Faculty Support for Student Mothers: Comparing Student and Faculty Perspectives

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The importance of faculty support of students in higher education is well-researched. There are positive correlations between faculty support and a host of student attributes such as satisfaction, academic attainment and retention. When there is a breakdown of understanding between faculty and students, or where perspectives of support are totally different, it can lead to isolation of students and misunderstandings from both sides. For students in particularly stressful periods of their life, this support can be critical. Student mothers who are juggling take care of a newborn, whilst keeping up with full time studies, need support and encouragement in copious amounts. We interviewed both student mothers and faculty at the same institution and explored their perceptions of the ways in which support was offered and received. Factors which may influence the quality of support offered by faculty were examined, such as the faculty's perception of the student mothers' support systems and coping mechanisms. These perceptions were compared with the students' own descriptions of these factors. It was found that the faculty's perceptions of the home support systems were similar to those experienced by the students, yet their college support systems were generally misunderstood. We discuss how this could possibly lead to faculty supporting student mothers inadequately in some areas, and how this may impact on student retention.

Keywords: Faculty; Support; Student mothers; United Arab Emirates; Comparing; Perceptions

Introduction

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), it is common for young women to combine undergraduate study with motherhood. This occurs for two reasons. Firstly, due to the rapid development of education for Emirati women which has made participation in higher education extremely prevalent (Arab Knowledge Report, 2014), and secondly, because of persisting cultural traditions which result in women marrying relatively young, and the onset of childbearing usually being immediately upon marriage (Sonleitner & Wooldridge, 2014). At the current point in time in the UAE, a number of young student mothers study in federal universities, and the support systems available to them are uncertain. Some localized studies suggest that this support and awareness of the challenges facing student mothers might be lacking. For example, mothers have noted that a lack of childcare facilities at some institutions causes additional strain (e.g. Al-Jenaibi, 2015; Saqr et al., 2014). The impetus of this research is to explore the perceptions, from both student mother and faculty perspectives, of the ways in which support is offered by faculty to the student mothers.

Literature Review

Faculty Support for Students

Studies in contexts outside of the UAE and the Arabian Gulf region have repeatedly demonstrated that students' stress can be alleviated by faculty support. Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, Von Hippel and Lerner (1998) showed that student-faculty partnerships positively affect student retention. The way in which faculty involvement can positively affect students are well documented (Mamiseishvili, 2012; Ullah & Wilson, 2007; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Students' relationships with faculty can also significantly influence their academic motivation and achievement (Hartmann et al., 2013; Trolian et al., 2016). Faculty being approachable, compassionate and encouraging towards students has also been identified as key in helping students from minority backgrounds to succeed (Gardner, 2005). Conversely, a perceived lack of faculty support has been cited as a factor in student attrition and dissatisfaction (Andrade, 2008; Gregerman et al.,1998; Hansen & Beaver, 2012; Shelton, 2003).

Where there is a mismatch between faculty perceptions of the students' experience and the students' reality, this can result in the student feeling misunderstood, and a consequent absence of support in some areas. Misra, McKean, West and Russo (2000) found that faculty perceived students to experience more stress than students themselves reported. Common stress factors were those due to self-imposed stress, pressures and conflicts. Different perspectives on positive characteristics of teaching can play a role in the expectations students have of faculty. Mogan and Nox (1987) found that important faculty characteristics were rated differently by faculty and students, such as provision of support and encouragement; the students rated these as being more important than the faculty did. In that study, faculty and students were in agreement over

the high importance of interpersonal skills such as being approachable and encouraging mutual respect. Sometimes, the differing perspectives between faculty and students can lead to incivility and confrontation if not addressed (Shanta & Eliason, 2014).

Student Mothers

Students who are also mothers have a plethora of challenges to overcome to remain in education, and often have to overcome barriers unique to their status in order to achieve their academic goals (White, 2008). The challenges they face include those faced by any new mother, and student mothers also face additional challenges such as trying to keep up with college work and finding time to study for exams while coping with unwell children, etc. (Al Khouri, 2013; Lutrell, 2016; White, 2008). The juggling of multiple roles which student mothers must undertake can lead to stress and role overload, leading to guilt and distraction from their academics (Griffiths, 2002). Some student mothers report finding faculty unsupportive of their situation and not understanding their different needs (Mahaffey et al., 2015).

Emirati mothers experience all of these challenges, and others which are unique to their cultural setting. For example, there are cultural obligations which most Emirati women have to undertake such as frequent social engagements and it is not easy to be excused from these (Bristol-Rhys, 2010, Gallant, 2008). On the other hand, some postulate that their challenges are less severe than mothers in other cultures, given the ubiquitous supply of inexpensive domestic help to aid mothers with their housework and childcare (Rashid, 2010; Gallant & Pounder, 2008). This is a prevalent notion, particularly among expatriates in the UAE, which possibly affects the ways in which faculty (who are mainly expatriates) might view the challenges faced by student mothers. In addition, the importance of family within UAE culture based on the traditional tribal systems whereby extended families have a large input into one another's lives, even in modern day UAE society, is also well-known (Crabtree, 2007; Daleure et al., 2014; Heard-Bey, 2005). These ideas could also contribute to a perception by faculty that student mothers have plentiful support at home, possibly implying that their dual roles as college students and student mothers are not as taxing as they might be in other parts of the world. In addition, some studies have indicated that spouses of student mothers are not necessarily fully supportive of their wives' endeavors, with some reportedly feeling threatened by their participation in higher education. (e.g. Al-Harthi, 2006).

Study Aims and Research Questions

The aims of this study were to examine and compare student and faculty perceptions of faculty support to new student mothers, and to explore faculty's perceptions of the issues facing student mothers and of their coping strategies. The research questions are as follows:

- What are faculty and student perceptions of the ways in which faculty support student mothers, and how do these compare?

- What are faculty perceptions of the support networks which student mothers depend upon at home and in college, and how do these compare with the students' own experiences?
- What suggestions do both groups make to facilitate the college lives of student mothers', and how do these compare to one another?

Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative approach and the data collection tool of choice was interview, due to its ability to provide deep and enriched personal data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The interview guide was compiled of questions based primarily upon the literature review which indicated areas of deficiency in higher education establishments' support for mothers. Examples of faculty support, or the lack of it, were used to design the questions for faculty. Both students and faculty were sent an email inviting them to participate in the study. This email provided the basic study and ethical information. Those who volunteered to participate were sent more detailed study information and an interview was arranged at a time convenient to them. For student participants, the only requirements were that they were full-time students who had given birth to at least one child during their time at the university. The selection criteria for faculty was that they should have taught core courses in the college, the rationale for this being that they were much more likely to have taught larger groups of students and could speak more broadly of their experiences. All participants were informed both verbally and in writing of the relevant ethical information, such as the anonymity and confidentiality of their participation in the study, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. In total, sixteen full-time faculty and fourteen student mothers were recruited for the study. The faculty were from a diversity of expatriate nationalities, while the student mothers were all nationals of the UAE, representative of the student body in federal institutions in the country.

A semi-structured interview strategy was used whereby we were guided by the interview questions, yet had the flexibility of probing or allowing participants to elaborate and lead slightly where appropriate. The qualitative analysis of the data involved compiling a combination of themes which emerged from the data itself but which clustered in relation to the research questions, thereby using a semi grounded theory approach to create themes and sub-themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). We utilized a saturation strategy to ensure that we had determined our categories and sub-categories sufficiently (Creswell, 2012). The combination of these analysis methods resulted in the main themes and sub themes which are discussed subsequently.

In order to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity of the data, we put into place the following procedures. Firstly, the interview guide was scrutinized and commented on by a peer for both students and faculty, in order to check for the relative objectivity of each question. To make our interview participants more comfortable, less self-conscious and therefore more likely to give authentic data, we briefly explained our own positions as working mothers and outlined our experiences of working with student mothers trying to juggle roles.

We emphasized that there were no 'right' answers to the interview questions. The participants were interviewed in person, rather than by email questionnaire or telephone interview, in hopes that the non-verbal communication which in-person interviews allow would lead to a more comfortable interviewing experience for the participant, making them more likely to share responses aligned to their true experiences rather than distorted due to nerves or discomfort. Critically, on the subject of support, whether from the students' or teachers' perspectives, we asked the participants to give concrete examples of how they interpreted action as being supportive or non-supportive, to try to eliminate perceptions which may be more personality based than factual. The triangular design of the research also allowed us to check trustworthiness between the two groups' data, to some extent. Finally, we carried out a process of member-checking and sent each participant the transcript of their interview for checking and approval of its authenticity.

In the findings section, we present the four main themes of perception by faculty of student mothers, and vice versa, by student mothers of faculty, which link into factors which either affect levels of support offered by faculty or experienced by student mothers. We view these through a comparative lens; searching for both similarities and differences within these themes.

Findings and Discussion

Perceptions of Domestic Support Systems

Both faculty and student mothers were asked to share their perceptions of the ways in which the students coped at home, and the kinds of support systems they have there. The faculty's perceptions were mixed. All acknowledged a widespread perception of Emirati women having a relatively easy, heavily supported home life, and some (around half) thought that this perception mirrored the mothers' reality at home. The ways in which domestic help were thought to alleviate their challenges as student mothers included the hiring of nannies, maids to cook and clean, and drivers, as this statement exemplifies:

> *The students here I think have much more supportive houses, larger families, brothers and sisters, potentially nannies, drivers who drive instead of driving themselves, people who are cooking so they do not need to cook every night.*

Some faculty perceived that the Emirati cultural traditions of large, close-knit extended families would support and facilitate the student mothers at home. One faculty member explained:

> *I am assuming that the extended families and maid might help. My interpretation is that it is a closer- knit, larger family circumstance compared to back home.*

However, other faculty thought that the student mothers struggled with their dual roles and did not necessarily have the kinds of support which extended family networks and domestic help might imply. Even where domestic help was available, they thought it did

not alter the fact that the student mothers were primarily responsible for their children and that they were under a lot of pressure, as this faculty statement demonstrates:

> *I've heard that their mothers are there, or extended families are there, for a few weeks, just to help with the baby. But other than that I don't hear about much help.*

From the student mothers' perspectives, most (ten out of fourteen) did talk about having domestic help with tasks such as cleaning and cooking, but often this help was shared with extended family. The availability of domestic help was not, therefore, as prevalent as may have been presumed by some faculty. As soon as the mothers returned from college, they reported being the primary caregivers for their children. One mother acknowledged that having domestic help freed her from chores to give her more time to spend with her children and domestic support was cited by some mothers as a factor in allowing them to return to college, for example:

> *My housemaid does the cooking and cleaning. With this support it was easier for me to come back*

The student mothers also cited examples of their social obligations causing them pressure and stress, particularly when they had assignments due. The faculty also acknowledged this pressure and made reference to the demands on young Emirati mothers, such as the number of family engagements, part of the fabric of Emirati society. For example, one faculty member reflected that:

> *I don't think birth is the only event, we are talking about other things that come up in these communities regularly. In the western structure, such events come once in a while, here they occur more frequently.*

As explained earlier, many faculty imagined that domestic help, in whichever form, would help enable student mothers to keep up with their studies, and the mothers corroborated this to some extent. The student mothers, though, still appear to take on the 'lion's share' of running their home upon their return to college, regardless of having full time help. Some faculty appreciated this, and others less so. Possibly, those who imagined that the mothers had more support at home and therefore could spend more time on their studies, may be less likely to show empathy for the students in practice.

Also within the theme of domestic support for the mothers, groups of participants were asked to share their perceptions and/or experiences regarding support provided by spouses. Six of the sixteen faculty interviewed made some reference to the idea that spouses may not necessarily be supportive of their wives' studies. Some specifically mentioned the pressure on student mothers due to their spouse's perception of childcare being an issue, the implication being that the mothers should be at home with their children instead of in nurseries etc.:

> [I am] *not sure what extent are they supported to balance the equations – home and work. I heard a lot of comments of husbands putting a lot of pressure because children were left behind during that period of time. As mothers they are trying to juggle these two aspects and it is incredibly difficult.*

Other faculty referred to having conversations with mothers about this issue. Echoing this, some mothers had experienced their spouses pressuring them to leave college when they became pregnant or after having their babies, saying for example "w*hen I was pregnant, my husband told me drop the course".* This was referred to sometimes within the context of the spouse intending to be caring, or worrying about either their wife's or child's welfare. In addition to this pressure from their spouses, some mothers felt that other family members also caused stress at times by putting pressure on them to stay home.

Again, no direct links between perception and consequent action were made by faculty, but the fact that the faculty showed empathy in this regard suggests that they would be able to offer support and understanding should a student not be able to meet a deadline or require extra one-on-one time.

Perceptions of Faculty Support and Accommodation

All of the faculty interviewed self-reported as being supportive and empathetic towards students and gave multiple examples of ways in which they felt they had accommodated returning new student mothers. These accommodations were both academic and non-academic. These included providing extra information sessions, deadline extensions, out of office hours support, comfort in the physical classroom environment, showing interest and congratulating them, allowing them to leave early for doctor's appointments, and showing empathy for the mothers' exhaustion and possible physical discomfort. For example,

> *I extended the deadline dates just because they are not sleeping. I have called them into my office and helped them with whatever they need- I help them out.*

This did have a gendered element, with female faculty feeling more able to provide emotional support through talking or asking about their babies, but male faculty also reported making provisions in ways they felt were culturally sensitive.

It was clear that the students' physical comfort was carefully considered by faculty and that they did make accommodations with their physical environment frequently, as one faculty explained:

> *Some of them, I notice they would bring in cushions to the classroom and we would talk about that, I would say, what's happening, and they would say – I'm in the final stages* [of pregnancy] *and I would say, okay, fine, just make sure you are as comfortable as you need to be.*

All of these examples would suggest a likelihood of students reporting feeling supported by faculty, perhaps leading to a better college experience. The student mothers' experiences, therefore, were a little surprising. Of the sixteen students interviewed, ten reported not feeling particularly supported. Some specifically noted that they did not feel that faculty did anything unusual or out of the ordinary to support them as student mothers, as this response exemplifies:

Nobody from faculty supported me. Only x understood my situation, he was very helpful. The teachers just say 'do your work'.

There were frequent references to the college policy of registering lateness to class by more than ten minutes, as an absence. The new mothers felt this particularly harsh on them. Students generally perceived faculty who implemented this policy negatively. There was evidence that the student mothers were not making a clear distinction between policy and personal treatment, as many referred to the application of the attendance policy by both faculty and college administration as being 'uncaring' or a similar sentiment. Only one student mother articulated a sense of distinguishing between the two:

I know they could not do anything as it was the policies, rules about the absences and they were clear about it and that it would be counted.

A smaller group of students who did feel supported by faculty gave examples of this such as being given extra time to complete assignments, receiving feedback on assignments, delaying projects and presentations, all of which were examples of academic support, such as:

I found a lot of support from my friends, my teachers, too much support, I had assignments and my teachers gave me more time, to work and submit my work... so I think I found a lot of help from them so it was easier to cope ... they were flexible with me.

Given the volume of faculty comments about the support they considered they provided both to accommodate the students both academically and holistically, such as showing empathy, asking about their babies, congratulating them upon return, etc., we might have anticipated more comments from the students in this vein.

Perceptions of Students' Coping Strategies

Students were asked to describe any coping strategies which they used when they returned to college after their two week maternity leave. Surprisingly, perhaps, most students said that they did not depend upon anyone in college but themselves. Occasionally, a friend or family member who also attended college would provide them with missed notes, but they reported feeling that they mainly had to become self-sufficient. By contrast, the faculty unanimously perceived and described the students as having a network of peers whom they relied upon for support, who helped them keep up with assignments, for example passing on lecture notes, explaining assignments etc. These statements from faculty demonstrate this perception of plentiful peer support:

When they come back, I see that some of them get a lot of help from their classmates, which I think was beneficial

I've noticed that the ladies here seem to have a close network of friends that they rely on

Some faculty thought that the students favored their peer support networks over support from faculty, and in fact attributed their experiences of students not taking up offers of faculty to this fact. This was thought to be a better means of catching up due to the ease of communication between peers, e.g.

> *Their friends at college will help them with that kind of thing too ... it's not just the faculty they go to ... I think they're going to friends to find out what's going on and maybe working together.*

Due to a combination of faculty's perceptions of the student mothers' resilience (which was indeed corroborated by the students) and their assumptions of a strong peer support network to cushion them academically upon their return to college, perhaps well intended support was offered rhetorically, but not acted upon or particularly emphasized.

> *I have not really had students ask me what they have missed. The opportunity is always there … In all my years, only one or two students actually asked me for help*

There was evidence that the mothers were self-motivated to complete their degree for personal achievement. Several themes of resilience emerged from their responses, including motivation to complete their degree due to a sense of having something which was just for them, e.g.

> *I did not want to just be sitting at home and be stressed because I can't go to my mother's house every day or sit in my husband's mother home. I did not want to have only to attend to my son, I wanted to do other things for myself.*

One mother explained that, rather than exhausting her further, returning to her studies had actually energized her and gave her a sense of purpose in keeping busy. Faculty corroborated these kinds of statements. In their experience, they had observed student mothers making enormous efforts to be prepared by handing in assignments early prior to their baby's birth, and then showing fierce determination to keep up with their studies. They recognized a deep resilience in the student mothers, for example:

> *A lot of them say, well that's life … I've just got to get on with it, and so they just do it somehow*

Perceptions of how College life could be made easier for Student Mothers

Student mothers repeatedly mentioned the need for greater autonomy in class scheduling, in order to reduce their physical attendance requirements at college. They also stressed the need for a longer period of maternity leave, but were not forthcoming on how this would enable them to fulfil the academic requirements of their degree. Predictably, faculty gave more concrete and detailed suggestions than student mothers as to how to increase the maternity leave, or at least lessen the impact of taking time to have their babies. They suggested reducing the strain on the mother by introducing a

semester entry system rather than missing a full academic year should they choose to withdraw for a while.

Almost all of the student mothers mentioned the need for more flexible modes of learning in order that they could complete some of their courses at home in their own time. This statement is selected as an example of the student mothers' comments in this vein:

> *Online teaching will be great, oh my goodness, it will be easier. Even if it is not long, At least after the delivery, the choice will be great, life-saving and if applied that will be supportive. [sic]*

Many faculty reiterated this, and thought that access to learning should be more flexible for all students but in particular would be more beneficial for student mothers. Both mothers and faculty mentioned the need for an onsite nursery facility which would enable them to be close to their babies, and possibly appeasing spouses who sometimes voiced displeasure at the childcare arrangements. One faculty member also made the point that the student mothers were often disengaged in class due to concerns over their babies being in off-campus nurseries, which they thought an onsite facility would help alleviate.

Students stressed the need for more time off following their babies' births, and so did many faculty, but for different reasons. For example, the students generally referred to needing time to physically recover and rest following childbirth, e.g.

> *I was always thinking about the baby and tired and not sleeping all night. I just came back after two weeks, you know otherwise the college will say something.*

The faculty, on the other hand, tended to chiefly articulate their concerns over their return by emphasizing the potentially detrimental effect of a mother having to leave her newborn so quickly, e.g. as one explained,

> *I feel that as a mother… an incredible injustice is being done to these young children that they are not permitted to have their mothers at home with them, as young babies to be able to be touched, nurtured, and loved by the mother*

This difference was notable, and possibly a product simply of the faculty having the ability to stand back from the situation and view it more objectively. The student mothers, trying to deal with each day as it occurred, perhaps do not have the luxury of time to reflect deeply on their situation.

The faculty's comments regarding making physical accommodations for mothers post-birth such as allowing them to bring more comfortable seating, cushions, etc., were reiterated by the students as they called for greater comfort for their recently post-birth bodies. Other accommodations which the students felt would help them to readjust to college life was a quiet, safe area to feed their newborns.

Implications and Conclusion

The differing perceptions which faculty and students held of the support, communication and engagement offered were obvious and as we have seen, mainly lay in the areas of faculty support itself and in the challenges which student mothers face. These diverse perspectives between faculty and students was also found by Mathieson and Leafman (2014).

What might be the implications of the fact that in some ways, faculty have different ideas about the students' support networks? Half of the faculty thought that mothers had plentiful domestic help which would alleviate their load at home, and many also believed that student mothers were heavily supported by their extended families who helped with childcare. The most obvious implication is that faculty might be more reticent in offering support, or simply conceptualise the status of student mothers as less challenging than it might be to a student mother in their own home country. It could be that when faculty perceive students to be coping admirably when a casual 'let me know if you need any help' is not taken up, there is a mismatch with the student's reality.

What possible reasons could there be for this mismatch between faculty thinking they are being very helpful and student mothers not really agreeing with this? Some of this inconsistency may be due to cultural differences in the way that support was being offered. It is possible that perhaps in the faculty's home countries they are more anticipatory of individuals seeking out help proactively, and they take an absence of doing so as a sign that the student is doing well. This could lead to them underestimating students' isolation. Other local studies have noted that sometimes cultural differences of understanding, including of potentially sensitive areas, can be an issue in the Gulf (e.g. Hudson, 2012, Rapanta, 2014). This might explain, for example, how male teachers feel they are being culturally sensitive and appropriate by keeping their distance while students may perceive them as being uncaring.

Faculty showed an understanding of the challenges faced in the same way that students themselves reported, and also an appreciation of the social and cultural obligations of the mothers. They also had perceptions of limited spousal support for some student mothers, which the mothers themselves corroborated. Some faculty (though not all) realized that students' families may not be fully involved, which would presumably lead to less support from them. Since the idea that Emiratis tend to have large extended families who co-raise children is common (e.g. Samier, 2015; Shallal, 2011), this was fairly enlightened on the part of the faculty. Similar suggestions from both students and faculty of how student mothers could be helped shows a degree of understanding between the two, and is significant, in part because of the greater chance of empathy and support this shows, and that it indicates faculty have listened to or carefully observed the students facing those challenges.

In the literature review, we outlined the key ways in which faculty support for students, particularly those such as student mothers, can affect them positively in a variety of ways, including improving the retention of student mothers. The UAE is a rapidly developing nation with a need for highly educated women and men to join its national workforce, and so retention of motivated and resilient students who can later join this workforce should be a core priority in higher education institutions. This study indicates evidence of faculty supporting and being 'in tune' with students' needs, yet much work needs to

be done, to both educate faculty and to facilitate student voices being heard, contributing to policy change where appropriate. College administrations could encourage and work together with students and faculty to explore opportunities to find out best ways to support student mothers, communicating these to senior management groups and institutional decision makers. These findings have widespread meaning in a region in which student motherhood is extremely common, but also bear significance for international institutions too with non-traditional student groups within its student body.

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