

## A narrative analysis of educators' lived experiences of motherhood and teaching

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*In this article we argue that mothers often construct images of what they perceive as society's expectations of them. These images become the parameters in the eyes of society to which they aspire. This is reminiscent of the adage: "I am not who you think I am. I am not who I think I am. I am who I think you think I am". This study is based on analysis of the life-stories of four professional female educators. These mother-educators shared their assumptions, cultural values and beliefs and showed how these shaped the subjective construction and harmonisation of the multiple roles of mother and educator. It was found that they often find themselves faced with the conflicting and complementary dimensions of the multiple roles of mother and professional. We contend that these mothers set high standards and expectations for themselves as mother-educator and they worry about failing, not only themselves, but also 'others'. They see the world of work, including parents, educators and school principal, as being against them — which is possibly a manifestation of a faltering self-image and linked to feelings of inadequacy. It is argued that mother educators need to negotiate new meaning in terms of their own perceived multiple role expectations so as to enable them to experience success as both homemakers and professionals. The challenge for the mother then is to engage in a constant search for her own identity.*

**Keywords:** acculturation; equality; gender; multiple role expectations; socialisation

### Introducing the inquiry

The place of women in society has changed and continues to do so. Their space is no longer restricted to the home; today women have the opportunity to live interesting and challenging lives within the labour market. However, talented and educated women with family responsibilities often face challenges of identity and self-esteem when they attempt to excel in their professional spheres (Spain & Bianchi, 1996). Although many achieve professional recognition and success, others find it more difficult to reconcile the multiple roles, commitments and career interruptions. The quandary that these mothers face is combining employment with motherhood. Friedman (1981:316), Morse and Fürst (1982:159), Josselson (1990), Grogan (1996:111) and Walzer (1997) draw attention to this often overlooked conundrum that underpins integrating motherhood and employment. These authors argue that mothers struggle to understand themselves by feeling a sense of acute division when attempting to reconcile the two worlds. Many mothers feel exhausted and overwhelmed trying to balance paid work commitments with parenting commitments, thus feeling psychologically, intellectually and emotionally drained. Bailey (2000)

claims that working mothers question almost every aspect of what they do, think and feel and measure their actions against perceived constructions of the ideal mother-educator. These mother-educators gain these perceptions from stimuli around them and feel overpowered by guilt when they fail to meet any of these perceived expectations or the many other paradoxes society provides them with (Berne, 1964:2-4).

### **Rationale for study**

Beck (1997) asserts that the lives of human beings are to a greater or lesser extent sanctioned and regulated by society. At birth, men and women are endowed by society with different characteristics finding expression in their roles (Forna, 1999). Moreover, society expects them to adopt different roles and duties as well as social attitudes that clearly define them as men and women. These concepts are set in rigid patterns which cannot change overnight. Duncan and Barlow (2002) contend that society has, therefore, never truly viewed women as individual citizens endowed by the constitution with inalienable rights because they are to carry out traditional role expectations, despite the requirements of a modern economy.

Although the multiple role expectations and women's responses to this have been researched in numerous overseas studies, very little research data exists with regards to female educators' experiences in the South African context. For this reason it was deemed necessary to explore the experiences of the mother-educator in a specific social milieu in South Africa. The guiding research questions were:

- How does the mother educator perceive her role as a mother and a professional educator?
- How does she reconcile role expectations that may differ?

### **Theoretical perspective of the study**

Based on the work of Ross (1995) and Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson (2001), it is argued that the feelings of inadequacy of many working mothers are mainly brought on by constantly swimming upstream in a society that imposes impossible expectations and unrealistic multiple role prescriptions. They cannot escape the scrutiny of others based on their sentiment and attachment to the dual role expectation of ideal mother and ideal worker that is firmly embedded in society's cultural assumptions, values and beliefs that are elevated to the norm. Trying to balance these idealized dual roles is largely unattainable (Chodorow, & Contratto, 1982), as the expectation is mainly linked to preserving a historical *status quo* and less about a changing reality and complexity of a 21st century world.

This line of reasoning follows the social constructionist-feministic trajectory of thinking by providing a new perspective from which to re-examine basic constructions in many spheres of motherhood, in order to restructure the school's functioning into one of real equality of opportunity, treatment and results for both sexes (Gans, 1993). Berger and Luckmann (1966) define a

social construction as an invention of a particular culture or society. A social construction exists solely because human beings agree to act as if it exists, or agree to follow specific conventional rules and expectations (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). It also brings an awareness of how society unconsciously practises gender-specific roles. For the most part, these practices go unnoticed in the school sphere. The insights gained from the social-constructivist perspective were applied as a lens through which this investigation unravelled the role expectations and fulfilments as expressed by mother-educators.

### **Research design**

A qualitative research design was used to gather data through a series of interviews in the field, where participants tend to behave naturally. The interviews explored the social, emotional and experiential phenomena regarding the multiple roles that mother-educators fulfill. Sherman and Webb (1988:7) encourage investigation of the experiences of participants, as these are 'lived', 'felt' and 'undergone'. The interviews therefore focused on the actions of the participants as well as how they represent their experiences and thoughts about being mother-educators.

An interpretive constructivist perspective was followed by using the narrative as a method of understanding human interaction and social behaviour from the participants' perspectives. The importance of the narrative lies in its ability to encounter the perspectives of participants. The narratives are based on recalling the memories of participants regarding their personal experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In social life, people narrate their lives in story form. They use stories to make sense of the world as they perceive and experience it and they use them to tell other people what they have discovered and how the world is experienced by them. People understand and construct meaning using their experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (1994:415) state:

Stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell our experiences. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history ... Experience ... is the stories people live. People live stories and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones.

Four participants were purposively selected from similar white, middle socio-economic class in a non-random manner by using judgement sampling and selecting those who met the requirements for this inquiry, in that they had to be working mother-educators. All four participants had had full-time professional careers prior to having children. The participants, aged between 28 and 35 years, had not been promoted during their careers as educators, and each had a child, with ages ranging from three months to two years. All were in committed relationships both at the time of falling pregnant and at the time of the interview. Although the period of maternity leave differed, all four of the participants resumed work after the birth of their child.

The research paid specific attention to ethical considerations. It started with the establishment of a clear and fair agreement that clarified obligations

and responsibilities of the participants and the researcher. Official approval was secured from the school principals and management committees of the schools where these educators were based. The research was explained to potential participants in order to ensure that they fully understood the implications of participation and were aware of their rights. They were made aware of the ethical principles and standards, which included aspects such as confidentiality and anonymity, avoidance of harm, reciprocity and feedback on the findings. Those mother-educators who agreed to participate were requested to sign a letter of informed consent. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, no information would be revealed that could lead to identification of the participants. Participants also received feedback on the research findings, as a form of recognition and gratitude for their participation in this study.

Three data-gathering techniques were used, namely, the narrative interview; reflective journal entries; and observational field notes. The narrative interview was particularly helpful in this inquiry, because "... the story is our oldest, proven motivational tool that carries the shared culture, beliefs, and history of a group. Moreover, it is a means of experiencing our lives" (Durance, 1997:26).

Participants were requested to 'tell their story' about motherhood and teaching. Eight narrative interviews were conducted over a 12-week period, which began in April 2005. These interviews developed into descriptive portraits of motherhood constructs. Each narrative interview enabled us to reflect critically about what the participants said about their motherhood and teaching experiences. The follow-up interview with each participant allowed for the acquisition of further data to explore some of our working assumptions (Wengraf, 2001). The follow-up interview also gave participants an opportunity to reflect on the first narrative interview. The follow-up interview took place two weeks after the first interview and the time in between the two interviews was used to work through the data, analysing them and refining follow-up questions. Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed with the permission of the participants.

To enrich the data collected through the interviews, participants were asked to keep a two-week journal detailing and describing their experiences as mother-educators. Spradley (1980:71) points out: "A reflexive journal includes a record of participants' experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems". When we analysed the journals it was clear that these diary-like reflections were not only cathartic in that the participant revealed her emotions about being a mother and an educator, but they also provided a record of the participant's feelings, attitudes and subjectivities.

Time was spent in the social milieu of participants where non-verbal and verbal cues were recorded before, during and after the interviews. Extensive field notes were made to describe what occurred by looking, listening and questioning the process (Gillham, 2000). These direct non-participant obser-

vations were useful in describing the settings, activities and the meaning of what was observed from the experiences of the participants (Patton, 1990). This technique is in line with Clandinin and Connelly's (1994:106) remark that: "Observational field notes are constructed representations of participants' experiences". In cases where greater clarification of actions was needed, these were probed during the interviews.

Empirical data obtained from the three data gathering techniques were subjected to a content and narrative analysis, and all the raw data were compared and interpreted against the background of the research problem. The data analysis focused on revealing aspects of how participants made sense of their lives and lived experiences, through thematic organisation (Mayring, 2000; Riessman, 2000).

The narrative analysis focused on the personal and the social constructions, as these occurred in specific places or sequences of places (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Specific attention was also given to the inward (internal conditions of participants, such as feelings, experiences, hopes and reactions); and outward (external conditions, such as the environment) directions in this inquiry. This process allowed us to transform the actual experiences of participants into a communicable representation of them.

Trustworthiness and credibility were regarded as important measures in this research. To enhance the credibility of the study the methodology used corresponded with the design of qualitative approaches and included on-going collaborative and iterative approaches for discussion and investigation of research questions. In addition, credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the participants, and requesting them to review transcripts and the synthesis thereof to ensure that the meanings communicated were correctly captured. The context of motherhood and teaching were described in-depth using ample empirical evidence to develop thick descriptions (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004:6-7; 85). Being aware of our own subjectivities and the possibility that interpretations may be subjective, we attempted to circumvent this problem by acknowledging that bias exists (therefore not expecting 'conformability'), and used probing extensively at various times during the interview in an attempt to limit biased interpretations. The audit trail for this inquiry included verbatim accounts, interview transcripts, interview guides, list of interviewees and personal notes.

## **Findings**

Each mother-educator's narrative was analysed, firstly, in terms of its uniqueness and, secondly, to establish emerging trends and categories from the stories of the four mother-educator participants. Some of the cross-cutting trends that emerged were that the roles of mothers and educators are associated with nurturing, guiding, parenting, matriarchy, loving, emotion and sensitivity. As mothers and educators they felt an obligation to protect, care for and nurture children, whether their own children or learners who were children of other parents. They tended to prioritise other's needs above their own and were guided in their choices by the needs, desires and feelings of

other people (a sense of altruism). This is illustrated by Christina when she said:

*I care not just for my own child, but also the learners I facilitate. I nurture, protect, guide and love both. I have a strong obligation towards my child and feel responsible for the success of my learners' future, especially my grade twelve learners. I have a natural instinct to love, help and facilitate the learners to live out their full potential in the world. Life is short and we, as educators, must make sure that the learners in our classes know where they are going so as to make the best of themselves and their future. Educators should set enough time aside to care for the learners. An educator must put the learners' needs before her own in order to be a 'good educator' who knows the needs, desires and feelings of the learners.*

Daleen also feels obligated to care for and nurture her child and the learners at school. She said:

*Teaching is my passion and I enjoy being at school. I prefer high school teaching, because I get stimulation from the subjects I teach as well as from the learners in my class. It is a privilege for me to work with the learners, because I try to develop them in a physical, cognitive, emotional, social, moral and spiritual way that contributes to becoming a confident citizen. I go the extra mile for my learners because they are my priority. I receive a salary for caring, loving and supporting them. I am a mother and an educator. This means that I am the primary caregiver of children. In other words, I need to nurture, take care of and protect children. I therefore feel responsible for assisting the learners with learning difficulties on a Monday and Wednesday afternoon.*

As mother-educators, they commit themselves both physically and emotionally to the expectations of their societal and cultural context. As educators, these mothers deal with other people's children and claim that they know what the needs of children and parents are due to the fact that they have undergone professional training. Ironically, when it comes to their own children, they sometimes suppress what they know by sacrificing the needs of their own children for the sake of taking care of the needs of other people's children. This leaves the mother-educators with feelings of guilt and inadequacy. By looking at specific comments and responses from the participants, these narratives highlighted the theme of inadequacy. The challenge for mother-educators is to engage in a constant search for their own development while there is a multitude of relationships and expectations of 'others' that further define them. Marilize's feelings of inadequacy in her role as a mother became evident when she claimed:

*I perceive that my multiple role expectations are mutually contradictory and exclusive. My family and work duties interfere with each other and thus I have to juggle them. The physical demands of family and work, the hours, the energy and the commitment, make it difficult to be a successful wife, parent and mother educator. I mark portfolio assignments and tests until late at night to ensure that other people are satisfied with my performance.*

*It feels as if I please other people instead of my own family. I feel awful, because Desmond, my son, has chickenpox and he needs my attention and love, but I am too committed to my schoolwork to give him the necessary attention. I do not have enough time to nurture and care for him during school terms. I cannot strengthen the connection between Desmond and myself, and I rely on other people to interact with my child. This makes me feel insecure and uncaring. Therefore, being in the workplace is a constant source of frustration to me. I know Desmond needs me full-time. I also know that I cannot do justice to my marriage and son as a homemaker, and to a teaching career, at the same time. I do not know how to fulfil my multiple role expectations.*

On becoming a mother, most women redefine their own being in terms of a new role and perceived accompanying role expectations. By and large, this role definition could be attributed to a process of acculturation. The mother-educator accepts that when she becomes a mother, the roles she is supposed to play change. Emerging from the data is a commonly held view where the mother-educator thinks that her role as a mother has to take precedence over her sense of self. Ironically, Forna (1999) reports that the moment a mother sacrifices her own identity, she is likely to experience such powerful feelings as depression, guilt, rejection, exhaustion, jealousy, frustration, irritability, inadequacy, tension, abandonment, stress, conflict and isolation. Gordon (1990) adds to this statement by pointing out that the mother will feel she needs to be and do more than she is and does. According to Knowles and Cole (1990) she may even feel confused about what she should do and what it is that she should feel good about. These observations from the literature corroborate what was found in the research. Leona, for example, expressed her feelings of inadequacy in the following manner:

*I feel guilty, I am worried and sometimes am I frustrated, but I try to manage my feelings by convincing myself that most mother educators feel guilty and stressed. I worry about whether Eduan [her son] is warm enough, whether the bath water is too hot or too cold, and I am worried about Eduan's health. I also feel sad if I have to leave Eduan alone with Madira in the morning. When Eduan smiles at me when I say goodbye, my heart starts to crumble. However, at least Tony, my husband, is there to look after Eduan when I go to work. Tony leaves for work after me and he has the freedom to work at home or to work at his office in Boksburg. I accept that I cannot do everything, and that some things are beyond my control. I realise that I cannot be 'perfect' and therefore, I threw away my feelings of guilt. A 'perfect mother-teacher' does not exist, it is just a myth. I do what I think is good for Eduan, due to the experiences that I have gained from other mother educators. They have set unrealistic standards for themselves. I do not compare myself with other mother-educators. I try to believe in myself and want to build on my own motherhood-image with realistic goals.*

Leona's feelings of inadequacy that she is failing as a mother correspond with those described by Gerdes (1972). Leona may be described as a 'conflicted

parent'. In an attempt to shrug off her guilt she must invent strategies to make good her feelings of inadequacy, which at best mean that she feels guilty only about half of the time. She admits that she experiences feelings like guilt and stress in trying to balance her multiple role expectations. Her experiences as a mother educator are hardly unique, compared to the stories of Christina, Daleen and Marilize.

Analysis of the data also revealed that the value systems of partnered mothers show both uniformity and diversity. The value systems of partnered mothers appear uniform, because society views mothers as being biologically the primary caregiver to see to the child's needs. How mothers substantively exercise this responsibility varies however. Mother-educators have varying feelings about their husband's participation and involvement in parenthood. Christina said:

*I feel that I abuse Rick's goodness. As a husband, he shares in some of the household duties and he helps me with my schoolwork even though he is also working and is tired in the afternoons. However, he complains when he helps me. It feels to me as if Rick does not want to help me. I experience pressure to take on my role of primary caregiver. My responsibilities have increased since having Nicky, because I am mainly responsible for the household duties, and I also have to fulfill Nicky's physical and emotional needs. I have to do it; I do not have a choice. Rick, on the other hand, has a choice. He can decide for himself how he wants to take on his role of fatherhood.*

Marilize feels upset because she has to retain the primary role as a caretaker for her child while her husband's role is more play-oriented. She pointed out:

*Jan is a wonderful husband, because he assists me with my household and school duties. He does not mind helping me, but he would rather work in the garage or lie on a couch in front of the television. I would also like to do other things, but I am mainly responsible for the household duties and Desmond's personal needs. I retain the primary role as a caretaker for Desmond, while Jan is his playmate. Mothering is in my genes. It upsets me when Jan takes over with Desmond. It hurts me not being part of my son's life and I feel jealous when Desmond prefers his dad's attention. I also feel guilty, because I cannot afford to play with Desmond for an hour or more like Jan. I have schoolwork to do.*

It is clear that Christina and Marilize remain the primary caretakers as their interactions are significantly more functional, while the fathers' interactions are more play-oriented. In general, parental responsibility for childcare is often associated exclusively with mothers (McBride & Mills, 1993; Pleck, 1997). Women largely carry out unpaid domestic work and childcare. This results in mothers that are overstrained by the paid and unpaid work. In the case of Daleen and Leona the available support systems seems to be stronger. Daleen said:

*I appreciate my husband's help and care. He is always there when I need him. He is reliable, accepts responsibility and shows a serious attitude towards helping me to fulfil my multiple roles. Through his support, I am*



*able to express my individuality as a mother educator. The fact that Anton helps me does not bother me, nor do I feel guilty or jealous about it. My responsibilities have not increased much at home, because I give Nthabiseng, the domestic worker, orders about what to do and how to do it. I have the free and unrestricted use of all the things which are necessary to my fullest mental, spiritual and physical unfoldment.*

Leona also relies greatly on the help of her husband, Tony. She stated:

*I rely greatly on the help of Tony, even if I am providing the most family care. I appreciate the fact that he arranges his lifestyle around my multiple roles. The two of us try to do things together as husband and wife. It is fun; there is not a night that goes by without both of us being involved in bathing Eduan. However, I feel that my duties have increased since having Eduan. My duties are far greater after the birth of Eduan and I have just enough time during the day to meet my obligations.*

## **Conclusion**

Based on this research it became clear that mother-educators find it difficult to deal with multiple role expectations. They want to change and become more effective in their competing roles and are searching for ideas and strategies through which they could come to terms with who they are when balancing their multiple role expectations. This is in line with similar findings by Storr (1988), Pretorius (1990), and Walzer (1997). The conclusion we have reached in studying these mother-educators is that they tend to express themselves in terms of what they think 'others' think they must be, with the result that they feel they lack control over their own identity. Berger and Luckmann (1966) state that there is a great possibility that women think they should improve on their motherhood and employment duties. Therefore, it does not matter what alternative arrangements mother-educators have made to reduce their multiple duties; they have not relinquished their deeply entrenched sense of duty to care. For those interviewed their overarching goal was to become better mothers and better educators, and by doing this they have convinced themselves that they need to bend and reshape their desires and actions. They hold on to the culturally entrenched idea that expected patterns of behaviour exist that they must live up to. The mother-educators then navigate their way through the norms that they think represent a 'good mother-educator'. The mother-educators who participated in this study therefore found it difficult to balance their multiple roles. The result is they felt that they were neither completely good mothers or good professional educators. The findings corroborated Foster's (2001) claim that working mothers experience an ongoing battle.

To create a constitution, guaranteeing equal rights to men and women, may take a few months or even a few years to promulgate, but to live it and make it manifest in a society where gender roles are deeply ingrained may take much longer. For millennia deep-seated stereotypes of the idealised role of a mother have been developed and these have not changed with the introduction of women into the workforce. Society has thus developed a dual yard-

stick against which working mothers are measured. Where new role definitions of women have been successfully introduced the effect of this may be less pronounced. However, the results of this study suggest that this has not yet been achieved in South Africa where the mother-educator's role as mother is idealised (even if only in their own minds) and societal expectations of what it means to be a professional educator places them in the role of Sisyphus where the dual role expectation is simply out of the reach of the ordinary mother-educator.

The answer to the conundrum seems to be seated in helping mother-educators reinvent and redefine themselves so that they can come to terms with who they are as both mothers and professionals. They will only find themselves and fulfill their place in society once they are able to successfully negotiate new meaning in terms of their own perceived multiple role expectations. More research is needed to explore whether initial teacher training programmes should include preparing educators (male and female) for planning and coping with multiple role expectations.

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