

What about the children?

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The University of Malta Gozo Centre made it possible for me to read for a university degree while living and working full time in Gozo. I had two very young children when I started in 1998 – little did I know, in those early days, that twelve years down the line I would have a masters degree and doctorate under my belt. It has been an enjoyable and challenging journey characterized by a series of choices and identification of priorities. But what about the children in all of this? How did this ‘deviation’ from the ‘traditional’ mothering role impact on their own education?



Gillian Martin, a former student at the University Gozo Campus.

With my own experience clearly at the root of my interest in this matter, I explore this issue below by focusing on children of two of my ex-fellow students at the Gozo Centre.

Research clearly shows that parental involvement in children’s education has been consistently linked with higher achievement and better adjustment to the school environment (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). This is an issue that needs little academic amplification as any mother will admit to being aware of the intense mother – child coaching and revision sessions that are commonly associated with the top performers in primary school classes. Many will admit to feeling intimidated and insecure when listening in to the conversations of those super-organized, highly motivated mothers who gather at the school gate and always know exactly what home work is due when, which colour plastic cover is meant to be on which exercise book and which method of addition of fractions is currently in use.

It is tempting, at this superficial level, to oversimplify the understanding of ‘parental involvement’ and conflate it with homework and revision cramming sessions. There is, however, much more to it than that.

“[Indeed], parental involvement takes many forms including good parenting in the home, [...] the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfillment and good citizenship. (Op. cit. p.4)

Research suggests that the key issue is the enhancement of the child’s self concept and the setting of high aspirations that then go on to motivate academic success in the child. The mother’s level of education is an important (though by no means exclusive) variable in this dynamic process and has been found

to have a strong positive effect on the child's educational life course (Op. cit.).

An interesting paradox arises when mothers of young children choose to go back to formal education themselves. Their eventual enhanced educational level should have ripple effects on that of their children. However, would the extra demands on their time lead to them depriving their young child of those precious 'hands on' coaxing and coaching sessions that seem to have such beneficial immediate results? Attempting to answer this question would lead to fascinating and complex sociological theorizing – tempting though this may be, this is not the intention of this piece. Rather, what would be interesting here is to explore how children view the issue of their 'mature student mum' going 'back to school' and to find out what they think of the way it influenced their own educational trajectory. What follows is by no means intended as an academic excursion into this issue – simply an attempt to offer very partial insight through the personal experience of the children of two Gozo Centre Alumni.

Christine and Mark are cousins – their mothers are sisters-in-law, both teachers, who opted to attend the Gozo Centre BA (General) evening course 1998-2003. These mature students both had young children at the time they started their BA and, indeed, one went on to have another child before the end of the course. Both were highly successful and went on to read for an MA in History, graduating in 2010 and have since continued with their teaching careers. Their children, Christine and Mark have 'grown and flown' and are now both medical students living independently as Gozitan students do, on mainland Malta.

When asked to describe what it was like for them to be at primary school and have to have a mum who was a student, both Mark and Christine said that they were too young to really

be aware of what was going on at first. Mark, however, admits to the fact that it seemed a bit strange to see his mother come home from her teaching job, do all the house chores, only to go back out in the evening for lectures "after all, when you're young, you think that university is for 20 year olds" he says with a grin. Both Christine and Mark are quick to emphasise that they never felt at a disadvantage because their mother had her own studies "I don't ever remember needing her help and her not being there" says Mark. Christine emphasized that the same applied to her, however she does admit to missing her mother when she had lectures on Saturday mornings "I missed cooking with her... I missed her company". She points out that, as the eldest child, she has always been 'the responsible one' in the family and admits that she did have to pull her weight and help with caring for her younger brother when her mother was at lectures. She betrays acute sensitivity when she describes how she would see the way her mother had to juggle work, family and study, and how this required determination, stamina and hard work. "In a way this made me realize how important it was for me to study now, while I am young ... I could see how hard it was for her juggling with everything ... I didn't want to have to do that". Mark agrees that his mother also helped motivate him to focus on studying – "when you see someone studying and determined to get good results, then you study too ...and when that person is your mother ...well, she is the ultimate role model isn't she?"

The interesting point worth emphasizing here is that this was not a short episode in their lives - Mark and Christine grew up with mothers who were constantly working towards a degree – with the BA (gen), Masters qualifying and Masters degree stretching over a good 10 year period. It is something that became part of their family routine, and the legacy of this is their heightened sensitivity towards the importance of effective time management. Christine describes how her mother used to have a clear idea of what she intended to do each day "she

used to tell me ... 'look today I am going to do this and this'... she certainly influenced me in this respect". Now that they are University students themselves in the high-powered medical course, effective time management is a fundamental part of coping with the demanding programme of studies. They feel that their experience puts them at an advantage in this respect. "I was so used to managing my studies on my own as a child, that now it is like second nature", Christine explains. To say that Mark was never as reliable as Christine as a child is certainly a gross understatement. He is quick to point out that he was never one to study or do homework willingly – "mum used to be constantly telling me to read or study ... but, as soon as she went out, I would ditch the book" he says with his mischievous sparkle in his eye. "But then," he continues, "you soon realize that if you don't do the work, you won't pass the exams ... and you learn this when you are young ... and now that I am here in Malta, there is no one to help me, I'm on my own, and I know what to do because I've been though it already". This is clearly an interesting issue – while many of their fellow medical students struggle with the pitfalls of their new found independence once at university, Mark and Christine hit the ground running in this respect and have their priorities clearly in focus.

But is it all worth it? I ask - What would Mark and Christine say to those mothers who claim that they don't have the time to go back to University because the children need her at home? "At the end of the day, what the mothers achieve ... when they eventually graduate... will benefit the children too", Christine is quick to point out, "they may miss their mother at times, but when the children grow older they will see that the whole family will benefit".

The advantages she refers to are not necessarily financial. The issue of the mother's influence as a positive role model is one both children referred to repeatedly. There is also, however,

an advantage that is more tangible and practical - both Mark and Christine appreciate the fact that they can turn to their mothers for advice on how to approach some of their course work, especially when it comes to ethics and philosophy. Both admit to turning to them for help with referencing techniques and academic writing. As Christine points out, her mother can really relate to her worries and challenges "because she's gone through the same stuff that you're going through yourself now". This all seems to give credence to the emphasis on 'intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfillment' that was described in the literature on 'parental involvement' as quoted above – there certainly seems to be more to it than homework and revision cramming in primary school.

Clearly, this positive account is a particular story of two individuals – any generalization would be naïve and untenable. It is also undoubtedly partial, in that things were certainly not always such a bed of roses. There is no doubt, however, that the good memories are the ones that prevail and that the positive legacy is tangible and relevant to Mark and Christine's current experience as university students with their own graduation clearly in sight.

Graduation ceremonies are always special, but even more impressive if you are eleven years old and your mother one of the graduands. Christine cherishes her photos of the occasion and has strong memories of it being a very special day for the whole family. The same applies to Mark. When asked to describe how he felt as he watched his mother walk up to collect her certificate in her gown and cape, he shifts in his seat and draws himself up taller "Oh ... amazing ... so proud!" he says with long and thoughtful pauses.

Was that a hint of a tear I could see in his eye? No – Mark is far too 'cool' for that – it must have been in mine.