate achievement: sustained effort and interest. The concept of grit came out of Angela Duckworth's (2007) research to explore the psychology of success. In doing so, she interviewed and examined the abilities of highly successful individuals who work, create, compete, and teach in a variety of challenging domains. Collectively, what stood out among the individuals apart from talent was their consistent determination to improve themselves and keep trying despite failures or setbacks, as well as their focused passion for their work (Duckworth, 2016).

Grit is defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Grit influences retention rates, positively correlates with levels of education, and increases over the lifespan (Duckworth et al., 2007). Cross (2014) studied GPA as a function of grit among online nontraditional

doctoral students and found that successful female students were grittier than male students, grittier students had more weekly study time, and grit increased with age.

Although single mothers may share similar outcome goals as other students, their academic success is high stakes. Single mother students' pathways to success involve battling economic stressors, stereotyping, psychological stressors, social isolation, time, and childcare constraints that compromise the quality of their education (Duran, 2008; Hinton-Smith, 2016; Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Katz, 2013; Lynch, 2008; Robinson, 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). Therefore, a study that explores the stressors of this population might provide an understanding of single mother students' academic success to university administrators and staff to better support them.

This study used a phenomenological approach to gain an understanding of lived experiences of single mother graduate students and explored perspectives on factors facilitating their academic success. Additional information on Pintrich's motivational self-regulated learning framework for achievement and Duckworth's grit framework for the psychology of achievement is presented in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

Although online learning has become a popular alternative to brick-and-mortar schools, most of the research on student success has involved undergraduate students in traditional learning environments rather than graduate students studying in online learning environments. Thus, I identified a gap in the research focusing on nontraditional graduate student single mothers attending an online education program and their academic success. The study used a phenomenological design. According to Moustakas

(1994), a goal of phenomenology is to lay a foundation for further research and give meaning to phenomena. Using a phenomenological approach was fitting for this study because the purpose of the study was to gather in-depth knowledge of lived experiences. Furthermore, I aimed to explore what it is like for single mothers navigating pitfalls and milestones during their experiences completing their advanced degrees fully online. This work may provide a basis for a model of success to be applied to other single mothers so they can be successful.

Study participants were purposefully selected to meet the criteria of the research setting, which was online graduate school programs. Therefore, participants were Walden University graduate students who were currently enrolled in their programs of study at the time of their participation. I accessed and screened participants through Walden's online participant pool to verify their eligibility for participation. I collected data via one-on-one online Skype interviews. One benefit of interviewing involves the ability to capture participants' experiences without having to directly observe them (Creswell, 2007). Interviewing is also useful to gain historical information from participants to learn more about their circumstances. Using an interview protocol allows the researcher more control over the process of information. In addition, one-on-one interviewing takes place in private spaces that may provide comfort for disclosing personal and sensitive information. The data collection method of using online Skype interviews was appropriate for the study to have access to participants because the sample set population is geographically diverse online learners. Interview data were organized and hand-coded for themes and patterns that emerged from participant responses to the

interview questions. The data analysis method was Moustakas (1994) model for phenomenological data analysis. The model has eight steps that are grouped within transcendental-phenomenological reduction procedures, imaginative variation procedures, and synthesis procedures. More detail on the data analysis steps for Moustakas' model is provided in Chapter 3.

Operational Definition of Terms

Academic Motivation: The term motivation will refer to academic motivation specifically. Academic motivation is a students' persistent drive to engage in the opportunity to learn (Artino & Stephens, 2009).

Academic Self-efficacy: The term self-efficacy will refer to academic self-efficacy specifically. Academic self-efficacy is one's confidence to succeed in relation to academic tasks (Hodges, Stackpole-Hodges, & Cox, 2008).

Academic Success: Academic success is defined as meeting mastery and performance goals for academic activities (Schweinle & Helming, 2011).

Grit: Grit is a character construct comprised of one's passion, commitment, and effort toward long term goals despite challenges and setbacks (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Nontraditional Student: According to the NCES (n.d.) a nontraditional student is characterized as a student with one or more of the following seven characteristics: age over 24, full-time work status while enrolled, delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment, presence of dependents other than a spouse, single parenthood, and financial independence.

Online Learning: Online learning is defined as distance education supported through the internet that includes synchronous and asynchronous communication between learners and instructors (Horzum, Kaymak, & Gungoren, 2015).

Self-Regulated Learning: Self-regulated learning is a constructive process for learning whereby one uses strategies of forethought, planning, activation, monitoring, control, reaction, and reflection to regulate their cognition, motivation/affect, and behavior guided by the context of their learning environments and standards to meet goals (Pintrich, 2000).

Single Mother: A single mother is an unmarried sole parent and primary caretaker for one or more children under the age of 18 without the assistance of another parent or caregiver in the home (Gucciardi, Celasun, & Stewart, 2004).

Social Support: Social support is a type of psychosocial resource in the form of instrumental, informational, or emotional assistance provided for an individual by others in their social network (Thoits, 1995).

Assumptions

I assumed the participants were a true representation of the criteria for the study, which were graduate student single mothers, head of household, living with their dependent children under the age of 18 who currently enrolled in their online program for at least one year. I also assumed that interview responses of the participants were honest and accurate descriptions of experiences. A further assumption was that the research methodology and design were appropriate for the study's intent as well as effective tools to answer the research questions. These assumptions were important for the goal of the

study, which was to capture meaningful data in the context of in-depth descriptions of the lives, struggles, and successes of graduate student single mothers according to their own individualized experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

Graduate student single mothers are consistently challenged by barriers that cause many forms of stress, which is disruptive to their ability to achieve their academic goals. Academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support are related to traditional undergraduate students' academic success (Jackson et al., 2012). Therefore, the scope of this research involved investigating factors that lead to single mother students' success, specifically focusing on their motivation, self-efficacy, and social support to help facilitate their learning goals and ability to cope to overcome barriers involving their graduate education. A traditional learning setting was not selected for this research because the flexibility associated with online learning is designed for nontraditional learners juggling work, parenting, and academics. This study was delimited to single mother students of varied socioeconomic statuses and ethnicities progressing through online graduate programs across a broad range of achievement. Transferability is not a factor in phenomenological studies because a standard of its design is to use small sample sizes, and the priority of phenomenological research is to give participants a voice regarding their subjective and unique experiences (Creswell, 2007; Usher & Jackson, 2014).

Limitations

One limitation of the present study was researcher bias. As the researcher, I was the only person to collect and analyze the data which leads to the potential of influenced results. Consequently, biases on the part of the researcher could skew the quality of the research results. To ensure reliability and validity, I followed an interview protocol and Moustakas' (1994) procedures for phenomenological analysis, which helped to standardize data collection. An interview protocol was used to maintain focus and accuracy as well as to gather thorough, detailed, and in-depth statements from the interviewees. In addition, I audio-recorded the interviews and used note-taking strategies for clarity and for quality control. To guard against biases, I used record-keeping, reflective techniques, member checking, bracketing, and the process of epoché, which is an important principle of phenomenological research. According to Moustakas (1994) epoché is a process whereby the researcher sets aside prejudgments in terms of what is already known about the phenomenon of interest and maintains a mindset free of bias to be truly receptive to = information during data collection.

Significance

There is a gap in literature regarding academic success among single mother students attending online graduate programs as most of the literature on single mother students focuses on their experiences in undergraduate programs at brick-and-mortar institutions. Further, research linking academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support with academic success has not been investigated using a qualitative approach among graduate student single mothers attending online programs. Single

mothers attending graduate school face many challenges that impact their ability to function in multiple roles and persist in their programs. Advanced education is an avenue for growth and opportunity to empower single mothers and overcome their challenges. Therefore, single mothers' success in graduate school is significant to their own lives, the future of their families, and the communities in which they live. As females are outpacing males by 16% in their enrollment in masters and doctoral studies (McFarland et al., 2017), and given the increasing popularity of online learning among higher education students (Allen & Seamen, 2014), it is important to understand these women's experiences in the online setting. The results from this study may be significant to online educators, academic advisors, and student support centers in terms of providing a better understanding of what contributes to the academic success of graduate student single mothers. In the same way, the study is significant to university officials and staff for creating policies at the institutional level to support these students. Positive social implications could result in an increase in retention and graduation rates for this population. This qualitative study is a platform for their personal stories of achievement, and in turn, a source for hope and a foundation for positive social change.

Summary

As single mothers are most likely to live in poverty (Cerven, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), thus experiencing the adverse effects associated with that kind of life and circumstances, they would especially benefit from an advanced education. However, graduate student single mothers are an understudied population in research, especially on the aspect of their motivation and academic success. Graduate student single mothers

report feeling stigmatized and experience a lack of institutional support (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Katz, 2013; Lynch, 2008; Pare, 2010). Furthermore, graduate student single mothers report financial, social, time management, psychological, and childcare barriers that keep them from furthering their education (Duran, 2008; Hinton-Smith, 2016; Robinson, 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). Academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support have been found to influence student success among traditional undergraduate students (Jackson et al., 2012), but it is not clear to what extent these factors facilitate the success of nontraditional single mother students in online graduate programs.

Through the lens of Pintrich's motivational self-regulated learning framework and Duckworth's grit framework, the study's purpose was to explore the lived experiences of graduate student single mothers attending an online education program. Using a phenomenological research design and in-depth interviews, I explored factors influencing graduate student single mothers' academic success, with a special focus on their motivation, self-efficacy, and social support. The study also sought to identify barriers which prevent graduate student single mothers' success and methods they employ to cope with and overcome barriers.

This study is important to understand the complexities and nuances associated with the lives of graduate student single mothers enrolled in online degree programs. This research is also important for prospective graduate student single mothers to understand how women in the same situations cope with barriers to meet their learning goals. Lastly, this research is informative for individuals who work in higher education

to support these students effectively, in turn alleviating some stress in the lives of single mother students and disseminating to others on what is required to help them succeed.

Chapter 2 begins with an introduction discussing the topic of the study and the relevance of the topic to the research problem. Next is an overview of the literature search, theory frameworks applied to guide the research, and a detailed literature review connecting the research population, research setting, and theoretical frameworks with factors to be explored in the study. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary of the chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Although graduate school enrollment has increased for women (McFarland et al., 2017), students who are also single mothers continue to struggle with barriers that are unique to their situations. Single mother graduate students report social barriers such as social stigma and marginalization (Hinton-Smith, 2016; Katz, 2013), economic burdens due to childcare responsibilities (Lynch, 2008; Robinson, 2016), time burdens (Jones-DeWeever, 2005), role responsibility and identity conflicts (Duran, 2008; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Van Stone et al., 1994), and emotional stressors such as guilt, self-doubt, and isolation (Patton, 2012; Schlehofer, 2012). These barriers contribute to the issue of single mother graduate students' lack of continued enrollment and low completion rates in their degree programs (Lynch, 2008; Robinson, 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2017).

Barriers leading to lack of retention and completion have been explored more with undergraduate student mothers, as women with dependent children are more apt to enroll in and complete lower-level academic degree programs (Theisen et al., 2018). While most qualitative research on graduate student persistence has included single mothers, there has only been a small percentage of single mother participants in these studies

The current study was designed to examine graduate student single mothers enrolled in online master's and doctoral programs to understand how they manage to achieve despite barriers associated with their roles as parents. The study explored factors

that graduate student single mothers perceive to impact their academic success with a special focus on their academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, social support, and how they cope with barriers to achieve. Chapter 2 starts with a discussion of the literature search strategy and conceptual frameworks. The chapter continues with a discussion of pertinent topics related to the proposal. These topics include single mother students, single mothers learning online, graduate student single mothers, online learning environments, social support, academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, stress and coping, and academic success. Throughout each section is a review of the literature to the literature review provides a concise background of the topics and key research findings.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was completed using the Walden University Online Library. I searched for articles using EBSCO database, ERIC, Education Source, Academic Search Complete, PsychInfo, PsychArticles, Academic Search Complete, and ProQuest Dissertation and Theses. In addition to the Walden online library, Google Scholar, and Research Gate was also used. Within these databases, an advanced search was defined to retrieve online peer-reviewed articles year by year, starting with the most recent literature first. Keywords included: *single mothers, online learning, higher education, online graduate students, academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, social support received, social support perceived, academic success, student achievement, motivation theory, non-traditional female student, student self-regulation, grit theory, stress and coping, graduate students, graduate education, doctoral, mother single,* and *divorced.* Given the

paucity of research focused on graduate student single mothers, this literature review is significantly informed by research on undergraduate student single mothers. Throughout, I will note how findings on undergraduates may be applied to graduate students or not.

Conceptual Framework

Two frameworks guided this study. The first framework was Pintrich's (2004) motivational self-regulated learning model for achievement. Pintrich's model provides insight into the intrapersonal factors that impact success, like cognition and motivation. The second framework described was Duckworth's (2007) framework for psychology of achievement called grit. Grit is a conceptual model brought into the study to provide insight into the personality factors related to academic success, such as the aspect of character.

Motivational Self-Regulated Learning Framework

Pintrich's (2004) motivational self-regulated learning model for educational achievement guided this study. Whereas most self-regulated learning models have separated cognition and behavior from motivation, key features of the Pintrich model include self-efficacy beliefs and the effect of motivation on cognition for academic performance (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Schunk, 2005). Built from a social cognitive framework, the Pintrich model (2000) posits that during the learning process, students engage in four distinct cognitive phases of self-regulation which are forethought/planning/activation, monitoring, control, and reaction/reflection. Infused within the four phases are motivational processes and self-efficacy factors that interact with cognitive, behavioral, and contextual factors to facilitate self-regulatory processes.

The motivational components of Pintrich's framework are based from the expectancy-value theoretical model of motivation. The basic idea of the expectancy-value theory is that a person's effort and motivation to do a task relies upon their perception of how they will perform (i.e., their academic self-efficacy; Burak, 2014). Expectancy-value motives include intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy beliefs. Intrinsic motivation is engaging in an activity for pure pleasure, whereas extrinsic motivation is engaging in an activity for external rewards (Fortier, Vallerand, & Guay, 1995). Self-regulated learners are more influenced by intrinsic motivating factors as they learn for mastery rather than performance (Garcia & Pintrich, 1991).

Self-regulation involves the use of cognitive strategies of rehearsal (recall, memorization), elaboration (meaning, summarizing, paraphrasing), and organization (outlining, mapping) as well as metacognitive strategies of planning (goal setting), monitoring (self-assessment), and regulating cognition for adaptive learning (self-adjustment; Vanderstoep, Pintrich, & Fagerlin, 1996; Zusho et al., 2003). Good self-regulated learners use retrieval practice of information, integrate past and present knowledge to create connections, actively organize plans to reach learning goals, self-evaluate their comprehension of knowledge to manage progress, and based on their self-evaluation, adjust their strategies accordingly to self-manage learning outcomes (Pintrich et al., 1991).

Self-regulatory processing is critical for successful graduate-level work. An example of this is the use of a higher-ordered thought strategy or critical thinking ability. Students who can think critically are able to apply previous and existing knowledge to

new situations to problem solve, make decisions, and gauge the quality of information they are receiving (Garcia & Pintrich, 1991). Critical thinking ability was found to positively influence academic help-seeking behaviors among non-traditional graduate students in an online learning environment (Dunn et al., 2014). Another area of graduate work successfully facilitated by self-regulation is students' academic writing. In a study of graduate students enrolled in a thesis writing seminar, researchers reported that students increasingly used cognitive regulation processes to improve their writing in anticipation of independent research and motivational regulation to sustain their drive to finish academic tasks (Miediiensky & Lichtinger, 2010).

Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) found that higher levels of student motivation and academic self-efficacy strongly correlated with higher cognitive strategy use and self-regulation. They also found that student motivation, academic self-efficacy, and self-regulation were all positively linked to student performance. Pintrich and DeGroot concluded that students who have the motivation and self-efficacy to learn are more likely to apply metacognitive and cognitive strategies in the classroom, making them more likely to have better academic performance.

Zusho et al. (2003) found that academic self-efficacy, a motivational component, was the best predictor for performance among university students enrolled over a semester in a college chemistry course. Although student motivation decreased over time among the lower-achieving students, students' overall use of self-regulation strategies increased over time as did their organizational skills, a deep processing cognitive strategy. Higher-achieving students reported increased self-efficacy over time which

indicates the reciprocal dynamic between self-regulation, self-efficacy, and motivation to foster achievement (Pintrich & Garcia, 1991).

Pintrich (2003) described motivation as a type of science, to be empirically tested in the physical environment rather than in a lab. Thus, Pintrich developed his theoretical model from research with student populations learning in the face-to-face classroom. However, self-regulatory capabilities are just as fundamental for the online learner, so it would be fitting to adapt Pintrich's framework for use in the context of the virtual classroom; in particular, due to the student-centered learning of online education. To be successful, online learners are required to self-direct their own learning (Kirmizi, 2013). Therefore, students are responsible for actively planning out course activities, managing their time to meet goals, monitoring their performance, and self-evaluating their knowledge to seek support when needed. Artino and Stephens (2009) found that motivational beliefs and deep processing strategies significantly impacted the persistence of graduate and undergraduate students learning online. Among undergraduate students enrolled in an online learning course, Cho and Shen (2013) found that student self-regulation was positively correlated with academic achievement. In addition, self-regulation influenced students' participation in the online classroom attributing to their academic success (Cho & Shen, 2013).

Self-regulation strategies increase over time as college students progress through school (Pintrich, 2003). It is assumed that graduate-level students, who are the focus of the present study, have mastered the skills required to self-regulate their learning. Therefore, self-regulation was not brought into the study as a factor to be examined.

Rather, I included the concept of self-regulation as part of the conceptual framework for the study due to research indicating that self-regulated learning skills are critical for independent learners to be successful (Artino & Stephens, 2009).

Although Pintrich's model serves as a guide, it is limited in that it only includes intrapersonal factors as predictors of success. For single mothers, there are many factors that they cannot control that impact their opportunities for success. These are economic, social, and time stressors that are consequential to single motherhood and are discussed in detail in the following literature review. It is possible that these other factors impact student motivation, self-efficacy, and support factors in the Pintrich model. These were examined in the study to determine their presence and impact on the other factors and on academic success.

Grit Framework

Positive psychology focuses on the goodness in life and human flourishing, in contrast to mainstream psychology that focuses on human misery and mental illness. Accordingly, positive psychology research involves positive human experience and positive human functioning. A popular research topic in the domain of positive psychology is Duckworth's (2016) framework on the psychology of achievement. Duckworth introduced her framework in the literature as a conceptual model for everyday success and extraordinary achievement called grit (Duckworth, 2012). Grit is measured as a trait-level character construct (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Duckworth, 2012) and it is defined as passion and perseverance for long term and challenging goals (Duckworth, 2016).

Grit was found to correlate positively with students' cumulative GPA scores but negatively with students' SAT scores (Duckworth et al., 2007). Students with higher general mental ability are not grittier than their higher-achieving peers who continuously work hard to maintain their GPAs, despite having lower SAT scores. Among freshman military cadets during an intensive basic training program at West Point Military Academy where 1 in 20 cadets tend to drop out, grit was a significant predictor of first-year academic cumulative GPA and cadet basic training retention (Duckworth et al., 2007). Among thousands of high achieving children from all over the world competing in the Scripps National Spelling Bee competition, the grittier contestants outperformed their less gritty peers not as a function of intelligence ability, but as a function of study time (Duckworth et al., 2007) and deliberate practice (Duckworth, Tsukayama, Kirby, Bernstein, & Ericsson, 2011). Among these studies, it was grit that emerged to be an essential characteristic for success beyond I.Q., physical aptitude, or talent.

The essence of grit encapsulates characteristics and behaviors such as consistency of interests, perseverance of effort despite setbacks, conscientiousness, and self-control (Duckworth, et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Due to the challenging features of graduate work, these *gritty* qualities are essential, even more so in online education because learning is self-directed. Wolters and Hussain (2015) found that persistency of effort and consistency of interest, which are two aspects of grit to be linked to college students' increased use of self-regulated learning strategies. Likewise, successful graduate work requires active engagement, organization, and self-management, which are components of self-regulated learning.

The gritty individual is someone who works long and hard to achieve their long-term goals with persistence and resolve no matter what difficulties arise to affect their progress (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit is associated with higher education levels and increases with age (Cross, 2014; Duckworth et al., 2007). Gender differences also apply to grit, as female graduate students are grittier and have higher achievement than their male counterparts (Aswini & Deb, 2017; Cross, 2014). Based on these findings, grit seems appropriate to explore as a framework for the success of nontraditional graduate students like single mothers. Furthermore, grit has shown to facilitate achievement for long term goals in contexts that are personally meaningful as in the study of Latina/o immigrants who are first generation to attend college despite fighting stereotypes, stress, financial burdens, and depression (O'Neal et al., 2016). Single mother students experience similar obstacles, yet they persevere in the face of adversity for the betterment of their families. It could be surmised that when the odds are against them, single mothers do not give up; instead they strive to be gritty. They stay the course with passion and perseverance to maintain the pursuit of challenging long-term goals, such as a college degree.

Literature Review

Single Mother Students

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017b), approximately nine million American families are headed by single mothers. Per the National Poverty Center (as cited in Cerven, 2013) female-headed households have double the poverty rate than male-headed households and nearly triple the poverty rate of married households. For those

single mothers relying on public assistance, welfare reform has taken away the focus on

higher education to overcome their poor situations. As part of the welfare reform agenda

to reduce dependency on welfare benefits, Congress passed the 1996 Personal

Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Under

PRWORA, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program was formed

(Johnson, 2010). TANF is a work-first initiative that places restrictions on recipients

receiving federal aid grants such as lifetime limits for benefits, mandatory work

requirements, and short-term vocational skills training requirements (Freeman, 2014;

Herbst, 2013). In 2006, the TANF program was re-designed further limiting the option

of higher education for recipients because to stay in compliance with TANF, the program

only allowed for specific educational programs to count toward work requirements

(Freeman, 2014). Due to time and cost, this change is especially difficult for single

mothers who are balancing motherhood along with work and skills training requirements

for TANF benefits.

 Single parent families endure greater financial hardship, family stress, and

maternal depression than families with two parents (Caragata & Liegghio, 2013; Zeiders,

Roosa, & Tein, 2011). Single mothers are doing it all; they are providing, parenting, and

caretaking in the absence of a partner to help them balance their multiple roles and

responsibilities. Research reports that single mothers experience high levels of parenting

stress due to work-family conflicts (Berryhill & Durhshi, 2017). The combination of

increased role responsibilities, low education, and limited social and economic resources

takes a toll on their mental well-being (Subramaniam et al., 2013).

Escaping poverty would result in lower stress and conflict for single mothers. However, the 1996 welfare reform work-first agenda of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) became a barrier for single mothers to pursue their college education because it increased work hours required for government assistance, which impacted single mothers' ability to study full time.   In two years, 33% of poor individuals and those on welfare dropped their college enrollment because of PRWORA (Cerven, 2013). According to a 2010 National Poverty Center report (as cited in Cerven, 2013), a third of female-headed households were living in poverty. Pandey and Min (2007) reported that every additional year of education predicts an added $917.00 in annual income for women. Furthermore, as women advance in their education, their income potential is close to 20% higher (Katz, 2013). Therefore, an advanced education seems to be a viable route for single mothers to lift themselves out of their poor situations.

Unfortunately, attending college brings on additional stress for single mothers. For single mothers on public assistance, work requirements because of welfare reform are a problem (Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Katz, 2013). In addition to work requirements, researchers have found that time constraints (Duran, 2008; Katz, 2013, Robinson, 2016), lack of affordable or reliable child care (Hinton-Smith, 2016), lack of institutional support (Pare, 2010), lack of emotional support (Lynch, 2008), and social stigma (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Duquaine-Watson 2017) were factors that hindered single mothers from progressing in their college education. Parenting stress, coupled with the burden of academic demands, poses an even greater challenge for single mothers to

function (Freeman, 2014; Robinson, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). Single mother students report struggling with stress and anxiety that affects their self-esteem and their ability to continue pursuing their degree (Katz, 2013).

Single mother students characterize their lives as living on the edge (Katz, 2013; Killinger et al., 2013), which can often push them to an emotional (Caragata & Liegghio, 2013) and physical brink (Robinson, 2016). Due to economic and time demands, each day of their life is infused with difficult choices (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Katz, 2013). For example, they often waver between using time for studying or time for their children (Freeman, 2014; Haleman, 2006), using financial aid for academic expenses or for childcare and living expenses (Katz, 2013). These stressors compromise single mothers' emotional well-being (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010; Katz, 2013), which in turn, negatively impacts their academic performance (Katz, 2013).

Social factors also impact single mothers' educational experiences. Due to their multiple roles, single mothers have limited time to socialize, and because of their single-parent status, they carry a negative social stigma (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Katz, 2013; Lashley & Olivierre, 2014; Robinson, 2016) that further isolates them from their peers (Killinger et al., 2013). In addition, researchers have found that single mother students experience an "invisible divide" (Killinger et al., 2013, p. 41) and feel unsupported in their learning environments (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Yakoboski, 2010). They report being marginalized by instructors and peers who are insensitive to their circumstances and treated as outcasts as if they do not belong (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Robinson, 2016). When single mothers experience marginalization, this

reduces their self-confidence and as a result, they doubt their ability to be successful (Greenburg & Shenaar-Golan, 2017).

Single mothers take on the challenge of pursuing a college degree for their independence, their children, and to prosper (Greenburg & Shenaar-Golan, 2017). However, in doing so, they are overburdened due to a lack of supportive resources and feel out of control of the very life that they strive so hard to achieve (Cerven, 2013). When single mother students are faced with limited support to execute their personal choice for betterment, this impacts their motivation and their persistence to complete their degrees (Cerven, 2013). At the same time, Cerven (2013) found that single mothers' persistence for education was due to motivation centering around their children, social support, and institutional support. Interestingly, what motivates students also contributes to the barriers they face.

Single mothers enrolled in graduate school reported their advanced education to be a transformative experience (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2017) yet their single-parent status is associated with time management, financial, social, child-care, and emotional difficulties (Duran, 2008; Hinton-Smith, 2016; Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Katz, 2013; Lynch, 2008; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014; Robinson, 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2017), that create obstacles for them to persist to complete their degrees. According to the NCES, The Condition of Education Report (as cited in Mcfarland et al, 2017), a large percentage of college students are females and these statistics are growing; NCES predicts a 15% increase in women's enrollment to the year 2025. Furthermore, with the United States Census Bureau (2017b) showing a growth trend in single motherhood, we

can assume many of these women are mothers. To accommodate single mothers' unique circumstances while learning online, we need to understand their perceptions of their experiences, successes, and challenges for a platform to build frameworks for their academic success.

Graduate Student Single Mothers

There is limited research on single mothers enrolled in graduate school. Past research has focused more on married mothers in college, post-graduate mothers in academia, or on the general aspects of female college enrollment. Of the limited research on single mothers, the literature is on women receiving public assistance post-1996 welfare reform (Haleman, 2006; Pandey & Min, 2007) or their well-being (Herbst, 2013), and those single mothers enrolled in undergraduate programs (Cerven, 2013) rather than single mothers and their educational pursuits in graduate school, and specifically online programs, which because of convenience is attractive to the non-traditional type students such as single moms. To help fill the gap in the literature, the proposed study would include single mothers of all socio-economic levels enrolled in online graduate programs. It would also look to expand the literature by including students who are successful in their programs of study as well as students who are struggling to succeed. In addition, the study will explore single mothers' academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support qualitatively for a deeper analysis. Most of the research on achievement has analyzed these variables statistically in a quantitative manner.

Researchers report that the gender imbalance for careers in academia brings to light a concerning trend with respect to student mothers' high attrition rates and longer

time for degree completion rates in graduate school (Kulp, 2016; Lynch, 2008; Theisen et al., 2018). Motherhood compounded with graduate training is associated with role-identity conflicts as graduate student mothers often deal with an internal battle to be the best in both roles (Lynch, 2008; Robinson, 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Springer, Parker, Levitin-Reid, 2009; Van Stone et al., 1994). In this way, graduate student mothers obscure their single parent status from their instructors and their peers (Lynch, 2008; Robinson, 2016; Van Stone et al., 1994). Unfortunately, the result is that graduate student mothers shun the supports that they truly need and feel isolated in their academic journey (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Lynch, 2008; Springer et al., 2009).

As graduate student mothers move into a higher level of learning, their barriers increase as does their need for support (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Katz, 2013; Theisen et al., 2018). Although graduate student mothers may be prepared academically for the rigor of graduate education, they are unprepared emotionally for the barriers they experience (Hinton-Smith, 2016; Lynch, 2008; Patton, 2012). Graduate student mothers face social barriers (Hinton-Smith, 2016; Patton, 2012), financial barriers (Katz, 2013), role-conflicts barriers (Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017), child-care barriers (Lynch, 2008), time restraints (Duran, 2008), and psycho-somatic problems as a result from stress (Robinson, 2016). To continue progressing in their graduate work, graduate student mothers indicate what they need most is support within their learning communities. They value resources and services at the institutional level to ease financial stress and child-care burdens (Lynch, 2008; Robinson, 2016). They also rely on emotional support from faculty (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Schlehofer, 2012;

Theisen et al., 2018; Springer et al., 2009; Van Stone et al., 1994) and peers (Duran, 2008; Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Katz, 2013; Robinson, 2016) because without these relationships their stress and isolation increases (Lynch, 2008; Schleofer, 2012).

Motherhood often clashes with academic and financial demands leaving mothers to consider dropping out of their graduate programs altogether (Lynch, 2008; Robinson, 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). Faculty could offer a network of supports for graduate student mothers, yet institutional support is lacking for these students (Katz, 2013; Kulp, 2016; Lynch, 2008; Robinson, 2016; Van Stone et al., 1994). Therefore, faculty may not be aware of the resources or services available to properly advise graduate student mothers to get them the support they need. Graduate student mothers also value institutional financial support options as they are more apt to finance their graduate education through personal means or taking on loans (Kulp, 2016; Robinson, 2016). Other institutional supports important for graduate student mothers are resources to ease time-management burdens, such as flexible child-care options (Robinson, 2016), part-time enrollment options, and parental leave options (Lynch, 2008; Theisen et al., 2018). Although decreasing their academic load or taking a leave may ease the pressure off for graduate student mothers to function in their multiple roles, there is a detrimental trade-off. Extending time in school equates to graduate student mothers incurring more student debt and having to put their career goals on hold (Theisen et al., 2018).

Online Learning Environment

The online learning environment is a feature of the distance education mode of learning versus the traditional on-campus mode of learning. Students who attend

distance learning institutions access their courses online via the Web using an online

learning management system such as Blackboard (Heirdsfield, Walker, Tambyah, &

Beutel, 2011). These systems offer a virtual classroom that facilitates student and

instructor synchronous and asynchronous communication using announcements,

discussion forums, email, and chat (Herdsfield et al., 2011).

Distance learning is becoming an increasingly popular and valuable alternative to

traditional learning on campus. Over seven million college students are online learners

(Allen & Seamen, 2014), and the growth in online enrollment has surpassed that of

traditional on-campus enrollment (Allen & Seamen, 2014; Johnson, 2010).

Single Mothers Learning Online

Online learning has many benefits for single mothers wanting to further their

education. Because many single mothers work in the service sector, their schedules vary,

making it difficult to attend traditional programs with set class schedules (Gatta, 2004).

Online learning essentially brings the classroom to the student at a time convenient to the

student, thus eliminating the cost-intensive barrier of commuting and the time-intensive

barrier of having to attend class onsite at specific times.

However, online distance education is not without its challenges for single

mothers. Gatta (2004) found that time management, accessing a flexible workspace,

feelings of social isolation, lack of instructor communication, computer technical issues,

and a lack of knowledge on information technology hindered their successful online

learning experiences. Despite these hindrances associated with online learning, Gatta

also found that single mothers who were online students reported increased self-confidence and positive role modeling for their children.

Convenience and flexibility are great motivators for students in the online learning environment (Kim & Frick, 2011). The student-centered quality of online learning allows students control over their learning environments (Guerrero- Roldán & Nogeura, 2018). Consistent across the literature, a large concern for single mothers attending traditional college was the conflict between going to class, studying, and caring for their children (Cerven, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Robinson, 2016; Wilson, 2014).

The online learning environment is characterized by limited social interaction, and although this was reported to be a negative aspect of online learning (Gatta, 2004), the benefit is that the virtual communication aspect of online learning creates an anonymous space that provides students the ability to be cautious with what they disclose personally to their peers (Buchanan, Wilson, & Gopal, 2008). This is convenient for single mothers who enroll in college to defy the single mother stereotype (Katz, 2013; Patton, 2012), yet reported feeling unwelcomed by instructors and received harsh comments from peers (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Duquaine-Watson, 2017).

Academic Success/Progress

By convention, academic success is defined by academic progress or achievement and determined by traditional grading protocols (LeSavoy, 2010). Historically, college student success has been predicted by measures of aptitude, grade point average (GPA), and standardized achievement testing (Prevatt et al., 2011). Students who are making

academic progress generally means that they are meeting minimal grade requirements to proceed through their programs to earn a degree. Academic progress/success in this qualitative study was determined by the rate that students are advancing through their program (i.e., the successful completion of credits versus time spent in their academic program) and their own perceptions.

Researchers have shown interest in examining factors that predict academic success. Among university students enrolled in a distance learning program, Kirmizi (2013) found that academic motivation was an important predictor of their success. Putwain, Sander, and Larkin (2013) found that students with greater academic self-efficacy in their first semester had continued academic success throughout their first year. Putwain et al. (2013) concluded that students in a university setting who are highly self-efficacious in their study beliefs and behaviors are also more likely to be academically successful. In a longitudinal study measuring the influence of social support on GPA trends, Cheng, Ickes, and Verhofstadt (2012) found that the female students with higher levels of family social support had more stable GPAs over time. This seems to suggest that students who feel supported by their families in their academic work remain successful throughout their program.

Academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support consistently relate to the academic success of post-secondary students. However, researchers have yet to determine if the same relationships exist for graduate student single mothers learning online. Single mothers are a non-traditional population of learners that due to their single-parent status, carry into the college classroom a plethora of demands outside of

academic demands. They face social (Duquaine-Watson 2017; Lashley & Ollivierre, 2014;Lynch, 2008), institutional (Freeman, 2014; Katz, 2013; Pare, 2010), and economic (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Hinton-Smith, 2016; Lovell, 2014; Robinson, 2016) barriers. Nevertheless, their enrollment in college has increased (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010) and they can be successful (Freeman, 2014; Killinger et al., 2013). For those single mother students receiving government economic aid, they are under time limits to join the job market (Herbst, 2013; Katz, 2013). Because single mothers' higher functioning relies on their academic success, it was important to learn what influences their success to disseminate to others how to succeed.

In the current study, I examined what factors impact the academic success of graduate student single mothers attending online degree programs. Specifically, I looked at their academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support factors. I also explored obstacles that single mothers face and what factors they use to cope with obstacles to understand how they manage their lives and keep up their momentum of achievement and persistence. In the following sections, I introduce and discuss the background literature for each factor to provide an understanding of their roles in the proposed study and, based on prior research, how these factors pertain to the current study's population and the research setting.

Social Support

Social support is typically characterized into four types: emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support (Meriläinen, Puhakka, & Sinkkonen, 2015). Emotional support is support that is compassionate and trustworthy

(Fernandez-Gonzalez, Gonzalez-Hernandez, & Trianes-Torres, 2015; Munich, 2014). An example of emotional support is someone who provides unconditional understanding of another's feelings (Garcia-Martin, Hombrados-Mendieta, & Gomez-Jacinto 2016). Instrumental support is support that is tangible (Meriläinen, Puhakka, & Sinkkonen, 2015). An example of receiving instrumental support is someone who assists another with providing their time, money, food, or a ride to an appointment, etc. (Garcia-Martin et al., 2016). Informational support is support in the form of guidance (Garcia-Martin et al., 2016). An example of informational support is someone who helps with the use of information (Garcia-Martin 2016). In his research, Pintrich (2004) discussed the importance of socially interacting through learning and included help-seeking as part of his framework which can be alluded to a type of informational support. According to Pintrich, help-seeking is characterized as a behavioral strategy whereas one can regulate their need for academic support within the context of the classroom such as soliciting help from peers and instructors. Along the same lines as informational support is appraisal support. Appraisal support is support that is derived from praise and positive feedback (Munich, 2014).

The research on the importance of social support having a positive effect on single mother students' educational experiences goes back decades. Whereas married women in college have reported that their main source of support was spousal, graduate student single mothers have reported their main support system revolved around a network of family and peers (Duran, 2008; Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Schlehofer, 2012). In their research on undergraduate African American single mothers' strengths and barriers

for their college experiences, Lashley and Ollivierre (2014) found social support to be the second strongest strength theme for the mothers while navigating academia and balancing their multiple roles. The mothers reported that their main source of support was from immediate family. It was also found that the mothers being willing and open to ask, accept, and receive support was important to their social-emotional development.

Social relationships with family, peers, and faculty play a role in college students' academic motivation. In a qualitative study on the experiences of non-traditional single mother students re-entering higher education, Filipponi-Berarderilli (2013) reported that despite facing barriers of guilt feelings, role conflicts, and social expectations, the ability for the women to be part of a community motivated them to strategize their success. However, this is not the case for online learning; establishing a sense of community and social connectedness in the online classroom is a challenge for students (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2010). Online students reportedly miss the social interactions and social cues that traditional students learning face-to-face have in their courses (Van Tryon & Bishop, 2009).

In some cases, social support has been found to be both a positive and negative aspect of pursuing higher education. Cerven (2013) reported that emotional support from family and peers acted as a major support network for encouraging low-income single mothers' access to college. However, there were also instances that significant others restricted single mothers from college, spurring feelings of a loss of identity and a lack of personal control in the women. Robinson (2016) found that due to specific conditions created by family, support was more harmful than helpful as it caused additional stress

and anxiety for one graduate student single mother who in turn, had to abandon her graduate studies.

Academic Motivation

Academic motivation is described as a drive for behavior regarding academics and the reasons (i.e., motivations) behind individuals pursuing their education (Vallerand et al., 1992). According to Hegarty (2011), previous research on motivation and education has focused on finding the types of motivation among diverse student populations and its relation to individual intelligence. However, researchers have recently discovered that motivation and student success were less influenced by intelligence, and more by how students approach academic tasks and their attainment of mastery and performance goals (Hegarty, 2011). Researchers found that students' mastery goal attainment was intrinsically motivated and experiential, whereas performance goal attainment was extrinsically motivated (Hegarty, 2011).

Hines (2004) found that single mothers who are enrolled in higher education are more motivated to reach their academic goals if they have a strong support network of friends to help them balance school and motherhood. According to Hines (2004), social support provides single mothers the encouragement for a better way of life, so they can pursue an education, work towards a career, and ultimately cycle out of poverty. These findings suggest that social support may lead to academic motivation.

Academic Self-Efficacy

The term self-efficacy has its foundation in Bandura's social cognitive theory (Cassidy, 2012). In social cognitive theory, self-efficacy purports that self-perceptions of

personal control over knowledge and skills enhance performance (Cassidy, 2012).

Individuals perceive their sense of self-efficacy based on their competence to perform

behaviors to an expected outcome. Self-efficacy affects people's judgments of their

effort to participate in activities as well as their persistence (Wigfield, Klauda, &

Cambria, 2011). Self-efficacy is also based on an individual's perception of how

confident they are to execute a response to specific tasks. Researchers reported that self-

efficacy and self-confidence are closely related constructs, yet self-efficacy is an overall

self-belief built upon the confidence to master each new skill (Kim & Frick, 2011;

Wigfield et al., 2011).

Academic self-efficacy is defined as a student's perceived competence to take

upon the tasks related to the rigors of post-secondary education (Soria & Stebelton,

2013). Students who perceive a strong sense of academic self-efficacy overcome the

obstacles that are a threat to their academic success (Soria & Stebelton, 2013). Academic

self-efficacy is also linked to social support. King, Wu, and Niranjan (2014) examined

the relationship between social support and academic self-efficacy among freshman and

sophomore traditional college students. King et al. (2014) found that the students'

amount of social support positively correlated with their feelings of academic self-

efficacy. The students reported their most important types of support were parental, peer,

and institutional support. Students who felt they had a large support network also

perceived themselves to have high academic self-efficacy and vice-versa.

Academic self-efficacy has been found to be a predictor of student success and

even more indicative of student performance as students move forward through their

studies (Galyon, Blondin, Yaw, Nails, & Williams, 2012). In a longitudinal study, Cassidy (2012) researched academic self-efficacy among a cohort of second- and third-year research methods students. Cassidy found significant increases in the students' perceived academic self-efficacy and GPA from first year throughout their last year of study. Cassidy also found that students' academic self-efficacy positively and significantly correlated with their final year degree dissertation marks.

Jackson et al. (2012) assessed academic self-efficacy, motivation, and social support as predictors for college performance among undergraduate students enrolled in a psychology course. Consistent with Van Stone et al.'s (1994) findings, all variables were positively correlated and greatly influenced students' grade point average (GPA). Results also showed a mediating relationship between social support, motivation, and self-efficacy on performance. The researchers concluded that higher education students who are supported by friends, family, and their community are more apt to gain the confidence beliefs and motivation to influence higher GPAs.

Stress and Coping

Over time, the concept of stress has been identified through measures of daily hassles and life events (DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988). According to Lazarus, DeLongis, Folkman, and Gruen's (1985) research on stress and coping, stress is described as a relational concept between an individual and their environment, whereby an individual when faced with a situation, processes the situation to assess whether it is relevant or not to be stressful and if stressful, reacts with ways they know to engage in coping. When faced with a stressful experience, an individual makes a primary appraisal

of their well-being and a secondary appraisal of whether the demands of the person-environment encounter exceeds their resources to cope or mitigate the stress situation (Folkman, Bernstein, & Lazarus, 1987). Stressful encounters are typically characterized by cognitive appraisals of harm/loss, threat, or challenge (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) and emotional appraisals of anxiety, worry, sadness, anger, guilt, fear, or shame (Folkman et al., 1987; Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, & Novacek, 1987).

Although graduate students see themselves as possessing leadership qualities, and being goal-oriented, and self-reliant (Bonifas & Napoli, 2014), they still succumb to academic pressure. Graduate student life is well-known for being a tumultuous experience (Haynes et al., 2012). As a result, graduate students report psychological, and social stressors (Abel, Abel, & Smith, 2012; Haynes et al., 2012; Olson-Garriott, Garriott, Rigali-Oiler & Chao, 2015). The more competitive the graduate program, the more threat to a student's self-concept that takes a toll on their emotional and physical well-being (Rummell, 2015).

Graduate students have described their graduate school experience as being one of the most stressful aspects of their lives across all their years in school (Rummell, 2015). Their stress is attributed to academic aspects (Brownson, Drum, Swanbrow Becker, Saathoff, & Hentschel, 2016; Sandover, Jonas-Dwyer, & Marr, 2015), social aspects (Rummell, 2015) and financial aspects (Olson-Garriott et al., 2015). Graduate students also experience stress from dealing with multiple role conflicts and social expectations; add on parenting responsibilities, and female students report increased levels of stress and dissatisfaction in both their mother and student roles (Brown et al., 2016; Haynes et al.,

2012). Burdens from financial stress disconnect graduate students from their social

relationships (Olson-Garriott et al., 2015). Furthermore, the financial stress has long-term

effects because it impacts graduate students' ability to securely plan for their future

(Olson-Garriott et al., 2015). These findings are ironic, considering students are likely to

pursue higher education for professional competence and socio-economic betterment for

their families.

Unfortunately, self-care is not a priority for graduate students (Bonifas & Napoli,

2014; Olson-Garriott et al., 2015), and barriers exist that impede their ability to cope.

According to Folkman et al. (1987), coping refers to cognitive and behavioral actions that

are emotion-focused and problem-focused that a person uses as a resource to manage

stressful events. Graduate students report barriers to cope are problems related to time

and financial demands, problems with confidentiality, and feeling shame, guilt, or

embarrassment (El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawagdeh, & Rufka, 2012; Olson-Garriott et al.,

2015). For graduate students who do use their coping mechanisms, two types of coping

are common throughout the research literature: emotion-focused coping and problem-

focused coping (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986).

Graduate students report more emotion-focused coping strategies such as social support

and entertainment (Chun & Poole, 2009), alcohol (Melnyk et al., 2016), exercise (El-

Ghoroury et al., 2012), religion (Sandover et al., 2015), and denial or avoidance (Olson-

Garriott et al., 2015). The problem-focused coping strategies that graduate students

reportedly use are planning and taking action (Sandover et al., 2015).

Due to stress, graduate students endure serious emotional (Haynes et al., 2012) and psychosomatic difficulties (Robinson, 2016; Rummell, 2015) that impact their overall well-being (Melnyk et al., 2016), detracts from their academic performance and impacts their ability to fully complete their programs (Ismail, Ashur, Jamil, Lee, & Mustafa, 2016). In some cases, researchers discovered that graduate students experience debilitating depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Rummell, 2015). Because psychological distress (Melnyk et al, 2016; Rummell, 2015) has been found to be most prominent among students early on in their graduate programs, it is important for graduate students to take a preventative approach toward stress and coping so they can persist and be academically successful.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of graduate student single mothers to gain an in-depth understanding of factors influencing their academic success, with a focus on their motivation, self-efficacy, and social support. The study also explored barriers and the methods they employ to cope and overcome barriers in their online education program. There is little research on graduate student single mothers and success. The present study filled a gap in the literature by identifying factors that facilitate or impede the academic success of graduate student single mothers with a special focus on their motivation, self-efficacy and social support; factors that are linked to achievement but were yet to be explored among a population of non-traditional graduate student single mothers in an online learning environment. The research study also explored factors that are barriers to single mothers' academic success and identified

strategies they use to cope and overcome these barriers. Due to the nature of their single-parent status, single mothers report stressors related to finances (Hinton-Smith, 2016), time management (Duran, 2008; Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Katz, 2013), child-care (Lynch, 2008; Robinson, 2016) and social stigma (Duquaine-Watson, 2007) that negatively affects their well-being (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). These stressors coupled with academic demands make it difficult for them to manage and in turn, they become dissatisfied with their mother and student roles (Haynes et al., 2012), and doubt their ability to achieve and continue in school (Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2017; Katz, 2013).

Females are outpacing males in their enrollment in higher education, and their enrollment is projected to increase (McFarland et al., 2017). However, the problem remains that students who are also single mothers are more likely to have lower completion rates and discontinuous enrollment due to the many obstacles they face (Freeman, 2014; Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010; Graham & Dugan-Bassett, 2012; Lynch, 2008; Robinson, 2016). Consequently, it is difficult for single mother students to meet their academic goals. Being limited in their ability to be successful is a significant problem because single-mother families are also the most likely to be living in poverty (Cerven, 2013; U.S. Census, 2016). Their underachievement is detrimental both individually and collectively. A college education is necessary to empower single mothers with the skills they need to apply in a competitive job market, bring their lives to a higher standard and build economically stronger communities. A college education is also an opportunity for single mothers to create a legacy for their children.

The findings from this research would benefit single mothers who are uncertain about their ability to thrive in graduate school by showing the experiences of others that success is possible. The study would also be of interest to educators and higher education decision-makers who create policies within their institutions to facilitate supports for single mother students to help them persist and graduate. Lastly, given the scarcity of research on online graduate student single mothers, the study extended the literature by providing an in-depth examination of their academic experiences. Chapter 3 provides a description of the study's research design and methodology including the procedures for data collection and analysis.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of the present study was to explore the lived experiences of graduate student single mothers attending an online education program to describe factors influencing their academic success, with a focus on their motivation, self-efficacy, and social support. I also explored barriers to their success and the methods they employed to cope with and overcome barriers. In this chapter, I will describe the study's research design and methodology, my role and ethical responsibilities, the procedures for data collection and data analysis, and procedures for establishing qualitative validity and reliability.

Research Design and Rationale

Given the complexities involving the lives of single mothers and that higher education can be particularly transformative for these women, the study sought to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of single mothers pursuing their graduate degrees online. There is limited research exploring female graduate students and their motivation, self-efficacy, and social support in terms of academic success, especially among nontraditional student populations like single mothers. Because of the limited research, the study was qualitative, using a phenomenological inquiry to capture in-depth accounts of experiences involving achieving an advanced degree despite obstacles associated with being a single mother.

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program?

RQ2: How do graduate student single mothers in an online program describe their academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support, and the role of these factors in facilitating their academic success?

RQ3: What are the barriers to academic success identified by single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program?

RQ4: What coping methods do single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program describe as useful to overcoming barriers to success?

Creswell (2014) described three types of research approaches: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Creswell characterized qualitative research as exploratory and inductive, focusing on subjective interpretation of meaning. In comparison, quantitative research is deductive and focuses on testing variables using objective measures and statistical procedures (Creswell, 2014). Mixed methods research integrates the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods in a sequential manner (Creswell, 2014). For this study, I used a qualitative phenomenological approach.

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a method. The roots of phenomenology stem from the works of philosopher Edmund Husserl who founded the transcendental phenomenology movement in the early 20th century. Transcendental phenomenology is epistemological and focuses on the principles of intentionality, consciousness, and eidetic description (Usher & Jackson, 2014). Over time, other philosophers such as Martin

Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Simone de Bouvier made modifications to transcendental phenomenology. These individuals believed phenomenology to be an interpretive endeavor rather than purely descriptive (Usher & Jackson, 2014). Thus, the existential phenomenology movement was formed. Existential phenomenology is ontological in orientation and shifted Husserl's notion of a phenomenology of consciousness to a phenomenology of being-in-the-world, called Dasein (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013). A concept of transcendental phenomenology is the epoché process, which according to Moustakas (1994) is an important step in phenomenological inquiry as it helps to guard against prejudgments and biases on the part of the researcher. I used the epoché process in this study as a method to help with any biases and maintain an attitude free of assumptions so as not to corrupt the research data.

Due to the variety of obstacles that single mothers face, their pathways to academic success are not all the same, nor are their opportunities for earning a degree. The research tradition chosen for the study was qualitative with a phenomenological design instead of quantitative. A qualitative approach was the best fit to address the study's research questions as they are open-ended and formulated to explore factors rather than closed-ended hypotheses formulated to measure variables. Furthermore, according to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is useful to understand commonalities among individual experiences. To capture authentic and accurate descriptions of the phenomenon, it was more suitable and valuable for the research to represent single mothers' experiences qualitatively with words rather than quantitatively with numbers.

Role of the Researcher

My role in the study was as the primary researcher. As the primary researcher, my role involved recruiting and selecting the participants, designing the interview protocol, acquiring participants' informed consent, conducting interviews with participants, recording and transcribing participant interviews, organizing and managing the interview data, and completing data analysis steps for interpretation of common themes found in the research.

For a period of life when I was young, I was the daughter of a single mother. As her only child, I experienced firsthand my mother's struggles with raising me alone while having to balance working two jobs. We frequently moved from apartments or stayed with family when finances were lacking. When I got older, she would tell me how important it is that I go to college, earn a degree, and become self-sufficient. She felt she became a mother too young and because of timing, she missed her opportunity for higher education. Because of my personal history, I have a connection with the research, which could lead to biased opinions and in turn biased results. Conversely, my sincere awareness of the potential to be biased also led me to take measures to manage these biases and guard against them.

From the start of the research study, I clarified my potential for bias by using qualitative strategies of self-reflection and self-dialogue through journaling. Moustakas (1994) said that self-dialogue is a process of self-discovery and puts the researcher on a path of authenticity. Further, according to Moustakas, engaging in self-dialogue is critical in preparing the researcher to free their mind of any preconceived ideas and

inquire about an unknown phenomenon. Another strategy found in the qualitative literature that a researcher can take to guard against bias is the concept of bracketing, otherwise known as the epoché process. The tactics of self-reflection and self-dialogue carry into the epoché process. Through diligent practice of the epoché process, I attempted to reach a state of mindfulness and be in the moment in order to free myself of any presupposed beliefs throughout data collection, analysis, and interpretation procedures.

Methodology

Participant Select Logic

The population for this study was single mothers who are head of their household and the sole caretakers of their dependent children ages birth through 18, and who are graduate students actively enrolled in a master's degree or doctoral degree program in an online university where their coursework is completed fully online. Because the objective of the study was to capture the essence of single mothers' unique and individual experiences of academic success in their graduate work, participants were selected using a non-probability, purposeful sampling method. This type of sampling method is important in qualitative research to strengthen the credibility of the study (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013).

Participant inclusion criteria were that the participant must: (a) be over 18 years of age, single, unmarried, head of the household, female, (b) be actively enrolled as a graduate student in an online university master's or doctoral program for a minimum of one year, (c) be able to read, write, and speak fluent English, (d) be a mother and sole

caretaker of dependent children under the age of 18 and currently live in the same household only with their dependent children, and be willing to consent to fully partake in the data collection efforts required for the study. To make sure participants met the inclusion criteria, a short demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) was given to individuals who showed interest in participating that outlined the criteria and collected basic information about each participant. Besides the study criteria information on this questionnaire, other basic information included the participant's age, type of current academic program, years enrolled in current academic program, academic progress or GPA, previous enrollment in another graduate program, ages of dependent children, number of dependent children living in the household, employment status, type of employment, and socioeconomic status.

I aimed for a sample size of a minimum of 12 to 15 participants to guard against the possibility of attrition and address data saturation. Because the objective of the study was more exploratory in its nature and included a population that has homogenous elements, a smaller sample size was appropriate (Johnnie, 2012). Furthermore, the typical sample size for studies using a phenomenology research design ranges from as small as three participants (Creswell, 2014) to as many as 10 participants (Creswell, 2014; Johnnie, 2012). Walden University was chosen as the main research setting for two reasons. First, the researcher is a Walden dissertation student, which makes data collection convenient because of greater accessibility to participants who fit the population needed for the study. Second, Walden is an online-only higher education institution, which fits the inclusion criteria for participant selection. For the purposeful

sampling method, once Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted (approval #10-16-180154161), participants were recruited via the Walden University Online participant pool. The Walden participant pool is a virtual bulletin board where Walden University researchers create an account and post their studies to connect with potential participants within the Walden University community. After approval, I posted my study announcement to the participant bulletin board (see Appendix B). For the snowball sampling method, I asked the participant pool participants for a referral of others who met the study's criteria and asked them to share my contact information.

Instrumentation

I developed two instruments for data collection, which included a close-ended demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) and a semi structured interview protocol (see Appendix C). The demographic questions were designed to provide a descriptive summary of the characteristics of the participants that are presented in a detailed table format in Chapter 4. The semi-structured interview questions were designed to provide data for answering the research questions. The interviews were designed to last approximately 60-90 minutes and included non-leading, open-ended questions used to encourage experience and a depth of response from participants. However, if a participant's response became too broad or off-topic, I redirected the conversation back to the interview questions. If a participant's response needed further clarification, I prompted them to expand on their response.

Because Walden University is a virtual school setting, participants recruited from the Walden University participant pool were interviewed using Skype for Business,

which is available for free to all Walden Students. Using Skype for Business allowed the

participants to be interviewed in a place that was convenient and private. To ensure

credibility for the qualitative analysis, I recorded all participant interviews. There was no

paraphrasing or reframing of the interview content; the interview protocol was

standardized and used for each participant. I emailed a summary of each participant's

interview to them for member checking to verify the accuracy of the interview data.

My basis for developing the instruments was guided by sources on in-depth

qualitative interviewing. To achieve content validity, I was careful to draft the content of

each interview question to be consistent with the objective of the research question it was

developed to elicit a response for. I also incorporated key words and terms in the

interview questions that would elicit a response that follows the study's

phenomenological approach (see Appendix C).

The interview questions were designed to explore: (a) a day in the life of a

graduate student single mother, (b) factors that facilitate student success, (c) experiences

with barriers and difficulties, and (d) strategies utilized for coping with difficulties. I

opened the interview process with a vignette-type question to gain rapport and closed the

interview process with a question to gather any additional insight from the participant. I

also included follow-up questions as prompts for an enriched response (see Appendix C).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Once I received approval from the Walden University IRB, I posted the study on

the Walden University participant pool website. Participation in the study was voluntary.

The informed consent document (see Appendix D) was provided to participants

electronically through the Walden University participant pool. I contacted individuals

who chose to participate and met the screening criteria through email. The first point of

contact with participants was to set up a date and time to discuss any questions they

might have, reconfirm they met the inclusion criteria, and to set up a date and time for the

interview. Prior to the interview, I asked if there were any questions about the informed

consent form and made sure that I had an electronically signed form before the interview

began.

I was the only one conducting and recording the participant interviews. The

tentative timeline for the interviews was two to four weeks, averaging three to five 60-90-

minute interviews per participant, per week. Once each interview was completed, I

verified the contact information for each participant and explained follow-up steps. Once

all the interviews were conducted, I prepared a summary of each of the participants'

responses that they could review for member checking and offer any additional ideas. I

emailed the summaries to the participants and advised them to contact me with any

corrections or additions to their responses within a week of receiving the email. In the

email, I also asked participants if they would like me to contact them with the results of

the study. If they were not interested in learning the study's results, there was no further

contact.

Data Analysis Plan

The data were analyzed using the phenomenological research tradition. Per

Senter and Caldwell (2002), a phenomenological investigation involves gathering

descriptions from individuals who are living in or have lived in the experience, analyzing

the descriptions to get a hold of common elements, and bringing together a report that articulates what the individuals described of the experience. To foster reflexivity and be one with the experience that I am attending to, I hand-coded the raw data. The interview questions were specifically developed to collect deep and meaningful responses from participants that connected the data with the pertinent research questions. I also looked closely at patterns in the data and clarified any contradicting data by including those discrepant cases in the findings.

Data analysis was guided by a transcendental phenomenological model proposed by Moustakas (1994). I started with the epoché process in preparation to silence my mind and free myself of preconceived thoughts, ideas, or biases on the phenomenon under study. I used bracketing which is interchangeable with the epoché process; bracketing facilitates reflection through memoing or journaling, allowing the researcher to set aside assumptions and remain objective as they attend to the task of capturing the essence of the lived experience.

Once I transcribed the interview data, the first phase of analysis was to organize the data. This was done by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and memoing any interesting details that emerged both from the data and my own thoughts. I followed Moustakas' (1994) model for data analysis. The model has eight steps that are grouped within transcendental-phenomenological reduction procedures, imaginative variation procedures, and synthesis procedures. I began with a step in transcendental-phenomenological reduction, listing and preliminary grouping of the data and noting every relevant expression to the experience called horizontalization. The significant

statements or horizons of data representative of the phenomenon was given equal value

and linked for a thematic description of the essence of the single mothers' experiences.

The second step in transcendental-phenomenological reduction is reduction and

elimination, reducing the data to distinguish the horizons that are texturally meaningful

and eliminating irrelevant statements to determine the invariant constituents of the

phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The final two steps of transcendental-

phenomenological reduction are clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents of

the phenomenon and developing the individual textural meaning (what) of the experience

for each participant. Following the transcendental-phenomenological reduction

procedures is imaginative variation. The first step of imaginative variation is developing

the individual structural meaning (how) of the experience for each participant to

determine structural themes that are rooted in the textural meanings of each participant's

experience (Moustakas, 1994). Next in the model is an imaginative variation step for the

researcher to develop a description of the textural-structural meanings for each

participant to reach the essence of their own experiences. The last step in Moustakas's

(1994) model is the synthesis step, developing composite textural descriptions and

composite structural descriptions to integrate the meanings and essences into one

collective experience for all participants.

<div style="text-align:center">**Issues of Trustworthiness**</div>

According to Creswell (2014), it is the role of the qualitative researcher to put into

place strategies for both validating the accuracy of the research findings and for

ascertaining research credibility. Credibility is the counterpart of validity in quantitative

research (Birks, 2014). To ascertain qualitative credibility, I recorded the participant interviews for accurate transcriptions and summarized the interview data for member checking of accurate findings. Dependability and confirmability are the counterparts of reliability in quantitative research (Birks, 2014). To ensure qualitative dependability, I used triangulation of methods such as note-taking along with interviewing multiple participants for varied descriptive perspectives. Gathering data from multiple perspectives will also strengthen the study's transferability and quality of the research (Golafshani, 2003). Another method I used for qualitative dependability is an audit trail (Birks, 2014), which provides documentation of the research process for transparency purposes. The epoché is also a method I used to strengthen qualitative dependability and confirmability as its reflective process helps the researcher to remain objective and transparent (Moustakas, 1994).

The qualitative trustworthiness criterion includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers also refer to these as concerns of truth, value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality that validate a research study (Anney, 2014). To establish qualitative credibility I: (a) recorded all interviews and transcribe them verbatim, (b) used member-checking for accuracy, (c) triangulated data by using interviews from multiple participants until the point of data saturation and by comparing the findings to existing research literature, (d) used reflexivity by employing a bracketing method called journaling to maintain a clear mindset and keep a neutral stance throughout the research process, and (e) sought out

scholarly support from the members of my dissertation committee and from peers in my dissertation course throughout the research process.

To establish qualitative transferability, I used purposeful sampling for selecting participants, elucidated all facets of the research study, and collected thick descriptive data from participants (Anney, 2014). For the study to be replicated, I established qualitative dependability by maintaining an audit trail to keep track of the raw data, used notetaking and journaling during data collection, and documented the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Golafshani, 2003). To establish qualitative confirmability, I was the key instrument for data collection and data analysis. Also, I used reflexive journaling as a strategy to establish confirmability (Anney, 2014) which also supports the epoché process, another confirmability strategy (Moustakas, 1994).

Ethical Procedures

It is also the role of the researcher to be morally and ethically responsible to uphold a research study's integrity (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008). According to Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008), an ethical researcher is also an educated one on responsible conduct in research. Because my doctoral degree is in psychology, I researched the American Psychological Association's website for information on the responsible conduct of research. Other ethical considerations I took was to follow Walden University's IRB guidelines, apply the informed consent process for participants, maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality by using a coding procedure during data collection, maintaining a description of the research procedures, and protecting and storing the data for a minimum of 5 years.

The ethical considerations for the study were to maintain anonymity, confidentiality, and integrity. Prior to the IRB application process, I completed the Human Research Protections training and renewed my certification with the National Institutes of Health as required by the Walden IRB. Data collection only started once I received approval from Walden's IRB. To minimize any potential issue of coercion, participation for the study was voluntary, and participants were made aware of this during the consent process. Participants were provided an informed consent form prior to their participation. The consent form described the purpose of the study, why the participant was chosen, procedures, risks and benefits, confidentiality, and advised them of their choice to participate and contact information for me. An additional plan to maintain the confidentiality of participants was to not provide participant names with the data; instead, I assigned each participant a number such as P1, P2, etc. I was the only one in contact with the participants and completing the data collection and analysis procedures. To maintain data integrity and confidentiality, I kept an audit trail, stored the raw data in a password-protected computer file, and transferred the raw data to an external drive that was locked away in a filing cabinet at my home office. All data will be maintained for five years and then destroyed. I am the only person to have access to the data.

Participants for this study were not considered a vulnerable group. However, I took steps to minimize the risks and protect the participants' welfare. I was aware that discussing the experiences of being a single mother could be a stressful event and trigger a negative emotional response. While this did not occur, I was prepared to take the time from the interview to provide reassurance to the participant until she felt emotionally

secure to continue. There are no known conflicts of interest and a conflict of interest did

not occur though I was prepared to bring any issues to the attention of my dissertation

committee chair as well as the Walden IRB.

Summary

This chapter was focused on the methodology of the research study. Using a

phenomenological approach, the study's purpose was to explore the lived experiences of

graduate student single mothers attending an online education program to describe factors

influencing their academic success, with a focus on their motivation, self-efficacy, and

social support. The study also explored barriers to their success and the methods they

employ to cope and overcome barriers. Chapter 3 included a discussion of the study's

participant selection, sampling strategies, and procedures for recruitment. Next, I

discussed sources of data collection which were semi structured and open-ended

interviews, and how the participant interview questions, which were the main data

collection tool, were designed to elicit responses to answer the research questions in the

phenomenological tradition. Furthermore, I provided the plan for the procedures for

participant data collection and follow up. Following the information on participant

recruitment and data collection, I provided the procedures for data analysis, which was

Moustakas' transcendental eight-step phenomenological model. I concluded the chapter

with information on qualitative validity and reliability, which is known collectively as

trustworthiness. I also discussed the different ethical considerations regarding both the

study's participants and the research process. In Chapter 4, I reiterate the data collection

and analysis procedures, discuss and display the research findings, and provide

information on the strategies to instill evidence that the study's findings are trustworthy.

The strategies taken to establish trustworthiness include qualitative dependability,

credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of graduate student single mothers attending an online education program to describe factors influencing their academic success, with a focus on their motivation, self-efficacy, and social support. The purpose was also to explore barriers to their success and the methods they employ to cope and overcome barriers. The study used a phenomenological research design and was guided using the lens of two conceptual frameworks, Pintrich's motivational self-regulated learning model for achievement and Duckworth's model on the psychology of achievement called grit. A sample size of 10 participants provided in-depth responses to one-on-one semi structured interviews that answered the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program?

RQ2: How do graduate student single mothers in an online program describe their academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support, and the role of these factors in facilitating their academic success?

RQ3: What are the barriers to academic success identified by single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program?

RQ4: What coping methods do single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program describe as useful to overcoming barriers to success?

Chapter 4 begins with an introduction reiterating the study's purpose, conceptual frameworks, and research questions. Next is a detailed description of the study's setting, participant demographic data, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 concludes with information on the study's findings, evidence of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability), and the study's results.

Setting

Data were collected through one-on-one recorded online interviews with participants via Skype for Business. Participants were recruited through a post on Walden University's participant pool website, a recruitment announcement post on varied Facebook and LinkedIn social media groups created specifically for online graduate students, and snowball sampling. Recruitment procedures started in November 2018, and data collection was slow. In November 2018, one participant was recruited and interviewed; in December 2018, two participants were recruited and interviewed; in January 2019, one participant was recruited and interviewed; in April 2019, two participants were recruited and interviewed; in May 2019, three participants were recruited and interviewed; in June 2019, one participant was recruited and interviewed. While interviewing the ninth and tenth participants, it became evident from their responses to the interview questions that data saturation had been met with a total sample size of 10 participants for the study.

Demographics

Participants were over 18 years of age, single, unmarried, head of the household and female, as well as actively enrolled as a graduate student in an online university master's or doctoral program for a minimum of one year, and able to read, write, and speak fluent English. Participants were mothers and sole caretakers of dependent children under the age of 18, and currently lived in the same household only with their dependent children and were willing to consent to fully partake in data collection. To be included in the study, potential participants filled out an online demographic questionnaire designed to be used as a screening tool (see Appendix A).

Besides the study criteria information from the online demographic questionnaire, other basic information collected from the participants included their age, type of current academic program, years enrolled in current academic program, number of credits earned and number of credits needed to complete, GPA, ages of dependent children, number of dependent children living in the household, and socioeconomic status. Prior to completing the online questionnaire screening tool, participants were provided the informed consent form to read and complete. To help keep confidentiality, each participant was assigned a letter and number pseudonym such as P1, P2, and so on.

The sample of 10 participants were adult females living with their dependent children who were heads of household and enrolled for a minimum of 1 year at Walden University. Three participants reported being a single mother for 1 to 5 years; two participants reported being a single mother for 5 to 10 years, and five participants reported being a single mother for 11 to 15 years. Participant ages ranged from 28 to 50

years, with a mean age of 38. Sixty percent of the mothers reported having one

dependent child in their household, and 40% of the mothers reported having two or more

dependent children in their household. The children's ages ranged from 2 to 17 years,

with a mean age of 10. The socioeconomic status of the mothers varied; three

participants reported an annual income of less than $20,000, three participants reported

an annual income between $20,000 and $34,000, two participants reported an annual

income between $35,000 to $49,000, and two participants reported an annual income of

over $50,000 (see Table 1).

Among the participants enrolled in the doctoral degree program, six were in

psychology and counseling, and one was in public health and health sciences. Among the

participants enrolled in the master's degree program, two were in psychology and

counseling, one was in business and management, and one was in social work and human

services. A large portion of the sample had good academic progress; 70% of the

participants reported that their total credits earned was more than their total credits

needed to complete their degrees, and 90% of participants reported their GPA was

between 3.1 and 4.0 (see Table 2).

Table 1

Participant Demographic Household Information

Participant	Age	Years of Single Motherhood	Number Dependent Children	Ages of Dependent Children	Annual Income
P1	32	12	2	12, 7	$35,000-$49,999
P2	49	12	1	11	Less than 20,000
P3	32	8	2	8, 5	$20,000-$34,999
P4	39	11	1	11	$20,000-$34,999
P5	36	7	1	10	$50,000-$74,999
P6	50	15	1	17	Over $100,000
P7	37	15	1	17	$20,000-$34,999
P8	46	5	2	13, 15	Less than $20,000
P9	31	2	3	8, 4, 2	Less than $20,000
P10	28	4	1	5	$35,000-$49,999

Table 2

Participant Demographic Academic Information

Participant	Type of Program Enrolled	Area of Study	Total Credits Earned	Total Credits Needed to Complete	Current GPA
P1	Doctoral	Psychology and Counseling	More than 50	More than 50	3.1-4.0
P2	Doctoral	Public Health and Human Service	More than 50	More than 50	3.1-4.0
P3	Masters	Psychology and Counseling	21-30	More than 50	3.1-4.0
P4	Masters	Social Work and Human Services	41-50	31-40	3.1-4.0
P5	Doctoral	Psychology and Counseling	More than 50	11-20	3.1-4.0
P6	Doctoral	Psychology and Counseling	More than 50	0-10	3.1-4.0
P7	Doctoral	Psychology and Counseling	More than 50	More than 50	3.1-4.0
P8	Masters	Psychology and Counseling	More than 50	11-20	2.1-3.0
P9	Doctoral	Psychology and Counseling	More than 50	11-20	3.1-4.0
P10	Masters	Business and Management	21-30	41-50	3.1-4.0

Data Collection

Once I received approval from the Walden University IRB (# 10-16-180154161),

I posted the study on the Walden University participant pool website. The informed

consent document (see Appendix D) was provided to participants electronically through

the Walden participant pool along with the demographic questionnaire designed to be

used as a screening tool (see Appendix A). Both the informed consent documentation

and demographic questionnaire were created in Qualtrics, an online survey platform, and

linked out from the Walden participant pool posting. In Qualtrics, when an individual

provided consent electronically to participate, they were immediately prompted to

complete the demographic questionnaire screening tool. I logged into Qualtrics regularly

to check for potential participants. Once I saw that a participant provided consent and

fully completed the demographic questionnaire, I emailed them to set up a date and time

to schedule a one-on-one interview. The data collection process took approximately

eight months (November 2018 through June 2019). There was a time frame when data

collection slowed down for approximately three months because there were no

participants joining the study. At that point, I emailed Walden's IRB to ask permission to

extend recruitment methods from the Walden participant pool to Facebook and LinkedIn

groups specific to online graduate students. However, this method did not result in any

other participants joining the study. Data collection finished with a total of 10

participants because data saturation was met.

All 10 participants joined the study through the Walden participant pool and

snowball sampling. The one-on-one interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and were

completed and recorded using Skype for Business, a free online communication software.

Prior to starting the interview, I advised each participant that the interview was being

recorded and inquired if they had any questions. I also took detailed notes during the

interviews with participants to help with encouraging a continuous flow of conversation

rather than having a rigid question and answer type of dialogue. At the end of each

interview, I thanked the participant and advised that I would be emailing a summary of

their interviews called member checks, to verify their responses. As soon as possible

after each interview was completed, I hand-transcribed the interview, summarized the

interview transcription for member checking purposes, and emailed the member checking

summary to each participant; no participants requested changes to the member checking

summaries of their interviews. For confidentiality purposes, I assigned each participant a

number instead of providing their names with the interview data and the interview data

was saved on a personal cloud storage file and transferred to an external drive via a

password-protected computer.

Data Analysis

I started the data analysis process by hand-transcribing each participant interview

and repeatedly reading each transcript to familiarize myself with the data, thinking about

codes, and making notes of particular points. I followed the steps from Moustakas'

(1994) modification of the van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data as a

guide. Beginning with the process of the phenomenological epochè, I suspended any

preconceived ideas I had on the phenomenon being studied for this research. Engaging in

the epochè process was relevant throughout data collection and data analysis for two

reasons. First, the epochè process aided my ability to free my mind of any biases because single motherhood is part of my history, and second, the epochè process aided my ability to use bracketing to prepare for the next steps of phenomenological reduction.

To begin the phase of phenomenological reduction, I completed the first step of listing and preliminary grouping; I started data analysis on each of the 10 interview transcripts with the process of horizonalization, excerpting horizonal statements of the research interview that portrays the action, emotion, or thought of the single mother and her experience as an online graduate student. Stanzas of participant expressions were listed, numbered, and retained. I made a column on the right side of the interview transcripts as a place to make notes of specific points. Line by line, I completed the first layer of coding by highlighting in a different color the participant expressions to the interview questions that corresponded with each research question. For example, I color-coded the participant expressions concerning their academic motivation in yellow font, academic self-efficacy in green font, social support in blue font, barriers in purple font, and coping methods in red font.

My next step in the data analysis process was reduction and elimination. I delaminated the first layer of color-coded data; I reread the participant expressions and tested the data for reduction and elimination criteria to contain the horizons of the experience and to determine the invariant constituents. I completed the second layer of color-coding, further reducing and winnowing the data; I discarded codes that did not relate directly to the study's research questions. I compiled what remained of color-coded data from the 10 responses to each interview question and created one primary

code and its cluster of sub-codes of significant units of meaning, known as the invariant constituents. Next, I completed a third layer of coding; I reviewed and re-reviewed the coded, labeled and categorized invariant constituents. I cross-checked the invariant constituents with each participant interview transcript to validate the coded data for relevancy and compatibility to its assigned category. I created charts to house the labeled and categorized invariant constituents in relation to the study's research questions. I also used the charts as a visual display for mapping out interrelationships. I further reduced the charted data through the process of interweaving, clustering, and sorting according to overarching themes and subthemes for a thematic inquiry into each research question. Once that process was completed, I transferred the charted data onto an Excel spreadsheet. Next, I completed a fourth layer of coding; I went back through the interview data to make sure I coded consistently. I looked for discrepant cases. I extracted individual relevant expressions of data alluding to the relationships between codes, themes, and sub-themes. I completed a data cross-validation check against the interview transcripts and eliminated data that did not meet the criteria for explicit or compatible or relevant expressions of experience. I sorted 119 units of meaning into 36 codes (see Table 3).

Table 3

List of Codes

Code	Code	Code	Code
Mothering	Role Modeling	Financial Stability	Financial Security
Career mobility	Social change	Competence	Career opportunity
Need to achieve	Personal growth	Self-fulfillment	Self-resilience
Spiritual grounding	Stubborn to not quit	Lack of progress	Unclear expectations
Goal directed	Small successes	Faculty expectations	Authenticity
Imposter feelings	Self-regulation	Humor from family	Love from family
Cheering on progress	Employer support	Child-care help	Financial help
Peer advice	faculty advice	Faculty approval	Pet-care help
Peer connections	someone to listen	Problems with time	Finding a balance
Unanticipated costs	Physical health	Mental health	Negative thoughts
Organizational tactics	Positivity	Self-care practice	Negative emotions

Next, I used the function of imagination variation to construct the individual textural and structural descriptions (see Appendix E) of experience. As both a reflective technique and to stay grounded in the data, I constructed a narrative memo of each participant's interview that described the textural *what* and then the structural *how* of their experiences. The narratives encapsulated expressions brought forth from the original interview questions designed to evoke a breadth and depth type of conversation between interviewer and interviewee, or in this context researcher and coresearcher. The textural and structural narratives depicted highlights of the co-researcher experiences in

their own words that I found important for capturing the essence of the experience of

being a single mother and an online graduate student. According to Moustakas (1994),

imagination variation is the step toward integrating the individual textural-structural

descriptions of experience into developing a composite textural-structural description of

experience. The composite description incorporates the invariant constituents and themes

of the coresearchers representing a unified view to understand the meaning of the lived

experiences for the group as one.

Eight themes emerged from the interview data to answer the study's four research

questions: wanting to do better as a mother (subthemes: providing security and stability

and role-modeling achievement), aspects of self-character (subthemes: being an achiever

and using one's personal power), wanting career and professional growth to make social

change, social support, self-efficacy, and motivation interrelated for success, difficulties

managing financial, physical, and emotional wellbeing, (time management issues

bringing about role conflict, using spiritual, social, emotional, personal, and physical self-

care, and using organizational tactics. There were two discrepant cases found among a

couple of responses to specific interview questions from P8 and P10. Although important

to note within the study results, the discrepant data as compared to the majority of other

participant responses to the same interview questions were not enough to contradict the

findings.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, measures to establish validity and reliability, terms used in

quantitative research, are called trustworthiness. Researchers look for trustworthiness

qualities in qualitative research such as credibility (i.e., accuracy), transferability (i.e., generalizability), dependability (consistency), and confirmability (objectivity).

Credibility refers to the accuracy of qualitative research. To establish qualitative credibility, I used the following strategies: First, I recorded and transcribed each participant interviews. Hand-transcribing the interview data helped to maintain researcher integrity. Using member checking, I emailed participants a summary of their interview data and gave them the opportunity to review and validate the information. Then, I triangulated the data by conducting the data collection process until the point of data saturation with 10 participants. I journaled throughout the research process so I could remain in an authentic frame of mind. I obtained thick, rich descriptions of participants experiences using open-ended interviews and used reflective techniques noting important points that stood out to me from the data throughout data collection and data analysis. I clearly documented my research process by providing a comprehensive description regarding how I followed Moustakas' data analysis steps. Furthermore, as part of using Moustakas's literature on phenomenological research, I used the processes of epochè, bracketing, and peer debriefing; I regularly checked in with my dissertation committee and peers for informational support and advice during the research process.

Transferability refers to how generalizable the study is. Generalizability is not a purpose of phenomenological research because it is a study about individual lived experiences and it is geared for smaller sample sizes. However, to establish transferability I used a purposeful sampling method to target a specific population of individuals within a specific setting that matched the criteria for the study, used open-

ended interviews to collect thick, rich descriptive data from participants, and followed a detailed research process and documented the research process step-by-step.

Dependability refers to the reliability of the study. To establish qualitative dependability, I maintained an audit trail of documentation to record the full research process, which included records of the raw data, methodological notes, and reflexive journaling notes. In addition, the member checking procedure I completed for credibility purposes is a strategy for establishing dependability because it characterizes accuracy.

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of the research study. To ascertain confirmability, as described for dependability strategies, I used an audit trail to detail all aspects of the research process. As described for credibility strategies, I used peer debriefing, triangulation, and member-checking strategies. In addition, in part of Moustakas' phenomenological data analysis steps, over a period of a few months, I was regularly re-reading the raw data to confirm my findings. I also documented the verbatim expressions from the participants' interviews as evidence to show authentic means to my findings.

Results

The data collection tool I used was open-ended interviews collected from 10 participants for an in-depth examination into their experiences of being a single mother and an online graduate student. I recorded and hand-transcribed all participant interviews. The study's four research questions guided the 25 interview questions that I used with participants. Data analysis revealed eight themes and subthemes (see Table 4).

Table 4

List of Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme(s)
1. Wanting to do better as a mother	Providing security and stability Role-modeling achievement
2. Aspects of self-character	Being an achiever Using one's personal power
3. Wanting career and professional growth to make social change	
4. Social Support, self-efficacy and motivation interrelate for success	
5. Difficulties managing financial, physical, and emotional well-being	
6. Time management issues bring about role-conflict	
7. Using spiritual, social, emotional, personal, and physical self-care	
8. Using organizational tactics	

Moustakas' (1994) final step of the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis is to develop a composite description of the single mothers' lived experiences being an online graduate student. The composite description is a synthesis of the textural and structural narrative data that represents the group of 10 participants for a universal description of the essence of the lived experience describing what it is like being a single mother and an online graduate student.

Textural-Structural Composite Description

Participants described a day in the life of being a single mother and a graduate student as an overwhelming and tumultuous experience. In their day-to-day life, participants described struggling the most with role-conflict. When asked how being a

student changes their typical day, participants reported that being a student means more added to the to do list and less time to spend with family or on their self-care.

Participants described both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that facilitate their academic motivation. What drives participants intrinsically for academic success is being a role-model for their children, putting their education into practice to make change, engaging in social support, and feeling a sense of accomplishment from the small achievements along their academic journey. What drives participants extrinsically for academic success is the personal and professional rewards the degree will bring, career growth and professional development, and financial stability and security.

As participants move along in their graduate program, most stated their academic motivation gets stronger, and their self-efficacy tends to fluctuate. What makes participants' academic motivation strong is the idea of having opportunity, independence, and self-fulfillment. Many participants felt that getting their degree is something for them that no one can take away. Although expensive and time-consuming, it is a chance for them to be able to do what they want to do and be who they want to be. Overall, participants feel pretty good about their self-efficacy. Their belief in their self-efficacy is rooted in their positive mindset, their strong character traits, and their experiences of working through tough personal and professional situations. However, the regards they have for their self-efficacy can be conflicted when they encounter barriers to their academic progress.

Because they are single mothers, participants feel there is more at stake to earning their degrees. They worry a lot about falling behind, and even the slightest setback can

disrupt their belief system. In the same way, a few participants indicated they struggle with perfectionism and anxiety. One participant described feelings associated with the imposter syndrome. In turn, they become self-discouraged and have thoughts of self-doubt and guilt over the choices they have made and are vulnerable to be their own barrier. When they are feeling low with their confidence, participants look to their resources and support in their educational environment.

Social support was found to be a key component to lead the relationship between participant's academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and academic success. When participants need support, they know whom to call. For instance, when they have had enough and feel like quitting, they look to their family and their peers for instrumental and emotional support. When they need direction to understand their expectations, they look to faculty for informational support and mentorship. When they need advice or friendship, they look to their peers for emotional and informational support.

The role of a single mother is usually synonymous with barriers. This was no different for participants in their role as graduate students. Participants described barriers to their academic success to be associated with time, finances, physical health, and mental health. Although barriers mainly cause difficulties for participants, there was also a positive side. A few participants described how they felt stressed and pressured from their graduate work. However, they also felt there is a purpose behind the pressure, so they view it as positive pressure. Another participant felt her barriers would be worse without graduate school because she would feel more hopelessness and more trapped in her situation.

Participants stated the barriers to their academic success also trickles into their personal life, mostly at home. When they have barriers, participants feel less tolerant of their children. They also feel isolation, self-doubt, exhaustion, and their physical and emotional health suffers. When inquiring whether their barriers exist even when they are on break from courses, most participants stated their barriers never go away. A few of the participants in the master's program felt their barriers with time were lessened. However, their reprieve is limited; these single mothers live busy lives, so for logistical and financial purposes they need to plan accordingly. In this way, whether on a break or not, graduate school is at the forefront of their minds.

To manage their barriers, participants use self-reflection and introspection for stress management. Participants also practice emotional self-regulation for their wellness and cognitive self-regulation for their learning. Participants cope and overcome barriers by way of their social support, self-care initiatives, and organizational skills. For the most part, when participants manage and overcome their barriers using a coping method, they feel a sense of accomplishment. However, one participant stated that she felt stressed after having to waste time on her coping mechanisms. So, in her case, her coping mechanisms conflicted with her stress management.

It can be surmised from the participants' stories that they are smart, motivated, self-efficacious, and resourceful women who are persistent in achieving their goals. Despite their obstacles, they are working on their graduate degree to be better – better mothers, better providers, better career professionals. They are effortful in their pursuit

of higher education to not only enrich their own lives but to put their passion for life-long learning into practice to help others and promote social change.

When finishing up the interview questions, I inquired with each participant if there was anything else they would like to add to help me understand their experiences of being a single mother and on online graduate student; two participants gave the following responses that they wanted to share with other women:

According to P8:

> I never would have chosen to be a single mom in a graduate program but the reality of it has been just fine. I want women to know that it is really possible to do this and it's not like at the end of this I'm going to feel good, it's like during it I'm actually pretty darn okay.

According to P9, "It's just like chaotic and sometimes there are days that are good and other days that are bad, but one day at a time. Enjoy the minor accomplishments, definitely attitude plays a big part in how you see things."

RQ1

The process of synthesizing the textural data descriptions and structural data descriptions into meanings and essences of the phenomenon also guided the answer to RQ1: What are the lived experiences of single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program? Consistently, participants' experiences of being a single mother and an online graduate student wavers between good days and bad days. On the good days, participants reported they feel a sense of accomplishment and achievement.

P1 said, "I feel accomplished that I'm able to get things done and figure out different ways to do things." P2 said, "I feel accomplished… I've achieved something for the day, or I've achieved something for this week." P7 said, "I feel like I am high strung, and I mean that in a sense where I like to pile on the pressure because it makes me feel like I am achieving something." P9 said, "I definitely feel like I've achieved something, like it's a minor success."

On the bad days, participants reported feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and hopeless. P1 said, "Some days are better than others, some days I feel optimistic and motivated and energized, and then other days I'm tired, I'm overwhelmed." P2 said, "Sometimes a little overwhelmed, stressed out, because I got to finish the program, or the project, or get the grade, or to be able to get financial aid, the financial aid helps me for school." P3 said, "It's extremely overwhelming and it's frustrating. It's stressful, it freaks me out, and it's too much." P8 said, "Exhausting, it feels exhausting. I've had days I've wanted to quit. I just get so tired and so exhausted and I'm just done with it all." P10 commented,

> I have felt like I was drowning. It's not even like I'm even keeping my head above water, it's like two feet above my head and so just even trying to get my head out of the water, and that's been the hardest part, the feeling honestly has been a lot of hopelessness.

Participants described how balancing single motherhood and graduate school provides little time for themselves, their family, or to enjoy the other aspects of their lives. P1 said, "I definitely think I would have more time for myself. Being in

dissertation stage takes up a lot of research and groundwork that I literally don't have any time for me anymore."

P2 commented:

> I'm always in school. I'm doing this while everybody else is kind of enjoying their lives, they're working, they're able to go on vacation, not worrying about schoolwork. They're able to go out on the weekends whether it be with their family or if they have a significant other. You know they have the time to spend and devote to those people while I'm trying to split it off here and there and keep up with schoolwork.

P6 said, "But I do feel that I'm missing out sometimes. Sometimes I feel like I'm not spending as much time with them as I should or as I typically did in the past." P7 said, "Maybe more engaged and less focused on schoolwork, having a little bit of that focus on family and fun and maybe life outside of school."

P8 commented:

> I think I would be able to do more self-care. I love crafting and I love artwork and reading for pleasure, I haven't had the chance to do that in so long. My self-care has kind of gone by the wayside.

Participants' experiences waver between good and bad due to the consistent barriers in their lives, most notably barriers related to a having a lack of time and money. Their barriers are not isolated to one area of their lives; barriers carry over into participant's personal lives causing them to have additional stress. P4 said, "It's mainly

stress, my daughter picks up on when I'm stressed so it does cross over; what I do affects her."

P1 commented:

> It's managing my work-life balance. And being able to devote what I feel is enough time to my child and time and attention to my own personal life as a family and just for me as an individual or as a woman.

P8 commented:

> Normally it's chaotic. I have to fit in time to make sure all of my assignments are completed on time, and on top of that thinking about the dissertation topic, and then you have to figure out when to do your chores, and play with the kids. Participants reported the issues with their barriers of time management and finances also causes them to worry about their falling behind in their graduate work.

P7 said, "There is like extra pressure to make sure that I'm not falling behind because that would not fit my personality and would probably cause more anxiety than I already have."

P9 commented:

> Part of it stresses me out because I'll be stressing about not getting something done that, I set in my mind to do, and I didn't get it done so I'll stress out about it, and then I feel that I'm falling behind.

P10 said, "I really do like feel like they are always there. The break did not always feel like a break, I felt like I always had to be doing something with schoolwork because I was behind already."

Participants also described feeling guilty for having to give priority to their graduate work and neglecting their other responsibilities. P2 said, "I think my most difficult part is feeling guilty when I can't get something done for my kids because I have to get something done with school." P4 said, "It makes you question if you are so focused on school that you are neglecting your other roles." P6 said, "There was a point when I felt guilty about pulling funds away that are typically allocated to other things, whether it was you know, for mini vacations."

P7 commented:

> There are times when there is a lot of guilt because instead of you know, doing school or whatever I would like to just you know, hang out with the kid and do what he wants to do, forget about all the responsibilities.

To guard against the challenges they face being a single mother and an online graduate student, participants are vigilant about planning for what's to come and can self-regulate their learning. Although generally tired and stressed, earning their graduate degree gives participants a sense of accomplishment, purpose, and hope. P2 said, "Even when I'm on a break I'm still mentally thinking about how I got to structure my life and everything coming up ahead of me so that I can move on." P3 said, "I know before I was a student, I had more time. I enjoy it because at the end of the day I know what purpose it serves."

P8 commented:

> It does because I feel like all of my hopes and dreams are hanging on with school. This is important because this is our future, and this is how we are going to be stable because right now we are on food stamps. I like the idea of being off the government and being self-sufficient. I never pictured being on Medicaid so there is a lot of hopes and dreams resting on this degree.

P7 said, "I think it will bring a more sense of accomplishment and gratitude for everything, the support I've had." P10 said, "So, it makes my day longer for sure. If I wasn't a student, I would have one big thing off my plate, but at the same time, I feel like it gives me some bigger purpose."

RQ2

Fifteen questions on the interview protocol prompted specific responses to answer RQ2: How do graduate student single mothers in an online program describe their academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support, and the role of these factors in facilitating their academic success? The analysis of the participant responses revealed four themes and subthemes shown in Table 5. I also included verbatim participant expressions to support the thematic findings.

Table 5

RQ2 List of Themes and Subthemes

Main Theme	Percentage of Responses	Subtheme A	Percentage of Responses	Subtheme B	Percentage of Responses
Wanting to do better as a mother		Providing security and stability	60%	Role-modeling achieveme nt	50%
Aspects of self-character		Being an Achiever	80%	Using one's personal power	60%
Wanting career and professional growth to make social change	60%				
Social-support, self-efficacy and motivation interrelate for success	50%				

Theme 1: Wanting to do better as a mother. A key point that stood out from all the participant interviews was that mothering is central to their lives. In the same way, their children were a main factor for their academic motivation. According to P1, "I think that my children and the importance of finishing school to do better for them, it's just something that mothers do and wish for their kids." According to P10, "I had to do it for my son because he's special needs. I felt I couldn't be the best mom that I could be if I didn't get myself a little more educated."

Subtheme 1a: Providing security and stability. For a single mother who assumes the role of two parents, mothering not only involves the responsibility of caring for and/or nurturing children; it also means having to provide for them financially. Having

the opportunity to provide for their children, to give them a sense of security and stability at home was a factor for their academic motivation. For a few of the mothers, the driving force for wanting stability and security came from experiencing an impoverished childhood. According to P4:

> My daughter is a major factor, I grew up in really extreme poverty to the point where we didn't know where our next meal was coming, when our next meal was coming; I never want her to live that life.

P7 was raised by a single mom and stated:

> I grew up in a very poor, single family, lack of resources home, and that is not what I wanted my life to be like. I did not want to have to work 100 hours to make and live in a very poverty-stricken life and I didn't want my kids to feel like that's all that they were worth either.

Additionally, the need for stability and security was reported by participants who did not indicate being in poverty at one time or another. P5 said, "I wanted that security, for me and for her. Providing your kid with a very stable environment is imperative." P9 reported being in a "financial rut", having to rely on her mother to help qualify for student loans. P9 said, "I want to be able to give them an opportunity and a better life, I want to be able to provide for them financially and not have to struggle." P10 who has a son with a disability said, "I think being on a single parent income you are motivated for more fire behind you for money, and stability. Not just money but something that is my own that someone can't take away."

Subtheme 1b: Role-modeling achievement. Being a mother also means being a

teacher. Fifty percent of the participants reported a factor for their motivation was role-modeling their success for their children. P6 said, "Setting an example for my girls so they are striving high, reaching for the stars, to watch my movements very closely, this is another way to set a good example." P7 said, "It's wanting to set a good example for my children, showing that I can achieve goals that I set for myself."

Participants also wanted to pass on the importance of life-long learning. According to P2:

> I look at my son and I want to believe that he's watching me, and he sees my mom, she's this lifetime learner, she's doing her homework, degrees, and this and that, like maybe some of that would rub off on him.

P4 said, "I also know she's seen me do homework, so she knows that graduate school is hard but it's worth it." P8 described how role-modeling life-long learning also provided a time to bond with her children, "We sit down and we do our homework together and there is this kind of feeling, like we are all in this together, and we create this cohesive feeling of comradery or bonding."

Theme 2: Aspects of self-character. Participants used different terms associated with their character namely, self-resilient, self-determined, self-confident, proud, stubborn, persistent, and perfectionistic. A lot of their characterizations centered around their need to achieve; in other words, these women are doers. Participants also described how they work hard to keep their personal power to create positive change.

Subtheme 2a: Being an achiever. Eighty percent of participants discussed how their past achievements act as a catalyst for their future achievements. Participants are

proud of what they have accomplished and value their ability to be academically successful. When they have a setback, they hold onto that self-awareness that they can be successful which instills in them a sense of confidence to continue pursuing their goals.

P1 said, "My own self-efficacy, the need for higher achievement for myself; working through poverty has led me to believe that I can achieve anything." Other participants described how their ability to maintain excellent grades sustains their confidence and motivation. P2 said, "My ability to be confident in my success is very strong. I've maintained a 4.0 GPA." P9 described that being confident in her work has provided better outcomes, and her high GPA gives her a sense of accomplishment, "I have a 4.0 in all of my coursework so that's definitely motivating." P5 described how she is empowered by her excellent grades, "When I log in and see A's, it has always fueled me."

P4 is proud and perfectionistic when it comes to her grades, "It's a matter of pride that I keep my GPA high. If I'm going to be doing something, I'm going to be good at it." P10 stated that she easily accomplished an MBA, so she feels her doctoral degree is an achievable goal, "I know that I've done it before, I breezed through my MBA. I know I can accomplish a lot." P6 stated that her past achievements are proof of what she can accomplish in the future, "I feel confident in the things that I've already achieved in my life and this step now is an additional puzzle piece to creating this entire puzzle of what my journey is supposed to be like." P7 is motivated for success simply by earning the

title of 'Dr', "Most important I would say I have a high sense of achievement; I can't wait to be called 'Dr', that is success."

Subtheme 2b: Using one's personal power. Sixty percent of participants described how their personal power helps them to create positive outcomes, namely their authenticity, tenacity, spirituality, positivity, persistence, and faith. Keeping their personal power is important for their inner strength to be successful. P3 described how an existential crisis led her to uncover her authenticity and having the power to be her authentic self keeps her confidence, "I learned the power to express my authentic self. I believe I have the power to create my own circumstance; what I tell myself is, "Hey, you got this." P5 credits an award she received in elementary school to push her through times when she wanted to quit:

> When I'm feeling doubts like sometimes it feels like you're a little kid and you're inadequate I try to remember that day I had an award and it had that word on it, tenacity. My mother calls it stubbornness, but I would call it, I won't give up.

P6 looks to her spirituality:

> I have strong spiritual ties, when I'm feeling weak, I focus on the positive things in my life and the positive things that are yet to come. The positive thought process is where the motivation comes into play. I absolutely remind myself on a daily basis that I can achieve this, I speak it as though it has already happened.

P7 acknowledges her positivity, "I have this mindset I'm just going to tackle the things that come. I'm going to appreciate what's fun and I'm going to appreciate what challenges me." P8 struggles with negative thinking from surviving a traumatic

childhood, yet she stays grounded in her spirituality giving her the strength to believe in herself, "I really feel that spiritual grounding is key to me having the confidence and the faith to believe in myself. Allowing my authenticity to be who I am is absolutely enough." P9 doesn't let barriers get in the way of her effort and is persistent to defy the odds, "I don't like barriers. I like proving people wrong all the time. You just have to put in the effort, you can do anything you put your mind to."

Theme 3: Wanting career and professional growth to make social change. Seventy percent of participants felt that gaining more education would facilitate better career opportunities so they can be self-fulfilled in their professional roles. According to P2, "I know that when and if I complete this program I'm hoping and praying that I'll be on a better career path." P7 described how she has advanced her skills, "My confidence has increased because I'm starting to feel like I am becoming the professional I want to be." P8 wants the opportunity to set her career path to discover a specific area of interest for her career, "This experience has kind of helped me to hone-in on areas of my degree I want to maybe pursue as a professional."

Forty percent of the women spoke about using their education to secure a career that drives social change. P3 said, "job attainment, or career change, I feel like this is a necessary step in me being able to help a lot of people". P4 said, "I would like to go into individual practice, I want to be able to provide services and help in the communities that I serve." P5 has connected her profession with her passion to make change:

Career-wise I'm working up to be exactly where I want to be doing in life. I get

paid for my passions and education helps me open more of those doors, so like the

system barriers that bother me, the more education I have the more ability I have

to make change.

P6 also has also connected her profession with her passion:

Work does motivate me to strive higher. I enjoy learning and I am fascinated with

the field that I have selected. I just try to stay focused on the overall goal and that

is being more of a proponent to social change. I always think that someday all of

this will help someone.

Theme 4: Social support, self-efficacy, and motivation interrelate for success.

Ninety percent of participants have social support networks in place. As single mothers,

the participants carry many different responsibilities and they are self-aware of their need

to be supported by others. The type of social support the participants described were

instrumental support in the form of child-care and pet-care from family, close friends,

and neighbors, and in the form of helping with chores, shopping etc., from family.

Participants also received informational support in the form of advice and mentorship

from colleagues at work and the sharing of learning resources from faculty members in

their program of study.

The most predominant type of support the women talked about was emotional

support received from immediate family, friends, social media connections, work

colleagues, and graduate school peers from attending academic residencies. The

emotional support the woman received was in the form of encouraging their progress and

bonding over shared feelings, issues, and experiences. The data revealed an interesting

finding that emotional support stood out from all the other types of social support as a

key component for participants' motivation and confidence. P2 discussed bonding with peers in her academic residency cohort:

> My program required me to go to residencies, at my first residency I was put in a cohort and I really bonded with the people and kept with them. Sometimes I might shoot them a text or leave a posting in our group and they'll give me some feedback. It kind of motivates me more because other people are doing the same thing.

P4 discussed the support she has received from colleagues at work and through social media:

> I don't think I would have the confidence that I had to finish my bachelors let alone starting my masters if I hadn't gotten a lot of support from the clinicians that I worked with who believed in me. They were constantly rooting for me. I kept in contact with people I've worked with through Facebook and such, I'll post updates and they are very supportive, they want to see me succeed.

P5 discussed making an important personal connection at her academic residency:

> During my first residency I connected with a group of people in the same program and we do group chats. I reached out to one of the girls I was close with and I was like, I'm at a very low point, and she's shared some of the things that she has gone through. And she was also a single mom, she was a huge part of my confidence at Walden.

P8 described the supportive bond she has with her sister:

I have built an amazing support structure of family and friends, the first one that

always comes to mind is my sister, she's such an anchor for me. She is also a

counselor so getting to talk to her about the things that she is dealing with at work

has reminded me of why I am doing this. I think it motivates me to continue to

work at this program. She sees me in such a positive, upbeat and powerful and

successful way that it's always a confidence boost to talk to her. She reminds me

of my successes at times when I tend to not see them myself.

RQ3

Six questions in the interview protocol prompted specific responses to answer

RQ3: What are the barriers to academic success identified by single mother students

enrolled in an online graduate program? The analysis of the participant responses

revealed two themes shown in Table 6. I also included verbatim participant expressions

to support the thematic findings.

Table 6

RQ3 Themes

Theme	Percentage of Participant Responses
Difficulties managing financial, physical, and emotional well-being	80%
Time Management issues bring about role-conflict	50%

Theme 5: Difficulties managing financial, physical, and emotional well-being.

Although participants feel they are strong academically, their well-being tends to

suffer. Seventy percent of participants described barriers associated with their well-being.

P1 described the guilt and stress on her physical health that she is feeling from time to time:

> My most difficult part is feeling guilty when I can't get something done for my kids because I have to get something done with school. Another barrier is finances because you have to work, and you have to make sure you pay for school and all those things; you can easily get tired, and then that impacts your motivation which impacts everything else.

P2 described feelings of sadness, self-judgment, and doubt:

> Sometimes it makes me kind of sad, sometimes it makes me more judgmental towards myself, like should I be taking this time to go to school when I should be a soccer mom or whatever, or devote spending more time with my family, or putting some time in to myself personally.

P3 described how she gets worried over providing for her children and the frustration she feels for having that worry and lack of independence. P3 also stated stress has affected her physically, causing hair loss:

> Well, as a single mom it's just difficult all around because I can't do what I want to do. If I want to do something, I have to make sure there's provisions for the kids, there's money for the kids, I got to worry about the kids, so that's frustrating; I actually lost some of my hair from stressing too much.

P6 also expressed feelings of guilt for prioritizing her degree over her daughters:

> The challenges have been financially, there was a point when I felt guilty about pulling funds away that are typically allocated to other things, like mini-vacations

and I had to remind myself that I wasn't being negligent in that sense that I was

actually preparing for a better path for all of us.

P7 described feeling lonely during her academic journey, which can make her feel sad:

It gets lonely sometimes, there is just a sadness. When people have a significant

other, they appear happier, maybe more engaged and less focused on schoolwork,

maybe having a little bit of that focus on their family and their fun and their life

outside of school.

P9 described experiences of feeling self-doubt and exhaustion which affected her

psychologically:

If I'm having a bad day, if the kids are carrying on and I'm exhausted and it's

like, what am I doing? I kept chugging along, chugging along, and I didn't take

care of myself and ended up having anxiety and depression.

P10 described her anxiety and nervousness and how she struggles with imposter feelings

and self-doubt:

Through this dissertation process, I have more doubts than ever. I'm like shaking

and nervous so my confidence is really low during those times, like am imposter

affect psychologically. There is a cap on how confident I am because I kind of

knock myself down.

Theme 6: Time management issues bring about role conflict. Seventy percent

of participants indicated that time management was a significant barrier. Furthermore,

problems with time makes it difficult for them to find a life balance. For some, time

management issues fueled thoughts of worry and self-doubt. P1 commented how

being a student takes over her time, "I would say time management, just learning how to balance work, kids and dissertation work. Being in dissertation stage takes up a lot of work and research and groundwork that I literally don't have time for myself anymore." P2 described her issue with time to focus on different areas of her life:

> I would say time; I don't always have the time, as much time as I feel I really could use. It's managing my work-life balance and being able to devote what I feel is enough time to my child, and time and attention to my own personal life like as a family, and just for me as an individual or as a woman.

P3 described how she plays three roles and her issues with time management gives her feelings of self-doubt,

> Before I was a student, I had more time. I play three roles. If I miss a deadline it weakens my motivation because if I'm not disciplined with my time management than why am I bothering; that's how I feel.

P4 also described feeling self-doubt over her role-conflict:

> Balancing the roles; most single moms have multiple roles, you're an employee, you're a mom, and then you're a student it's hard to separate. It can be difficult and time management is an issue, it makes you question if you are so focused on school that you are neglecting your other roles.

P8 commented on her worry about keeping her life well-coordinated and balanced, "The logistics of things, just balancing all the details and the demands of all the aspects of my life, I am definitely worried about that."

P9 spoke about managing time to focus on multiple responsibilities:

Whenever it comes to being a single mom and a graduate student, time

management is a big thing; sometimes it's hard to focus. Managing your time

well, you need to figure how much time you are going to spend on each thing

because you have homework, you have your kids, you have housework.

RQ4

Four questions on the interview protocol prompted specific responses to answer

RQ4: What coping methods do single mother students enrolled in an online graduate

program describe as useful to overcoming barriers to success? The analysis of the

participant responses revealed two themes shown in Table 7. I also included verbatim

participant expressions to support the thematic findings.

Table 7

RQ4 Themes

Main Theme	Percentage of participant responses
Using spiritual, social, emotional, personal, and physical self-care	80%
Using organizational tactics	50%

Theme 7: Using spiritual, social, emotional, personal, and physical self-care.

Eighty percent of participants reported using different self-care methods to cope with

barriers to their wellness. This was not a surprising finding as many of the participants

had indicated an awareness of their personal power as a factor for their academic

motivation and academic self-efficacy. P1 described her personal and spiritual self-care,

"Naps; I like to sleep. I'm a counselor so I do a lot of self-care stuff; meditation."

P3 described her personal, spiritual and social self-care, "positive self-talk, meditation, I use social-emotional support; that's part of my self-care."

P4 described her emotional and personal self-care:

> The strategies I use for coping is a lot of self-reflection; it's about knowing myself and knowing what my limits are and recognizing when I am at the point where I do need to practice self-care, I can usually tell when I start getting snappish and my irritability has increased. Another good coping skill is, I try to make it a point to spend at least 30 minutes a day on me, between the time I drop off my daughter till 8 o'clock when I have to log in for work, that's me time, that is my time.

P5 described her personal self-care:

> Self-care. I knew I was going to go nuts when I started to do the fast track program, so I made a list of the things that stress me out the most; I kind of tracked the last month which times I had that I wasn't proud of, like did I have an outburst, and the deep cleaning seemed to be stressful, so I know it's expensive but I found this cleaning lady once a month. It kind of seems like an indulgent thing and people kind of look at me weird when I say I have a cleaning lady, but it has relieved a lot.

P6 described her personal self-care:

> Remaining positive and always speaking of things as if they already exist, I call it speaking things into existence. I've made a declaration of what I want, what I need, and make it so it's a mindset. I set my mind on the positive and my body

follows. It's really about believing in self and even if you have a small amount of

doubt speaking that belief of positivity, it changes.

P7 described her personal self-care:

Mindset is everything, if you can get a mindset and follow it you can achieve, but

if your mindset is not there you can have a lot of barriers and a lot of setbacks.

Whether a single parent or not, you need to make sure your personality includes

determination and openness to experience, and a willingness to be flexible and

encounter what you can. It's about positivity.

P9 described her personal self-care:

I tend to be a very happy person, it's just chaotic and sometimes there are days

that are good and there are days that are bad, but one day at a time; attitude

definitely plays an important part of how you see things.

P10 described her physical self-care that also provides her time with her children:

Sometimes I'm overwhelmed, I go on a walk, it reduces my stress. With my girls

I have been doing yoga on YouTube right at home, it tires my kids out. I need

them to be quiet so I can do my work, and I count it as family time; so, multi-

faceted coping.

Theme 8: Using organizational tactics. Fifty percent of participants use ways

for organizing themselves to cope with time management and financial barriers.

P1 described how planning is a strategy for her success, "I try to stick to a plan for

myself, organization is like my biggest thing; planning my day out and using check lists,

calendars."

P2 also uses planning and prioritizing:

> I look at what time during the day I have a little bit of quiet time that I can focus.
> Sometimes at work I start with a list of priorities and I go through them or think
> about my workday and how I can get that done. I also look at what I have to
> spend as far as financially before I can do something, or even if I have the
> physical energy to spend into it.

P7 described how she prioritizes by setting boundaries and using a calendar as a
reminder:

> It's learning to manage your time, it's setting boundaries for what you need to do
> and what you can do, and what's important. Time management is a must when
> you have kids and sports and school and everything else. My calendar is
> everything; I have my calendar on the computer and I constantly update it, I print
> it out, I write down what is going on so I can remember, and I can look at it at a
> glance. I have it in my bag that I carry with me every single day to remind myself,
> I look at it every single morning before my day starts.

P8 described how she structures her life around keeping a calendar:

> I use a paper calendar and I print out the syllabus, and I will create the calendar
> for the term so I'll put every assignment and when it's due and every discussion
> so that I can see exactly when it's coming and I will have that calendar written out
> before classes start. Otherwise, if it isn't written down, it isn't going to get done.
> I use it at work, it's the only way I can keep track of the million different tasks

that come at me and, also at home, just trying to keep track of who needs to go

where, when.

P9 described how she multi-tasks and compartmentalizes her days:

Multi-tasking every day, all the time. I work on my homework in the afternoons,

I'll try to spend time with the kids in the morning, and then at night I'll try to

spend time with them too, and then in-between I'll work on my homework or my

dissertation.

Discrepant Cases

I found two discrepant cases in the interview data. The first case was P8. P8's

discrepant data was regarding her response to the interview question inquiring whether

the barriers she has exists even when she is on a break from school. Whereas all the

other participants' answers to that question were that their barriers remained the same or

lessened, P8 responded that her barriers would be "tremendously worse." P8 followed up

to say, "I would feel so much hopelessness and so much despair about ever being able to

change my situation." I think the reason for her response is that earlier in the interview

P8 indicated that her academics were an area she did well in so because she thrives in her

academic work, although it causes her financial barriers and stress, graduate school is

also how she copes with the other aspects of her life in which she struggles.

The second case was P10. P10's discrepant data was regarding her response to

the interview question inquiring about the key individuals who are supportive resources

for her success in her graduate work. Whereas all the other participants indicated they

received a type of support, P10 responded she did not have any support. When I probed

further, she said, "No one that is doing anything really similar in my circles" and indicated that she was alone. However, later in the interview, when I asked P10 the question about how her difficulties being a single mother and a graduate student impacts her, she responded that the difficulties make her slower, and she puts her guard up. I think P10's response that she has a lack of support is partly due to her sense of isolation. A second discrepancy found in P10's data was regarding her answer to the interview question inquiring about the experience of overcoming difficulties. Whereas all the other participants' responses were in the realm of positivity and self-accomplishment, P10's response was, "Still stressed, actually. Because I shouldn't be wasting time on all these coping mechanisms."

Summary

In Chapter 4, I discussed the purpose of the study to explore the lived experiences of graduate student single mothers learning online and to understand the factors that influence their academic success with a focus on their academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and their social support. The study also explored their barriers to their academic success and their coping methods to overcome their barriers. For this study, I used a phenomenological research design and followed Moustakas' modification of the van Kaam method for data analysis.

Eight themes emerged from the interview data to answer the study's four research questions. For RQ2, four themes and subthemes emerged: wanting to do better as a mother, aspects of self-character, wanting career and professional growth to make social change, social support, self-efficacy, and motivation interrelate for success. For RQ3,

two themes emerged: difficulties managing financial, physical, and emotional wellbeing and time management issues bringing about role conflict. For RQ4, two themes emerged: using spiritual, social, emotional, personal, and physical self-care and using organizational tactics. RQ1 was designed as a central research question to capture the essence of the lived experiences of the group as a universal whole. In this way, the themes found for RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 and the synthesis of the textural and structural data descriptions provided the answer to RQ1.

Chapter 4 began with the introduction, which gave information on the purpose of the study, the conceptual framework, and the research questions. The introduction section of Chapter 4 continued with the sections on the setting of the study, the demographics of the ten research participants, detailed steps for data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 concluded with sections on the strategies for establishing qualitative reliability and validity, data analysis results, and the interpretation of the results by the themes that emerged from the interview data, and any discrepant cases found in the data.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings of the research study and in what way the findings compare to the previous research in the literature review. I will also discuss how the findings of the research study can be interpreted within the context of the conceptual frameworks. I will also discuss the limitations to the study, recommendations for future research regarding the topic of study, and the potential impact of the study's findings on social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The overall purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of student single mothers attending an online graduate program. In the study, I intended to explore the factors influencing their academic success, with a focus on their academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support. I also investigated barriers to their success and the methods they employ to cope and overcome barriers.

In a review of literature on topics pertinent to the study, I found that graduate student single mothers are an understudied population. Therefore, this study was conducted because of the gap in research on single mothers enrolled in graduate programs and their academic success. Furthermore, research linking academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support with academic success had not previously been investigated using a qualitative approach among graduate student single mothers attending online programs.

Online learning is appealing to nontraditional student populations like single mothers because of its flexible learning model. However, even with the flexibility of attending graduate school online, single mothers face challenges unique to their situations that affects their progress. This research was necessary to conduct a qualitative examination regarding their experiences to help mitigate their barriers so they can be successful. This research was also important for expanding the literature on academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, social support, and academic success because most of the research on these factors has been done with a quantitative approach.

In line with the goals of the study I used a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design. I used a nonprobability purposeful sampling method to recruit and screen participants through Walden University's online participant pool. A sample size of 10 participants provided in-depth responses to one-on-one semi structured interviews (see Appendix C) designed to answer the four research questions that guided the study:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program?

RQ2: How do graduate student single mothers in an online program describe their academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support, and the role of these factors in facilitating their academic success?

RQ3: What are the barriers to academic success identified by single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program?

RQ4: What coping methods do single mother students enrolled in an online graduate program describe as useful to overcoming barriers to success?

I followed Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological model for data analysis to derive themes from the 10 participants' interview data. Eight themes emerged from the interview data to answer the study's four research questions: (a) wanting to do better as a mother (subthemes: providing security and stability and role-modeling achievement), (b) aspects of self-character (subthemes: being an achiever and using one's personal power), (c) wanting career and professional growth to make social change, (d) social support, self-efficacy, and motivation interrelate for success, (e) difficulties managing

financial, physical, and emotional wellbeing, (f) time management issues bring about role conflict, (g) using spiritual, social, emotional, personal, and physical self-care, and (h) using organizational tactics.

Themes 1-4 provided the answer to RQ2, involving factors that facilitate academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and social support among single mothers. Themes 5-6 provided the answer to RQ3, involving barriers to single mothers' academic success. Themes 7-8 provided the answer to RQ4, which involved the coping methods that single mothers employ to overcome barriers. A composite textural-structural analysis revealed the essence of lived experiences, which also provided the answer to RQ1.

Interpretation of the Findings

Theme 1: Wanting To Do Better as a Mother

Theme one emerged from participants' expressions describing their desire to do better and be more complete as a mother. Given the importance of their children in their lives, two sub-themes derived from theme one: providing security and stability and role-modeling achievement.

Subtheme 1a: Providing security and stability. Participants in the current study frequently cited a motivating factor to be able to provide a financially stable and secure life for their children. Some of the mothers described growing up in poverty and did not want their children to experience that kind of existence. Others yearned for financial wellness so they would be able to support themselves and their children without having to rely on family members or government aid. Similar to the current study, single mothers

enrolled in undergraduate and graduate courses cited the main purpose for their enrollment in college was financial rewards to change their lives for a better future (Cerven, 2013; Freeman, 2016; Robinson, 2016).

Subtheme 1b: Role-modeling achievement. Participants commonly expressed the belief they were serving as positive role models for their children. Participants also said that through role-modeling, they were inadvertently bonding with their children because they share with one another their school achievements. Like the current study, Greenberg and Shenarr-Goldan (2017) and Robinson (2016) found that undergraduate single mother students who are positive role models for their children experience a sense of mutual appreciation and respect from their children. Also like the current study, Greenberg and Shenarr-Goldan and Cerven (2013) found that prior positive role-modeling increased single-mother students' self-efficacy and college persistence.

Theme 2: Aspects of Self-Character

Theme two emerged from participants describing their specific attributes that lead them toward achievement. Throughout the interview data it was revealed that the single mothers naturally work hard and have a fire inside of them to strive for more. Given their effort and determination to succeed that was attributed to their character, two sub-themes were derived from theme two: being an achiever and using one's personal power.

Subtheme 2a: Being an achiever. Many of the participants discussed their self-awareness regarding their abilities to obtain their graduate degree based on what they have accomplished in the past. Although most give credit to their past scholarly achievements, they also acknowledged their mothering abilities and professional

achievements. Participants also described their self-resilience, self-determination, self-efficacy, and pride. Although they routinely face obstacles related to single motherhood, participants held firm in their opinion that quitting was not an option for them.

Like the current study, high achieving undergraduate single mother students proudly self-identify with their student role (Haleman, 2006; Killinger et al., 2016). Through their self-identification, the mothers also reported an increase in their self-confidence that instilled in them the power to break down barriers. Greenberg & Shenarr-Goldan (2017) found that single mother undergraduate students reported that their educational experiences boosted their self-confidence and self-respect. They also reported that from their achievements in school, they developed a strong sense of self-efficacy to aspire for success in other areas of their lives that they never thought they could.

Subtheme 2b: Using one's personal power. Participants commented on the part of their personality that drives the power within themselves to move forward when they face obstacles preventing success or have doubts about the choices they have made. Two participants spoke about how their authenticity allows them to speak their truths and believe in themselves. Another participant described her tenacious nature that drives her to go after what she wants and never give up. Other participants described how they keep a positive mindset and look to their spirituality and faith for inspiration to keep positivity flowing. Similar to the current study, Cerven (2013), Katz (2013), and Robinson (2016) found that single mother undergraduate students described their self-determination, tenacity, dedication, and resilience to help empower them to fight every day for what they

want and what they feel they deserve. As a testament to their strong will and character, similar to the single mothers in the current study, single mother undergraduates indicated that they would not allow themselves to fall victim to their barriers (Cerven, 2013; Katz, 2013; Robinson, 2016).

Theme 3: Wanting Career and Professional Growth to Make Social Change

Theme three emerged from participants describing their ambition for more opportunity in their professional endeavors. Although most participants commented they are working in an area related to their chosen professions, they still have a desire to do more with their careers. For example, some participants wanted to use the knowledge they gained from their graduate education to build onto their current knowledge and others wanted to earn credentials to go on a different path. Commonly, most participants spoke about a plan to use their graduate education combined with their career to be agents of social change and help others on a broader scale.

Similar to the current study, Cerven (2013), Freeman (2014), and Robinson (2016) found a main factor for single mother undergraduate students to pursue a college degree was for a career to become financially self-sufficient and to create change. However, because the previous research on single mother students mostly involved single mothers navigating college while being in the welfare system, they were more apt to aspire for change regarding their individual situations rather than to create social change. In the interest of social change, Freeman (2014) reported on single mother students who wanted to use their college education to secure a job in a non- profit type of organization that provides services to homeless women and teens.

Theme 4: Social Support, Motivation, and Self-Efficacy Interrelate for Success

Theme four emerged from the participant responses describing the types of social support in their lives and in what way these supportive resources have facilitated their academic success. For these single mothers, instrumental support (child-care, pet-care, house-chores, ride-sharing, access to self-care, financial assistance), informational support (advice, mentorship, academic tools, and resources) and emotional support (friendship, encouragement, love, comradery) from immediate family, close friends, social media networks, work colleagues, peers, and faculty in their graduate programs were significant to their academic success by helping them in times of need.

Similar to the current study, Lashley and Ollivierre (2014) and Robinson (2016) found that undergraduate single mother students reported informational support from academic support counselors assisted them with navigating the educational environment; instrumental support from family facilitated their access and pursuit of college by helping them through the enrollment process and with childcare. In contrast to undergraduate single mother students, graduate student single mothers reported more benefit from social support received from faculty and peers within their graduate programs than social support received from family members (Duran, 2008; Pare, 2010). This finding is consistent with the current study findings. In the current study, graduate student single mothers frequently mentioned how the social support they received from faculty and peers in their academic program was a factor for their motivation and confidence to persevere. These findings suggest that perhaps due to the rigor of graduate work, graduate students feel more connected to their academic programs and individuals within

their academic, social circles than students in undergraduate and community college programs.

Theme 5: Difficulties Managing Financial, Physical, and Emotional Well-Being

Theme five emerged from the participant responses describing the most difficult part of being a single mother and an online graduate student. Due to parenting alone, participants have many demands placed on them, which increases their stress and provides them little time for self-care. As a result, their well-being gets compromised. Rummell (2015) found that graduate students described their time in graduate school to be one of the most stressful periods of their lives. In their interviews, participants said they struggle most with financial worries, maladaptive thinking, physical health problems, and psychological health problems. Similar to the findings from the current study, single mothers commonly report stress-related depression, anxiety-related disorders, and physical ailments due to exhaustion (Berryhill & Durhshi, 2017; Caragata & Liegghio, 2013; Katz, 2013; Robinson, 2016; Subramaniam et al., 2013; Zeiders, Roosa, & Tein, 2011). Although single mothers' physical and emotional health needs come second to their children's needs, similar to the current study's findings, Caragata and Liegghio (2013) found that it is in their relationships with their children where single mothers find the resilience to deal with the challenges associated with the stressful circumstances of their lives.

Theme 6: Time Management Issues Bring About Role-Conflict

Theme six emerged from the participant expressions describing their inability to manage their time effectively. For these single mothers, day to day life is a juggling act,

and their time is limited. As a result, they struggle with finding a work-life balance.

Participants also mentioned that their barrier of time management impedes their

emotional health and their motivation to complete their degrees. Filipponi-Berarderilli

(2003), Katz, (2013), and Robinson (2016) found that single mothers worry about losing

time with their children, finding time to study, finding time for themselves, and finding

time for household responsibilities.

For those single mothers living on the brink financially, the aspect of time is life

changing. To them, time is money, and both are key for the mothers to be able to earn

their degrees and make a better life for their children (Robinson, 2016). Like the current

study, Filipponi-Berarderilli (2013), Jones-DeWeever (2005), and Robinson (2016)

reported that single mothers struggle with time-related role conflict. One could argue that

time is scarce for mothers in general, but for single mothers who are splitting themselves

off trying to fulfill the role of mother, provider, worker, and student all at once, having

the time to manage and balance these roles was vital for them to function and for their

emotional well-being.

Theme 7: Using Spiritual, Social, Emotional, Personal, and Physical Self-Care

Theme seven emerged from the participant expressions describing their self-care

habits to cope with their barriers to their academic success. The single mothers used a

variety of types of self-care but most preferred personal self-care methods such as

napping, keeping a positive mindset, and scheduling me time. Other types of self-care

the single mothers used were physical self-care such as taking walks and doing yoga,

spiritual self-care such as practicing meditation, social self-care such as seeking out

friends and family for social-emotional support, and emotional self-care such as self-reflection and mindfulness. In contrast to the current study, Cerven (2013) and Lashley and Ollivierre (2014) reported that single mothers enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs did not use self-care strategies for coping. Instead, they used social support and faith to guide them through their challenges. Chun and Poole (2009) and El-Ghoroury et al., (2012) found that graduate students use social support, regular exercise, and engaging in pleasure activities as effective strategies for managing their stress. Consistent with the current study, Bonifas and Napoli (2014) found that graduate students who practice mindfulness for stress management experience a better quality of life.

Theme 8: Using Organizational Tactics

Theme eight emerged from the participant expressions describing the different tools and techniques they use for effective time management to organize their busy lives. For these single mothers, time management was a must for them to stay in control of their schedules, their finances, and whatever other responsibilities are thrown at them daily. The single mothers used a variety of ways to stay organized, but most preferred keeping an online and paper calendar to plan and structure their day and creating checklists to prioritize tasks. Participants also rely on their ability to multitask, fitting in the time to do their coursework during their lunch hour at work, or during their children's homework time or after-school activities. Consistent with the current study, Katz (2013) found that single mother students reported their coping strategies for time management were using planners and calendars to prioritize their schedules. Furthermore, Katz found that single mother students used multi-tasking, set boundaries, and revolved their study time around

their children's sleep schedules, which meant frequent middle-of-the-night study sessions. Unfortunately, single mothers' time management can also have a negative effect. Like the current study, Katz found that single mother students used their multitasking skills to the point of exhaustion, which lead to physical burnout and depression.

Interpretation of the Findings in the Context of the Conceptual Framework

Two conceptual frameworks guided the study, Pintrich's (2004) motivational self-regulated learning model for achievement and Duckworth et al.'s (2007) grit character construct for the psychology of achievement. Pintrich's framework has a social-cognitive orientation and came out of his research linking academic learning, motivation, and self-regulation. Pintrich's conceptual model emphasizes the integration of cognitive (cognitive strategies, self-regulatory strategies) and motivational (self-efficacy, task value, goal orientation, affect) processes to enhance self-regulatory learning strategies. The model includes four phases (forethought/planning/activation, monitoring, control, and reaction/reflection) and four areas (cognition, motivation/affect, behavior, and control) of self-regulation.

Pintrich's conceptual framework is relatable to the current study's findings in many ways. First, participants described their organizational and planning skills for time management; organization and planning are strategies in line with the regulation of cognition, regulation of behavior, cognitive control, and behavioral control components in the Pintrich model. Second, participants described their ability to self-regulate their need for social support; seeking support is a strategy in line with help-seeking, the

regulation of behavior, and behavioral components in the Pintrich model. Third, participants described their self-efficacy for achievement based on their ability to maintain excellent GPAs overtime; self-efficacy beliefs are in line with the regulation of motivation and affect components in the Pintrich model. Fourth, participants described their ability to connect their academic learning to their professional work and how putting their education into practice boosts their confidence and their motivation; using critical thinking and applying knowledge to new situations are in line with cognitive reaction and reflection strategies, the regulation of cognition component in the Pintrich model. Fifth, participants described how they regularly engage in social self-care through texting and virtual meetups and personal self-care like keeping an attitude of positivity for their coping; positive self-talk and engaging with peers are in line with motivational regulation and control of affect strategies, the regulation of motivation and affect component in the Pintrich model. Pintrich's framework looks at the intrapersonal factors associated with single mother students' academic success to explain their motivational, behavioral, and cognitive strategies for success and how they control and regulate their learning to achieve. However, single mother students face multiple barriers out of their control that are detrimental to their ability to complete their degrees.

A second framework, grit, is applied to the study to look at single mother students' factors associated with their academic success, such as character traits and personality, to help explain their effort and resilience to complete their degrees in the face of barriers. Grit is measured as a character construct, strongly related to conscientiousness, one of the big five personality traits, and self-control. The concept of

grit came from research on the psychology of success among high achieving individuals in a variety of challenging settings in business, the arts, education, journalism, medicine, and law (Duckworth et al., 2007). Duckworth et al. (2007) found that grit is predictive of high performance, high achievement, retention, and positive well-being in educational, professional, and avocational settings.

According to Duckworth (2016), to be gritty is characterized by an individual who has the passion and the perseverance of effort for a long-term superordinate goal despite experiencing setbacks, failures, or a plateau in progress. As such, the concept of grit is relatable to the current study by the participants' responses in their interviews describing the aspects of their personality associated with their confidence and motivation for their academic success. In their responses, participants characterized themselves as being resilient, self-determined, tenacious, effortful, persistent to defy the odds, and stubborn to not give up. These character traits are similar to the concept of being gritty, described as having consistency of interests, perseverance of effort despite setbacks, conscientiousness, and self-control (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Grit is made up of two components: passion and perseverance. Passion means purpose, to work steadfastly toward a long-term goal. In their interviews, participants discussed their love of learning, being goal-directed, and how they aspire to use their degrees for a bigger purpose. For these single mother graduate students, the passion they have for earning their graduate degree is not only about the accolade. Their persistence for their degrees is to do better for themselves, their families, and to create social change.

The second component of grit, perseverance, means effort, to have the will to stay the course even in the face of setbacks. The participants reported that their lives are full of barriers, so much so that they live their lives surviving one day at a time. In their interviews, participants described barriers to their academic success associated with time, finances, psychological wellness, physical wellness, and role-conflict. As a result of their barriers, they tend to have self-doubt over their choice to pursue graduate school, which prompts thoughts of giving up. However, these single mothers are also resourceful women who can self-regulate. As such, they resolve the negative thoughts as positive pressure and continue to move forward because for these single moms, as noted in their interviews, quitting is not an option.

Limitations of the Study

Trustworthiness in qualitative studies is representative of the credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the research. There are several limitations within the different areas of trustworthiness to be aware of in the study. The first limitation is with sample size; the study is a phenomenological design that used a small sample size of 10 participants. Although the sample size is typical for phenomenology, the sample was a specific group of individuals attending graduate school at the same university, which is a limitation to the study's transferability. The second limitation is with the use of a self-reported measure to collect data. Although participant interviews were recorded and member checked to verify the accuracy of their responses, the interview data is subjective in nature, and there is no way to verify the truthfulness of

their responses, which leads to the possibility of obtaining biased results and a limitation to the study's credibility.

Furthermore, self-reported interview data would be hard to replicate, so there is a lack of consistency or in qualitative terms, dependability. The third limitation is with sampling; participants were not randomly sampled. I used purposeful sampling to recruit a specific group of participants who met the criteria. Along the same line, participants volunteered to partake in the study because they met the criteria. The use of purposeful sampling and volunteer participants leads to the possibility of participant subject bias as participants might over-report or under-report information to try to please the researcher. The fourth limitation is with confirmability; although I used peer-debriefing during the research process, I was the only one collecting and analyzing the data, which leads to the possibility of a biased interpretation of the results.

Recommendations

The findings from this study provided insight into the experience of single mother students attending graduate school online to understand factors that influence their success, their barriers, and what coping methods they use to overcome barriers to be successful. The study used a qualitative approach to capture the meaning of participants' experiences in their own words. There are strengths of qualitative research, and just as there are strengths, there are limitations. One limitation, as mentioned in the previous section, is the use of a small sample size and a select group of participants from the same university, which limits the transferability of the study. Also, there were findings in the current study that contrasted with previous research findings on similar populations of

single mother students. Specifically, the study's limitation of transferability provides the opportunity for researchers to extend the literature base on graduate single mother students using a more diverse and larger group of participants. The conflicted findings that emerged from the study provides an opportunity for future researchers to use the current research as a baseline study and conduct a follow-up study to compare those results within subset populations of graduate student single mothers (masters, doctoral, online learners, face to face learners, first-generation learners) as an avenue to fill that gap.

Based on the study's findings and a review of the literature, there are two recommendations for future studies to be considered. The first recommendation is to investigate peer connections in the online setting for non-traditional type students like single mothers. In the current study, graduate student single mothers reported that they feel sad, lonely, and isolated. Like the current study, Duquaine-Watson (2007) and Robinson (2016) found that undergraduate single mothers reported feeling like an outsider as if they do not belong. In line with building connections, the second recommendation for future research on single mother students to consider is a study on the topic of peer modeling and grit. Specifically, researchers should investigate graduate student single mothers using peer modeling strategies with undergraduate student single mothers to grow grit for retention, achievement, and well-being. O'Neal et al., (2016) found that the students with more grit had fewer depression symptoms. Cross (2014) and Duckworth et al., (2007) found that grit is associated with educational attainment and grows with age. Also, gender differences apply to grit; female graduate students are

grittier than male graduate students and have higher achievement (Aswini & Deb, 2017; Cross, 2014).

Single mother college students, whether undergraduate or graduate level experience similar challenges, but their resources for support and their coping methods differ. Future research could inquire about these differences. In this way, single mother students have an opportunity to develop relationships with one another and not only from an academic standpoint, peer to peer, to enhance learning strategies for achievement, but also from an emotional standpoint, mother-to-mother, to improve coping strategies for resilience and well-being.

The third recommendation for future research would include single mothers who have earned their doctoral degrees working in faculty positions to gain their perspective on the problem commonly known as a leak in the academic pipeline, which references the gender imbalance in academia. Given that motherhood is significantly associated with attrition rates in graduate students (Lynch, 2008; Onwuegbuzie, Rosli, Ingram, & Frels, 2014), it might be useful for researchers to do a longitudinal inquiry on single mothers who have earned their doctorates, their experiences parenting, the long term effects of their degrees on career mobility, and their perceptions as to why women are leaking out of academia.

Implications

The information from the study is significant to social change in many areas. First, the individual narratives describing the single mothers' experiences in-depth are an opportunity to inform and empower other single mothers who want to educate themselves

into a better life for their families but are unsure about how to manage their care

responsibilities, work responsibilities, and academic responsibilities. In this way, their

stories serve as a platform for social change at the personal level. The social change

effect on the personal level is likely to lead to change at the community level. Single

mother students who were the first generation females to go to college reported that

through their exposure to higher education not only did their lives change for the better,

they were also inspired to encourage others in their social circles to go to college

(Greenberg & Shenarr-Goldan, 2017). In addition, the single mothers in the current study

reported that their love of learning allows them to connect their passion for their graduate

studies with their professional lives. In turn, by putting their education into practice at

work, they are promoting social change at the macro level.

The second implication for social change is on the organizational level. The

single mothers in the current study described their financial obstacles, time management

obstacles, and role-conflict obstacles that can halt their academic progress. College and

universities that cater to nontraditional students like single mothers could put policies and

practices in place specifically designed to guard against these barriers to help single

mothers complete their degrees. Through offering a streamlined program curriculum,

flexible attendance policies, financial wellness and time management workshops geared

for single parents, these programs might counteract attrition. In their interviews, the

single mothers mentioned that when they experience a lack of progress in their graduate

work, they seek out informational support from faculty and emotional support from their

peers. Graduate school is an extremely stressful experience for students (Rummell,

2017). For student parents, as their level of education increases, their need for support also increases (Katz, 2013). Therefore, college and university administrators should put supportive practices in place that are more proactive than reactive. Maintaining a close connection with students and treating them as members of a learning community rather than just a college ID number is a way to keep them from falling through the cracks. By developing a tracking system, student support staff can monitor student progress, keep track of student learning goals, recognize achievements or the lack thereof, and link them to supportive resources to help them resolve any academic, social, health, or financial issues. Through taking a proactive approach, single mother students do not have to take time out of their busy day to seek out support; instead, the resources that are specific to their situations should be readily available to meet their needs.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to capture the essence of the experience of the lives of single mother graduate students to understand what factors specific to their motivation, self-efficacy, and social support facilitate their academic success. The second purpose of was to understand the barriers that single mothers face and their coping methods. The data collected from the study revealed eight themes. Overall, what motivates the single mothers in this study to complete their graduate degree is the opportunity to be better in their role as a mother, better in their role as a provider, and better in their role as a career professional. The women also spoke about using their education as a chance to create change, not only in their own lives but also in the lives of others. According to their interviews, the experience for these women balancing single motherhood with their

graduate studies is full of ups and downs. On the upside, they feel accomplished, and on the downside, they feel guilt and self-doubt. Although these women are highly confident in their ability to be successful in their academic lives, which is evident from their strong history of maintaining excellent GPAs, they consistently struggle in their personal lives to find work-life balance and to manage their overall wellness. When faced with barriers, the single mothers rely on their social support, their self-care practices, their organizational skills, and the power within themselves for the strength to continue and to make their dreams come true.

References

Allen, E., & Seamen, J. (2014*). Grade change: Tracking online education in the United States*. Retrieved from

http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/gradechange.pdf

Anney, V. N. (2014). Ensuring the quality of the findings of qualitative research: Looking at trustworthiness criteria. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies, 5*(2), 272-281. Retrieved from

http://jeteraps.scholarlinkresearch.com/

Artino, A. J., & Stephens, J. M. (2009). Academic motivation and self-regulation: A comparative analysis of undergraduate and graduate students learning online. *Internet & Higher Education, 12*(3/4), 146-151. doi: 10.1016/j.iheduc.2009.02.001

Aswini, S., & Deb, A. (2017). Flourishing among postgraduate students: The role of resilience, meaningfulness and grit. *Indian Journal of Community Psychology, 13*(1), 24-37. Retrieved from http://www.ijcpind.com/

Bandura, A. (1997). Insights: Self-efficacy. *Harvard Mental Health Letter, 13*(9), 4-6. Retrieved from http://www.countway.med.harvard.edu/

Berryhill, M.B., & Durtschi, J.A. (2017). Understanding single mothers' parenting stress trajectories. *Marriage & Family Review, 53*(3), 227-245. doi: 10.1080/01494292.2016.1204406

Beeler, S. (2016). Undergraduate single mothers' experiences in postsecondary education. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 176, 69-80.

doi:10.1002/he.20210

Birks, M. (2014). Quality in qualitative research. In J. Mills & M. Birds (eds.),

Qualitative methodology: A practical guide (pp. 221-236). London: SAGE

Publications.

Bonifas, R. P., & Napoli, M. (2014). Mindfully increasing quality of life: A promising

curriculum for MSW students. *Social Work Education, 33*(4), 469-484.

doi:10.1080/02615479.2013.838215

Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2008). Ethics in qualitative psychological research. In C.

Willig & W. Stainton-Rogers (eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*

in psychology (pp. 263-279). London: SAGE Publications.

Brouse, C. H., Basch, C. E., LeBlanc, M., McKnight, K. R., & Lei, T. (2010). College

students' academic motivation: Differences by gender, class, and source of

payment. *College Quarterly, 13*(1), 2. Retrieved from http://collegequarterly.ca/

Brownson, C., Drum, D. J., Swanbrow Becker, M. A., Saathoff, A., & Hentschel, E.

(2016). Distress and suicidality in higher education: Implications for population-

oriented prevention paradigms. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, *30*(2),

98-113. doi:10.1080/87568225.2016.1140978

Buchanan, J., Wilson, S. T., & Gopal, N. (2008). A cross cultural virtual learning

environment for students to explore the issue of racism: A case study involving

the UK, USA and SA. *Social Work Education, 27*(6), 671-682.

doi:10.1080/02615470802201804

Burak, S. B. (2014). Motivation for instrument education: A study from the perspective

of expectancy-value and flow theories. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research, 55*, 123-136. doi:14689/ejer.2014.55.8

Caragata, L., & Liegghio, M. (2013). Mental health, welfare reliance, and lone motherhood. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health, 32*(1), 95-107. doi: 10.7870/cjcmh-2013-006

Cassidy, S. S. (2012). Exploring individual differences as determining factors in student academic achievement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 37*(7), 793-810. doi:10.1080/03075079.2010.545948

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). CDC/NCHS national vital statistics system. Retrieved from

https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/national_marriage_divorce_rates_00-16.pdf

Cerven, C. (2013). Public and private lives: Institutional structures and personal supports in low-income single mothers' educational pursuits. *Education Policy Analysis Archives. 21*(16/17), 1-27. doi:10.14507/epaa.v21n17.2013

Cheng, W., Ickes, W., & Verhofstadt, L. (2012). How is family support related to students' GPA scores? A longitudinal study. *Higher Education*, *64*(3), 399-420. doi:10.1007/s10734-011-9501-4

Cho, M., & Shen, D. (2013). Self-regulation in online learning. *Distance Education, 34*(3), 290-301. doi: 10.1080/01587919.2013.835770

Chun, J., & Poole, D. (2009). Conceptualizing Stress and Coping Strategies of Korean Social Work Students in the United States: A Concept Mapping Application. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *29*(1), 1–17. doi:

10.1080/08841230802194620

Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cross, T. M. (2014). The gritty: Grit and non-traditional doctoral student success. *Journal of Educators Online, 11*(3), 1-30. doi:10.9743/JEO.2014.3.4

DeLongis, A., Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R. S. (1988). The impact of daily stress on health and mood: Psychological and social resources as mediators. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*(3), 486-495. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.54.3.486

D'Lima, G. M., Winsler, A., & Kitsantas, A. (2014). Ethnic and gender differences in first-year college students' goal orientation, self-efficacy, and extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Educational Research, 107*(5), 341-356. doi: 10.1080/00220671.2013.823366

Duckworth, A.L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M.D., & Kelly, D.R. (2007). Grit: perseverance and passion for long term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *92*(6), 1087-1101. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.92.6.1087

Duckworth, A.L., & Quinn, P.D. (2009). Development and validation of the short grit scale (Grit-S). *Journal of Personality Assessment, 91*(2), 166-174. doi: 10.1080/00223890802634290

Duckworth, A.L., Tsukayama E., Kirby, T.A., Berstein, H., & Ericsson, K.A. (2011).

Deliberate practice spells success: Why grittier competitors triumph at the
National Spelling Bee. *Social Psychology and Personality Science, 2*(2). 174-181.
doi:10.1177/1948550610385872

Duckworth, A., & Gross, J. J. (2014). Self-control and grit: Related but separable
determinants of success. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *23*(5), 319-325. doi:10.1177/0963721414541462

Duckworth, A. L., Gendler, T. S., & Gross, J. J. (2014). Self-control in school-age
children. *Educational Psychologist, 49*(3), 199-217. doi:
10.1080/00461520.2014.926225

Duckworth, A. (2016). *GRIT. The power of passion and perseverance*. New York, NY:
Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Dunn, K.E., Rakes, G.C., & Rakes, T.A. (2014). Influence of academic self-regulation,
critical thinking, and age on online graduate students' academic help-seeking.
Distance Education, 35(1), 75-89. doi 10.1080/01587919.2014.891426

Duquaine-Watson, J.M. (2007). "Pretty darned cold." Single mother students and the
community college climate in post-welfare reform America. *Equity & Excellence
in Education, 40*(3). 229-240. doi:10.1080/10665680701334785

Duquaine-Watson, J. M. (2017, May 12). They loved being moms. *Chronicle of Higher
Education*, A6-A7. Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/

Duran, A. (2008). One mama's dispensable myths and indispensable machines. In E.
Evans, C. Grant, E. Evans, & C. Grant (Eds.), *Mama, PhD: Women write about
motherhood and academic life* (pp. 80-88). Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University

Press.

El-Ghoroury, N. H., Galper, D. I., Sawaqdeh, A., & Bufka, L. F. (2012). Stress, coping, and barriers to wellness among psychology graduate students. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, *6*(2), 122–134. doi:10.1037/a0028768

Erichsen, E., & Bolliger, D. (2011). Towards understanding international graduate student isolation in traditional and online environments. *Educational Technology Research & Development*, *59*(3), 309-326. doi:10.1007/s11423-010-9161-6

Fernández-González, L., González-Hernández, A., & Trianes-Torres, M. V. (2015). Relationships between academic stress, social support, optimism-pessimism and self-esteem in college students. *Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology, 13*(1), 111-129. doi:10.14204/ejrep.35.14053

Filipponi-Berardinelli, J. O. (2013). Exploring efficacy in negotiating support: Women re-entry students in higher education. *College Quarterly, 16*(2). Retrieved from http://collegequarterly.ca/

Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R. S. (1985). Stress questionnaire. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *48*(1), 150-170. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.48.1.150

Folkman, S., Lazarus, R. S., Pimley, S., & Novacek, J. (1987). Age differences in stress and coping processes. *Psychology and Aging, 2*(2), 171-184. doi:10.1037/0882-7974.2.2.171

Fortier, M.S., Vallerand, R.J., & Guay, F. (1995). Academic motivation and school performance toward a structural model. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 20*, 257-274. doi: 10.1006/ceps. 1995. 1017

Frankfort-Nachmias, C., & Nachmias, D. (2008). *Research methods in the social sciences* (7th ed.). New York, NY: Worth.

Freeman, A. (2014). The winding path back to school: Hidden obstacles to higher education for low-income single mothers. *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association*, 1-35. Retrieved from http://www.asanet.org/

Galyon, C. E., Blondin, C. A., Yaw, J. S., Nalls, M. L., & Williams, R. L. (2012). The relationship of academic self-efficacy to class participation and exam performance. *Social Psychology of Education: An International Journal, 15*(2), 233-249. doi: 10.1007/s11218-011-9175-x

García-Martín, M. Á., Hombrados-Mendieta, I., & Gómez-Jacinto, L. (2016). A multidimensional approach to social support: The questionnaire on the frequency of and satisfaction with social support (QFSS). *Anales De Psicología, 32*(2), 501-515. doi:10.6018/analesps.32.2.201941

Garcia, T., & Pintrich, P.R. (1991). *Student motivation and self-regulated learning: A LISREL model*. Retrieved from ERIC database (ED333006)

Gatta, M. (2004). Raising women and their families out of poverty: Single working poor mothers, skills training and online learning. *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association,* 1-30. doi: asa_proceeding_34432.PDF.

Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, *8*(4), 597-606. Retrieved from http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol8/iss4/6

Goldrick-Rab, S., & Sorensen, K. (2010). Unmarried parents in college. *The Future of*

Children, *20*(2), 179-203. doi:10.1353/foc.2010.0008

Graham, M., & Dugan-Bassett, M., (2012). *Low-income single mothers at community college: Recommendations for practices to improve completion*. Retrieved from https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/

Greenberg, Z., & Shenaar-Golan, V. (2017). Overcoming multidimensional marginality: The significance of higher education for traditionally reared single mothers living in the outer periphery. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *21*(8), 833-848. doi:10.1080/13603116.2017.1283716

Gucciardi, E., Celasun, N., & Stewart, D. (2004). Single-mother families in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, *95*(1), 70-73. doi:10.1007/BF03403638

Guerrero-Roldán, A., & Noguera, I. (2018). A model for aligning assessment with competences and learning activities in online courses. *Internet & Higher Education*, *38,* 36-46. doi:10.1016/j.iheduc.2018.04.005

Guest, G., Namey, E. & Mitchell, M. (2013). *Collecting Qualitative Data* (pp. 41-74). London: SAGE. doi:10.4135/9781506374680

Haleman, D. (2006) Great expectations: Single mothers in higher education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 17*(6), 769-784, doi: 10.1080/0951839042000256448

Haynes, C., Bulosan, M., Citty, J., Grant-Harris, M., Hudson, J., & Koro-Ljungberg, M. (2012). My world is not my doctoral program...or is it?: Female students' perceptions of well-being. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *7,* 1-17.

doi:10.28945/1555

Heirdsfield, A., Walker, S., Tambyah, M., & Beutel, D. (2011). Blackboard as an online

learning environment: What do teacher education students and staff think?

Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 36(7). doi:10.14221/ajte.2011v36n7.4

Hegarty, N. (2011). Adult learners as graduate students: Underlying motivation in

completing graduate programs. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 59*(3),

146-151. doi:10.1080/07377363.2011.614883

Herbst, C. (2013). Welfare reform and the subjective well-being of single mothers.

Journal of Population Economics, *26*(1), 203-238. doi:10.1007/s00148-012-0406-

z

Hines, J. (2004). The social policy snare: Keeping women out of university.

Canadian Woman Studies, 23(3/4), 138-141. Retrieved from

http://www.yorku.ca/cwscf/

Hinton-Smith, T. (2016). Negotiating the risk of debt-financed higher education: The

experience of lone parent students. *British Educational Research Journal*, *42*(2),

207-222. doi:10.1002/berj.3201

Hodges, C. B., Stackpole-Hodges, C. L., & Cox, K. M. (2008). Self-efficacy, self-

regulation, and cognitive style as predictors of achievement with podcast

instruction. *Journal of Educational Computing Research, 38*(2), 139-153.

doi:10.2190/EC.38.2.b

Horzum, M. B., Kaymak, Z. D., & Gungoren, O. C. (2015). Structural equation modeling

towards online learning readiness, academic motivations, and perceived

learning. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice*, *15*(3), 759-770. Retrieved from ERIC database. (EJ1067438)

Jackson, S. M., Miller, C. E., Arbuckle, N., Michael, B., Peyton, E., & Shoda, E. A. (2012). Predicting academic success: Self-efficacy, motivation, expectancy, goal-setting, and social support. *Predicting Academic Success: Self-Efficacy, Motivation, Expectancy, Goal-Setting, and Social Support*, *11*. doi:10.1037/e660652012-001

Johnnie, D. (2012). *Sampling essentials: Practical guidelines for making sampling choices*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. doi: 10.4135/9781452272047

Johnson, V. D. (2010). Impact of race and welfare reform on African American single mothers' access to higher education. *Journal of Black Studies*, *40*(6), 1041-1051. doi:10.1177/0021934708323986.

Jones-DeWeever, A. A. (2005). When the spirit blooms: Acquiring higher education in the context of welfare reform. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, *27*(3/4), 113. doi:10.1300/J501v27n03•08

Julian, T., & Kominski, R. A. (2011). Education and synthetic work-life earnings estimates. *American Community Survey Reports*, ACS-14. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acs-14.pdf

Katz, S. (2013). "Give us a chance to get an education." Single mothers' survival narrative and strategies for pursuing higher education on welfare. *Journal of Poverty, 17*(3), 273-304. doi:10.1080/10875549.2013.804477

Killinger, M., Binder-Hathaway, R., Mitchell, P., Patrick., E. (2013). Mothers in honors. *Journal of The National Collegiate Honors Council, 14*(1), 37-45. Retrieved from https://www.nchchonors.org/

Kim, K., & Frick, T. W. (2011). Changes in student motivation during online learning. *Journal of Educational Computing Research, 44*(1), 1-23. doi:10.2190/EC.44.1. a

King, C., Wu, J., & Niiranjan, S. (2014). Social support, self-efficacy and depression of college students. *International Journal of Arts and Social Science, 2*(3), 51-64. Retrieved from https://ijlass.org/

Kirmizi, O., (2013). Investigating self-regulated learning habits of distance education students. *Journal of History, Culture, & Art Research/Tarih Kutir Ve Sanat Arastimalan Degisi, 2*(2), 161-174. doi:10.7596/taksad.v2i2.246

Kulp, A. M. (2016). The effects of parenthood during graduate school on PhD recipients' paths to the professoriate: A focus on motherhood. *New Directions for Higher Education, 2016*(176), 81-95. doi:10.1002/he.20211

Lashley, M. M., & Ollivierre, L. (2014). Exploring the linkages of single black mothers and their college experiences. *Global Education Journal, 3*, 138-155. Retrieved from http://www.franklinpublishing.net

Lazarus, R. S., DeLongis, A., Folkman, S., & Gruen, R. (1985). Stress and adaptational outcomes: The problem of confounded measures. *American Psychologist, 40*(7), 770-779. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.40.7.770.

LeSavoy, B. (2010). "On the outside end:" Systems of oppression and academic

success. *Black Women, Gender & Families*, *4*(2), 85-108.

doi:10.1353/bwg.2010.0002

Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Linnenbrink, E.A., & Pintrich, P.R. (2002). Motivation as an enabler for academic

success. *School Psychology Review*, *31*(3), 313-327. Retrieved from

http://www.nasponline.org/

Lovell, E. (2014). College students who are parents need equitable services for retention.

Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 16(2), 187-

202. doi:10.2190/CS.162b

Lundberg, C. A., McIntire, D. D., & Creasman, C. T. (2008). Sources of social support

and self-efficacy for adult students. *Journal of College Counseling, 11*(1), 58.

Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1882.2008.tb00024.x

Lynch, K. K. (2008). Gender roles and the American academe: A case study of graduate

student mothers. *Gender & Education*, *20*(6), 585-605.

doi:10.1080/09540250802213099

Lynch, D. D., & Trujillo, H. T. (2011). Motivational beliefs and learning strategies in

organic chemistry. *International Journal of Science & Mathematics*

Education, 9(6), 1351-1365. doi:10.1007/s10763-010-9264-x

McFarland, J., Hussar, B., de Brey, C., Snyder, T., Wang, X., Wilkinson-Flicker, S.,

Hinz, S. (2017). *The Condition of Education 2017* (NCES 2017-144). U.S.

Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education

Statistics. Retrieved from

https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2017144

Melnyk, B. M., Slevin, C., Militello, L., Hoying, J., Teall, A., & McGovern, C. (2016). Physical health, lifestyle beliefs and behaviors, and mental health of entering graduate health professional students: Evidence to support screening and early intervention. *Journal of The American Association of Nurse Practitioners*, *28*(4), 204-211. doi: 10.1002/2327-924.12350

Meriläinen, M., Puhakka, H., & Sinkkonen, H. (2015). Students' suggestions for eliminating bullying at a university. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 43*(2), 202-215. doi: 10.1080/03069885.2014.950943

Miedjiensky, S., & Lichtinger, E. (2016). Seminar for masters thesis projects: Promoting students' self-regulation. *International Journal of Higher Education, 5*(4), 13-26. doi:10.5430/ijhe.v5n4p13

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. doi: 10.4135/9781412995658

Munich, K. (2014). Social support for online learning: Perspectives of nursing students. *International Journal Of E-Learning & Distance Education, 29*(2), 1-12. Retrieved from ERIC Database. (EJ1102010)

National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). U.S. Department of Education, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 1986-87 (NPSAS:87), 1989-90 (NPSAS:90), 1992-93 (NPSAS:93), Data Analysis Systems. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578e.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). U.S. Department of Commerce, Census

Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), Annual Social and Economic

Supplement, 1996 through 2016. Retrieved from

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_502.30.asp

Olson-Garriott, A. N., Garriott, P. O., Rigali-Oiler, M., & Chao, R. C. (2015). Counseling

psychology trainees' experiences with debt stress: a mixed methods

examination. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *62*(2), 202-215.

doi:10.1037/cou0000051

Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Rosli, R., Ingram, J. M., & Frels, R. K. (2014). A critical dialectical

pluralistic examination of the lived experience of select women doctoral

students. *Qualitative Report*, *19*(3), 1-35. Retrieved from

https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/

O'Neal, C. R., Espino, M. M., Goldthrite, A., Morin, M. F., Weston, L., Hernandez, P., &

Fuhrmann, A. (2016). Grit under duress. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral

Sciences*, *38*(4), 446-466. doi:10.1177/0739986316660775

Pandey, S., & Min, Z. (2007). Postsecondary education, marital status, and economic

well-being of women with children. *Social Development Issues, 29*(1), 1-26.

Retrieved from http://www.lyceumbooks.com/

Pare, E. (2010). A qualitative study of the experience of student-mothers and university

support. *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association*, 2227.

Retrieved from http://www.asanet.org/

Patton, S. (2012). The phd now comes with food stamps. *Utne Reader*, 40-41. Retrieved

from https://www.chronicle.com/

Pintrich., P.R., & DeGroot, E.V. (1990). Motivational and self-regulated learning components of classroom academic performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *82*(1), 33-40. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.82.1.33

Pintrich, P. (2000). The role of goal orientation in self-regulated learning. In M. Boekaerts, P. R. Pintrich, & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation* (pp. 451–502). San Diego, CA: Academic Press. doi: 10.1016/B978-012109890-2/50043-3

Pintrich, P.R. (2003). A motivational science perspective on the role of student motivation in learning and teaching context. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*(4), 667-686. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.95.4.667

Pintrich, P. R. (2004). A conceptual framework for assessing motivation and self-regulated learning in college students. *Educational Psychology Review, 16*(4), 385-407. doi:10.1007/s10648-004-0006-x

Prevatt, F., Li, H., Welles, T., Festa-Dreher, D., Yelland, S., & Lee, J. (2011). The academic success inventory for college students: Scale development and practical implications for use with students. *Journal of College Admission, 211*, 26-31. Retrieved from http://www.nacac.com

Putwain, D., Sander, P., & Larkin, D. (2013). Academic self-efficacy in study-related skills and behaviours: Relations with learning-related emotions and academic success. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *83*(4), 633-650. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8279.2012.02084.x

Robbins, S. B., Lauver, K., Le, H., Davis, D., Langley, R., & Carlstrom, A. (2004). Do

psychosocial and study skill factors predict college outcomes? A Meta-Analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 130*(2), 261-288. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.130.2.261

Robinson, K. (2016). Capabilities eroded and childcare dilemmas: A phenomenological study of low-income single student mothers in higher education in the United States and Germany (Order No. 10617883). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1972605660).

Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. A., Spaulding, L. l., & Lunde, R. (2017). Women in distance doctoral programs: How they negotiate their identities as mothers, professionals, and academics in order to persist. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 1249-71. Retrieved from http://informingscience.org/

Rosen, J. A., Glennie, E. J., Dalton, B. W., Lennon, J. M., Bozick, R. N., & RTI, I. (2010). *Noncognitive Skills in the Classroom: New Perspectives on Educational Research*. RTI International. Retrieved from ERIC Database. (ED512833)

Rubin, H. J. & Rubin, I. S. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. doi:10.4135/9781452226651

Rummell, C. M. (2015). An exploratory study of psychology graduate student workload, health, and program satisfaction. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *46*(6), 391–399. doi: 10.1037/pro0000056.

Sandover, S., Jonas-Dwyer, D., & Marr, T. (2015). Graduate entry and undergraduate medical students' study approaches, stress levels and ways of coping: a five year longitudinal study. *BMC Medical Education*, *15*, 5. doi: 10.1186/s12909-015-

0284-7.

Schlehofer, M. (2012). Practicing what we teach? An autobiographical reflection on navigating academia as a single mother. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *40*(1), 112-128. doi: 10.1002/jcop.20490

Schunk, D. H. (2005). Self-regulated learning: The educational legacy of Paul R. Pintrich. *Educational Psychologist, 40*(2), 85-94. doi:10.1207/s15326985ep4002_3

Schweinle, A., & Helming, L. (2011). Success and motivation among college students. *Social Psychology of Education, 14*(4), 529-546. doi:10.1007/s11218-011-9157-z.

Sealey-Ruiz, Y. (2007). Rising above reality: The voices of reentry black mothers and their daughters. *Journal of Negro Education*, *76*(2), 141-153. Retrieved from http://www.journalnegroed.org/

Senter, K. E., & Caldwell, K. (2002). Spirituality and the maintenance of change: A phenomenological study of women who leave abusive relationships. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal*, *24*(4), 543. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021269028756

Shriver, M. (2014). *The Shriver report. A women's nation pushes back from the brink*. O. Morgan & K. Skelton (Eds). New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Soria, K. M., & Stebleton, M. (2013). Immigrant College Students' Academic Obstacles. *Learning Assistance Review*, *18*(1), 7–24. Retrieved from https://nclca.wildapricot.org/tlar

Springer, K. W., Parker, B. K., & Leviten-Reid, C. (2009). Making space for graduate student parents: practice and politics. *Journal of Family Issues*, *30*(4), 435-457. doi: 10.177/0192513X08329293

Subramaniam M; Prasad R.O., Abdin E., Vaingankar J.A., Chong S.A. (2014). Single mothers have a higher risk of mood disorders. *Annals of the Academy of Medicine, 43*(3), pp. 145-51. Retrieved from http://www.annals.edu.sg/

Theisen, M. R., McGeorge, C. R., & Walsdorf, A. A. (2018). Graduate student parents' perceptions of resources to support degree completion: implications for family therapy programs. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, *30*(1), 46-70. doi:10.1080/08952833.2017.1382650

Thoits, P. A. (1995). Stress, coping, and social support processes: Where are we? What next? *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 36*, 53-79. doi:10.2307/2626947

Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2012). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, *11*(1), 80. doi:10.1177/1473325010368316

Tuohy, D., Cooney, A., Dowling, M., Murphy, K., & Sixsmith, J. (2013). An overview of interpretive phenomenology as a research methodology. *Nurse Researcher*, *20*(6), 17-20. Retrieved from https://journals.rcni.com/nurse-researcher

United States Census Bureau (2016). Current population reports, P60-259, *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2016*. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2017/demo/P60 -259.pdf

United States Census Bureau (2017a). Current population survey, 2016 annual social and economic supplement. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2016/demo/families/cps-2016.html

United States Census Bureau (2017b). Facts for features: Mother's day: May 14, 2017. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/newsroom/facts-for-features/2017/cb17-ff09-mothers-day.pdf

Usher, K. & Jackson, D. (2014). Phenomenology. In J. Mills, & M. Birks. *Qualitative methodology*: *A practical guide* (pp. 181-198). London: SAGE Publications Ltd. doi:10.4135/9781473920163.

Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., Blais, M. R., Briere, N. M., Senecal, C., & Vallieres, E. F. (1992). The academic motivation scale: A measure of intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation in education. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, *52*(4), 1003-1017. doi:10.1177/0013164492052004025

Vanderstoep, S.W., Pintrich, P.R., & Fagerlin, A. (1996). Disciplinary differences in self-regulated learning in college students. *Contemporary Educational Psychology,* *21*(4), 345-362. doi:10.1006/ceps. 1996.0026

Van Stone, N., Nelson, J. R., & Niemann, J. (1994). Poor single-mother college students' views on the effect of some primary sociological and psychological belief factors on their academic success. *Journal of Higher Education*, 65571-584. doi:10.2307/2943779.

Wilson, A. A. (2014). The lived experiences of resilient single mothers who raised successful black men. *Adultspan Journal, 13*(2), 90-108. doi:10.1002/j.2161-

0029.2014.00029

Wigfield, A., Klauda, S.L., & Cambria, J. (2011). Influences on the development of

academic self-regulatory processes. *Handbook of Self-Regulation of Learning and*

Performance. In Barry Zimmerman and Dale Schunk (Eds). New York, NY:

Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203839010

Wolters, C.A., & Hussain, M. (2015). Investigating grit and its relations with college

students' self-regulated learning and academic achievement. *Metacognition and*

Learning, 10 (3), 293-311. doi:10.1007/s114090-014-9128-9.

Yakoboski, T. (2010). Going at it alone: Single-mother undergraduate's

experiences. *Journal of Student Affairs Research & Practice*, *47*(4), 456-474.

doi:10.2202/1949-6605.6185

Zeiders, K.H., Roosa, M.W., & Tein, J. (2011). Family structure and family processes in

Mexican-American families. *Family Process, 50*(1), 77-91. doi:10.1111/j.1545-

5300.2010.01347.x

Zimmerman, E., & Brogan, L. (2015). Grit and legal education. *Pace Law Review, 36*(1),

112-157. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/plr/

Zusho, A., Pintrich, P.R., & Coppola, B. (2003). Skill and will: The role

of motivation and cognition in the learning of college chemistry. *International*

Journal of Science Education, 25(9), 1081-1094. doi:

10.1080/0950069032000052207

Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

1. Are you a single mother?

    - Yes

    - No

2. How many years have you been a single mother? ____

3. What is your age? _____

4. Do you live with at least one of your dependent children and without a

    romantic partner?

    - Yes

    - No

5. How many of your children under the age of 18 live in your household? ____

6. What are the ages of your children that live in your household?

    _____

7. Are you actively enrolled in an online graduate program?

    - Yes

    - No

8. Have you been enrolled in your online graduate program for at least one year?

    - Yes

    - No

9. What type of online program are you currently enrolled in?

    - Master's

    - Doctoral

10. What is your area of study?

- Business and Management

- Public Health and Health Sciences

- Information Technology

- Psychology and Counseling

- Social Work and Human Services

- Education

- Criminal Justice and Emergency Management

- Public Policy and Administration

- Nursing

- Communication and New Media

- Other_____

11. What is your annual household income level? (excluding student loans)

- Less than $20,000

- $21,000 to $34,999

- $35,000 to $49,999

- $50,000 to $74,999

- $75,000 to $99,000

- Over $100,000

- Prefer not to answer

12. How many total credits have you earned in your online graduate program?

- 0-10

- 11-20

- 21-30

- 31-40

- 41-50

- More than 50

13. How many total credits do you need to complete your online graduate

program?

- 0-10

- 11-20

- 31-40

- 41-50

- More than 50

14. What is your current GPA?

- 1.0-2.0

- 2.1-3.0

- 3.1-4.0

Appendix B: Social Media Recruitment Post

I am seeking single mothers for a study that explores their lived experiences as graduate students enrolled in an online master's or doctoral program. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of graduate student single mothers attending an online education program to describe factors influencing their academic success, with a focus on their motivation, self-efficacy, and social support. The study will also explore barriers to their success and the methods they employ to cope and overcome barriers.   Participation is voluntary and confidential. If you are interested in participating in this study, please follow the link below to be directed to a more detailed informed consent document regarding this study. If you choose to participate and provide informed consent, you will be directed to the online survey:

https://qtrial2018q4az1.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_07kpFDN3iMciOMt. In addition to completing the online survey, you will be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute 1:1 recorded interview.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

The following questions were used to guide the interviews.

Opening Statement. Let's begin with you telling me what your experience is like being a single mother and an online graduate student.

1. Please describe for me what a typical day is like for you?

2. Tell me what did that experience of (participants description of a typical day) feel like to you?

3. How does being a student change your typical day?

4. Please tell me about what factors motivate you toward being successful in your graduate work. (PROMPT) Please provide me an example of how these motivating factors facilitated your success?

5. Describe for me in what ways are motivated for achievement?

6. Does your academic motivation get stronger or weaker as you move along in your graduate work? (PROMPT)What makes it strong? (PROMPT)What makes it weak?

7. During times when your academic motivation is weak, what helps to make it stronger?

8. Please tell me about what your belief is in your ability to be confident to achieve success in your graduate work. (PROMPT) Please provide me an example of how being confident facilitated your success?

9. Describe for me in what ways you feel confident for achievement?

10. Does your confidence get stronger or weaker as you move along in your graduate work? (PROMPT) Where do you think your confidence comes from? (PROMPT)What do you think limits your confidence?

11. During times when you feel your confidence is weak, what helps to make it stronger?

12. Please tell me about key individuals who are supportive resources for your success in your graduate work. (PROMPT) Please describe for me a specific example of how the support of these individuals facilitated your success?

13. Why do you consider them as support? (PROMPT)What do they do? (PROMPT)What do they not do?

14. What would you describe as barriers to your success in your graduate work?

15. Please tell me about your experience of what is the most difficult part about being a single mother and an online graduate student?

16. How did that experience of having difficulties impact you?

17. How do the barriers that you describe cross over into your work life and home life?

18. In what way do the barriers that you describe exist when you are on a break from school? (PROMPT) Why or Why not do you think they exist?

19. Please tell me about what strategies you find helpful in managing how you cope with overcoming the difficulties that you experience being a single mother and an online graduate student? (PROMPT) Please provide me an

example of how you used a strategy to cope and overcome difficulties.

(PROMPT) What did that experience of overcoming difficulties mean to you?

20. Please tell me how you use the same strategies across different settings (tie this question into how they answer the question on the barriers that they experience across different settings)?

Closing Question - Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about to help me understand your experiences being a single mother and an online graduate student?

Appendix D: Participant Textural-Structural Descriptions

Participant 1. A typical day for P1 starts with waking up her son, making him breakfast and getting him ready for school, and then driving to work. After work, P1 usually takes her son to his extra-curricular activities, makes dinner, and gets her son ready for bed. P1 typically does her graduate schoolwork during her lunch breaks at work.

The factors that influence P1's academic motivation is wanting a better life for her child and her self-efficacy and need to achieve. Her experience balancing single motherhood and graduate school varies - some days, she is optimistic, motivated and energized; other days she is tired and overwhelmed; she feels that being a student provides her no time for herself. P1 is motivated to achieve because "it's just something that mothers do for their kids." She described her academic motivation as "up and down"; it starts strong, but she is easily discouraged. What makes P1's academic motivation strong is reinforcement from faculty and making small accomplishments. P1's academic motivation is weak when she experiences a lack of direction from instructors to help her progress. When P1's motivation is weak, she reorganizes herself and takes control of her learning by reaching out and asking for help from faculty, and these tasks help to make her academic motivation stronger.

P1's has a strong belief in her academic self-efficacy; her motto is, "I personally believe that anything is possible if I work hard towards it." She knows she is capable of achievement, and when she is discouraged, she remembers that her lack of progress is not about the quality of her work or her ability. P1 reported that her confidence to believe in

herself has always been there, but in graduate school, she had to adjust to a new way of writing. Once she adjusted, she altered her belief system, which led her to produce better work and have better outcomes. Like her academic motivation, P1's academic self-efficacy ebbs and flows and is dependent on how she is progressing; small successes along the way increase her self-efficacy, and academic setbacks weaken it. P1's academic self-efficacy is due to her resilience and strength to overcome poverty, which led her to believe she can achieve anything. When P1 feels self-discouraged, her academic self-efficacy is weakened, but emotional support from immediate family helps to make her self-efficacy strong again. P1 also practices regular self-care such as napping and meditation to help.

P1's support network is her immediate family, specifically her children and her mom. Her children provide her emotional support such as humor, and her mother provides her instrumental support such as childcare, cooking, and house cleaning. When asked the question on what she lacks in support, P1 responded, "I would not mind having a day or two to myself."

P1 faces many barriers in her life that get in the way of her academic success. She reported these barriers are time management, financial, and physical wellness that affects her motivation. Other difficulties she experiences are feelings of worry and guilt. P1 reported that the problems that stem from the barriers she experiences exist even when she is not in school. Her way of coping with barriers is using organizational tactics, such as planning her day out, using checklists and calendars, and prioritizing what needs to get

done. Interestingly, she only uses these coping strategies for her professional and academic life because planning out her personal life would "freak her out."

Participant 2. A typical day for P2 starts with waking up her son, making him breakfast and getting him ready for school, driving her son to school and then driving to work. After work, P2 usually does errands, makes dinner, and helps her son with his homework while she does her schoolwork. P2 also does her graduate schoolwork in the middle of the night and on the weekends.

The factors that influence P2's academic motivation are career growth, financial growth, and personal growth. Her experience balancing single motherhood and graduate school is being overwhelmed and stressed; she feels that being a student provides her extra worry, and in turn, she cannot fully enjoy her life. P2 is motivated to achieve by role-modeling her academic success for her son, "I look at my son and I want to believe that he's kind of, you know, watching me." She describes her academic motivation "fluctuates"; it's stronger when she is progressing and understanding faculty expectations and weak when she has faced an academic setback. What makes P2's academic motivation strong is informational support from faculty. P2's academic motivation is weak when she experiences personal and educational setbacks. When P2's motivation is weak, she connects with faculty and with her peers for support, and these tasks help to make her academic motivation stronger.

P2 described her academic self-efficacy as "pretty strong." She has a strong belief in her academic self-efficacy because of her ability to maintain her high GPA. She knows she is capable of achievement from her experience managing her grades and

staying on track with her studies. P2's academic self-efficacy has grown throughout her graduate program and is dependent on understanding faculty expectations. When she experiences a slump in her confidence to achieve, informational support from attending academic residencies and social support from peers helps to increase it. P2's academic self-efficacy comes from her time earned as a graduate student and understanding the academic rigor it involves.

P2's support network is comprised of her peers in graduate school, work colleagues, good neighbors, and good friends. Her peers provide her emotional and informational support, her work colleagues, namely her boss, provides her mentorship, and her neighbors and good friends, provide instrumental support such as childcare when she needs it. When asked what she lacks in support, P2 responded, "The finances I could use help with." She relies on her financial aid for school to supplement her work income.

P2's barrier for her academic success is time; she struggles with finding the time to study. Other difficulties she experiences are finding a work/life balance, feelings of sadness, and self-judgment and self-doubt about her decision to further her education. P2 reported that the problems that stem from the barriers she experiences exist even when she is not in school, namely in her professional life. P2's stated barriers cause her to "worry" because, "sometimes at work, I don't feel that I put in as much as I could put in as an employee." P2's way of coping with barriers is using her time wisely and prioritizing her day to fit in different tasks. In this way, she gets a sense of accomplishment because she feels that having a structured life is also crucial for juggling finances and keeping her personal power.

Participant 3. A typical day for P3 starts with getting her kids ready for school, driving them to school. Participant three works shift work, so the days that she is at work, she spends studying, doing house chores, and running errands. After P3 picks her children up from school, she helps them with homework, makes dinner, and gets them ready for bed. P3 reported that her children are special needs, so she also gives them play therapy in the evening before getting them to bed. P3 does her graduate schoolwork at night after her kids are asleep.

The factors that influence P3's academic motivation are career opportunities, financial stability, and personal accomplishment. She described her experience balancing single motherhood and graduate school as being extremely frustrated and stressed from having role conflict. Moreover, P3's stress has affected not only her emotional health but also her physical health. P3 described that being a student affects her ability to manage her time. P2 is motivated to achieve by wanting to give back to her mom and by her faith and spirituality to bring "light into the world." As P3 moves along in her program, she reported her academic motivation is stronger; it's stronger as she learns the validity and purpose of the degree but weak when she is tired and misses course deadlines. When P3's academic motivation is weak, she experiences self-doubt. To strengthen her motivation P3 connects with her faculty mentor for emotional support and reminds herself of the advice her mentor has given her to "trust the process."

P3 described her academic self-efficacy as "the power to create my circumstances." Her belief in her academic self-efficacy is due to her faith and spiritual ability. She knows she is capable of achievement from an experience she had when she

had a low point in her life and went through an existential crisis. During that time, she reached out to others for emotional support and learned how to put forth her "authentic self" to give her life purpose. P2's academic self-efficacy wavers and is dependent on her academic performance and how she is progressing as compared to her peers. When P3 experiences a slump in her confidence, emotional support from immediate family and her peers, and remembering to "trust the process" helps to increase her confidence. P3's academic self-efficacy comes from her mother and her ability to be her authentic self.

P3's support network is her faculty mentor, immediate family members, and her boyfriend. Her boyfriend and her mother provide her emotional support; her grandmother and brother provide her instrumental support such as financial support and childcare. Her faculty mentor provides her informational support and emotional support. When asked what she lacks in support, P3 would like more proactive assistance from her support network. P3 stated that she tends to get "snappy" when she feels overwhelmed, and then her support people will leave her alone instead of taking charge, but that is when she needs the most support.

P3's barrier for her academic success is her lack of experience; she struggles with feeling like she cannot keep up in her courses because she lacks the professional experience. Other difficulties she experiences are feeling frustrated and isolated. P3 reported that the problems that stem from the barriers she experiences exist even when she is not in school, namely in her personal life. Her barriers cause her to "worry about the kids," and anxiety about her academic performance. Moreover, her sense of isolation makes her "feel so sad." P3's way of coping with barriers is practicing spiritual self-care,

reaching out for social support, and positive self-talk. In this way, she feels resilient to keep her personal power and can look forward to becoming an agent of social change from her degree.

Participant 4. A typical day for P4 starts with waking up her daughter and getting her ready for school and to the school bus. Once her daughter leaves for school, P4 takes time for herself to have coffee, and "boot" up for the day. P4 works full time from home. When her daughter comes home from school, she will give her chores to do while P4 finishes work. After work, P4 helps her daughter with her homework, makes dinner, and puts her daughter to bed. P4 does her graduate schoolwork on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and the weekends.

The factors that influence P4's academic motivation are her daughter, financial growth, career mobility, and personal fulfillment. Her experience balancing single motherhood and graduate school is being exhausted and stressed to the point she sometimes thinks about quitting. However, P4's stated her stubbornness keeps her from giving up. P4 described that being a student also affects her ability to relax. P4 is motivated to achieve by role-modeling for her daughter, and her personal aspiration to create social change. As P4 moves along in her program, her academic motivation is "up and down"; it's stronger from positive relationships with faculty and her course interest and weakens when she feels what she is learning is redundant. When P4's motivation is weak, her stubborn nature and pride to maintain her high GPA helps to make her academic motivation stronger.

P4 described her academic self-efficacy as 'knowing that I am going to succeed; there is no other option". Her belief in her academic self-efficacy is because she has the confidence to know she will not quit. She knows she is capable of achievement from having an experience of hitting a low point in her professional life, which made her have self-doubt about her career path and field of study. From that experience, she reached out to others for emotional support and advice, and through these tactics, she was able to put her "big girl panties on" and put personal conflicts aside to move forward. P4's reported her academic self-efficacy wavers and is dependent on her interest in the course. When P4 experiences a slump in her confidence to achieve, emotional support from immediate family and work colleagues, role-modeling for her daughter, self-fulfillment from helping others, and ideas of the financial gain from the degree helps to increase it. P4's academic self-efficacy comes from her professional relationships and her relationship with her daughter.

P4's support network is comprised of her immediate family, work colleagues, and her daughter's father. Her immediate family members provide her emotional support, her work colleagues provide her emotional, informational, and instrumental support such as prompting self-care, and her daughter's father also provides her instrumental support such as child-care. P4 indicated that she is fortunate to have a support network of individuals who "have her back" because as a single mother, that is essential for her success.

P4's barrier for her academic success is her work situation that is less flexible than before. She struggles with balancing her multiple roles and with time management

problems. Other difficulties she experiences are feeling guilt and self-doubt over how much time she spends on her coursework over other things in her life. P4 reported that the problems that stem from the barriers she experiences do not exist as much when she is not in school. She states it is "freeing" when she is on a break from school. However, after the break, the barriers reappear, especially stress. The barriers cause her to feel self-doubt because she is "so focused on school that you neglect everything else." Her way of coping with barriers is "a lot of self-reflection and knowing myself and knowing what my limits are." She also makes sure she gets her "me time" for at least 30 minutes a day. In this way, she can reflect on self-love and acceptance to better handle the stressful times.

Participant 5. A typical day for P5 starts with getting her daughter ready for school and to the school bus. Once her daughter leaves for school, P5 goes to work. While P5 is at work, a neighbor looks after her daughter when she gets home from school until P5 gets home. After work on certain days, P5 takes her daughter to extra-curricular activities and this is when P5 will do her graduate schoolwork. P5 also will do her graduate schoolwork after her daughter is asleep.

The factors that influence P5's academic motivation are her drive for independence and to have security for her and her daughter. Her experience balancing single motherhood and graduate school is being overwhelmed; being a student also increases her stress and her 'to do' list. P5 is motivated to achieve by being able to provide a stable environment for her daughter. She also believes that "as a female, money and education is your ticket to stability." Also, P5 has an innate sense of motivation to be busy and is motivated to achieve for her passion to provide social change. As P5 moves

along in her program her academic motivation "ebbs and flows." It is stronger from earning excellent grades and weakens from the lack of support she receives from her immediate family. When P5's motivation is weak, meeting short term goals and accomplishments gives her a sense of power and helps to make her academic motivation stronger.

P5 described her academic self-efficacy as "good" and that "education and age help with that." Her belief in her academic self-efficacy comes from her tenacity. She knows she is capable of achievement from having an experience of overcoming her social anxiety and surviving through other tough times in her personal life. From these experiences, P5 has reached out to others for emotional and instrumental support, and she was able to move forward. However, P5 does feel she has to mask her self-doubts and worry for the sake of her daughter, which can overwhelm her more. P5's academic self-efficacy gradually increases as she moves along in graduate school and is dependent on how she projects her idea of the world onto her daughter. When she experiences a slump in her confidence to achieve, she remembers her tenacity to make it strong again. P5's academic self-efficacy also comes from her daughter's strong sense of self.

P5's support network is individuals in her community and her graduate school peers. Her neighbor provide her instrumental support in the form of child-care and pet-care, her graduate school peers provide her informational support and emotional support through tough times. P5 indicated that this support network of individuals came "unexpectedly" and when she learned to stop relying on people that she thought should help her, but those who volunteered instead, it was a less disappointing experience.

P5's barriers for her academic success are "money, time, and energy"; she struggles with physical and mental wellness, especially in the form of tiredness and anxiety. Other difficulties she experiences are a loss of energy due to dealing with crises in her professional role. P5 reported that the problems that stem from the barriers she experiences do not exist as much when she is not in school. She indicated that without having to juggle schoolwork, she could prioritize her mom role easier with her professional role because her "home environment is not conducive for schoolwork, so it's harder." Her way of coping with barriers is personal "self-care" by hiring someone to clean her home. In this way, she eases her stress. Because P5 works in mental health, she believes that self-care is essential for ethical purposes because she would not be able to give quality care to others without also taking care of herself.

Participant 6. A typical day for P6 starts with working a full-time job as an educator and doing professional development work. After work, P6 spends approximately six hours on her graduate schoolwork each day. P6 indicated her children are adolescents, so they are mostly independent with responsibilities.

The factors that influence P6's academic motivation are her interest in connecting her learning to her profession and her drive for being a life-long learner. Her experience balancing single motherhood and graduate school makes her feel that she is missing out on time with her daughters; being a student gives her less control over her schedule and time. P6 is motivated to achieve by focusing on her goals to create positive social change. She believes that "someday all of this will help someone, even if it's just one person." P6 also said she is role-modeling for her daughters, "so they are striving high, reaching for

the stars." As P6 moves along in her program, her academic motivation is "stronger." It is stronger from "seeing the light at the end of the tunnel" and being able to put her schoolwork into practice. Her motivation weakens from trying to maintain a work/life/academic balance. When P6's motivation is weak, her spiritualty and self-reflection on what is positive in her life help to make her academic motivation stronger.

P6 described her academic self-efficacy as knowing she can achieve by "speaking things into existence." Her belief in her academic self-efficacy is because she has the confidence from what she has already achieved in life. She knows she is capable of achievement from the experiences of feeling overwhelming pressure, yet she can self-regulate and change her thought process to turn her pressure into "positive pressure." From these experiences, she remembers to put her best self forward. P6'academic self-efficacy is stronger as she moves along in graduate school, and it is dependent on keeping a positive mindset. When she experiences a slump in her confidence to achieve, she remembers to always speak things into existence, her gratitude, and practices personal and physical self-care to make it strong again. P6's academic self-efficacy comes from love from her immediate family.

P6's support network is her family, who are also educators. Her family provides her emotional support to hit important milestones as they are "waiting at the finish line" for her. P6 indicated that she is "fortunate" to have them. P6's barriers for her academic success are financial; she struggles with "keeping up with the unexpected expenses" related to graduate school. Other difficulties she experiences are feeling guilty for using the money for graduate school instead of for family vacations with her daughters. P6

reported that the problems that stem from the barriers she experiences exist even when she's on a break from school. She indicated that although the financial barriers cross into her work and home life, graduate school is worth the sacrifice because "the debt is also a chance" and in the end will "prepare a better path" for her and her daughters. P6's way of coping with barriers is keeping a positive mind-body connection. In this way, she remains thankful and passes her positivity onto others to "pay it forward."

Participant 7. A typical day for P7 starts with getting her son ready for school and driving him to school. After working full-time, P7 makes dinner, helps her son with his homework, and gets him ready for bed. P7 typically dedicates four days a week to work on her graduate schoolwork.

The factors that influence P7's academic motivation are her high sense of achievement and her positive thoughts not to allow setbacks to get in the way of achieving her goals. Her experience balancing single motherhood and graduate school makes her feel high strung, guilt, and pressure from role conflict. She describes that being a student involves more cost and time that takes away from the enjoyment of extracurricular activities to bond with her family. P7 is motivated to achieve by surviving an impoverished childhood. She believes that higher education is a chance for her family to "make a life for themselves that involves somewhat of a comfortable lifestyle." Also, she is excited to be someday called "doctor," a title that represents her success. As P7 moves along in her program, her academic motivation has remained the same as she has kept a positive mindset to take one day at a time and "appreciate what's fun and appreciate what challenges me."

P7 described her academic self-efficacy as "very confident," knowing she can achieve by her experience in her professional life and level of education. Her belief in her academic self-efficacy is due to her confidence to ask for help so she can strengthen her professional knowledge and skills. She knows she is capable of achievement from experiences of personal and academic setbacks, yet she learned from these negative experiences and turned them around to be a personal gain. From these experiences, she remembers to be humble and show humility in her professional work, and in turn helping others. P7's academic self-efficacy is stronger as she moves along in graduate school, and it is dependent on financial constraints that keep her from furthering her professional skills. When she experiences a slump in her confidence to achieve, she reflects on the idea that pursuing her doctoral degree is the "biggest journey of [your]entire life" and "to enjoy meeting goals and to be excited for what the next goal is." These tactics help to make her self-efficacy strong again. P7's academic self-efficacy comes from her education, graduate school peers, and positive feedback from colleagues in her profession.

P7's support network are her close friends. Her friends provide her emotional and instrumental support. P7 indicated that her support network of friends have never made her feel guilty for asking for help and are always there.

P7's barriers for her academic success are financial. Other difficulties she experiences are feeling sad from loneliness. P7 reported that the problems that stem from the barriers she experiences mainly exist only when she's in school. She indicated that although the financial barriers cross into her professional and home-life, she feels the

sacrifice is worth the accomplishment the degree will bring. Also, she will feel "proud" and will be a role model for others. P7's way of coping with barriers is keeping a positive mindset, using calendars to manage her time and establishing boundaries. In this way, she remains focused and takes precautions from toxic situations that might get in the way of meeting her goals.

Participant 8. A typical day for P8 starts with getting her daughter ready for school and driving her daughter to school. P8 then goes to the gym and to work. After work, P8 picks up her daughter from school and goes home. Her son is home-schooled, so after work, she helps her son with his homework. In the evenings, P8 takes her dog to the park for playtime, makes dinner for the family, and puts her kids to bed. P8 works on her graduate schoolwork in the evenings. She also works a part-time job on Sundays.

The factors that influence P8's academic motivation are her passion and excitement for her studies. Her experience balancing single motherhood and graduate school makes her feel anxious as if she is "drowning" and hopeless from the lone responsibility of being a single mom. She described that being a student involves more cost and time that takes away from her self-care. P8 is motivated to achieve by the learning resources that provide her a new perspective from what she has learned in the past. She believes that her graduate program is the opportunity to "hone-in on what areas of my degree I want to maybe pursue as a professional." Also, she feels her degree will provide "that stability and that financial security for me and my kids" As P8 moves along in her program, her academic motivation is stronger; it is stronger from being a "life-long learner," and bonding with her daughter while doing homework together. Her academic

motivation weakens she P8 feels discouraged. When her academic motivation is weak, looking forward to practicum and connecting socially with her peers helps her to overcome those negative feelings.

P8 described her academic self-efficacy as having "a lot of confidence," knowing she can achieve by "academics is an area where I tend to succeed very well." Her belief in her academic self-efficacy is because of the self-sacrifices that she has made to be successful in her prior degree programs. She knows she is capable of achievement from experiences of feeling isolated and worry, yet through supportive faculty and peers has learned she is not alone in her worry and that she is on the right path. P8's academic self-efficacy is stronger as she moves along in graduate school, and it is dependent on logistical and financial hurdles that could keep her from moving forward. When she experiences a slump in her confidence to achieve, she remembers her potential, her ideas to create social change, and reaches out for emotional support to restructure any negative thoughts. These tactics help to make her self-efficacy strong again. P8's academic self-efficacy comes from her spiritual grounding and maturity.

P8's support network is her family and friends. Mainly, P8's sister provides her emotional and informational support. P8 indicated that her support networks are spread out and compartmentalized; she knows "who to call" for the different supports in her life.

P8's barriers to her academic success are logistical, emotional, and financial. Other difficulties she experiences is her perfectionism. P8 reported that the problems that stem from the barriers she experiences would be worse if she were not in school because her academics are also her coping method. She indicated that logistical barriers are also

part of the financial barriers because she worries about balancing her academic fieldwork and her job. She also stated that although her barriers cross into her home life, she remembers to do her best and to factor in personal self-care. This way of thinking helps because she realizes her "hopes and dreams are resting on this degree," so she needs to feel good about what she is doing. P8's way of coping with barriers is always pre-planning and keeping a calendar to organize her time. In this way, she feels proud and accomplished when she is structured to take care of getting things done in her life. When closing her interview, P8 shared that she wanted other women to know it is possible to accomplish graduate school, and that is not only at the end they will feel good about getting the degree, but they will also feel good during the process of getting their degree.

Participant 9. A typical day for P9 starts with getting her daughter ready for school and to the school bus. P9 is a stay-at-home mom. During the day, she is caring for her younger children, running errands, and providing them lunch, snacks, and playtime. P9 usually does her graduate schoolwork during the day when her children are having snack time. In the evening, P9 makes dinner, more playtime, reading time, and puts the kids to bed.

The factors that influence P9's academic motivation are role-modeling and wanting to provide a better financial life for her children. Her experience balancing single motherhood and graduate school is described as "chaotic" and that being a student involves having to adjust more of her time. P9 is motivated to achieve to defy the odds to "prove people wrong." She believes her degree is an opportunity for her and her children to not struggle financially. As P9 moves along in her program, her academic motivation

is stronger; it is stronger from her excellent grades and being in the "final stretch" of her doctoral work. Her academic motivation weakens when she feels exhausted and self-doubt. When P9's academic motivation is weak, to know she is close to being finished, and connecting with her mom for emotional support helps her motivation get stronger.

P9 described her academic self-efficacy as "being very confident," knowing she can achieve by her academic excellence. P9's belief in her academic self-efficacy is because of her ability to put forth the effort to give quality academic work, especially in her ability to write scholarly. She knows she is capable of achievement from experiences of facing academic challenges that eventually lead to positive outcomes. From these experiences, she is sure she can finish her doctorate. P9's academic self-efficacy is stronger as she moves along in graduate school, and it is dependent on her issues with motivation. P9's academic self-efficacy comes from the good vibes she gets when she posts her progress on social media. In this way, she gets to put out positivity in the world and in turn feels supported by her friends who cheer her on.

P9's support network is her close family and friends. Mainly, her P9's mother provides her emotional, instrumental, and informational support. P9's best friend also provides her emotional and instrumental support and mentorship as she also is a graduate student.

P9's barriers to her academic success are a lack of child-care and finances. Other difficulties she experiences is time management. P9 reported that the problems that stem from the barriers exist even when she is not in school. They exist mainly due to time because she not only has the responsibility of caring for her children but also for her

mother, who is disabled. She indicated that in the past, she struggled with a psychological disorder from stress and overworking herself because she worried about "falling behind." She also mentioned that although her barriers cross into her home life, she remembers to always practice personal self-care by taking time to "relax and do nothing" and to remain healthy. P8's way of coping with barriers is multi-tasking her priorities. In this way, she feels accomplished that she has achieved something and enjoys the minor accomplishments of her academic journey. When closing the interview, P9 shared that even when it is chaotic as a single mom with good days and bad days, to take one day at a time and try to be positive and enjoy because attitude is a big part of how one sees things.

Participant 10. A typical day for P10 starts with getting her son ready for school and driving to work. After work, she picks up her son from an aftercare program, and then she makes dinner and does homework with her son. P10 indicated her son is special needs so some days can be chaotic. Once P10 puts her son to bed, she works on her graduate schoolwork.

The factors that influence P10's academic motivation is having the education to better advocate for his special needs, which, in turn, makes her feel like a better mom. Her experience balancing single motherhood and graduate school is "like I can hardly sit down and take a breath if I do everything will fall." She describes that being a student makes her days longer, but it also provides her a sense of purpose. P10 is motivated to achieve for financial reasons and stability, "not just money, but something is my own and someone can't take away." She believes her degree is the opportunity for her to "hold my own" as a mom and more knowledge to push for her son's wellbeing. As P10 moves

along in her program, her academic motivation is stronger; it is stronger from being close to finishing and being able to provide for her son. Her academic motivation weakens when she is unclear on expectations related to her doctoral work and organizational problems. When her academic motivation is weak, remembering her priorities and her 'why' helps to strengthen her motivation.

P10 described her academic self-efficacy as "building on that I know I've done it before," knowing she can achieve by what she has accomplished as a mom and past academic achievements. P10 knows she is capable of achievement from her feelings associated with the imposter affect, yet she manages to push through those feelings with positive outcomes. P10's academic self-efficacy "wavers" as she moves along in graduate school, and it is dependent on her issues with self-esteem. When P10 needs a boost in her confidence, she gives herself a "pep talk" and looks at what she has accomplished. P10's academic self-efficacy comes from her years of practice in her graduate student role. In this way, she uses reflection as a tool to keep her moving forward.

P10 reported that she does not have any scholarly support for her success in graduate school. This is because the individuals in her social network are not pursuing their doctoral degrees, and when they ask her how she is doing, she feels like "they don't really want to talk about it." P10's barriers for her academic success are time and a lack of resources. Other difficulties she experiences are "dull interaction" and "isolation." P10 reported that the problems that stem from the barriers exist even when she is not in school; this is mainly due to her "always doing something with schoolwork because I was

behind already." P10 indicated that she sometimes has self-doubt over her choice to earn her doctorate because she did not anticipate struggling. She also indicated that the barriers cross into her home life because she is easily frustrated and "way snappier." P10 is aware that she is guarded when it comes to reaching out for support and this problem might be due to issues stemming from her feelings of being an imposter. P10's way of coping with her barriers are physical self-care such as walking and yoga. In this way, she feels she can clear her mind. Although the stress relief from her self-care time is fleeting, her "multi-faceted" way of coping is a win/win because she involves her children in her self-care routine whenever she can. In this way, she gets some reprieve from stress but also gives her children "family bonding time."