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**PARENTS PURSUING A DOCTORATE OF EDUCATION: A MIXED  
METHODS EXAMINATION OF HOW PARENTS MANAGE THE  
ROLES OF STUDENT AND PARENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

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Aim/Purpose	Doctoral students who are parents are increasingly more common, particularly in female-dominated disciplines, such as education. This study aims to examine the experiences of parents pursuing an education doctorate
Background	This study examines the experiences of doctoral students who are parents and their perceptions of support in order to determine how programs and faculty can better serve students.
Methodology	This mixed methods study examines the experiences of 52 doctoral students who were parents or became parents during their doctoral program. Methods include surveys and interviews.
Contribution	Very little published literature focuses on the experiences of both mothers and fathers who are doctoral students. This study is unique in that education doctoral students are generally established professionals with families and career success.
Findings	Among participants, 37% were women who became pregnant during the program. While most parents persisted in the program to graduate with a doctorate, several participants, including fathers, discussed their decisions to leave the doctoral program due to family responsibilities.
Recommendations for Practitioners	In order to uphold standards for a high-quality doctoral education, while also supporting student-parents, recommendations are presented for both doctoral programs and students.

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Recommendations for Researchers	Further research is needed on LGBTQ families and single-parent families of lower incomes.
Impact on Society	Differences between workloads and barriers to advancement still persist for mothers in comparison to fathers.
Future Research	Future research should examine the experiences of fathers more fully.
Keywords	doctoral studies, Ed. D, parents, motherhood, academia

## INTRODUCTION

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Doctoral studies are known to be rigorous and time consuming; earning a doctorate is a milestone only 1% of people achieve. In 2018, 55,195 doctorates were awarded at a growth of 3.2% over the previous reporting period in 2015 according to the National Science Foundation (NSF) (2019). Doctorates in Education account for 8.8% of all those awarded, a stark decline from 15.9% in 1999. Of all doctorates awarded, 18,068 were awarded to women. While the number of women earning doctorates increased, more than half of non-STEM doctorates are earned by women. Most salient to the current study, 69% of doctorates in education are earned by women. Given women's predominance in the education field and in earning doctorates, this research examines women's experiences particularly with respect to parenthood while completing a doctoral degree. This study examines this phenomenon in the context of well-established doctoral programs in education at a large, private university in the northwestern United States. These programs have seen a preponderance of women who became pregnant in their first year of doctoral studies leading the researchers to ask how and why parents, particularly mothers, persist in their doctoral studies.

Preparing doctoral level experts in education is essential to improving research in curriculum, school policy, educational psychology, and educational administration. However, given that education is a female dominated field, doctoral programs in education are largely attended by women. Additionally, doctoral programs in education are often composed of professionals who have already been working as teachers or administrators for many years, unlike doctoral programs in other disciplines. Modern doctoral students tend to be older and established in their families and work (Gardner, 2009). Unsurprisingly, family responsibilities often occur concurrently with career development. Because many educational doctoral students are working professionals with families and adult responsibilities, support of these non-traditional students is imperative to the success of education research and ultimately improved quality of education. To that end this article presents the results of a phenomenological study in which doctoral students or recent alumni were surveyed and interviewed about their experiences parenting while completing their studies.

### *MOTHERS IN ACADEMIA*

The literature on parents and academia and doctoral studies focuses almost entirely on the plight of mothers. Inequities and negative attitudes towards females, particularly mothers, in academia has long been reported. Holmstrom and Holmstrom (1974) noted that faculty attitudes toward female doctoral students had contributed to their increased stress and negative self-efficacy. Even now, nearly 50 years later, other researchers have pointed out that for some female doctoral students, the perception of negative attitudes toward them has not changed, especially when it comes to motherhood (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018; Trepal et al, 2013). Mothers in academia are more negatively affected by parenthood and marriage than are married men with children and single women without children (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004a, 2004b; Lynch, 2008; Miller, 2009; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). Despite the fact that mothers are just as productive as their non-parent counterparts (Kulp et al., 2016), research shows women are more likely than men to hold adjunct teaching positions and are overrepresented in part-time, non-tenure-track jobs, illustrating a clear discrepancy between genders

related to academic work (Armenti, 2004; McMahon & Green, 2008). Doctoral students who are mothers are less likely to become socialized into programs and may be less likely to be asked to co-author papers with advisors and engage in other status-building activities, putting them at a disadvantage when it comes to obtaining tenure at a postsecondary institution (Kennelly & Spalter Roth, 2006; Kulp, 2016). Additionally, Kulp (2016) found that mothers with doctorates tended to take longer to complete the degree and graduated at an older age than their non-parent counterparts. They tended to finance their degrees through loans and personal savings rather than scholarships. And although Armenti (2004) reports a bias against motherhood, most of the mothers who earn doctoral degrees in education go back to their schools to move up to administrative positions such as superintendent.

### ***MOTHERS' EXPERIENCES IN DOCTORAL PROGRAMS***

While the complicated experiences of mothers in academia have been well-documented, the research on doctoral students who are mothers is far more scant, and no articles have been published on fathers who are doctoral students. The studies that focus on mother doctoral students that do exist, however, report that parents who are doctoral students experience added challenges due to their family responsibilities (e.g., Leijen et al., 2016). Some women reported that they felt like they had to work harder and be more productive because they were parents. Further, there is a pervasive perception that mother doctoral students don't take their studies as seriously as non-parents or fathers (Mason et al., 2013). Mirick and Wladkowski (2018), examining the experiences of 28 pregnant doctoral students in a health care program, found that participants felt that they were expected to "maintain ... silence about their identity as a mother and ensure that their family life did not negatively impact their work productivity" (p. 253).

The theme of keeping silent on motherhood and pregnancy in doctoral studies also emerged in Trepal et al.'s (2013) phenomenological study of 10 doctoral students who were mothers in a counseling program. They found that the major theme pervading their research was that of disparate expectations placed on doctoral students who were mothers as compared to other mothers who were not doctoral students or women doctoral students who were not mothers. Women reported feeling guilty about putting children in daycare to work and do schoolwork, spending time away from children who were crying for them, and about being "a horrible employee, and a debilitated student" (p. 35). This guilt was tempered by what a career as a professor could afford them as a parent – namely stability and flexibility, and hypothetically control over their own time to do research. More than one student reported that while they wanted to be highly productive academics at a major research institution, they could not do that while being the parent they wanted to be. Trepal et al. also found that mother-doctoral students also looked to female faculty for inspiration and guidance. As one participant noted, she received mixed messages from professors who were mothers: on the one hand, that achieving a doctorate while parenting can be done but, on the other hand, not to use children as an excuse for not doing work or doing well.

### ***FATHERS IN DOCTORAL PROGRAMS***

As noted above, a thorough literature review discovered no published studies on fathers and doctoral studies. However, several dissertations have focused on fatherhood and achieving the PhD. Billman (2015) investigated the experiences of 12 doctoral student fathers using the lens of identity theory, in order to define coping strategies for stress, maintenance of relationships, time, and finances. Billman laments that the predominance of research on mothers in academia excludes any study on fathers in academia and their struggles to balance work and life. Indeed, the literature appears to have written men out of the "family equation ... and now the academy" (p. 3). Billman (2015) emphasizes "Men might begin to feel as if no one really needs them at home" (p. 3). These sentiments have been confirmed by other researchers on fatherhood (Doucet, 2006; Kaufman, 2013). Further, Billman points out that fathers may prioritize professional relationships at the expense of relationships with their

spouses and children. However, Patterson (2017) in his phenomenological dissertation study of 13 father-doctoral student-educational administrators noted the essential motivational role of spouses, which “stimulated the internal grit” needed to propel these fathers through completion of the program (p. 196). Like the research on mothers and their perceptions of their work-life balance and parenting quality (referred to below), most of Patterson’s (2017) participants similarly were unhappy. Indeed, other research on fathers in academia points out that the work-life balance is just as challenging for men as well (Reddick et al., 2012).

### ***PERSISTENCE IN DOCTORAL PROGRAMS***

Since post-secondary institutions are concerned with student retention, it warrants investigating the reason doctoral students drop out (Strikwerder, 2019). Leijen et al. (2016) analyzed interviews with 14 non-completing doctoral students in education to discern their reasons for dropping out. Family commitments and health issues were significant contributors to the lack of persistence, but a common thread in these findings is that non-completers also noted that they did not have the requisite motivation at the commencement of the program. Other researchers have confirmed these findings (see, for example, McAlpine et al., 2012).

For some women, the pressure to persist for pregnant students is even greater according to Mason et al. (2013):

There is a pervasive attitude that the female graduate student in question must now prove to the faculty that she is capable of completing her degree, even when prior to the pregnancy there were absolutely no doubts about her capabilities and ambition. (p. 13)

Indeed, there is a preponderance of evidence that shows women, mothers in particular, in academia feel the need to prove their competency far more often than men, through increased research productivity and committee work, for example (Cimpian, 2018).

For some mothers, though, the process of completing the doctorate contributes positively to the development of one’s identity. Accordingly, Gibson et al. (2017) posited the concept of identity as an interpretation of the self and worth. “The ultimate aim for education is to expand people’s capabilities; that is, their freedom to promote or achieve valuable activities that are important to them” (p. 173). They too espouse the notion that motivation is integral to persistence in the doctoral for busy parents who must make challenging decisions. Gibson et al. also posed the idea that, in the development of one’s identity and exploration of self, the “third space” (a place where women can develop identities independent from motherhood, and even work responsibilities) of the education doctorate allowed parents to explore and interact with new concepts. “Further, that lifelong learning is exactly that and for professional doctorates to be successful they must be flexible enough to support individual learning journeys” (p. 177). Similarly, Pement’s (2013) dissertation research with 16 doctoral student-mothers revealed that these women considered the doctorate in education an “extension to advancing social justice on behalf of other people’s children” as well as their own (p. 194). Despite the difficulties of completing doctoral work, their lives were completely “enmeshed” with that of their children’s and they identified as lifelong learners.

Although more common in STEM-related doctoral programs, universities that offer part time graduate degrees attract adults with families. A study conducted at the University of California reported that only 13% of graduate students became parents while in graduate school, although at some institutions part time studies may be considered an optimal opportunity due to student housing where there many other adults to help and always babysitters (Mason, 2009). Some schools also offer free childcare and subsidized health care, making the pursuit of a doctorate even more supportive. Most of the women in graduate school attend during their childbearing years. The average age of a woman earning a doctorate is 33; therefore, university tenure is predicted to be achieved by the age of 39 on average. Therefore, if women put off having children until after earning the doctorate or after achieving tenure, they may run into some of the risks that are associated with having children at after

35. However, unsurprisingly, much of the literature reports that students see children as a barrier to finishing their degree (Trepal et al., 2013).

While the current study focuses on mothers, as they over-represent doctoral student-parents in education, this study is unique in that it also examines the experiences of fathers. This study attempts to analyze and understand the experiences of mothers and fathers pursuing a doctoral degree. What are the challenges parents face in pursuit of their degree and how do they manage and overcome these issues? What sacrifices, if any, do parents make? Are the challenges and sacrifices different for mothers from fathers? Furthermore, with this greater understanding of parent student experiences, we hope to assess the ability of universities to meet the needs of parent students, increase enrollment, and enhance their educational experience, while maintaining a high standard of excellence associated with the degree. How do student expectations of doctoral education align with the reality of doctoral studies? What do doctoral programs do or not do to accommodate parents as students? Should programs make these accommodations or concessions?

## **METHODS**

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### ***PARTICIPANTS***

Current and former doctoral students and doctoral recipients that had graduated within the last ten years from several education programs at one large private institution in the northeastern United States were sent an invitation to participate in this study. About 300 students in three separate programs were emailed a survey and an additional invitation to participate in interviews. Some participants offered to forward the survey to others who had completed doctorates but had not attended this institution, which resulted in two respondents from other institutions. The majority of participants, however, were derived from the one program in which both authors are involved.

A total 54 participants accessed the survey, two of whom were not parents and were directed to exit the survey. Of the remaining 52 eligible participants most were in their dissertation procedures or had graduated. Only 11 participants were in their first or second year. The majority of respondents ( $n=37$ ) of the respondents were mothers and 15 were fathers. Fifty participants were from one institution, and two were from another.

### ***STUDY DESIGN***

The current investigation is a mixed methods design using phenomenological examination of parents engaged in, or who have recently completed, a doctoral program in education. The goals of the study were to determine how these students navigated the difficulties of doctoral work while working full time and parenting, the types of support they received at home and at school, and, where applicable, why students chose not to continue their doctoral studies once they became parents. A survey was used to discern basic information about participants (see below), while semi-structured interviews allowed a sample of those participants to explain their particular situations. Phenomenology allows participants to share their subjective view of an event or experience, while also allowing the researcher to examine the collective, shared experience through the lens of objectivity (Koopman, 2017).

### ***SURVEY***

The survey (Appendix A) included 20 questions developed by the authors. Brief, demographic-type questions included the progress in the degree, parenting status, number and ages of children, and whether the participant concluded the degree. Most of the other questions were open-ended and asked respondents to describe the type of support they have at home, and the types of support they get in the program. They were also asked to describe how they were able to persist in the program, or why they chose to leave if they did not complete the degree. The last question on the survey asked

participants for their contact information if they were willing to participate in in-depth semi-structured interviews.

## *INTERVIEWS*

### **Participants**

Of the 52 surveyed participants, 12 were purposefully chosen to be interviewed in depth about parenting and pursuing a doctoral degree so researchers could explore a diversity of experiences related to the phenomena. Based on their survey responses, nine women and three men were chosen as representative of the sample in terms of gender, stage in the doctoral process, number of children (between 2-4) and pregnancies during the program (between 0-4), and feelings about their doctoral education. Of the 12 interviewees, five graduated, five were in the dissertation phase, one was in her first year, and one had dropped out.

### **Interview protocol**

Interviewees were recruited from 52 participants surveyed. The final question of the survey asked participants to provide their email address if they were interested in being interviewed. Participants were offered in person or phone interviews via email. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Questions explored various aspects of their experiences parenting while pursuing a doctoral degree, such as strategies employed to balance parenting and studying, personal and family sacrifices, childcare, and suggestions for university support of parents. Interviewees were invited to share their experiences and encouraged to recall specific strategies and challenges related to parenting and pursuing the degree as well as their perceptions of the accessibility and level of university support related to parent students. Data was stored on a password protected computer and was not shared with anyone. Pseudonyms were applied prior to transcription and kept in a separate file on the password protected computer. The interview appears in Appendix B.

## *DATA ANALYSIS*

Interviews were conversational guided by seven questions encouraging the interviewee to share their personal experiences of parenting while pursuing a doctoral degree. Data analysis also included thematic analysis to identify common themes within the participants' description of their experiences and how they experienced the phenomenon (Miles et al, 2019). Researchers sought recurring themes, disconfirming data, participant verification, and consideration of alternate interpretations of narrative throughout the process. To identify recurring themes within and across interviews, coding techniques included line by line and open coding. Additionally, data analysis methods were borrowed from grounded theory including constant comparison, a combination of axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## *RESEARCHER IDENTITIES*

In research such as this where the subject is of personal interest to the authors, it is essential to declaim our researcher identities so that potential biases may be considered in the context of the data analysis. The first author is a faculty member with five children and has been professionally involved with the programs at the institution under study. Additionally, while a doctoral student, the first author was pregnant with her fourth child and experienced first-hand many of the experiences reported in the results.

The second author was also professionally involved with the institution under study. She is currently a doctoral student and mother. She also works full time in a neighboring high school and has two young children. Her experience as a working parent and doctoral student gave her insight into the phenomena elemental to understanding the personal and professional struggles of the participants.

## RESULTS

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### *SURVEY RESULTS*

#### **Pregnancy during doctoral studies**

Out of 37 mothers, 38 % (n = 14) were pregnant at some point during the first two years of their programs. Four of those mothers who were pregnant during their studies considered quitting the program but did not. Five of the mothers began the doctoral program with no children but had delivered two babies by the time they graduated. For those students who were pregnant during their studies, their persistence was attributed to determination and motivation to continue and to support from a husband and faculty advisors. Additionally, these mothers reported the fact that they had help at home and that the money was already spent as reasons to complete the degree. Several respondents reported that they took off time after each birth.

#### **Support in the program**

Participants were from three separate programs at one institution in the School of Education, and two others were from other institutions in the area. The majority of participants were from one particular program that had the cohort model in which students took all of their classes on the same day, once a week for the first two years of the program, prior to commencing dissertation procedures. Nearly all of the parents who were in this program reported that this particular cohort model was most conducive to their success because they only had to take one day of their week to go to classes and they could predict their schedule. Other support came from professors who were willing to be flexible if a student had a childcare issue. For example, professors were willing to allow student-parents to Zoom in or Skype to classes. Many students also noted that having peer support via the cohort model was essential to building momentum early in the program.

A small number of students reported that their programs were not accommodating and that they had no expectation that it would be. However, these respondents were from another institution. As several participants remarked, there is only so much a program can do for its students when it comes to quality of life.

#### **Support at home**

When asked about support systems at home that allow them to continue doctoral studies, most parents reported that they had some familial support. Eight respondents noted that they had no support at home. However, six of those eight respondents stated that they had no help, but then later reported, in response to other survey questions, that their spouses or parents helped. It is possible the first question was interpreted as paid help at home. Participants who had support stated that they relied on their mothers or in-laws (N = 11) or a babysitter (N = 3) for help. Others reported that they had teenagers or waited until their children were older to pursue doctoral studies. The majority of respondents reported that their husbands were their support at home. When asked what their partners could do to be more supportive, many participants (N = 20) stated that there was nothing more their spouse could do – they were already very supportive. However, others reported that their spouses could be more understanding, help with cooking, help with children's homework and school issues, and childcare. Ten of the fifteen fathers reported that they had wives that supported them, who picked up the majority of the household and childcare duties. A surprising number of mothers reported that their husbands shared in parenting and household duties.

#### **Reasons for persistence**

Parents who persisted stated that they were determined and motivated to continue. Most stated that they had help and encouragement from family at home – husbands and children in particular. Several respondents also noted the substantial financial investment already made. Several of the mothers

who were pregnant while in the program stated that they took time off after having a baby to care for a newborn and then return to doctoral studies. These same women also took time off from work.

### **Reasons parents leave the program**

Only two of the respondents had permanently left the program at the time of data collection, although several parents had taken a long break from dissertation procedures and were struggling to continue. Among the most commonly cited reasons for leaving was the cost of the program. Others found the workload and writing to not be worth the cost of time away from family. As one father stated, “I did not want to miss any more important moments.” Another graduate, a mother, reported “While I have finished [my degree], now that I have children, completing the doctorate seems less important to me.” As some mothers who did not complete the program pointed out, the mental cost of the doctorate was not worth the salary bump. Other, less onerous paths can be taken to increase salary steps.

### ***INTERVIEWS***

The pursuit of a doctoral degree has implications for the individual pursuing the degree and their family. All participants experienced a loss of family time and connection with their children to some degree, and all participants relied heavily on their spouses, parents, and siblings to care for their children. Many used daycare and/or aftercare if family members were unavailable to help with child care.

### **Time management**

All participants were forced to carve time out of their family and personal life in order to meet the demands of the degree. Working before their children awoke, post-bedtime, and on weekends was the norm for doctoral student-parents. Some participants could carve some time out of their workday during free periods, or would do their doctoral work during their work day and fulfill their professional responsibilities at home because they could do their educational work amidst distractions, but not their doctoral work, which all participants said required extended spans of undisturbed time to accomplish. For example, teachers or administrators could find quiet time during a free period to write, and then grade, write lessons or answer emails at night. In some cases, the participants admitted that without their spouse to pick up the slack that their absence left, they could not have accomplished the degree. Those that struggled to complete the degree, or took more than four years, stated that they did so because they did not have the help they required to care for their children, or they simply couldn't fit the studying into their family's schedule.

All participants emphasized the need to plan and structure their family, professional, and educational life in advance and to the minute. The constant juggling of time and tasks was a common theme. One mother explained, “Either I'm getting somebody else to pick up the slack for me, whether it be other family members or my husband or I'm sacrificing, you know, robbing Peter to pay Paul.” Scheduling time to study within a day that consists of work, kids' activities, and household responsibilities was an Olympic feat for parents. The more children, the more difficult and essential time management became to doctoral student parents.

### **Sacrifices**

The greatest sacrifice doctoral students make is time with their family. It is important to note that 10 interviewees worked full-time, and two switched to part-time after having babies, during their doctoral studies, which also put demands on their time. Most, although expecting a rigorous academic program, did not anticipate the extraordinary consumption of time and energy accomplishing the degree actually required. All participants experienced loss of time with their families. Family events and parties were refused. They couldn't attend as many of their children's activities or help their kids with their homework. Their kids watched more television or played on devices more. Some partici-



pants found creative ways to engage their kids that didn't involve parent involvement, such as art classes, sports, and music lessons, and play dates. One parent would write at Skyzone, a children's indoor trampoline park, while her daughter bounced. Others brought their kids to the library with them. Women with newborns found nursing very challenging, and two moms admitted to stopping breastfeeding earlier than they would have due to the strain it put on them to pump and store milk throughout the day. Overall, parents who are doctoral students spend less quality and leisure time with their children while pursuing the degree.

Multiple women talked about finding time where they could be "present" with their children to offset the amount of time they were absent or multitasking when they were with their kids. They expressed feelings of guilt and worried about not being the mother they should be. Guilt for being frequently absent in their kids' daily lives was a common theme among mothers and fathers. Parents of young children felt it acutely, and it would cause them emotional distress. As a result, they would try to push their work to pre-dawn and post bed-time hours, which although gave them time to care for their children, it exhausted them personally. One mother explained, "I'm not going to do something else for myself ... [instead] I'm sacrificing sleep ... you're spread thin. You're spread thinner than you think you are."

Some parents adapted to the sleeplessness and relentless pace of life and others found it oppressive and exhausting. The constant juggle and varied responsibilities caused them more stress because they weren't meeting their standards academically, professionally, or in parenting. One mother shared an inside joke, "There were definitely times when my husband and I would joke about letting our kids get dumber so that we can get smarter."

One father dropped out of the program after completing the coursework because he felt strongly that spending time with his children was more important than the degree. Ironically, the coursework didn't seem to take a toll on him. His wife was a stay-at-home mom and handled the household, and he managed to carve out time in the mornings to accomplish his assignments. However, he felt, more than evidenced, missing out on his younger child's life and decided he didn't want to continue. Many parents struggled with the emotional toll as a result of being absent in their children's lives and constantly juggling their responsibilities.

Some mothers took a hiatus during their pursuit of the degree, which enabled them some time when their children were born to focus on being a parent, though it never seemed to be long enough. None of the men interviewed took or considered parental leave to accommodate their parenting. One mother admitted that she put the degree before her kids.

Many parents utilized similar strategies to accomplish the requirements of the degree and fulfill their jobs. Parents used extreme scheduling, multi-tasking and juggling, child-care, online shopping, extreme study hours, libraries, limited socializing if at all, financial loans and prioritizing funds, prioritizing events, self-sacrifice, relying on others for help with their children, ordering pre-made or packaged "quick" foods, and letting household chores go. Parents discussed the art of carving out time during an already busy day to pursue the degree. They spoke of "juggling", "multi-tasking" and "borrowing from Peter to pay Paul" when it came to time management. Several parents committed to not allowing the degree to impose on their family life, and they did everything possible to work at times that least affected their family, which put tremendous pressure on them. One mother, discouraged by her inability to finish her degree, hired a time management aid to get and keep her on track and help her make progress on her research.

Some married participants talked about the importance of teamwork and the division of labor in the house by both parents to enable the one to accomplish the degree. For married women, husbands had to increase their participation in household duties and childcare. One mother admitted that her husband had been "pushed to his breaking point" trying to make up for her absence. One mother and one father admitted that their spouses had become the primary caregiver in the home due to the

extraordinary time dedicated to accomplishing the degree. Some women still fulfilled the role of primary caregiver and appreciated their husbands' contributions to childcare. As one woman noted, "The whole thing was not easy. The nights of going there [to the doctoral program] and my husband also [was] accommodat[ing] ... he doesn't expect dinner every night. [He] can just order in or cook something by himself. He doesn't expect [a] clean house every day." The participants with less help from their partners struggled the most accomplishing the degree.

Post-graduation, despite their children's expressed sadness and longing for the parent during the process, and their fears of being seen as a neglectful absentee parent, many parents discussed their families' pride in their accomplishment. According to the interviewees, family members felt they shared in the parent-student's success and were inspired by their persistence. Interviewees attributed their success to their support networks because without the understanding of those they are taking the time away from and the assistance in fulfilling parental responsibilities, they would not have completed the degree.

### **Changing ways of thinking**

Most of the participants were overachievers by nature. They were familiar with the standards of advanced education and multi-tasking. They struggled when they felt they could not meet their own high academic standards because parenting precluded the time they would normally spend on an assignment. Many participants learned to adjust their thinking about their work and alter their standards in order to survive and continue with the degree. One participant discussed having to accept that although she wasn't turning in her best work, it was the best work she could do in the time she had. This alleviated her feelings of personal failure. Some women realized that they had to let go of what they thought they should be doing academically and where they should be in terms of the degree's time frame and accept where they were and what they could do because they were mothers. One mother explained, "I think ... I hav[e] this image of what I'm supposed to be doing and when I got rid of that image and reoriented, that really gave me the space to ... move forward in a less stressed way." Another mother similarly had to "let go" of what she believed a good mother was and accepted who she was as a mother, which included being a working professional and student. Many students learned to cut themselves some slack and forgive themselves for not always being perfect. "And you do feel like you're not doing anything quite the way you want to do it. And I had to learn to say to myself it needs to be done and it needs to be my best work but also my best work in this time frame."

All students found the doctoral work challenging and exciting. As one parent student explained, "So being a student and being in class, I know is my strength. I love working with my peers, discussing the assignments. I love research and writing and having a connection with my professors." A few of the mothers found the work a welcome escape and enjoyable intellectual exercise.

Participants that completed their doctoral degree found that their dissertation topics influenced them personally. One participant expressed a greater empathy for people, others found that their professional work was enhanced by their knowledge of their topic and their improved ability to write. One participant's dissertation became an educational tool throughout her district. Another used her topic to help future doctoral students pursue their research within her district. One graduate felt she has become more organized, structured in her family life, and does more goal setting and planning for her family as a result of the habits she formed while pursuing her degree. She also now has higher educational goals for her children.

Several participants believed that they modeled perseverance, personal sacrifice, and commitment to a goal for their children. Many believed they modeled the value of education for their children.

### What can doctoral programs do to better support parents?

Suggestions from both the surveys and interviews provide solid suggestions for what universities can do to support students. Most participants reported that one night of classes (as is the model in the programs in this study) and advanced notice of assignments would be most helpful. Other suggestions included options to make up work, although in the pandemic era, where the use of remote learning and participation is ubiquitous, students can be encouraged to attend remotely if needed instead of taking an absence. Further, courses may be offered in a hybrid format. Some participants noted that professors were already understanding but suggested that they could assign less reading and use less expensive textbooks. Given the volume of pregnant doctoral students at this particular institution, providing a lactation room for student use was a reasonable suggestion. A few participants suggested that providing childcare would be appreciated, and indeed at some institutions, childcare is available for free or on a sliding scale basis. Despite these diverse recommendations from participants, the most common answer was that “the program could not do more.” However, several interviewees admitted that parenting definitely made it more difficult to attain the degree. One female participant reported, “You know, the burden on men is so different that I felt like I was competing in a man’s world all the time or a woman-with no-children’s world.” One father explained, “everything gets magnified and I kept thinking to myself throughout the program, you know there are a couple people in my program that aren’t married and have no kids and their life must be so much easier, you know and so much simpler.”

Overall, participants did not feel that universities should provide parents with preferential treatment because it is a choice to pursue an advanced degree, and the candidate should expect to make changes and sacrifices to attain an elite degree. In education doctoral programs, participants saw the “target audience” for doctoral students as working educators that most likely were parents or would become parents at the age of pursuing a degree, thus universities and their professors should factor the demands of parenting into their courses to some degree.

## DISCUSSION

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This study reported that doctoral students that are parents sacrifice quality time with their family, feel their parenting suffers, and experience academic and personal overload while pursuing the degree. The rigors of the degree, although anticipated by the doctoral students, were beyond their expectations and put extraordinary stress on their role as a parent. Parent-students employed strategies of multi-tasking and time management, relinquishing parental responsibilities to others, and relying on others to fulfill their parenting duties. Students without support from spouses or family members and students that did not possess strong self-discipline and time management skills struggled the most.

All interviewees felt overwhelmed by the amount of work required to attain the degree and pressure to be a good parent. Their need to rely on others to parent their children was very hard for them, and they were very appreciative and effusive with their gratitude for the person or persons who supported them in their parenting so they could achieve the degree. Women interviewees in particular expressed feelings of guilt about not being the ideal mother or the best mother to their kids. They expressed worries about the impact of them not being present for their children, cutting corners on healthy eating and sleeping routines, and prioritizing the degree over time with their children. This guilt manifested itself in feelings of failure. Both fathers and mothers were concerned with meeting their standards of excellence as a student and a parent, however women expressed feelings of failure to submit work that reflected their intelligence or to adequately parent their children due to lack of time to do both. These findings support some research reporting doctoral student mothers report more stress than fathers (Wilton & Ross, 2017).

Interviews provided personal emotional data about the experience of pursuing a doctoral degree and parenting. Overwhelmingly, interviewees experienced a diminished role as a parent and were forced to carve time out of their personal and professional lives, rely on others, and make sacrifices to meet

the demands of the degree. In some cases, interviewees faced additional stressors like relocation, divorce, more children, deaths in the family, spouse deployment, and financial strain that increased the challenge to complete the degree. However, these life events were not emphasized as the greatest challenge toward completing their degree – parenting was. Of the 12 interviewees, one male student dropped out of the program post-coursework because he felt being a father was more important than being a doctor, but the data did not reveal that he was an absent father as a result of pursuing his degree. It is quite likely that the enormity of parenting was too great an inhibitor for this father to complete such a time consuming and stressful endeavor as completing a doctorate. Although none of the women interviewed dropped out of the program, some experienced delays in obtaining the degree due to parental leave of absences, relocation, and poor time management. As the non-completing participants in Leijen et al.'s (2016) study pointed out, some lacked the requisite motivation on the outset of beginning doctoral studies.

We speculate that the consequences of failing as a parent weighs heavily on parents, and pursuing an advanced degree, which requires an inordinate amount of time and energy, increases those fears of failure and positions the guilt squarely on the parent-student and makes the already difficult job of raising children even harder with less time. Choosing to pursue the degree could be perceived as a selfish act subconsciously by the student themselves and overtly by others that don't value advanced education and research, and the anticipated negative impact on their children and the parent's own guilt can be overwhelming to the parent-student. If the student does not have the support to compensate for their absence as a parent and the encouragement and self-motivation to persist, success will elude the parent-student.

As noted previously, 38% of mother-participants had become pregnant at some point during their studies. However, to our knowledge, no fathers who participated in the study added a child to the household during their time in the program. These widely different family-building experiences demonstrate the challenges that women appear to face that men do not (or do not choose to). Surprisingly, the data did not reveal much difference between the experiences of mothers and fathers pursuing their degree in terms of strategies employed for childcare and time management. One major difference revealed in the interviews was how mothers and fathers talked about their experiences. For men it was very black and white. The degree would take them an allotted amount of time, sacrifices would be made, responsibilities would be designated and then it would be over. Women took the experience much more personally. They discussed what they were feeling during the pursuit of the degree, what they thought their kids were feeling, what they thought their peers and colleagues thought about their choice to pursue the degree and lifestyle changes they were forced to make to achieve success, what the degree meant to them personally and their connection to their research. Women discussed the consequences of their absence and their struggle to be “present” for their kids; men explained how they scheduled time to spend with their children. Even the male interviewee who chose to quit the program against the advice of his wife and parents, did so with a swift decision and no regrets. It just wasn't how he wanted to spend his time anymore. However, no male participant reported taking paternal leave after the birth of their children during their careers, although no male participant became a parent during their doctoral program. Thus, the phenomena of “missing out” was not something fathers discussed to the degree that mothers did.

A second difference between mothers and fathers was that the process of obtaining the degree forced women to change how they perceived motherhood and how they thought about themselves as mothers. Like the mothers in Mirick and Wladkowski (2018), mothers experienced dual identities: scholar and mother. Also, women felt a personal connection to their research and the degree held a personal meaning to them as women and mothers. As Gibson et al (2017) noted the doctorate is a “third space” where women can develop identities independent from motherhood, and even work responsibilities.

Unlike much of the literature on women and academia, only one of our participants reported that she felt the need to keep silent about the difficulties motherhood and pregnancy brought to doctoral

studies. However, it has been our observation that some students are reluctant to report pregnancies (particularly when they occur in the first year of doctoral studies), although they quickly find support once they do reveal that they are expecting. As both Trepal et al. (2013) and a participant in this study reported, female faculty members who were mothers became role models.

### ***LIMITATIONS***

Diversity of the participant pool was missing. Respondents all appeared to be heterosexual, thus there was no representative of LGBTQ families. Additionally, nearly all respondents were employed in local school districts. Teachers and administrators in this area of the country are well-paid compared to teachers in other states. Responses to persistence and support questions may have differed if the socioeconomic status of participants were lower. All but two respondents were from one institution, and most were from one particular program that includes a cohort model. The program was set up to be conducive to part-time attendance and intended for working professionals. Selecting participants from a wider range of institutions would likely reveal greater differences in responses.

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE***

Doctoral programs in fields that value experience and attract working professionals like education should schedule classes in a predictable time slot, offer remote learning options, and hire faculty that is aware of the struggle parent-students experience. Unlike doctoral programs that fund living expenses and tuition, education doctorates are often financed in some part by the student while they concurrently work full time and finance their family life, thus some flexibility should be extended to students on an emergency basis. The participants and the authors do not recommend lowering the caliber and rigor of the program but do recommend providing extended deadlines and remote learning when extenuating circumstances arise. Relationships between faculty and doctoral students that are supportive and encourage students to excel are valued by the students and positive for the doctoral program. Given the preponderance of women and mothers in education doctoral programs, consideration should be given to offering lactation spaces for new mothers.

Parents that are considering pursuing doctoral degrees should plan for reliable childcare affording them extended periods of time to accomplish the rigorous work of the doctoral degree. Childcare that incorporates daily chores such as cooking, cleaning, and chauffeuring children to activities would be very helpful. Parents pursuing the degree should gain the support of their family prior to pursuing the degree to alleviate guilt and prevent resentment and discord. Students that have a strong self-discipline, time management skills, and incentive to complete the degree will achieve success in less time and save money. The financial cost of the extended degree should be considered prior to enrolling in a program. Additionally, participants often stated that they were able to complete their degrees because they had the help of a spouse at home or were able to pay for help. Potential doctoral candidates may opt-out of doctoral studies if they feel they lack the requisite support.

### ***RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH***

The literature has focused on the experience of women, in part in the context of bias against women, however, our research has revealed that men too struggle with fatherhood in the pursuit of doctoral studies. More research needs to be conducted on fathers who work in academia, particularly with respect to the work their partners do, both at home and in the workplace. Our findings that husbands provided support at home to their doctoral-student wives suggests that men are taking on more household and childcare duties. Although media accounts widely report that women still take on the lion share of child-related responsibilities even when they work outside the home, our findings suggest that there are work-school-life balance issues for fathers that have remained largely unexamined (Germano, 2019).

Some researchers have also pointed out that in addition to family responsibilities, lack of sufficient motivation inhibited persistence (Leijen et al., 2016). Where retention in programs is important, further research should investigate how and in what ways motivation impacts doctoral studies.

While not the purview of this particular article, it has been reported far and wide that women in general, and mothers in particular, feel the need to over perform in academia in order to compensate for perceived deficiencies due to motherhood. Future research must explore this phenomenon further and work to mitigate the inequality experienced by mothers specifically, and women in general in academia.

## CONCLUSION

Most participants experienced lack of sleep, feelings of guilt and failure, feelings of missing out, and feelings of being overwhelmed. All participants lowered their expectations for household duties. All the mothers felt that they parented less than they would normally in order to meet the demands of the degree and feared and hoped that their children weren't hurt by their actions. Many felt that they were not meeting the traditional standards of mothering as a result of trying to attain the doctoral degree. Overall, doctoral student parents pursued a doctoral degree at the expense of their own well-being. Rigorous and supportive doctoral programs in which the majority of participants are parents are not the norm. This study has shown that experiences of parent-doctoral students are common. Support systems both at home and in the program will enhance persistence in doctoral programs and improve (make manageable) the experience of parents. The culture of the program and academic institution facilitates support of parents, and accordingly their perceptions of support. Some of these differences may be related to the type of research institution at which the doctoral program takes place, or the discipline of study.

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## APPENDIX A

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This research is being conducted to determine how parents who are pursuing a doctorate navigate doctoral work and parenting simultaneously. We would like to know about your experiences and opinions. We would also like to know what your doctoral program does well, and what it can do to improve your experience. Most of the questions to this survey are open-ended. Please be as detailed as you wish. Please know that your responses will remain confidential. Should you choose to disclose your name, your name will not be matched to your responses, and no faculty member in any doctoral program will have access to your name. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from this study at any time with no penalty to you. If you have questions about this study, please direct them to Susan Radin at [suturnerr@gmail.com](mailto:suturnerr@gmail.com). If you consent to participating in this research and have read the above statement. Please select "yes" below.

- Yes, I consent to participation in this study
- No
- 

Are you a parent?

- Yes
- No
- 

If you are parent are you a... (select all that apply)

- Mother
- Father
- Step-mother
- Step-father
- single parent
- other \_\_\_\_\_
-



At which institution are you completing your doctorate?

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What program are you in?

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Where are you in your doctoral studies?

- year 1
- year 2
- dissertation procedures
- I graduated

How many children do you have and what were their ages when you began the program? (feel free to add as much explanation as you like).

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Were you ever pregnant during your doctoral program?

- Yes
- No

If you were pregnant during your doctoral program, during which years?

- First year
- Second year
- During dissertation procedures
- Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_

Parents Pursuing a Doctorate of Education

While pregnant in the program, did you ever consider quitting the program due to your pregnancy or during the care of your newborn?

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If you persisted in the program during and after pregnancy, please explain what factors helped you to persist? (i.e., help at home, support of faculty, support of your classmates, etc.)

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Do you have support at home with childcare duties that allows you to complete your doctoral work (attend classes, write papers, etc.)?

Yes

No

Who is your support at home (with child care and home responsibilities) and in what ways are they supportive (or helpful)? What specific things do they do for you to allow you to persist in the program.

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If you have support at home, what could they do to be more helpful or supportive?

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Is your doctoral program conducive to parenting? Please explain your answer.

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What can your doctoral program **do better** to help you better complete your doctoral work, while also parenting?

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What does your doctoral program **do well** that helps you to complete your doctoral work, while also parenting?

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Do you feel that your professors are accommodating to your parental responsibilities (i.e., if you can't attend class because you have no childcare or another child related event)? Please explain your answer or give an example where possible?

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If you chose to leave your program, what factors contributed to this decision?

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If you would be willing to participate in an interview or focus group (either in person or on the phone), please provide your name and email address below. Interviews will ONLY be conducted by graduate students.

## APPENDIX B

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Interviewees were recruited from 52 participants surveyed. The final question of the survey asked participants to provide their email address if they were interested in being interviewed. Interviewees could choose to be interviewed via phone or in person. Interviews lasted 30-45 and were recorded and transcribed by Researcher #2. Interviews were conversational guided by seven questions encouraging the interviewee to share their personal experiences parenting while pursuing a doctoral degree. Data was stored on a password protected computer and was not shared with anyone. Pseudonyms were applied prior to transcription and kept in a separate file on the password protected computer.

### Interview Questions

1. Where are you in the process of pursuing a doctoral degree, at what institution, in what field? Does the experience and education meet your expectations? Why or why not?
2. Can you describe your family? How many children do you have, what ages, pregnant while pursuing a degree?
3. Can you describe any lifestyle changes you or your family have had to make in order to meet the requirements of your program?
  - How have these changes impacted your family?
  - What sacrifices have you or your family members had to make, if any, in pursuit of your doctoral degree?
  - Can you describe how that affected you personally and professionally?
4. How do you manage childcare while pursuing your doctoral degree? (is this different than when you weren't pursuing your degree)
  - Can you describe a situation where parenting has prevented you from meeting deadlines or attending classes and how you and your university handled the situation?
  - Did you ever change your parenting to accommodate your educational responsibilities? If so, can you describe how you changed your parenting or describe a situation when this occurred?

5. If you are married, what did your partner do, if anything, to assist you in achieving your goal?

What could he/she have done to better facilitate your endeavors?

Were there any other services that you used to make your life easier while pursuing your degree? (Online shopping, uber, babysitters, playdates)

6. What challenges did you encounter in pursuit of your degree? How did you overcome them, if you did?

Were there specific times during the year that were more difficult than others to parent and pursue your degree? How did you manage these times?

### Doctoral Program Questions:

7. Did/does your doctoral program accommodate your role as a parent? How?

What could your program have done to better accommodate your role as a parent?

To what extent do you believe it should accommodate your role as a parent?

8. If you are in a cohort model, did it help you or detract from your educational experience? Please, explain.

9. Have you ever had to take a hiatus from your doctoral studies? If so, why?

Do you think it could have been prevented with some sort of university intervention or accommodation? Describe your alternate solution.

10. If you are a working professional, parent and doctoral student, do you feel your job or your role as a parent is more difficult to manage with your studies? Can you describe the differences?

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

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