

Article

School-Family and Family-School Enrichment: A Study with Portuguese Working Student Parents

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Abstract: In recent years, higher education institutions have progressively undertaken efforts to attract more diversified populations to their programs, both in the first and second cycles. These new groups include students who work professionally and who are parents. The literature that aims to address the management of multiple roles of higher education students has mainly devoted its attention to the potential conflict of roles, with a scarcity of studies focused on the positive aspects that may result from this articulation. The present study aims to analyze the relationships between satisfaction with social support (in the academic/school, work, and family domain), satisfaction with role management and academic performance and school-family and family-school enrichment experiences. The study was carried out using a questionnaire, with 155 students working fathers/mothers allowed to identify predictors of school-family and family-school enrichment. The results provide a better understanding of the factors that contribute to a student role having a positive impact on other life roles, namely the professional role and the role of father/mother.

Keywords: working student parents; higher education; school-family enrichment; family-school enrichment



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1. Introduction

Post-secondary education is an increasingly essential factor for the development of societies; it will become even more important in times of economic competitiveness and uncertainty as higher education has the potential to economically develop the country and improve the quality of life [1], actively fostering social mobility and equal opportunities [2]. Moreover, Portugal faces population ageing and labor force decline has led to an increased demand to have further educational credentials to face the demands of the labor market. Additionally, the ageing of the labor force also raises the issue of retaining talent and the importance of promoting employee training to ensure that retention [3]. Since education is a key element in this process, higher education has made significant efforts to attract more diverse populations over the last decade. In 2019/20, 16.4% of new Portuguese higher education students are aged 23 or over, and there has been an increase since 2016 [4]. However, the participation rate of adults in training in higher education, although close to the European average, remains below the established reference value (15%), standing in Portugal at 10.3% [5]. However, one out of four students who enroll in higher education, aged 23 or over, leave their studies during the first year and the rate of completion of the program is less than 25% [4].

Working parents are one non-traditional population that could profit from the changes in higher education aimed at attracting more diverse groups [6]. For example, some higher education institutions in Portugal offer flexible study options, such as evening classes or distance learning programs, which can be beneficial for working students [7]. These options allow students to tailor their schedules to accommodate their work commitments. In addition to administrative measures, such as flexible hours and student statutes, technical

measures for distance learning are listed. In addition, a selection of candidates who already have a professional profile guarantees a more successful path [7]. It should be noted that the existence of these measures is increasingly pointed out as a requirement for socially responsible action by Portuguese HEIs [8].

While there is a growing body of research within the country that focuses on how the structures of higher education promote or hinder non-traditional students' academic aspirations, scholars have advocated in favor of additional research on non-traditional students' experiences in higher education [9,10]. This can be particularly important if we consider that, in line with previous research, non-traditional students in higher education are a very diverse group of students [11]. Working student parents are, to our knowledge, a subgroup of non-traditional students that have received little attention from research. Moreover, research about this group often focuses only on female students and on the conflicting aspects of combining the educational paths in higher education with other roles, such as being a parent and a worker [12,13]. As is stated by Adams et al. [14], although working student parents' chances of long-term self-sufficiency and upward mobility would undoubtedly be improved by additional education or training, a number of barriers might hinder them from completing their educational objectives. Such students have diverse needs that result from managing their complex schedules, in addition to the finances needed to support a family while seeking school and training [14,15]. Despite this, many working student parents persist and complete their chosen programs. In addition to the desire for career advancement, non-traditional students see returning to their studies as an opportunity for personal satisfaction, to expand their network of contacts, and to value themselves as a person [16]. One of the reasons pointed out by the literature that is associated with this persistence is anchored in the desire to give better opportunities to their families. Mature students are often the first generation of the family to access higher education and an inspiration for generations to come [6]. Thus, families play a crucial role as a source of support for working student parents and are potential beneficiaries of the school enrollment. Research about the interaction between the student and family role in samples of working student parents enrolled in higher education is limited and often focus on the negative aspects that are associated with conflicts and pressures that these students face to combine their roles. Since pursuing post-secondary education can be seen as a family project for working student parents, both roles—the student and family role—can benefit, resulting in an inter-role enriching process. Adapting the definition of work-family enrichment, van Rhijn and Lero [17] stated that school-family enrichment is defined as the extent to which experiences in the school role enhance the quality of life in the other role, namely the family role. In their study, the authors showed that being able to balance family and school roles accounts for a perception of family to school enrichment [17]. Within the Portuguese context, Andrade, van Rhijn and Coimbra [18] also identified the presence of school-family enrichment in a sample of working student parents enrolled in higher education.

This study aims to contribute to the literature that focuses on the positive aspects of being a worker, a student, and a parent, by analyzing the concepts of school-family and family-school enrichment and the potential predictors, in line with van Rhijn and Lero's [17] school-family interaction model, using a sample of Portuguese working student parents.

1.1. School-Family and Family-School Enrichment

School-family enrichment emphasizes assets or resources in one domain (i.e., school or family) that can be used to perform the role in another domain more effectively [17]. According to van Rhijn and Lero [17], school-family enrichment is defined as the extent to which experiences in the school role improve the quality of life in the other role, namely the family role. Research using samples of student parents in Portugal that focus on this positive concept found the presence of family-school and school-family enrichment [18,19].

1.2. Antecedents of School-Family and Family-School Enrichment

1.2.1. School/Academic Support

Several studies have found that non-traditional students participate in college activities less frequently than traditional students, which may affect their ability to socialize and receive support from other students [20,21]. Despite this, studies have shown that social support at school improves academic performance and overall academic happiness, particularly for student mothers [20,21]. 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 [22]. Moreover, in regards to 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 [22,23]. Collaboration like this not only improves academic performance but also promotes a sense of community [22,23].

1.2.2. Satisfaction with Academic Performance

Working student parents are more likely to be motivated and interested in their studies if they are satisfied with their academic results [24]. A sense of accomplishment validates their efforts and strengthens their dedication to studying. It motivates them to set higher goals, strive for greatness, and have a positive outlook on their educational journey [25]. In fact, according to Carney-Crompton and Tan [26], among non-traditional students such as student parents, intrinsic motivation to learn is associated with reported satisfaction with the school role. By fostering a positive attitude toward the student experience and being satisfied with academic performance, student parents' adjustment to their school and family and work roles can be supported. Satisfaction with academic performance can help with overall well-being and stress reduction [24]. Working student parents experience less anxiety and stress when they are satisfied with their academic success [24]. 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 [26].

1.2.3. Family Support

Family support can act as a safety net and a foundation of support for working student parents. While balancing employment and study can be difficult and time-consuming, family support can offer emotional support, empathy, and a sense of belonging, which can help relieve stress and keep working student parents motivated [27]. Moreover, juggling work, school, 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 [15,27]. Research by Carreira and Lopes [28] 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, spouses) available for both emotional and instrumental assistance (e.g., helping with domestic chores, taking over childcare or other household commitments, etc.) will influence levels of family-to-school enrichment.

1.2.4. Satisfaction with Role Management

It is acknowledged that juggling family and work responsibilities is difficult. A similar approach can be taken to school, family, and work role balance. According to Grzywacz and Carlson's [29] definition, work-family balance is the "accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his/her role related partners in the work and family domains" [29] (p. 458). The ability to be a good parent to their child was essential to student parents who described success in balancing as being

tied to both their student and parenting duties, according to several studies [30,31]. When assessing how non-traditional students who are parents manage their many role duties, the perspective of school, family, and work role management is beneficial and can be related to a good experience that supports school-to-family and family-to-school enrichment.

1.2.5. Work Support

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 [32]. When work support is available working student parents can adjust their employment hours or responsibilities to fit their class schedules, exams, or other academic requirements [32]. This assistance helps to avoid conflicts between work and studies and promotes a better work-family-school balance.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised 155 working student parents enrolled in the second semester of a first or second cycle program (i.e., undergraduate, or master program) in higher education institutions in Portugal. Most of the students (76%) were enrolled in an evening/weekend program and 14% in a daytime program. The sample comprised 88 women and 67 men and 98% reported being enrolled in the program as a full-time student. The participants' ages ranged from 27 to 58 years old ($M = 36.6$; $SD = 2.35$). Number of dependent children ranged from one to three and their ages ranged from 1 month to 25 years old. Most of the participants were either married or in a common-law relationship (81%) and 70% reported working in a full-time job for a significant number of hours alongside their academic studies ($M = 32.31$; $SD = 4.36$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. School-Family Enrichment

A Portuguese adapted version by Andrade, van Rhijn, and Matias [19] of the School-Family Enrichment Scale, adapted by van Rhijn and Lero [17], was used. The scale consists of six subscales, but only three were used for this study: school-to-family development, school-to-family affect, and school-to-family capital (the family-to-school subscales were not used). It is an 18-item self-report scale using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The Cronbach alpha for the scale was 0.81. A sample item is "School helps me to understand different viewpoints, and this helps me be a better family member".

2.2.2. School/Academic Support

A Portuguese adapted version by Andrade, van Rhijn, and Matias [19] of van Rhijn and Lero's [17] adapted version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was used to assess perceptions of the adequacy of social support from friends at school. It is a 3-item self-report scale rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very strongly disagree (1) to very strongly agree (5). For the purposes of this study, participants answered the items of the Friends subscale referring to friends and peers available at school. The Cronbach alpha for this subscale was 0.87. A sample item is "I have students available whom I can depend on when I have a problem".

2.2.3. Family Support

A Portuguese adapted version by Andrade, van Rhijn, and Matias [19] of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) adapted version by van Rhijn and Lero [17] was used to assess perceptions of the adequacy of social support from family members. It is a 3-item self-report scale rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very strongly disagree (1) to very strongly agree (5). For the purposes of this study, participants

answered the items of the Friends subscale referring to friends and peers available at school. The Cronbach alpha for this subscale was 0.91. A sample item is “I have family members available whom I can depend on when I have a problem”.

2.2.4. Work Support

A Portuguese adapted version by Andrade, van Rhijn, and Matias [19] of van Rhijn and Lero’s [17] adapted version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) by was used to assess perceptions of the adequacy of social support from work. It is a 3-item self-report scale rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very strongly disagree (1) to very strongly agree (5). For the purposes of this study, participants answered the items of the Friends subscale referring to friends and peers available at school. The Cronbach alpha for this subscale was 0.91. A sample item is “I have work colleagues available whom I can depend on when I have a problem”.

2.2.5. Satisfaction with Academic Performance

Satisfaction with academic performance was measured using an item “How satisfied are you with your academic performance”, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

2.2.6. Satisfaction with Role Management

Satisfaction with role management was measured using an item “How satisfied are you with the way you combine your life roles”, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

2.3. Procedure and Data Analysis

This study is part of an ongoing research project approved by the Ethical Committee of the Polytechnic of Coimbra (Reference: 12_CEIPC/2021). Participants were contacted through emails and social media that included a link to access the questionnaire. Goals of the research project and the anonymous nature of responses and confidentiality were clearly indicated. Participants completed a questionnaire that included various measures and scales via the Google forms platform. For the present research we shall analyze the measures that are referred to in the above section.

The statistics software SPSS 25 was used to perform descriptive data analysis, Pearson correlations were tested to detect relationships between the variables, and Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was calculated to verify the scales’ reliability in the whole sample. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine linear association between study variables. As a second step, correlations between predictor variables and the outcome variables were calculated.

3. Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables were calculated. Then, correlations between predictor variables and the outcome variables, school-family enrichment and family-school enrichment were calculated (Table 1).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations and intercorrelations.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. School/academic support	3.43	1.45	-					
2. Family support	3.40	1.25	0.36 **	-				
3. Satisfaction with academic performance	3.23	1.66	0.48 **	0.31 *	-			
4. Satisfaction with role management	3.35	0.86	0.36 **	0.49 **	0.23	-		
5. Work support	3.11	0.74	0.21	0.27	0.24	0.17	-	

* $p < 0.05$ and ** $p < 0.01$.

In the regression model, all variables were regressed onto school-family enrichment controlling for age and having children, which were the variables considered that accounted

for significant variance in school-family enrichment ($\Delta R^2 = 0.29$, $F_{6,37} = 7.32$, $p < 0.001$; Table 2). Specifically, school/academic support ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$), family support ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$), satisfaction with academic performance ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$), and satisfaction with role management ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$) were significantly associated with school-family enrichment. No other variables were significantly related to school-family enrichment.

Table 2. Predictors of School-Family Enrichment.

Predictors	R ²	B	SE	t	P
Step 1	0.07				
Age		−0.18	0.14	−1.45	0.23
Having children under 18		0.31	0.11	−1.12	0.17
Step 2	0.39				
School/academic support		0.45	0.23	0.24	<0.001
Family support		0.47	1.21	−0.27	<0.001
Satisfaction with academic performance		0.46	1.33	1.34	<0.001
Satisfaction with role management		0.33	0.35	0.73	<0.001
Work support		0.24	0.26	0.48	0.21

In the regression model for family-school enrichment, all variables were regressed onto family-school enrichment controlling for age and having children. The variables accounted for significant variance in family-school enrichment ($\Delta R^2 = 0.39$, $F_{6,37} = 9.56$, $p < 0.001$; Table 3). In particular, family support ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$) and satisfaction with role management ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$) were significantly associated with family-school enrichment. No other variables were significantly related to school-family enrichment.

Table 3. Predictors of Family-School Enrichment.

Predictors	R ²	B	SE	t	P
Step 1	0.07				
Age		−0.18	0.14	−1.45	0.23
Having children under 18		0.31	0.11	−1.12	0.17
Step 2	0.29				
School/academic support		0.33	0.35	0.75	0.34
Family support		0.45	0.23	0.24	<0.001
Satisfaction with academic performance		0.46	1.33	1.34	0.43
Satisfaction with role management		0.47	1.21	−0.27	<0.001
Work support		0.22	0.28	0.47	0.22

4. Discussion

Based on research about multiple role management in working student parents, the present study aimed to expand our knowledge about the positive implications of combining the student and parental roles. Our findings indicate that, in line with previous research, positive experiences in school can increase the perception of school-family enrichment [18,19]. The present study also aimed to gain an understanding of some variables that account for the presence of school-family and family-school enrichment in a sample of Portuguese working student parents. The regression model for school-family enrichment allowed us to identify that school/academic support, family support, satisfaction with academic performance, and satisfaction with role management acted as significant predictors of school-family enrichment. Our findings, in line with previous research, suggest that, for working student parents, school/academic support can create a sense of community that understands their unique challenges, offers motivation, promotes collaboration, and contributes to their emotional well-being [20–22]. In addition, Andrade and Fernandes [33] observed that peer and institutional support were identified as coping strategies during the pandemic, for student mothers. This is a valuable resource that enhances the sense that their academic life can have a positive impact on their families. Another important predictor

was family support, meaning that more family support can positively impact school-family enrichment. In fact, many studies proved that family support can improve working student parents' outcomes, including academic achievement, well-being, and the interplay between family responsibilities and work demands [15]. Married students, or those with a partner, have a greater chance of completing their studies, which is in line with the importance of family support in combining different roles [28]. In our study, this kind of support is also linked with school-family enrichment, suggesting that having support from family can also positively impact the positive influence of school on family life. Our study also confirmed that being satisfied with academic performance influences the school-family enrichment. In fact, previous studies showed that satisfaction with academic performance is crucial for working student parents as it enhances motivation, self-efficacy, academic progress, goal attainment, well-being, and future opportunities [24,25]. It serves as a driving force for continued success in both their educational and personal endeavors. Moreover, being satisfied with role management also accounts for school-family enrichment. This result is in line with previous studies that called attention to the fact that working student parents have multiple roles and responsibilities, including their studies, employment, and parenting duties [30,31]. Effective role management helps them navigate and balance these various roles, ensuring that they can fulfill their obligations without compromising their well-being or the well-being of their children. The results of our study also suggest that this perception can also impact positively their school-family enrichment. It is important to note that, in our model, work support did not predict school-family enrichment. One possible explanation for this result can be linked to the fact that work support often enables working student parents to effectively manage their work and study commitments. This support can help to prevent conflicts between work and studies and probably has more impact on the good balance of work and study. In what concerns the predictors of family-school enrichment, the model showed that only family support and satisfaction with role management were significant predictors. These results can be framed by the fact that these are variables that are dependent of family dynamics, meaning that when these working student parents feel supported by their families and are satisfied with the management of their different roles, they are more prone to have family-school enrichment. These results are in line with studies that showed that the family dynamic and support is not only important for the success of the academic journey of these students but can also trigger family-school enrichment [24,34].

5. Conclusions and Limitations

The present study contributes to furthering the understanding of the positive experiences of working student parents when combining school and family roles, including the importance of school-related and family-related antecedents of school-family enrichment and family enrichment. The study highlighted, as expected, the importance of social support (from family and school academic support) as an important net that sustained some of the enrichment of roles between school and family. Other dimensions that were identified included the perception that these students have that they are able to successfully combine roles and are satisfied with their academic performance. These positive experiences seem to trigger the transference of positive mood, knowledge, and learning outcomes between the familial and student roles. However, it should be noted that these results come from a sample of working student parents who were able to successfully enroll and persist in their academic paths. Thus, despite the importance of the results of the present study, implications should be taken with caution due to some theoretical and methodological limitations. The nature of this study is exploratory. Future work evaluating the proposed model should also include work-related predictors and extend to the concept of enrichment to the combination of work and study roles. Moreover, since researchers advocate that the student parent population is very diverse [35], future research should include additional variables, for example, gender, social support from partners, number of children, study and professional status (part-time versus full-time study), enrollment in a first cycle or

second cycle program, and daytime or evening/weekend classes, to name some. Such inclusions may contribute to building a more comprehensive model that may guide intervention programs aimed at enhancing the positive experiences of working students during their paths in higher education. According to van Rhijn and colleagues [35], higher education institutions can help to create formal and informal peer support networks to encourage non-traditional students to connect with one another by utilizing resources such as mature student networks or internet portals. Higher education institutions and counseling centers should develop more inclusive practices, recognizing the diversity of students, deepening our knowledge of current and future post-secondary populations, and moving beyond the normative construction that students that are engaged in multiple roles, such as being a parent, worker, and student will necessarily lead to role conflicts and negative consequences.

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