

## Chapter 21

# A Never Ending Journey Towards Balance: Being a Mom in the World of Academia

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter is a narrative of the author's experience as a mother and a teacher transitioning from public school teaching to the higher education classroom. It explores the identity developments and shifts during this transition. The narrative suggests that achieving balance during this journey might be never ending but can be successful and filled with joy by doing fulfilling work, taking time to celebrate achievements, and reflecting on the process. By focusing on these elements during her own journey, she has been refreshed and her teaching is energized. Through this chapter, she hopes to share this story and encourage others on similar journeys.*

### INTRODUCTION

I recently had a great conversation about graduate school with one of the preservice teachers in my methods class. She was interested in eventually getting her PhD and was asking me about my process. One question she asked took me a little by surprise. She asked how I balanced kids and school. She mentioned she knew a lot of people who always wanted to get their PhD, but had kids and it never happened. I found myself speaking authentically, telling her about how my teaching and research is very fulfilling. I mentioned that while it's incredibly difficult and a lot of hard work, I love that I have the opportunity to show my kids the joy that comes with doing something with my life that makes me happy. My kids also make me happy. They make me laugh and remind me to slow down and enjoy the moment. I'm incredibly fortunate to be able to have so much in my life that brings me joy. But, I don't often talk about both of those aspects of my life in the same conversations. When I talk to people in academia, they don't always see kids as a positive attribute. When I talk to people outside of academia, they don't often see why anyone would get their PhD. I've learned to modify how I tell my story and how

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## ***A Never Ending Journey Towards Balance***

I talk about my identities, depending on my audience. So, I was pleasantly surprised when I was talking with this preservice teacher and was able to talk about both parts of my life and how they actually work happily together and make me better. I believe that my identities as a mom and as an academic each benefit the other and make me stronger in all aspects of my life. This conversation made me realize the importance of telling my story and how it might help other people, too. That is the goal of this chapter. I want to change the narrative on being a mom in academia and use the lens of motherhood to explore the transition from public school teaching to the higher education classroom. I want to share my story to help other women see that it can be a positive experience to attend graduate school while raising kids. The experience, I believe, has many strengths that can benefit people in the higher education classroom. People decide to return to graduate school with many identities that aren't often explored or celebrated. Others have done work to acknowledge, study, and center mothers in academia. Matias and Nishi (2017) as well as Spradley et al. (2020) have shared their experiences on what it is like to be a mother and a scholar. I want to contribute my narrative to this work by sharing my story to help normalize being a mom in academia and all that comes with it, especially the joy.

## **REFLECTION AND IDENTITY**

I sat in the parking lot and punched the word “Walgreens” into my phone’s Google maps app. My electric breast pump wasn’t working and I needed to figure out a solution before my next class. It was my first semester in my doctoral program and I was new to the city and wasn’t sure where to find a store to buy a manual breast pump. I started my program with a three-year-old and a three-month-old. I had always known I wanted to get my PhD and have kids. I wanted to complete my degree before my kids were old enough to be entirely involved in school and extracurriculars because I didn’t want to miss any of their school experiences. And, because I wanted to be a teacher educator, it was essential that I spend a few years in the public school classroom before starting my doctoral program. So, here I was. In my early 30’s with two kids and pursuing my dream. And planning my dream around breast pumping. I did find the Walgreens and made it back to campus in time for my class. But this harried afternoon perfectly portrays the crazy juggling yet incredibly gratifying experience of getting my PhD while being a mom.

The demands of motherhood are probably well known, but no matter how much you prepare, having children is the hardest, most exhausting, and best experience ever. Having two daughters, I wanted to be an example for them of what it looks like to be a woman who pursues her goals, who works, and can have a family. These identities make me happy and I want my daughters to be able to do whatever they want that makes them happy. My work in academia also makes me happy. I wanted to get my PhD so I could work in higher education and help prepare future teachers for their own public teaching classrooms. Specifically, I want to help future English language arts teachers teach literature in relevant ways that address social issues. To be a mother and a teacher educator is a very fulfilling and joyful combination. My experiences as my identities in both of these areas have emerged have helped ignite my passion even more. The hardships and challenges are well worth it because the rewards are great. I feel that my work in academia helps me to be a better mom and my work as a mom also benefits my work in academia. I have learned to be stronger, more flexible, and share my passion for education with others.

As I’ve continued through my PhD program, I’ve reflected on my experiences as a mom in academia. The transition from public school teaching to the higher education classroom is exciting, challenging, and insightful, but perhaps lacks thorough discussion and research. When undergraduate preservice teachers

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