

Theirs, Mine, and Ours: On Being a Doctoral Student and a Mother

Catherine DiFelice Box

Teachers College, Columbia University

This is a perfect moment to reflect on my life as a doctoral student and a mother, for never have these two roles dominated the many others I assume as they do now. In the two weeks since I was approached about writing on my experience as a parent and student, I have accomplished many tasks, for lack of a better term: laid out my plan for future doctoral classes and research, finished a book review, began the daunting search for kindergarten programs for my 4-year-old daughter, Océane, and gave birth to my second child, Samuel. At first glance, it seems that one could demarcate my professional work from my personal life—doctoral coursework, professors, research papers, and exams on one side, husband, children and preschool conferences on the other. If that were true, it would have been impossible for me to have survived the past two weeks. Instead, my doctoral work and my personal life intertwine so closely that one informs the other; indeed, one inspires the other. Balancing the two roles, in fact, makes me a better student and mother.

I did not always view student life and motherhood as existing symbiotically. While I have always loved to study, I did not always want to become a mother. As a Master's student in English Literature more than ten years ago, I was completely devoted to my work. I pitied the women who had to go home to families. How, I wondered, could they digest the readings when they were saddled with helping children complete homework and doing the laundry? Unlike these women, I could read and write for hours uninterrupted. I surrounded myself with fellow graduate students who shared the same interests and point of view. We often discussed our aversion to being “weighted down” with families.

More than a decade later, I am that woman I once pitied. I do not know when or how my attitude changed, though I suspect that falling in love had something to do with it. When my daughter was a year old, my husband and I decided that I should pursue my dream of returning to school for a doctorate, though by then my interests had changed from studying English Literature to working with the English language. I was confident that becoming a student would make me a better mother. I intended to convey to Océane that a hard-working woman could achieve great things. I planned to express to her the importance of education, and the delight inherent in reaching a lofty goal. I dreamt of one day accepting my diploma, my family beaming.

I still have these intentions, plans, and dreams. I realize now, however, that my vision was one-sided. I had given my passion for learning all the credit. In fact, and to my great surprise, being a mother has made me a better student. Of course, there are the academic benefits for a student of language having the opportunity to directly observe children acquiring language in real time. Almost daily I am able to tie theory to life experience in meaningful ways. But there are other, less direct benefits. For instance, at times, no matter how much work looms before me, the most important task of the morning is to locate Océane's missing sparkly pink hair accessory. And just last night, apparently unaware of my need to rest before finals week, Samuel woke up at 3 a.m., alert and ready to greet the world. These moments remind me that no matter how ensconced I may become in my work, there is a world surrounding academia that must receive my attention. Rather than closing myself off to the world outside of campus, then, I am wide open to it. Thanks

to my children, I have learned to search, watch, and listen for learning opportunities no matter where I am or what I am doing.

Most importantly, I have discovered I must relish the here and now. So much of pursuing a doctoral degree focuses on that moment when the degree is rendered, just as so much of motherhood involves planning the children's future. Nevertheless, it is those moments in class when I fall upon a great idea, or those occasions when my children accomplish something I thought impossible, that make this journey worthwhile. It is then that I am so proud of the roles I have chosen to assume, and I could not imagine my life any other way.

Catherine Box is a doctoral student in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her interests include conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, interlanguage pragmatics, and classroom discourse. She is the mother of 4-year-old Océane, whose interests include the solar system, princesses, and wearing the color pink. Catherine is also the mother of 3-week old Samuel, who enjoys eating, crying, and watching his big sister and dog!