


Article

Mature Working Student Parents Navigating Multiple Roles: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract: Managing multiple roles is considered a major challenge that mature working student parents face when they embrace the educational pursuit of enrolling in higher education. Limited research exists on mature working student parents that identify the strategies that concur for a successful journey through their educational paths. The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of mature working student parents balancing studies, work, and family. We conducted 11 semi-structured interviews with mature students enrolled in first- and second-cycle degrees in a higher education institution in Portugal. Thematic analysis was used, and findings demonstrated that working student parents develop diverse strategies to combine work, family, and studies and these strategies are shaped by the needs they have in each role and interconnect with the activation of social support. Recommendations for researchers and institutions to support the educational pursuits of mature working student parents to best suit their needs are discussed.

Keywords: mature students; working students; student parents; multiple role management



Citation: Andrade, C.; Fernandes, J.L.; Almeida, L.S. Mature Working Student Parents Navigating Multiple Roles: A Qualitative Analysis. *Educ. Sci.* **2024**, *14*, 786. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14070786>

Academic Editor: Xinqiao Liu

Received: 23 May 2024

Revised: 11 July 2024

Accepted: 14 July 2024

Published: 19 July 2024



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1. Introduction

The importance of lifelong learning and continuous training in the context of higher education was expressed in the Bologna declaration [1]. More recently, the UN's 2030 Agenda has made ensuring access to lifelong learning one of its goals (SDG4) and recognizes the role that higher education institutions can play in some of the targets of this goal [2]. In social and economic contexts of increasing uncertainty and organizational competitiveness, lifelong learning has been a key factor not only for the qualification of professionals, ensuring their adaptability to the demands of the job market, but also allowing these professionals to requalify and adjust to more flexible work contexts, demanding jobs or professional careers that require new skills. At same time, public policies for higher education in recent decades have placed emphasis on attracting mature students, for social justice (guaranteeing access for all) and for economic reasons (stimulating an economy based on knowledge) [3]. These changes allowed the expansion of higher education in many European countries targeting a more diverse population. This group includes students with work and family responsibilities but who are still being penalized by some invisibility [4]. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are particularly organized according to expectations and norms related to traditional students, which complicates the academic adaptation of mature students [5–8].

Mature students are one of the target groups of these educational policies, aiming to fulfil the goals of lifelong learning by continuing their studies or acquiring a new academic degree. Studies that focus on mature students, especially those that focus on working students who have parental responsibilities, are relatively scarce. This is a vast

group that includes various configurations, one of which is those who work and have family responsibilities. The latter share the cross-cutting problems of mature students, as Gregersen and Nielson describe it [6], to which others are added arising from the need to conciliate the three roles. Accordingly, higher education attracts students who must manage their professional and family life with enrolling in higher education training. Students who have children face barriers that hinder a full experience of studying in higher education [3]. Strategies to attract these students to higher education were implemented but without the necessary transformation of the training environment and the features offered [3,5], and a change in HEI's organizational culture is required [7].

Among this group, generically known as working students, it is relevant to introduce an additional layer of analysis, as proposed by Remenick and Bergman [9], distinguishing "students who work" from "employees who study" insofar as mature students, who develop a professional activity, have family responsibilities and study seems to fall, for the most part, in the second group. In this sense, studies that aim to deepen knowledge about different experiences in the context of higher education are fruitful. The management of these three life roles—being a student, a worker, and a mother or father—is often portrayed by the literature as problematic, leading to multiple role conflicts. However, despite this scenario, studies also found that role conciliation is possible and positive in many cases [10–12]. In fact, working student parents have active strategies and mechanisms through which these students can conciliate the demands of the three roles, often mitigating the role conflicts and creating role reciprocal gains. Nevertheless, there are several obstacles that could prevent working student parents from achieving their educational goals [13,14]. These students have a variety of needs that arise from juggling their professional, familiar, and school schedules and demands and the financial obligations of providing for a family while pursuing education and training. To our knowledge, working parents who are also students is a category of nontraditional students that has not received much scholarly attention.

This study was conducted to add to our understanding of the experiences of mature working student parents in navigating their three life roles, fostering support and promoting the academic achievement and permanence of these students in higher education. Understanding the articulation between the three roles involves analyzing the students' discourse on this experience of articulation, interpreting the strategies implemented by this group of students and the support they received for a successful conciliation. González-Monteaudo et al. [15] emphasize that higher education policies for nontraditional students can only be successful if they are based on their learning experience. This experience, for students who combine the three roles, goes beyond the exclusively academic dimension and encompasses the family and workspaces. Thus, studies aimed at deepening understanding of this group of students make it possible to identify strategies and support networks that sustain the student's journey.

Combining Multiple Roles: Student, Worker, and Parental Roles

Within the higher education community, mature working student parents remain an overlooked group when compared with research that focuses on the combination of work and study [16]. These students face further challenges to complete their studies, such as combining the demands between their school, family, and professional lives. Existing studies on mature students [6,17] provide valuable insights for an initial understanding of the difficulties encountered by the target subgroup of this study, to which parental responsibilities are added. In fact, the studies found that they often experience role strain because of the competing responsibilities associated with each role [16,18–21]. A study from Andrade and Matias [22] with mature female student mothers undertaking master's degrees found school-to-family and school-to-work conflicts as these female students tried to manage study alongside work and family demands, with inadequate workplace support. A more recent study from Andrade and Fernandes [23] that aimed to analyze the experiences of working student mother and strategies used to cope with the three roles as they navigated through the days of the shelter in place order during the COVID-19 pandemic found that

using daily negotiations and asking for help from partners, family, friends, and children were crucial to deal with the demands of each role. Even though this study reports on unique circumstances, it highlights, in line with other studies, the importance of self-efficacy and resource mobilization [8,11,16,24,25]. When examining the unique circumstances of working student parents, the literature on work–family relations has been employed as a conceptual framework that also applies to work–family–school role conciliation. Research of Nippert-Eng [26] revealed there are boundaries to life roles–constructs created at the person level that are frequently negotiated by the various actors, including family members, coworkers, supervisors, and others. Role boundary theory therefore postulates that, when people adopt many roles, they typically create boundaries based on the roles they imagine themselves playing to feel more accurately in control of each context [27,28]. According to Ashforth et al. [27], these role boundaries can be somewhat flexible or permeable, describing opposing extremes of a continuum with terms like segmentation and integration. Mature individuals with children face specific problems when they are also students, as this role often conflicts with that of a caregiver [29]. Moreau [30] shows that HEIs marginalize students that are parents, as their policies are made for “‘carefree’ students” (p. 908). However, role disputes can arise when people divide or combine roles. As stated by Kreiner et al. [28], individuals might face strains connected with the demands related with the different roles and, to adapt to those demands adequately, they could have to effectively set role boundary limits. Using the framework of role boundary theory, Lowe and Gayle [8] identified work–family–school role balance types with a sample of adult learners.

Four types of situations were identified, based on the permeability of the border between roles and the success in negotiating agreements that provide balance: (a) segmentation of the roles, (b) integration of the student role with the work–family roles through dialogs with key individuals and with secure solutions, (c) a more difficult integration of the student role with the work–family roles, risking spillover, using daily negotiations, and (d) demands from each role competing for time and energy generating conflicts with negative impacts in the student role. Contextual factors can also account for the role boundary management. The use of technologies into the domestic and academic contexts has blurred the boundaries between home/family and work and school, resulting in greater flexibility in the management of roles and the cost of greater permeability between them [31]. Technology can play a facilitating role, although it brings challenges in managing boundaries between life domains, especially for student mothers, as they have a greater number of tasks and responsibilities in caring for the home and children [4].

Social support that comes from family, peers/students, teachers/non-teaching staff, colleagues, and managers in a professional context has been identified by several studies as a crucial resource for the conciliation of multiple roles and responsibilities of working students. Ahn and Davis [32] analyzed the impact of sense of belonging in nontraditional students and strongly link it to retention in higher education. However, these forms of support can vary. Chaudhry et al. [33] distinguish between formal and informal support that students received from different sources, the first including the official responses given by higher education institutions services to support students and the internal team environment, where group relationships are found to carry out academic tasks, while the latter is based on the network of relationships with family and friends. All forms of support have impact, although differentiated, in psychological well-being of students. The quality of these relationships can be very important, but it does not invalidate the fact that the conciliation process may be accompanied by feelings of stress, frustration, exhaustion, and questioning about the correct performance of other roles in family and at work. Overall, an understanding of the journey of a working student parent in higher education is complex. A better understanding of their experiences and strategies used to accomplish can account not only for enhancing successful inclusion of this group but also supporting them to achieve their educational goals. Student experience is a multidimensional “lived” experience [34] and the perception of a student “as a whole person inclusive of her or his [other] roles” [8] (p. 234) is promising.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants for this study included working student parents enrolled in a public higher education institution in the center of Portugal. The legal framework for working students, the student worker status, provides for specific conditions both in the labor context, in terms of working hours and days off to prepare assessments, and in the academic context, namely access to a greater number of assessment periods. For students with family responsibilities, there is also the possibility of applying for student mother/father status, which guarantees the same benefits in an academic context and provides support measures, such as justifying absences to care for children. At a national level, almost 9% of all Portuguese higher education students enjoyed this status in 2022/23 [35]. It should be noted that not all working students apply for the status, so the real number of students could be higher. There are no national statistics on the number of students benefiting from the maternity/paternity support status.

The selection criteria required the participants to be working full-time while enrolled in the second year of an undergraduate or master's degree program and they had to be a mother/father. This study considers 11 participants, two male and nine female. The mean age was 46.2 ($SD = 6.60$) (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant characterization.

Interview #	Gender	Age	Degree	Number of People in the Household	Age of Children
#1	M	48	Undergraduate	3	17
#2 ¹	F	55	Master	4	26 and 20
#3	F	53	Undergraduate	4	23 and 18
#4	F	45	Master	4	15 and 10
#5	F	31	Undergraduate	4	11 and 6
#6	F	47	Master	4	16 and 13
#7	M	51	Undergraduate	3	15
#8 ²	F	47	Undergraduate	3	14 and 10
#9	F	48	Master	3	17
#10	F	43	Master	2	14
#11	F	40	Master	3	14

¹ The participant is responsible for two elderly parents. ² The participant is in distance learning mode.

2.2. Data Collection

Considering the goals of the study, a qualitative and exploratory methodology was used. The qualitative approach allows a deeper understanding of the experiences and feelings about the main topics that this research aims to target and, as such, a semi-structured interview was used for data collection. The sample was purposely recruited, and it was a convenience sample. Participants were recruited through invitations by the researchers after taking part in a survey for all working students of the aforementioned higher education institution. Being a parent was set up as a criterion to take part in the study. For those who agreed to take part in the interview, an explanation about the goals of the research project followed and free and informed consent to participate was given. There was no financial compensation for participating in this study. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, with consent for audio recording, and lasted, on average, 20/30 min. The interviewees were unknown to the interviewer, ensuring that there was no interference or bias in the conduct of the interview. A semi-structured interview script was used, with the following general themes/questions: (1) experiences and feeling of combining the student, worker, and parental roles; (2) individual strategies used to combine school-work-family; and (3) formal and informal social support received.

2.3. Data Analysis

This study was carried out as an exploratory, qualitative study to enhance knowledge of the perspectives of student parents considering the identified research gap. As a result, the interpretivist/social constructionist paradigm was used to conduct this research, acknowledging that individuals engage in an interactive, social process of meaning-making to make sense of their experiences [36]. This approach was considered appropriate for investigating how working student parents interpret their circumstances as needed for this purpose. The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis [37], which is a broadly used method for identifying patterns and themes within textual data. This methodology is particularly useful in cases where the research question is wide, and the goal is to identify and describe participants' experiences and feelings. Following Braun and Clarke [37] procedure, a code book was created, which involved early subtheme development in accordance with prior themes, after some data familiarization (reading and rereading data to become familiar with its contents). Braun and Clarke's [37] six-step process for performing thematic analysis was followed. During the first phase, authors became familiar with the data by analyzing the transcripts. In the second phase, codes were written and themes and subthemes were generated. Phase three required reviewing the initial subthemes. In phase four, both researchers checked whether the data bounded together meaningfully within each subtheme. In phase five, each subtheme was set as final and, in the sixth phase, a report was written based on excerpts from participants selected to illustrate each theme and subtheme. Further presentation and discussion of each theme and subtheme is presented in the following section.

3. Results and Discussion

This study's main goal was to gain better knowledge of how working student parents manage their many responsibilities, the strategies they develop, and the support they receive. Therefore, the results are divided into the three interrelated themes. In the following sections, an examination of the emergent subthemes related to the main themes is presented. From the thematic analysis of interview transcripts three main themes were identified and subthemes emerged from within participants' experiences: (a) school, work, and family roles integration; (b) individual strategies used to conciliate school, work, and family roles; and (c) social support received from school, work, and family contexts. The first theme answers the question: how do working students with family responsibilities describe the conciliation of the three roles and how they interact; the second theme seeks to list the strategies for a balanced management of the three roles that are put into practice by working students with family responsibilities and the third theme answers the question, what kind of support do students who work and have family responsibilities receive. The integration of student, worker, and parental roles is a dynamic process that requires ongoing adaptation. For those navigating these overlapping responsibilities, success lies in finding a delicate balance and continuous adjustment between academic pursuits and professional and family obligations. Amidst the pressure of academic deadlines, work pressures, and family responsibilities, it is crucial that working student parents develop strategies to accommodate demands associated with the three roles, as well as seeking support networks.

Theme 1. *School, work, and family roles integration.*

Most respondents (nine in eleven) describe the conciliation of the three roles as positive although demanding. Most of the participants reported an ability to integrate different roles, making it possible through the negotiations to accommodate the student role in the equation that balances family life and work. As one participant reports: "When I enter the classroom, everything else stays outside" (#5). However, this scenario is achieved with personal sacrifice, with impacts on physical and mental health, as expressed, e.g., in "I made a lot of effort to balance the three lives and I think I managed it successfully, at least in the first semester" (#12). It is exactly these implications that weigh most heavily on the

negative assessment of the three roles' conciliation, as is stated by two participants, which is illustrated by the following quotes from the interviews: "It is very difficult to balance things (. . .). I must play on three fronts, there is no way back to give" (#1); "Right now I think it's really difficult to conciliate the three roles" (#3). As mentioned by Lowe and Gayle [8], the attempts to integrate the three roles can be difficult, the result achieved is unstable, and with a high risk of breakdown. In this study, these participants highlighted the negative implications of this precarious balance, in terms of physical and mental health. In fact, as some participants point out, even when the three roles' conciliation is perceived as positive, it can be detrimental at the personal level, leading to high levels of fatigue, lack of free time, stress, and mental exhaustion. Some interviewees emphasized: "It's stressful. Being able to manage all these things . . ." (#7) and "Now one negative thing and something that I'm giving up is. . . Friday night is family time, Saturday too, I had to deprive myself of that, right?" (#9). Another participant notes that, in case of role conflict, the student role is the one that is let off: "I'm not able to dedicate myself 100% (. . .) because I have to prioritize" (#4). This can also have impacts on academic success, as can be read in this quote: "The main consequence for me is the exhaustion that I have, as a person. Last year, I found myself unable to finish the course, with four subjects, because I had a burnout" (#1). Another participant highlights the tensions associated with the potential interference of the studies with the professional activities that need to be accomplished to secure financial stability, as illustrated by "it's more in the sense of stress management, of wanting to do things, and also not wanting to leave anything behind. And (. . .) the sense of responsibility (. . .) at work, right? It's what pays for my studies (and other things)" (#7).

Theme 2. *Individual strategies.*

Individual strategies used by working student parents revolve around using time management and flexibility, active planning, and motivation, enabling them to thrive amidst the challenges of balancing studies, work, and parenthood.

(a) Time management and flexibility

The ability to manage time and respond flexibly to unforeseen events is vital for working student parents as they navigate the complex balance between academic activities, work, and parenting responsibilities. Juggling these roles' demands often requires adaptability to ever-changing schedules and unexpected demands. Thus, flexibility allows them to integrate study time, work obligations, and family commitments without sacrificing one for the other [8,16]. By being able to adjust their schedules, they can allocate time efficiently, ensuring that each role receives the attention it requires. Moreover, flexibility provides the freedom to handle unexpected situations, such as childcare emergencies or last-minute assignments, without compromising other responsibilities. The ability to organize time and the respective allocation of tasks/roles is common and valued in the participants' speeches. This positive attitude is expressed in the face of harsh conditions, as mentioned one participant: "It has to be done and that's why I have to come up with strategies" (#11). As another participant states: "I think that makes us grow, at least me. I feel like I must manage things differently. That ends up give me the ability to manage several things at the same time, with resilience" and "The SOS are here to test us and then we can rethink everything we have planned" (#1).

Most of the participants reported that the conciliation of the student role with the work–family roles must be managed on a daily basis. Participants mentioned several strategies used to conciliate schedules and mobility but also for sharing domestic and family responsibilities that involve managing family and work schedules. For example, the use of technologies in this management (shared calendars, cell phones, among others) appear as a good strategy. One participant described that, at the beginning of the year, "I copy the timetables (ours) and then I create a, let's say, consolidated timetable". (#3); another interviewee also subscribed to this practice: "I use Google calendar a lot to help me organize. Therefore, I consider myself a very methodical and organized person [. . .]. In other words, Google is my best friend: Google calendar and Google notes" (#4). Furthermore, the

importance of care and tasks related with care work are more frequently mentioned by female students that report that, when they ask other family members to complete these tasks, they are still in charge of co-ordinating them.

(b) Active planning

For working student parents, planning becomes an indispensable tool for balancing responsibilities [16], as it means the ability to deal with changing schedules and redefining priorities in live time. Efficient planning allows them to effectively juggle between academic pursuits, professional commitments, and family responsibilities, as mentioned by one participant: “I think the secret really lies in us planning and knowing what we are actually going to do” (#9). Active planning serves as a compass ensuring that neither their studies nor their family suffers and helps working student parents prioritize tasks, allocate time wisely, and set realistic goals. By having a clear roadmap, they can anticipate challenges and manage their resources more efficiently. Additionally, planning prompts discipline and cultivates good time management habits, which are crucial skills in both academic and professional realms. It also sets a positive example for their children, demonstrating the importance of organization and perseverance in achieving goals [16]. Ultimately, planning empowers working student parents to navigate the complexities of their roles, perceiving competence and success.

In what concerns the use of the legal mechanism that protects those who work full-time and study, of the eleven participants, only one did use the “worker-student status”, which accounts for the importance of having the professional activities organized to secure the time to be used for school activities. In Portugal, “worker-student status” translates into a flexibility or reduction in working of two or three hours, mostly used on evenings or exam days and often discounted in holidays.

On the family sphere, participants highlighted the importance of active planning but also of sharing this planning as a family. One participant said, “I have a written a list of the tasks I have to carry out for the next day. [...] what I restrict is 10 tasks per day. Of the 10 tasks, at least 3 are priority” (#1); with the same concern, another participant mentioned, “I try as much as possible to be organized in everything: in the things I have to do at college, in the things I have to do for work, and in the things I have to manage at home” (#11). Active planning is a competence prioritized by this group of students, as the participants conclude: “I think the secret really lies in us planning and knowing what we are actually going to do” (#9) and “We try to organize ourselves in order to conciliate the various activities of the various family members, without neglecting my participation in classes” (#3). Allocating domestic tasks to other family members, being able to disconnect (from any concerns that may pass from one area to another, etc.), as well as having a positive attitude (towards life and its challenges) are key factors to enhance active planning.

(c) Motivation for studying

Working student parents are driven by a unique blend of motivations that drive them forward despite the challenges they face [16] and is a fundamental ingredient in the day-to-day equation for managing the three roles. A recent study has confirmed that higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning are observed in mature students [38]. Foremost among these motivations is the desire to create a better future for themselves and their families. They understand that education is a powerful tool for upward mobility and they are willing to put in the extra effort to secure brighter prospects, as mentioned by one participant: “everything enriched my career and, subsequently, in terms of my career, also the conditions [financial; logistical] that I can currently have, in terms of family” (#1). Also, studying at a mature stage of life is often associated with personal development, not only as a professional but in terms of cognitive and experiential gains for the individual. Obtaining new skills to better perform personal challenges (e.g., caring for a dependent parent) or cultivating oneself, improving self-esteem, and dedicating oneself to a task of personal development are witnessed by those who study “out of time”. For example, one participant recognizes that “When I enter [at HEI], I wear the student ‘uniform’, because I like it, and I think it

makes me feel good" (#11). Whether it is pursuing a passion, advancing in their career, or achieving a long-held dream, they are motivated by a desire to fulfil their potential and pursue their ambitions [16,39], as expressed by this participant: "And I was systematically thinking about how I took that to the practical component in my [professional] day-to-day life. I was always struggling. . ." (#4). In line with Carney-Crompton and Tan [40], among nontraditional students such as student parents, intrinsic motivation to learn is associated with fostering a positive attitude toward the academic experience. This pleasant emotional state can improve their general quality of life, reduce burnout, and increase their capacity to properly balance work, family, and study commitments [40].

Moreover, working student parents are often fueled by a deep sense of responsibility [16,41]. They recognize the importance of setting a positive example for their children, as this quote shows: "if mom is studying, I have to study too" (#4), demonstrating the value of hard work, perseverance, and lifelong learning. By pursuing their education while juggling work and family commitments, they show their children the importance of resilience and determination in overcoming obstacles. Also, it brings new dynamics around mutual help in studying between family members, as mentioned by one participant: "We sometimes end up studying both [mother and daughter], she studies to one side, and I study to each other. And we also try to motivate each other in this way" (#10).

Student parents' sense of accomplishment validates their efforts and strengthens their dedication to studying [16]. It motivates them to set higher goals, strive for greatness, and have a positive outlook on their educational journey [39]. Moreover, many working student parents are driven by personal goals and aspirations, like personal growth, getting out of the routine, and searching for happiness, while remaining cognitively active and bringing new technical skills, particularly problem-solving and relational skills, as observed in "It helps me to be more organized and my ideas are clearer. [. . .]. So, yes, this training is clearly an added value" (#4).

Furthermore, working student parents may also be inspired by the support of their families and partners [16]. Knowing that they have a network of encouragement behind them can fuel their determination to succeed despite the odds. In essence, the motivation of working student parents is multifaceted, drawing strength from their aspirations, responsibilities, and support systems as they strive to create a brighter future for themselves and their families.

Throughout the analysis process, it became clear that juggling the responsibilities of a being a student, worker, and a father/mother was not a solitary endeavor and that the borders of each life domain were permeable and depended on the experiences of support received in each of these three domains.

Theme 3. Social support.

Social support plays a vital role in the lives of working student parents, offering a crucial lifeline amidst the myriad challenges they face. Chaudhry et al. [33] distinguish between formal and informal support that students received from different sources, the first including the one given by HEI services and the informal one is based on the network of relationships with family and friends. Whether it comes from family, friends, colleagues, or community networks, social support tends to include emotional encouragement, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging that is essential for navigating the complexities of balancing work, education, and family responsibilities.

(a) Formal support

Formal support occurs at college, in the relation of teacher–student mainly and between peers, in the classroom. Research has shown that social support at college improves academic performance and overall academic happiness, particularly for student mothers [42,43].

The narrative regarding the teacher–student relationship is divided between understanding and adapting the conditions to participate in teaching activities (e.g., teaching methodologies that prioritize work in the classroom and not outside of school hours) and

inflexibility in this adaptation. One participant recognized that “I don’t want to take advantage of being a mother and having student-worker status, but I think they should pay extra attention to our cases. [. . .] And there are people who end up giving up—it’s a dream, but they even end up giving up” (#5). However, it is on peer support that students rely most, although it is important to highlight that this support is greater whenever the student has peers who live the same higher education experience, with a shared experience of conciliation, as mentioned by one participant: “We try not to get together at the Sunday, because it’s the only day we have completely as a family” (#9). School peers who are also working students, or working student parents, understand the difficulties and stress that come with juggling work, family, and studies. They are aware of the specific needs and time limits, making them great sources of empathy and understanding [44]. Moreover, in what concerns academic tasks, working student parents can divide tasks, share knowledge, and learn from one another when they collaborate with their classmates. Study groups can assist members in offering their skills and helping each other understand complex concepts or assignments, facilitating a communal learning experience [44,45].

Furthermore, social support fosters a sense of community and belonging, reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness that can arise from the demands of juggling multiple roles and, namely by connecting with others who share similar experiences, working student parents can find solidarity that increases resilience and enriches their academic lives. Ahn and Davis [32] contradict the idea that maturity could be an obstacle to attending higher education, as mature students are usually more apt to deal with pressure since they deal daily with the “puzzle” of balancing roles and reported higher resilience [46]. Other expectations regarding studies (from traditional students), not sharing with other students a personal situation of balancing more than one role, can generate fear of not being able or not having the specific skills to achieve [3] and can be an obstacle to academic success. A significant part of the feeling of well-being arises from social interactions in an academic context, which justifies the search for peers with similar experiences. Also, the relationship with teachers is fundamental for enabling belonging and to anchor academic success. Lastly, in any case, with this specific group of mature nontraditional students, the equation must include nuclear family in a very strong way.

(b) Informal support

Notwithstanding the significance of formal support, it is the informal support mechanisms that these students rely on most. A study by Webber and Dismore [47] with female PhD students and a study by Andrade and Matias [22] with female master’s students highlights the importance of developing strategies within the family (e.g., negotiating time or space to study) to deal with daily challenges and underlines communication within family as a key factor for a good role balance. The family is the base support for the option to study and this option is lived by the family. Family support can act as a safety net and a foundation of support for working student parents. While balancing work and study can be difficult and time-consuming, family support can offer emotional support, empathy, and a sense of belonging, which can help to relieve stress and keep working student parents motivated [48]. The testimonies collected show decisive support, from encouragement and pride in the act of studying to the availability to adapt daily dynamics to the student’s schedule. This support is evaluated as very positive and has implications for family equity, although accompanied by a feeling of guilt on the part of those who study. Moreover, juggling work, studies, and family requires good time management. Thus, understanding of educational commitments and aid with household duties or responsibilities are examples of family support. This assistance can help working student parents plan their time more effectively and establish a good work–study–life balance [22,48]. Excerpts from the interviews illustrate this description: “my husband ended up replacing me in tasks that were normally mine” (#6) and “They realize that I need to study and, therefore, that time is mine and they have to do it and realize that it is a phase” (#7). Family support is fundamental, as one participant said, “the family also has a role in which everyone helps, so that we, as student workers, can achieve success. It is not just our task, that of the student worker, but

it is a task for the entire family" (#9). This belief is reinforced, as mentioned in this quote: "I know that, since I started studying, I can't dedicate myself 100% to my children" (#5) and in this one: "Just because of the issue of time, in the sense that we are not so present in certain situations" (#7). Research by Carreira and Lopes [49] shows that married or partnered students have a greater chance of completing their studies, which is in line with the importance of family support in combining different roles. It is likely that having family members and significant others (e.g., partners and spouses) available for both emotional and instrumental assistance (e.g., helping with domestic chores, taking over childcare or other household commitments, etc.).

Social support offers working student parents a source of encouragement and additional motivation. Knowing that they have a network of people who believe in them and their ability to succeed can reinforce their confidence and resilience, especially during times of doubt or difficulty. Moreover, social support provides practical assistance in the form of childcare, transportation, or help with household tasks. By sharing the load with others, working student parents can alleviate some of the logistical burdens they face, allowing them to focus more fully on their academic and professional pursuits.

Finally, work support is on the borderline between formal and informal support. The legal framework provided by the worker–student status is an important resource to ensure flexibility in working hours and time for studying (mainly during assessment periods). Work support is critical for working student parents. Managing work, family, and school responsibilities can be eased if work support is available, such as flexible work schedules or accommodations to meet the demands of family and school duties [50]. When work support is available, working student parents can adjust their work hours or responsibilities to fit their class schedules, exams, or other academic requirements [50]. This assistance helps to avoid conflicts between work and studies and promotes a better work–family–school balance.

Just like the support received at the educational institution, narratives are also shared in the work context, whether regarding support from managers, indifference, or encouragement. This is mentioned by one participant: "On the part of managers, at least the direct managers, always encouraged me to advance, yes" (#6), and from colleagues, from misunderstanding to facilitators of a more peaceful conciliation, as one participant states: "On the part of colleagues, I also usually let things be guided or, if there is an urgent situation, they also safeguard" (#3). In essence, social support is a cornerstone of resilience for working student parents, providing a vital network of encouragement, assistance, and belonging that empowers them to thrive amidst the complexities of managing the three roles.

4. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

Results show that successfully conciliating the three roles is demanding, with impacts on physical health and psychological well-being. The balance achieved is the result of a negotiation, which is rebuilt and re-established in response to the demands of everyday life and may require different temporary prioritization between the three roles.

The strategies developed by these students for balancing the three roles involve flexibility, the ability to reorganize on a daily basis, and depend to a large extent on the support and back-up network at work and, above all, in the family, with the redistribution of household tasks and the involvement of all the student's family members. Although the ability to respond to the unexpected is seen as fundamental, it cannot be dissociated from the ability to plan. The activity of planning the day, the week, or the semester, involving the family and sometimes work colleagues, acts as an anchor for the well-being of the student who works and has family responsibilities. Motivation to study also acts as a facilitator for a successful work–life balance, both through opportunities for professional and intellectual development and as a stimulus and example for younger generations.

These results emphasize that the process of studying in these circumstances is a personal project whose success relies on formal and informal support networks. While the formal responses provided by HEIs in terms of teaching and learning appear to be

structural, the relationship between peers fosters a sense of belonging and a community that shares similar daily challenges. But it is at the level of informal support, especially within the family, that the greatest encouragement to study is concentrated, providing a solid basis for commitment to studies.

This study contributes to a broader understanding of the academic experience and the conciliation of roles for a group of students with unique characteristics, which have been widely highlighted. It brings insights that should be considered by higher education institutions, which welcome diverse populations and, consequently, specific needs and challenges, helping to guarantee access to inclusive, quality, and equitable education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG 4).

The results from the study need to be considered in the light of some limitations. The first limitation of this study concerns its cross-sectional nature, using a convenience sample of a single higher education institution. The generalization of the results is thereby limited. Hence, we encourage further developing this study with larger populations from diverse higher institutions. In this case, also some information can be collected by questionnaire.

Future research should also explore deeper institutional related dimensions that can act as barriers to study and work–family relations. It would also be interesting to conduct a similar study with working student parents that have different work (e.g., work full-time or work part-time), familial (e.g., partnered and non-partnered, with young children or adolescents/young adults, or with elderly care obligations), and study (e.g., enroll in full-time and part-time studies, in first-, second-, and third-cycle degrees, or attend daytime or evening/weekend programs) constellations in order to have a more complete picture of the diversity of the demands this group faces.

Finally, using a longitudinal design can also provide a deeper insight about the individual strategies and their effects during the study program and during specific periods (e.g., during exams). Although working student parents face challenges in terms of combining study with work and family obligations, they themselves need to be aware of these possible negative but also the positive effects and benefits of this role conciliation. So, the findings of this study highlight the importance of creating environments that support working student parents in reducing inter-role conflict and help working student parents to maintain positive involvement with their studies, enhancing their work and career prospects and personal development. Higher education institutions can support those academic experiences providing psychoeducational and mental health services in campus.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.A. and J.L.F.; methodology, C.A. and J.L.F.; formal analysis, C.A., J.L.F. and L.S.A.; writing—original draft preparation, C.A. and J.L.F.; writing—review and editing, C.A., J.L.F. and L.S.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethical Committee of the Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra (protocol code 12_CEIPC/2021, 4 January 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data will be available upon request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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