

Challenges Facing Emirati College Student Mothers Post Childbirth

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Abstract

The vast majority of women in higher education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are first generation college students and about over half of them are student mothers. The education of women has been the top priority of the UAE government. The intent of the study was to examine the needs and challenges of student mothers at a teacher education campus in Abu Dhabi. The research study, using a mixed methods approach, surveyed about 71 students and interviewed about 13 students, a representative sample of student mothers, about experiences after their return to college post childbirth. The findings of the study revealed the physical and academic challenges faced by the mothers and their ways of coping in order to pursue their education within the constraints of the college policies. Recommendations and implications for teacher education colleges are discussed.

Keywords

mothers; preservice-teachers; higher education; post childbirth; United Arab Emirates

Introduction

The growth of young Emirati women enrolled in higher education has been significant with over 65.76% of female students in federal institutions in the United Arab Emirates. (MOSHER, 2013). The enrollment of female Emiratis has increased from 16,619 student in 2018 to 22,819 students in 2014. Two-thirds of

the UAE government employees are women; two thirds are graduates from federal universities and a third of the UAE cabinet are women (The Khaleej Times, 2016). The accelerated pace of modernization has given women new opportunities to go beyond their traditional stereotypical role of mothers. Educational reforms in the past decade have allowed for women to pursue higher education and employment in the workforce which reflects the outgrowths of the expansion of

educational opportunities and socioeconomic changes rather than gender-specific educational policies. In short, Emirati women who account for 49.3% of the national population are in the forefront of UAE's educational, social, economic and political spheres.

The status of women in the UAE has evolved considerably with all kinds of rights and responsibilities provided to them in all aspects of life. Emirati women are involved in political roles in the government, serve as ambassadors, work in different professions in various sectors and build the economy of the Emirates (Bristol-Rhys, 2010). Due to the visionary leadership of Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, women have been empowered to take significant roles in the country, keeping with Islamic principles and respect to women:

The means to develop a country and modernize its infrastructure is a magnificent burden that should not be taken up by men only....It would lead to an unbalanced rhythm of life. Hence, women's participation in public life is required and we must be prepared for it.... Nothing could delight me more than to see woman taking up her distinctive position in society. Nothing should hinder her progress. Like men, women deserve the right to occupy high positions, according to their capabilities and qualifications. (Augsburg, Claus, and Randeree, 2009, 29–30).

After the demise of Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan in 2004, his wife Sheikha Fatimah bint Mubarak played a very influential role in the advancement of women in higher education and in the government. The

Emiratization policy adopted by the country in 2014 has particularly allowed women to take leadership roles. Emirati women play a mediating role in a country which has a strong western influence by representing their own cultural roles, values, and traditions. Samier (2015) has elaborated in her experiential discourse that the Emirates has evolved as a modern country, preserving the Islamic values, providing a safe environment and empowering women in higher education.

Cultural and social expectations of young married Emiratis to have children soon after marriage is common in the UAE which can be challenging while pursuing higher education. There have been incidences where female Emirati students take time off from universities and fulfil their duties of motherhood (Thomas, Raymor, & AL Marzooqi, 2012). According to Abdulla (2007), young Emirati women experienced a conflict as the result of their higher education and what their society perceived of them as daughters, wives and mothers. There remains a view that education could interfere with the mother training her daughter in traditional tasks. One of the major factors that influences women's participation in the workforce is the difficulty of balancing family and work responsibilities (Aryee et al., 1999; Hijab, 1988; Rugh, 1985; Sha'aban, 1996).

Despite a gradual change in cultural traditions, barriers do exist which illustrate many of society's views about women, such as the presumption that women are responsible for childcare and household duties, the restriction on women mingling freely with men and the need to maintain family honor. Crabtree (2007) notes, "academic studies do not appear to be

taken for the love of learning solely, but rather that families view an education at this level as providing the final polish to a young girl's life, that marks her out as being successfully poised on the brink of adult life, commensurate with Islamic and cultural expectations of womanhood" (P.577). Despite the cultural considerations limiting career options and career planning for Emirati women, teacher education is still viewed as a suitable profession as it is comparatively female dominated (Salem, 2011).

Research shows that student mothers find balancing work, study and family life particularly challenging. Tennant, Stringer & Saqr (2013) found that married Emirati students pursuing higher education experience a lot of stress and anxieties in fulfilling their multiple roles as married women, mothers and full-time students. Other such feelings expressed by married student teachers are the lack of quality time that they spend with their spouse and children as well as meeting the requirements of college coursework (Stringer, Saqr, Tennant, 2014; Thomas, Raynor & Al Marzooqi, 2012).

Studies in the United States of non-traditional students such as student mothers indicated that some college campuses are not family friendly places and have policies that do not allow student mothers to engage in campus life, such as the timing of academic activities and inflexible scheduling for required classes, therefore delaying a timely completion of a degree (Astin, 1999; Mahaffey, Hungeford & Sill, 2015; Siebert, 2006; Tinto, 1993). Lack of childcare facilities in colleges or universities was another barrier for student mothers while studying in regional campuses in Ohio (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley,

Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Therefore, it is critical to find out the needs of student mothers and what services need to be provided to them for retention as well as to empower their education.

The intent of the study was to understand the perspectives of the young mothers who return to college soon after childbirth and to find out the challenges and barriers that they face while attending a Bachelor of Education Program. In addition, to examine appropriate services, colleges could provide for student mothers, and to understand student mothers' perceptions of college expectations and its related policies. The following research questions are addressed: 1) What are the main challenges that student mothers in a teacher preparation college face upon their return to college studies after giving birth? 2) What are the student mothers' perceptions of college expectations and related policies? The study aims to explore the needs and obstacles faced by student mothers as they pursue teacher education. The findings will inform higher education institutions and policy makers to support future teachers of the nation.

Method

The mixed methods approach to conducting research was based on the notion of "what works" and choosing methods that best address the research questions (Creswell, 1994). In this study, the mixed methods design, which included both quantitative and qualitative methods, was used to investigate the challenges that are faced by Emirati student mothers who return to college soon after childbirth. A convergent parallel mixed methods design was used in which the quantitative and

qualitative data was collected in parallel, analyzed separately and then merged. In this study, the survey data was used to find out specifically from student mothers from a larger sample of college students about their personal challenges post-childbirth. Qualitative data obtained from individual interviews was used to explore the student mothers' experiences during their transition back to college after childbirth. The reason for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data is to converge the two forms of data to bring greater insight about the challenges faced by Emirati student mothers and to corroborate results obtained from two sources of data separately, allowing for the triangulation of data.

Participants

At the time of the study, the total number of students enrolled in the college was 410. For the purpose of the study, only students who identified as student mothers were contacted, which was 90 students. Among the 90 students, 71 student mothers consented to participate in the study. Participants were student mothers who were enrolled in the four-year Bachelor of Education (B. Ed) program in a college in Abu Dhabi Emirate. Student mothers at this teacher education college are being qualified to teach Cycle 1 students (grades 1 to 5) a range of subjects including English, Math and Science, which will be conducted in the English language. The recruitment of participants was done by an email that was sent to all of the college's students which included the criteria for participation. Information about the research study was provided in the message. Students who had become

mothers during their study at the college consented to participate and 71 completed an online survey of which thirteen who completed the survey volunteered to participate in individual interviews. The age range of the participants was between 18 years to 30 years. 71 Arabic-speaking student mothers who consented to participate in the study were at different year levels in the four-year B.Ed. program of study. The number of children bore ranged from one to six. At the time of the study, 54% of the student mothers had one to two children, 25% had between three and five children, 7% had more than 5 children and 9% were pregnant. The age ranges of the children ranged from newborns to 14 years old. Out of the 71 student mothers, 69 were married, 1 separated and 1 divorced. The years of marriage of the student mothers ranged from one to sixteen years. About 53% of the student mothers lived as a nuclear family in a private home, 23% of the participants lived with their spouse's family and 24% stayed with their own maternal family.

Survey Instrument

The survey items were designed to find out the forms of support systems available to student mothers and the challenges they faced post-childbirth. The survey statements were created by the researchers based on their student observations and also as discussed in the review of literature related to social and cultural aspects of Emirati mothers. The total number of survey items was thirty, and the items were divided into seven major sections: demographic information; childbirth and breastfeeding related;

support systems at home, type of support provided by their spouse and extended family members; kinds of challenges; level of satisfaction with college support services. The survey responses varied in form; from yes, no, to multiple choice, Likert type scale and one free form response. The final version of the online survey used both the English and Arabic languages. The survey items were verified for clarity by experts other than the researchers. The survey items were entered into the eSurveysPro online software. The survey link was sent to all of the college students with a call for student mothers to voluntarily participate in the research study. 71 student mothers who consented participated and completed the survey, however, there were some participants who skipped certain questions, hence the response rate varied for each of the survey statements. Two weeks after the initial email, an additional email reminder was sent to the college students. The survey link was open during the data collection period of four weeks. The quantitative data obtained from the survey responses was tabulated electronically and presented using descriptive statistics.

Individual Interviews

Interviews allow the researcher to enter the inner world of another person to gain understanding from their perspective (Patton, 1987). In this study, in-depth interviews elicited depth of data (Denzin & Lincoln 2003; Hussey & Hussey 1997; Patton, 1990) as participants were encouraged to reflect, discuss their experiences post-childbirth including their coping mechanisms, support networks available, challenges faced and their

perceptions of the support provided at the college and suggestions for the college to assist student mothers after they return from their brief maternity leave. In addition to the survey data, thirteen students opted to be interviewed. These were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative interview data was coded and grouped into tentative categories and then classified into themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to address the research questions.

Findings & Discussions

Inferences are drawn from both the quantitative and qualitative strands of the study which provide insight on the intent of the study. Merged mixed methods data findings are presented for each of the research questions.

Research Question 1: What are the main challenges which student mothers in a teacher-preparation college face upon return to their college studies after giving birth? The findings to this research question are addressed in the form of following themes: i) physical challenges; ii) academic issues; and iii) concerns on college facilities.

Physical Challenges

When asked about the type of birth of their first child, out of 55 student mothers, 85.45% had a normal delivery and 14.55% had a Caesarean section. The number of weeks of leave taken post-childbirth varied as depicted in Table 1.

In reviewing the survey findings, about 50% of student mothers who responded mentioned that for their first child they took only one or two weeks of

maternity leave and returned immediately after to the college to continue their studies. Student mothers stated that returning after two weeks of leave was not enough to take care of the baby while in college, and for a few it was their first child.

However, Rizk, Nasser, Thomas and Ezimokhai, (2005) found in their study

on women's perceptions of childbirth experiences that the prevalence and correlates of postnatal psychosocial morbidity in UAE are not different from those observed elsewhere.

In addition to the physical challenges they faced, student mothers expressed feelings of guilt for leaving their newborn with a nanny, lack of spousal support, limited extended family help, and financial strain. One of the participants shared her anguish: *"I cannot enjoy my time. I feel, last week, my baby called the housemaid Momma and when I took him ... he doesn't want me. He cried. It's hard for me ..."*

Regarding the duration of breast feeding, survey data from 50 respondents showed that about 8% did not breast feed, 10% breast fed for a period of one month, about 16% for about a year and 28% for over a year. While attending the college, out of the 56 respondents, 58.93% were breastfeeding their newborn while 41.07% were not breastfeeding. Therefore, this suggests that many of the student mothers were dealing with the challenge of not

being available for their newborn as they had to return to college. About 23.64% expressed their breast milk and 76.36% did not express their breast milk while at the college. During the interviews, when asked

Table 1: Number of Weeks Taken for Maternity Leave

Participants	Ordinal Position	5 weeks or more	4 weeks	Three weeks	One –two weeks
# of Responses 34	Child 1	14.71%	5.88%	29.41%	50%
# of Responses 16	Child 2	18.75%	18.75%	31.25%	31.25%
# of Responses 9	Child 3	1%	11.11%	44.44%	33.33%

about breastfeeding, two of the participants responded:

I breastfed for two months and continued in the evenings but giving formula milk when I am in college

It was difficult to come back after 2 weeks, breastfeeding was hard, went to the nurse's office, I used to pump and kept it in the fridge, breast fed only for 4 months

In a study conducted about childbirth and parenting with 216 women in the UAE, findings on duration of breastfeeding decreased across three generations of women. 89% of grandmothers breastfed, 52% of mothers breastfed, and 26% of daughters breastfed. It is a religious expectation in Islam that babies be fed breast milk for at least 2 years (Schleifer, 1996). A verse in Surat Al Baqarah in the Quran states: "Mothers may breastfeed their children two complete years for whoever wishes to complete the nursing [period]" as cited in the national newspaper (Al Khoori, 2014). Since all of the student mothers in the study are

Muslims, this religious expectation creates a dilemma and poses a challenge for them.

The weaning process and combination of utilizing formula with breastmilk differed among the Emirati grandmothers, mothers and daughters (Green & Smith, 2006). Similar to the recent trends around the world, breastfeeding has declined in the UAE (World Health Organization (WHO), 2005). More recently, the Federal National Council (FNC) included a clause about breastfeeding as mandatory in the Child Rights Law in the UAE (Salem, 2014) until the age of two years. Hence, the educational campaign on the benefits of breastfeeding have been propagated. Breastfeeding facilities have been installed in some public places such as shopping malls and airports and breaks for breastfeeding mothers are being provided by certain employers. However, mothers still face barriers such as short maternity leave, lack of private breastfeeding facilities, no designated space to express milk or store it, and the lack of nurseries in colleges and workplaces. Therefore, challenges continue to exist for student mothers as they juggle their dual roles and responsibilities.

Academic Issues

When the student mothers were surveyed about their challenges post-childbirth, as depicted in Table 2, out of the 55 responses, the areas that they felt were very challenging were managing academic coursework, deprived sleep and disrupted sleep cycle, and difficulty catching up with college work. Student mothers had to deal with medical related issues post-childbirth. They had concerns over their physical well-

being and many of them reported that dealing with their newborn and also managing their other children was very challenging which affected the completion of their coursework.

Qualitative interview data analysis revealed that the majority of student mothers had difficulty coping with their college work and managing their time, balancing their duties at home and at college. One of the student mothers mentioned: *“I sacrifice my sleep and do projects...work only when baby is asleep, it is hard to manage with six kids...”* Another participant shared that she felt: *“physically tired, no sleep... I am thinking of my new baby and can't focus...”* A few revealed in the individual interviews that

Table 2: Challenges Faced Post-Childbirth

Type	Very Challenging	Sometimes Challenging	Not a Challenge
Managing my course load and all the assignments	70.00%	22%	8.00%
My sleep cycle	69.23%	26.92%	3.85%
Catching up with college work that I missed during my maternity leave	66.67%	25%	8.33%
Managing medical care, doctor appointments and hospital visits	57.69%	34.62%	7.69%
My physical health after having the baby	53.19%	31.91%	14.89%
Dealing with my other children and the baby	51.02%	26.53%	22.45%

they considered dropping out of college as one of them remarked:

Sometimes, I wanted to drop. I don't want to continue ... in year 3 it was too much pressure for me ... too many projects, many exams, everything ... so in that time I want to stop because my husband didn't help me with the children. He also had other issues to deal with ... so no-one helped me with the children... what I will do miss ... but I do it ... I tried to do what I can.

Another student mother with similar sentiments shared: *"Sometimes I felt like dropping out during the pressure of project time..."*

One of the significant difficulties for mothers who are student teachers is lack of time to spend with their children, spouses, extended families and friends, and to study and complete college assignments. In spite of their academic challenges, student mothers mentioned that proper planning and time management have been key to their academic success. One participant stated *"I am strong woman. If you can manage at home your kids and husband, you*

can do everything." Student mothers are self-motivated to complete their teacher education degree within the constraints of college and home life.

Concerns about College Facilities

As presented in Table 3, student mothers' satisfaction scale about the types of supports or facilities at the college were analyzed.

The findings of the study revealed that the student mothers were satisfied with their access to online resources that are available through the college's learning management system software known as D2L, or Desire to Learn. A few of the students were very dissatisfied with accessing course materials on D2L because of constraints pertaining to Internet access at home. While examining the qualitative data, student mothers shared that there were some teachers who supported them and showed flexibility on deadlines for

submission of project work. A few of the student mothers mentioned:

Teachers helped me a lot and to answer my

Some friends pick up handouts for me when I miss class or tell me what I missed

Friends support me to continue to encourage

Table 3: Level of Satisfaction on College Support Services

Types of support/facilities	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Not Satisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Access to course materials on D2L	26.42%	33.96%	28.30%	3.77%	7.55%
Access to my teachers at the college after I returned from maternity leave	15.22%	21.74%	41.30%	19.57%	6.52%
Classmates help with missed course work after I returned to the college	12.77%	29.79%	34.04%	17.02%	6.38%
The number of leave days that I received from the college	4.44%	6.67%	22.22%	35.56%	31.11%
College facilities to rest when tired after childbirth	2.27%	9.09%	18.18%	20.45%	50.00%
College facilities for expressing milk	0	15.56%	28.89%	22.22%	33.33%
Study area or space at the college	0	19.57%	30.43%	19.57%	30.43%

questions on assignments...

Teachers ask me to come to their office for help

The teachers understand when I talk with them, my situations and they support me

As presented in Table 3, when asked about access to their college instructors after their return from maternity leave, a few responses were positive and others were neutral in their opinions on the level of support they received. Regarding help from their classmates for their coursework that they missed during their maternity leave, there were mixed opinions, many were satisfied with the support and a few others felt not very supported by their classmates.

A few of the quotes obtained from the individual interviews with student mothers are included here:

My friend (A) supports me for assignments or exam and study together

but they are busy

Friends are not supporting, mainly teachers.

Out of the 53 student mothers who responded about their satisfaction with the number of maternity leave days granted by the college, the majority were dissatisfied with the two weeks of maternity leave as well as the college's motherhood facilities. Also, student mothers were dissatisfied with the facilities dedicated to studying provided by the college.

Comments from student mothers in the interview were:

It was hard for breastfeeding to come to college after 2 weeks; 2 weeks leave to take care of newborn was not enough.

It was difficult to come back after 2 weeks, breastfeeding was hard, went to the nurse's office, I used to pump and kept it in the fridge.

Dickson & Tennant (2019) explored the support systems that contributed to

Emirati student mothers' ability to return to their college studies after only a few weeks of maternity leave. The types of support included domestic, family, spousal, and self-support. However, among the supports that were discussed, student mothers' intrinsic motivation was significant to completing their education within their academic constraints.

Research Question 2: What are student mothers' perceptions of college expectations and related policies?

According to the college student handbook, the number of excused absences for students cannot exceed more than 15% in each of the classes that they are enrolled in during that semester. However, in exceptional circumstances such as health or personal matters, students are allowed to suspend their study for one semester (Emirates College for Advanced Education, 2015-16). With regard to maternity care, married students are required to provide the college with early notification of their pregnancy and must return to classes no later than 2 weeks (10 working days) after their child's birth. In reviewing another higher education statement on maternity leave, female students are encouraged to suspend their registration for that semester in which the baby is expected to be born. If a student chooses not to utilize a term or semester maternity attendance suspension but instead to deliver her baby and return to complete the term or semester, her total semester absences must not exceed 15% to receive credit for the class (Zayed University Catalog, 2015-2016). These policy expectations are challenging for student mothers. From the findings of this

study, none of the student mothers took up the option of suspending an academic term because they would have to wait until the following academic year to take the courses, hence the student mothers returned to college after two or three weeks post-childbirth.

Referring to Table 4, the survey included statements about their opinions or views of possibilities in the future.

Out of the 54 student mothers who responded, many of them strongly agreed that, in the future, the college should consider having specific policies pertaining to maternity leave and attendance. During the interviews, several of the student mothers would have preferred a longer maternity leave than two weeks and the ability to increase the percentage of absences from the college. The majority of the student mothers wanted to have nursery facilities in the college. Student mothers voiced:

We need a baby nursery...

Need to get a nursery, I told the student services...

A room in the college to bring my nanny with the baby, even if there is no nursery....

The traditional Gulf practice of a woman staying at her parental home immediately following delivery was followed by most of the women, albeit in a shortened form, since they are required to return to their studies after two weeks. Emirati mothers have been found to wish their daughters'

Table 4: Views on College Facilities

Opinions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Having college policies specifically for student mothers such as extended maternity leave and attendance	53.85%	21.15%	3.85%	13.46%	9.62%
Having nursery facilities in the college would support me	64.81%	25.93%	9.26%	0	0
A mix of online and face to face course work will support me to complete my college degree	46.30%	33.33%	12.96%	3.70%	3.70%
Having a choice to take a few evening classes from 4:00PM to 6:30PM would support me	35.85%	7.55%	18.87%	15.09%	22.64%

lives to be easier than their own (Crabtree, 2007).

When asked about online and face to face approaches to coursework, the majority of the student mothers responded that they preferred a blend of both. Interview analysis indicated that student mothers welcomed the idea of blended teaching. These were some of their comments:

I like online course, many friends also were telling me to have online courses, some subjects yes, not Math...

Mothers with new baby, should come 2 hours less instead of 6 hours to be in the college and manage class work from home...

Online teaching – oh my God, that will help at least after delivery, it will be amazing, life-saving and will be supportive.

Out of the 54 respondents, there were mixed feelings about having a choice of evening classes. Interviews revealed that student mothers preferred a choice in class timings. A couple of them commented:

Leave early from college by 1:30-2:00PM, so I can be there for the children when they come from school

The timings are difficult for mothers, 8:00-4:00 because it is very long. 8:00-2:00 would be better

A previous study on married students enrolled in a teacher education college (Stringer, Saqr & Tennant, 2014) showed that students experienced inflexibility with schedules and the lack of course delivery options which concur with the findings of this study. Reviewing college policies and providing the necessary facilities for married students were key factors highlighted as pertinent to college success (Saqr, Tennant & Stringer, 2014; Tennant, Saqr & Stringer, 2014). Therefore, we can infer from the findings that the student mothers who were participants of this study face several challenges while they pursue a college degree and that their voices need to be heard especially among the key personnel in the administration of higher education institutions.

Future Implications of Study

In reviewing the findings of this study, there are implications specific to the college and a few to other similar higher education institutions. One of the recommendations is to offer childcare services or facilities on college campuses as this would allow student mothers convenient access to their babies during the early months of childhood for bonding and breastfeeding. Since the maternity leave allowed for students at the tertiary level is only two weeks and excused absences up to 15% of class time, one of the options would be distance education or a blended teaching approach. Creating more cultural awareness of the roles of Emirati student mothers among faculty would allow for greater understanding of their concerns and better rapport between faculty and students. In addition, having special counseling services for mothers' post-childbirth or postpartum is important as the mothers have experienced a lot of stress and these services would give them more avenues to cope. Another implication is for higher education institutions to provide married students and student mothers a special workshop or session on coping strategies, stress and time management to balance their multiple roles. Future work has been planned regarding these student mothers to observe their challenges and experiences having transitioned from being student mothers to novice teachers in public school.

Conclusion

Women's entry into higher education has consistently increased over

the past two decades (UNESCO, 2009) and is considered essential and necessary for the construction of a new society (Al Qazzat, 2003). A large proportion of female university students in the UAE are mothers of young children or become mothers whilst at university. The purpose of the study was to gain insight on student mothers' experiences post-childbirth while they were in the Bachelor of Education Program. This study has provided a meaningful insight of Emirati student mothers' challenges and realities while pursuing a teacher education degree. Studies such as these are important because they inform policy makers of the needs of key stakeholders, in this case, student mothers. Emirati student mothers in this study demonstrated a commitment to the educational process, and a desire to make a valuable contribution to their families, the college community and to the nation. They have valuable knowledge and experience to contribute and are an asset to the college and their community. Higher education institutions also need to be mindful that not supporting these student mothers may ultimately lead to high rates of attrition in their predominantly female student body. Therefore, teacher education programs need to be proactive in meeting the needs of student mothers and appreciate their self-efficacy and resilience.

In order to attract and retain student mothers in tertiary education, it is critical to provide them with adequate facilities and support because they are largely responsible for the building of the young Emirati generation. In conclusion, Emirati women value higher education and realize the benefits of being an educated mother for their own children as well as their country.



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