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"Focus in Your Study and Don't Worry": Exploring the Roles of Student Mother in Higher Education Institution in Malaysia

Siti Norzaimalina Abd Majid¹

¹Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP)

Correspondence: Siti Norzaimalina Abd Majid (norzaimalina@ump.edu.my)

Abstract

The role of a mother alone is very challenging. With an additional role as a student or a worker add more burden to them. It is undeniable that Malaysian women in the 21st century has more roles than women in the pre-independent era. Nowadays, women have equal opportunities to work and pursue higher education like men. The need to provide quality life to the children has also encouraged women to contribute more in the family income. Despite the multiple roles play by women, the household tasks are still managed by them. For this phenomenological research, in-depth interviews were conducted with two participants who studied in public university in Malaysia. By using thematic analysis, four themes were emerged from this study. The themes were challenges, role management, assistance/support and coping strategies. In this study, the major challenge was to balance the role of mother and student. But whatever challenges they faced; family was their priority. Furthermore, spousal support also helped the mothers in managing their multiple roles. From the findings, it is hoped that it gives some insights on the type of support that student mother needs and ways of coping in challenging situation.

Key words: student mother, qualitative study, thematic analysis, multiple roles

Introduction

The word 'education' has been derived from the Latin word '*educare*' that means to bring up, to rise, and to nourish, to train or mould. In the pre-historic era, education is a training process to acquire knowledge and skills that are necessary to live in the society, which can be achieved through imitation and storytelling. Since human has the capacity to extend their knowledge from generation to generation, education has flourished into many branches of knowledge. Nowadays, the definition of education has transcended beyond learning for basic survival. Education offers a happy and stable life, makes the world safer and peaceful place to live, become a useful member of the society and vital for economic prosperity of a nation (Reda, 2015). Many studies suggested that people who have better education, can contribute towards the building of social capital and lasting economic development. (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina (2019).

Education was deemed important only for boys because they were going to be the family provider. In the traditional society, man was the primary income-earner in a household and needed to be educated, as to secure better job opportunity and get higher income. The girls were expected to stay at home, managing the household and taking care of the family. Before Malaysia's independence in 1957, there were many obstacles for the girls to become more educated. Frank Swettenham, who was the British

resident during British Occupation at Malaya¹, posited that the Malays were too attached to the traditional Malay customs and as a result, girls were restricted from socialising. In addition, the prejudice among Malays that school was the place to propagate Christianity, socialising place for boys and girls, the fear of losing helping hands at home and the lack of interest by the girls to pursue study were some factors that education for girls was not the primary focus (Musa, 2010). Only parents who were aware the importance of education to girls, sent their children to schools. These parents knew education was an important vehicle to empower oneself, offer better livelihood for the family, develop the society and drive the economy. As Nelson Mandela says, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

However, the landscape of women’s education is totally different now in comparison to the pre-independent era. The challenging world of economy today, has encouraged women to contribute to the household income and therefore, must be educated to get employed or self-employed. For example, some women decided to pursue higher education, so they can get better job opportunities or attended for short courses, to start home business. It is a necessity for women to be equipped with skills, knowledge and attitudes that fit with the current demand. With the advanced of technology, education is accessible to all and some of them are even free.

For those women who are working, they are often exposed to the “second shift” at home after their working hours ends (Adofo, 2013). In addition, women who are self-employed, they do not have fixed working hours and it can be a challenge for them to juggle between roles as mother and a working mother. This situation can also be applied for mothers who are continuing their study, where academic matters have also their own weightage. In these conditions, it is undeniable, women need support from the spouse or family in managing the household. Noor Laily Abu Bakar and Rita Raj Hashim (1984) cited from Hirschman (2016), reported that Malay husbands helped their spouse, who was a working woman, in handling the house chores such as cleaning, washing clothes and going to market. The men were also willing to assist with childcare and other traditional domestic duties. From this study, we could observe that both men and women were open in portraying non-stereotypical gender roles and this is seen as a great move towards gender equality.

Malaysia has seen a gradual increase in the number of students enrolled in college and universities for the past decades. In 2007, the enrolment of male students in higher education institutions² was 396, 595 students and female students were 476, 673 students. Eleven years later, in 2018, the number has almost doubled with enrolment of female students in higher education institutions (HEIs) was 736,103 students exceeded male students which was 607,727 students (Ministry of Education, 2018). It is worth too emphasised, that this enrolment leads to increase number of employments. According to International Monetary Fund (IMF), between 2010 and 2016, women’s employment raised significantly compared to male employment where sectors such as health and hospitality as well as public sector showed the greatest rate of increase. The number of female students who pursued postgraduate education was also high with female Master (49, 604), male Master (40, 210) but at PhD level, female students decreased to 19, 910 and male was 23, 269. Only about 4.7% students, aged between 21-24 years old, enrolled in post graduate education right after first degree education. From this number, we can assume that most of females post graduate students are those who aged more than 25 years old, usually associated with working and married woman. Since the number is increasing every year, this phenomenon has brought attention about the multiple roles of women, considering that not all universities provide facilities such as lactation room, day care centre for student mother and the like. Therefore, this study aims in exploring the lived experiences and challenges of student mothers, understanding the roles and obligations as student mothers and discovering their coping mechanism in challenging and conflicting situations.

¹ Malaya was the name used before independence.

² Higher Education Institutions include Matriculation & Foundation, Professional, Certificate, Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Bachelor Degree, Postgraduate Diploma, Master and Ph.D in public and private

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Methodology

For this phenomenological research, in-depth, semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews were conducted with two participants who studied in southern public university in Malaysia. All participants were recruited based on voluntary basis, geographical ease, expense of contact, and their availability during the interview took place. Purposive sampling was used to select participants that fit to the objectives of this study. The criteria of the participants chosen were a student who is currently studying in post graduate study in the university, a biological mother who lives with her child/children, single parent or married woman, and willing to participate in this study. The research participants demographic background is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic information

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Statu	Employment	Current level of study	Child status
Yuki	33	Married	Full time Lecturer	Master	1 child
Kate	33	Married	Full time Housewife	Master	3 children

The interviews were conducted based on participant's availability and comfort. Participant's 1 interview was conducted at her workplace and participant's 2 was at the university. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Before the interview started, each participant was given consent form to participate in this research. This consent form is important in qualitative research because the researcher wanted the participants to understand the purpose of their involvement, gained their permission to use the data for research purposes and agree to the conditions of the participation. A copy of the consent form was given to them for record keeping purpose. Next, a brief description about the research objectives and the flow of the interview were explained.

Prior to the interview, the participants were given a set of interview questions as to allow them to be prepared for the session and have some time to ask researcher if they could not understand the questions. The participants were also aware that additional follow-up questions and probe questions were expected to be asked spontaneously during the interview to elicit in-depth responses. In the interview, the participants were asked about their personal and family background, decision to pursue postgraduate study, their experience as student mother, challenges they face as a student and a mother at the same time and ways to deal with conflicting situation.

The data were transcribed, and thematic analysis adopted from Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse the data. The phase of thematic analysis is represented in Table 2.

Table 2: Phases of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006)

Phase	Description of the process
Familiarising with data	Transcribing, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
Searching for themes	Gathering data and collating codes into potential themes.
Reviewing themes	Checking the themes in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic map of the analysis.

Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine each theme and generate clear definitions and names for each theme.
Producing the report	Selection of vivid, compelling text extracts relating to the analysis to the research questions and literature, producing a scholarly report.

Although the interviews were semi-structured, it was not considered to base the analysis by quantifying the data. In addition, the limited number of participants contributed to the study, limits the quantification of the data. The researcher was more interested in the qualitative experience of the student mother, challenges they face and their coping strategies. In organizing the data into themes, the researcher let the themes emerged from the data and direct quotes from the transcripts were used to explain the data for each theme.

Results and Discussion

From data analysis, it was evident that to be a mother and a student at the same time was very challenging and had significant impacts in their everyday lives. Their surrounding really helped the student mother to face the challenges. Interestingly, they do not see “challenges” as a major thing in student-motherhood journey because they see “challenge” as a part of human’s life, and in every challenge or problem, there must be a reason behind it. In this study, the researcher has identified four themes and subthemes. The themes are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Physical and mental stress
Role Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Planning ▪ Self-sacrifice ▪ Asking for help
Assistance/Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Physical ▪ Emotional ▪ Spiritual
Coping Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cognitive ▪ Supportive ▪ Behavioural

Theme 1 : Challenges

The first theme was challenges and struggles of student mothers. Being a student alone require a lot of efforts and adding mothering in the situation will make the situation even more challenging. The participants’ commented that juggling two important roles at the same time was not an easy task. But, as they took decision to pursue postgraduate education willingly, they must be ready to face deal the upcoming challenges. When they were asked about challenge being student mothers, one of the participants, Kate said *“My biggest obstacle during master is when my kids were unwell, or you know when their health is not at the best condition. Because you know I had to focus on my study and focus on them especially when they had to be admitted to the hospital. I don't want to say that was the worst condition but that was the most challenging moment for me, to take care of this [taking care of kids], and to focus on this [study] at the same time. But I believe, Allah does not give you something [burden] more than you can bear. Whatever happened in the past, Alhamdulillah, we managed to face it. We managed to go through to it together. Alhamdulillah.”*

Managing children who were unwell was her top priority. She also mentioned that *“I always tell myself that my family is my priority. So whatever it is, I will focus on my family first and then only I focus on something else”*. Although she experienced physical stress, stayed at the hospital to look after her children, and at the same time, mental stress, thinking about her assignment to complete, at the end of

the day, she managed to handle the situation. Yuki also had the similar situation like Kate. In her experience as student mother, Yuki would settle her child's matter first by ensuring her child's needs were fulfilled, then she would focus on other matters. If she did not solve her child's matter, she would feel guilty and kept thinking about the problem, which will consequently lead to mental stress. Therefore, for Yuki and Kate, children's matter come first before anything else. The journey as a postgraduate student lasted about two years only but the journey of a mother lasts a lifetime.

In the interview, it is interesting that faith also plays a big role in the times of hardship. The fact that Kate mentioned the translation of a Quranic verse "*Allah does not burden a soul beyond that it can bear...*" (*Qur'an, 2:286*) and said *Alhamdulillah*, which means "*Praise be to Allah*" many times throughout the interview, her view about challenges was different. As a Muslim, she believes that tribulations are a part of life and everything that happens in life is Allah's destiny and His plan for her. Whatever trials or adversities come her way; Allah has guaranteed that His servants can handle it. Despite all the stresses and challenges, at the end of the day, it will pass. Perception towards challenges determines on the way she responds to it.

Theme 2 : Role Management

Role management was the second theme that was prevalent in the study. Women nowadays are striving to balance the role outside the home and domestic responsibilities. It was inevitable that stress is often considered as the outcome of exhibiting multiple role concurrently, although extensive support for this theory is scarce (Ahrens & Ryff, 2006). According to Ahrens and Ryff (2006), there were two perspectives within role theory that explain the effects of multiple roles on well-being. First, the role-strain perspective or Depletion Hypothesis, proposes that increased number of roles lead to psychological and physical stress. Second, the role enhancement perspective or identity accumulation perspective, increased number of roles enrich personal well-being, social connections, power, prestige and emotional gratifications.

In this study, Kate's decision to add role as a student was driven by her desire to be someone that she knows is capable of or what Maslow defined as self-actualization. She was in her pinnacle of life where she has loving husband and beautiful children, comfortable life, so why not she does for herself. In the interview, the decision to pursue postgraduate was because of personal satisfaction and not because of external forces. She said that "*I don't use my brain as much as I use it now as a student because I don't really think. I don't really use my brain for something critical [before becoming a student]*". But, for Yuki, she pursued study because her husband wanted her to make a move on in her career, and requirements from her workplace. According to Yuki, her husband wanted her to continue Master might be because of the current job was perceived as unsecured and he wished that Yuki can apply job at government sector. However, despite the external influences, she was the one who decided to continue study at her own free will and sweet time.

Being a student mother involves switching from one role to another or take place simultaneously. For example, when a mother is cooking, she is thinking about the outline of her assignment or ways to teach her child reading. Women who engaged in multiple role must be able to manage her role equally, so the level of stress remains under control. In this research, there were three sub-themes related to role management, namely planning, sacrifice and asking for help. In managing the student-mother role, planning is the most important thing. Planning refers to as allocating parts of the day to perform domestic activities as a wife and a mother and time to fulfil academic activities. For Yuki, she works from 8.30 am until 5.30 pm from Sunday to Thursday. Her nature of work and encouragement from associates allowed her to do her academic activities at her workplace, but with a condition, she completed her daily work obligations first before focusing on her study. She tried to leave work and academic matters at her workplace and concentrated on her family once she reached home.

However, for Kate, as a fulltime housewife, it was a different situation. Her house was the "workplace". Having two preschool children was manageable where she could send them to preschool during daytime. But she had a baby that needs her full attention day and night. So, what Kate did was she made a routine every day. In the interview, she said "*I would say I have my own schedule. I know*

what time I will wake up in the morning, what time I will send the girls to school, what time they will come back, what time I will cook, what time I put my baby to sleep. I have the schedule. that's why I know how to manage my time." Once her children were asleep, that was the time for Kate to do her academic work. Her study time was dependent on her children's sleep time.

Despite all the scheduling and time blocking, sometimes it did not work. Yuki and Kate had to make sacrifice by prioritising being a student than a mother and using spare time to study. For Yuki, if there was a conflicting situation, she weighed the most important role at that time and focus on that role. In one of Yuki's experience, she said *"On the same day, I have a presentation and my child has a test. I just look at her and make sure she studies [for the test] and make revision and I do my slide for presentation."* When Yuki said she was busy, her child understood and did not disturb her. She also sacrificed her lunch time with friends to do her assignment. Unlike Kate, her study was dependent on her children's time. She could not concentrate on her study if her children were awake. She devoted her time to take care and fulfil their needs until they sleep at night. Therefore, the only time she could focus on her study was late at night or early in the morning. The spare time that she had was devoted to study. But, if she was on tight deadlines, she would be prioritising role of a student. She explained to her children that she needed to finish her work and could not entertain them temporarily, they understood.

Women have the idea of wanting to "do it all and do it well" in order to be portrayed as successfully balancing multiple concurrent fulltime roles as wife, mother, worker, student and caregiver (Sumra & Schillaci, 2015). However, that is not always the case for Yuki and Kate. They admitted that they asked for help when one role requires more demands than the other especially if they could not do house chores on the day they had class. For example, Kate mentioned in the interview, *"My husband, he works. He is the one who earns the money. He helps with the house chores. He also spends time with the children whenever I am going to class, I am not at home"*. Similar in Yuki's situation, whenever she went to class, her husband helped her doing domestic activities. Yuki illustrate din the interview *"I go to class on Sunday, my husband... all house chores [were completed] by my husband. About house, about my child, totally my husband. I just go to class and [when I got back at home] everything was done."* Their husbands played a major role in managing the household while their wives were away to class. Assistance from husbands are crucial in a life of student mother, which will be explained next.

Theme 3 : Assistance/Support

Social support theory proposed by that there are two types of support: emotional and tangible support. McLaughlin and Randolph (2012) described emotional support as "verbal encouragement or appraisal during an interpersonal interaction". Examples of emotional support are supportive feedback, caring, and showing empathy. While tangible support or instrumental support refers to financial assistance, receiving materials good, or services. (Heaney & Isreal, 2002 cited from Mclaughlin & Randolph, 2012). In this study, the researcher added one more sub-theme that is spiritual support. It is one type of intangible support but not similar to emotional. Therefore, this sub-theme will be discussed separately. In sum, three sub-themes were related to assistance/support: emotional, tangible, and spiritual.

There is an adage says, *"Behind every great/successful man, there stands a great woman"*. This saying emphasises men's success are frequently associated to the support of their mother or spouse, who took care of their health and wellbeing, taking care of the children and motivate them to achieve their dreams. But, in this study, the saying goes the opposite way. Both participants received full support from their spouse and family when they decided to continue study. Kate's husband felt surprised at first because he thought she did not want to continue her study. But as long as Kate is happy, he is happy too and fully support Kate's decision to pursue her dream. Yuki's husband had never been happier with her decision, since he had talked about this matter three years before she registered her study. In terms of emotional support, both participants received a lot of encouragement and reassurance from their husbands. For example, we could see from Yuki's husband reaction after she made the decision: *"Good. You can go study and I can control [take care of] house chores. Just go [focus on] your study and don't worry."* He reassured Yuki that everything will be under control and she can rely on him. In addition, Kate's husband also did not expect much from her when she was being a student. He

understood that being a student and a mother requires a lot of efforts. Her husband kept reminding her to do her best and just do whatever she wants to do, whatever she thinks best for her. This kind of emotional support that keeps Yuki and Kate going through the obstacles as student mother.

Next, the type of support that is important is tangible support. Tangible support that was apparent in the study was financial aid and labour. In this study, both spouses were fully responsible in funding study-related costs such as tuition fees, laptop, printers, stationeries, transportation and the like. For Yuki who was a working mother, she did not have to worry about using her money to pay the fees and other study-related expenses. She really appreciates her husband's action and acknowledges his sacrifice. Because of that, Yuki felt it was an obligation for her to concentrate on her study and do her best. Conversely, Kate did not have any income, so, she must depend on her husband financially. In terms of labour, the husbands were helpful in doing the house chores. Even before both participants continue studying, the men were already sharing household chores and they were good doing it. As a student mother, having a husband who are understanding, and cooperative contribute immensely in the student-motherhood journey. In the interview, Kate voiced out her opinion about her married life *"We tolerate. We cooperate. We take the responsibilities collectively because it is impossible for you to do it alone. When you say married life, you are expected to do things together."* In her opinion, it did not matter whether you have one role or multiple roles, they should have mutual agreement in every aspect of married life. Apart from her husband, Kate received support from her lecturers. During her first year of study, she had extreme morning sickness in the first trimester, which had affected her class attendance. Instead of deferring her study, she asked permission to study and complete the assignment from home. Fortunately, the lecturers were very understanding and allowed her to do so. As a result, she managed to finish her first semester with good result. Lecturer's understanding about his or her students' condition was also considered as one type of support that help students to manage their role as student mother.

The final sub-theme is spiritual support. Spiritual support involves "a person experiences a connection to a higher power (i.e., God or other transcendent force) that is actively supporting, protecting, guiding, teaching, helping, and healing" (Mackenzie et al, 2000). This support includes employing religious and spiritual practices coherent with their beliefs and having a sense of spiritual purpose along with hope and faith in something divine. In the interview, it was visible that the participants have hope in God's divine intervention when they face obstacles in their life. For example, Kate sought spiritual support by monologuing and praying. It is illustrated as such: *"I will do some monologue. I will ask "Ya Allah, why did this happen to me? Why don't you help me? Sometimes, I feel so weak. Please help me to go through this thing [situation]."* In Islam, they believe that everything that happens in life is what Allah has prescribed for them and there must be a reason behind it that only God knows what it is. If the believers were in difficult situation, they prayed to Allah and asked for help as mentioned in Holy Quran: *"It is You we worship and You we ask for help (1:5) Please guide us to the straight path (1:6)"*. Yuki who has similar faith with Kate, also perform spiritual practices when she faced big problems. She said, *"When I have big problem, I think reciting Al-Quran gives me some calmness and I feel better [after reciting it]"*. Holy Quran contains words of Allah that was revealed to Prophet Muhammad as a guidance to whole mankind. The content encompasses sayings and prayers that soothing the soul and encouraging positive energy to those who read it. That was why Yuki felt serene and calmer after performing the ritual.

Theme 4 : Coping Strategies

The final theme emerged from this study is coping strategies. In psychology, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person". Basically, coping means a continuous attempt to deal with personal or interpersonal problems and seeking to lower or tolerate the stress and conflicts. There are two forms coping as explained by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) , which are emotion-focused and problem-focused forms of coping. Generally, emotion-focused form of coping happens when the difficult and challenging situation cannot be changed. On the contrary, for problem-focused forms of coping, the situation is more feasible to change or have potential to alter. Although there are differences, both forms of coping often

occur concurrently (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As discussed before, challenges are evident in student mothers' life. They had to balance their role wisely and seek support in order to keep their sanity. In this study, there were three sub-themes related to coping strategies theme namely cognitive coping, supportive coping, and behavioural coping.

Cognitive coping involves restructuring your thought processes in order to influence how you think or behave. Generally, when people face with unpleasant situation, they will have emotional distress such as anxious, sad and angry. Instead of succumbing to the negative emotions, people can use cognitive coping strategy by perceiving that situation in the opposite way. In this study, faith plays an important role to change the way participants' felt about the hard situation. Kate said *"To me whatever happened [during] that [difficult] day, it is just that what Allah has stated for you. I did not see it as challenges. I just face whatever comes to me in positive way because I am a very positive person."* As a Muslim, Kate believed that challenges were test from God to His servant. To pass the test, she had to accept it and dealt with it in a positive way and only God knows what He has planned for her. For Yuki, when she faced with challenging situation, she would want to deal it quickly. She would focus on finding solution for her problems and do whatever she could to mitigate the issue. For her, challenges come and go, and the quicker she solves the problem, the better she can move on with her life.

Next is supportive coping. Supportive coping involves "conveying empathy and interest, helping to positively reframe the situation, providing information, and taking over tasks or duties" (Badr et al, 2011). Woman is created as an emotional and sensitive person, so, as student mother, it is one of the effective ways to relieve their emotional distress. In this study, both participants were grateful to have an understanding husband that willing to listen to their problems, console them when they were down and give them courageous words throughout this journey. For Yuki, if she had any problem at work or related to study, or she was in stressful condition, her husband was the first person to know. When she was in stressful situation, her husband would say *"Why should you stress yourself. Every problem has a solution. If you don't know something about your research, you can ask your friend. About financial matters, I can handle it."* He would try his very best to help Yuki in any situation. Kate's husband also showed the same gestures as Yuki's. Her husband was also supportive with anything that Kate wanted to pursue in her life. Her husband said *"If you want to work you can work, but if you don't want to work, I don't force you. You decide, I cannot force you to work, if you want to pursue your career, then you can go."* Her husband's blessing was all she wanted, and she would not take it for granted. Both participants agreed that helpful, supporting and understanding husbands were all they need to endure this situation.

Last coping strategy depicted in the study was behavioural coping. Behavioural coping comprises actions or activities conducted that can alleviate the stress. Being a student mother is stressful. In the interview, both participants mentioned the word "stress" about eleven times. Usually, they associated the word stress with the assignment workload. Since they continued postgraduate study after 9 to 10 years after their undergraduate, it took some time to get back to the learning momentum. The nature of postgraduate study that needed a lot of critical reading, presentation and writing paper, made it more challenging. According to Yuki, when she could not handle difficult situation or cannot solve the problem, she would sleep for a few minutes or eat whatever she wanted. She felt relieved, more relaxed and calmer after that. In this calm state, then she would try to find solutions for her problems. As for Kate, she would cry and perform prayer to soothe herself, if she could not handle the situation. According to Sharon Martin, a psychotherapist, crying "purges negative energy and allows for new, positive energy to fill us up." It is natural body response to release the negative feelings. So, let the woman cries if she is in stressful condition; it is a way of coping.

Conclusion

It is not easy to become a mother and a student at the same time. Planning is one approach to minimise the tension and pressure among student mother. Sometimes, if the plan did not work, student mother or even working mother had to sacrifice their time and energy to ensure everything is in order. It is expected that they experienced physical and mental stress during the journey. The challenges that

student mothers faced are indeed complicated, especially in time management, where they had to play different kinds of roles concurrently such as furthering education, working outside the home to committing to the traditional roles of a housewife. But, if they have strong support system, student mothers can maintain work-life-study balance and able to achieve success in every aspect of their life. In the end of the day, they must remember their priority, which is family. Career and certificate are temporary, but family is everlasting.

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