CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT FACTORS OF MARRIED EMIRATI STUDENTS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Patricia Stringer[1], Sumaya Saqr[2], Lilly Tennant[3]
[1,2,3]Division Head of Health and Special Education
[3]ltennant@ecae.ac.ae

ABSTRACT

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is on the path to becoming a knowledge economy and the role women play as pioneers and innovators, not only in their own society but, also, in the global community is strongly advocated (Al-Qazzat, 2003). Involvement of women in tertiary education and in the work force is promoted despite restrictions as to the kinds of jobs they can take up and difficulties associated with socio-cultural factors. When making career choices, teaching appears to be favored as a respectable, stable job involving limited interaction with the opposite sex. This paper explores the motivational factors, challenges and support strategies of a social group of married female Emirati students undertaking their Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) teaching degree. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and socio-cultural influences on 'self' among the various nested systems that play a role in their development, data on motivational factors, challenges and support strategies are portrayed in the findings.

Keywords: Emirates, teacher, education, married, challenges

I.   INTRODUCTION

In Abu Dhabi, capital city of the UAE, the drive for growth and future development is inseparably linked to the education reform agenda initiated by the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) aimed at improving schools through the introduction of a New School Model (NSM) in September, 2010. Reasons for this are clearly stated by Dr. Al Khaili, the Director General of ADEC, who comments, "we don't just want to improve our education system, our schools and the performance of our students…we want to be ranked as one of the best education systems in the world" (ADEC, 2008, p.1). The reforms and a break away from the more traditional methods of teaching where teachers do most of the talking and students listen passively to one where inquiry and active learning is encouraged can be traced to ADEC's Strategic Plan for the 2009-2018 period which focuses on six key priorities: 1) elevate school quality in Abu Dhabi to international standards; 2) improve access to P-12 education; 3) provide students with affordable options of high quality private education; 4) preserve UAE culture and heritage and develop successful careers; 5) build ADEC capabilities; and 6) actively engage the stakeholders (ADEC, 2009).

As part of the reforms to initiate change in Abu Dhabi, ADEC's New School Model is claimed as, "a new approach to teaching and learning…to improve student learning experiences and to raise academic outcomes of Abu Dhabi students to the internationally competitive level necessary to achieve the Abu Dhabi economic vision 2030" (ADEC, 2009). The main objective is to foster a student centered learning environment emphasizing culture and national identity. NSM adopts bilingual teaching (Arabic and English) and the introduction of English as a medium of instruction in Science and Mathematics. The curriculum aims to develop Arabic and English language literacy. As Dr. Al Khaili notes, "a new curriculum, advanced teaching methods and learning materials and resources are introduced in order to enhance student performance by developing the student as a communicator, a thinker and a problem solver, appreciative of the UAE heritage and culture" (El Ajou, 2010).

With the impetus to improve schools and raise achievement levels of students, teacher education is a priority as the reforms taking place in Abu Dhabi demand highly qualified Emirati teachers to teach in schools. But, what exactly are the challenges facing students undergoing teacher education? What support strategies do they use in coping with the challenges that face them in their attainment of their Bachelor of Education teaching degree?

Our study seeks to understand the nature of motivational factors that encourage married female Emirati students enroll in the B. Ed. teaching degree, the challenges they face during their course of study and the support strategies used by them to undertake and complete their degree in a start-up teachers college in Abu Dhabi. Our study employs a situated perspective; that is, it takes into consideration the complexity of overlapping environmental determinants that affect married female Emirati students during their course of study. We investigated motivational factors, challenges

faced and support strategies used within particular contexts of home, college, home/college, government and the wider society.

The particular group on which we focus is that of women who are currently married (not separated or divorced) studying to complete their B. Ed. teaching degree. In 2011, the student body at the college consisted of 400 students of which 122 were married female Emirati students. Participants were selected from across four different year groupings to provide us with a cross-sectional view of motivational factors, challenges and support strategies used in completion of their B. Ed teaching degree. In keeping with our goal, we developed a conceptual framework that draws on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979), socio-cultural influences on role construction and educational changes and development in Abu Dhabi.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceives of the environment as a nested systems arrangement each contained within the next. The four systems focused on in this study include: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The microsystem denotes the complexity of relationships the developing person experiences in an environment considered immediate and in which the participants have roles (for example, daughter, parent, student and teacher). The mesosystem comprises the interrelationships that result among major settings containing the developing person. The mesosystem can be considered a system of microsystems. Exosystems define the larger contexts which are experienced vicariously and yet have a direct impact on the developing person. The macrosystem refers to economic, social, educational, legal and political systems existing in the culture that set the pattern for the structures and activities occurring at both the micro and mesosystems.

One tool used to measure the factors that influence women's occupational role is 'The Eccles' Model' (Eccles, 1984). The model states that decisions women make in relation to occupational choice relate to "gender role beliefs, to self-perceptions and self-concept and to one's perceptions of the task itself" (Eccles, 1994, p. 587) and gendered socialization practices "at home, in the schools, and among peers…in shaping these individual differences in self-perceptions and subjective task values" (p. 605). The Eccles' model added to the conceptual framework in terms of understanding the socially constructed roles of these students in multiple contexts.

Students' adoption, modification and negotiation behaviors in counteracting challenges of context to establish support strategies became a focal point of our analysis. We note that their stated reasons for establishing support strategies are rooted in their perception of what it means to be a student, wife, mother, daughter and daughter-in-law. The roles played by them vary given expectations and demands of context. We assert that from the intertwining of multiple contexts, particular challenges emerge and the corresponding behavior patterns that follow account for the manner in which support strategies are established and used in the undertaking of their tertiary level studies.

In the sections that follow, we provide a literature review, describe the methodology and data analysis, present a discussion of our findings and offer suggestions for both program development and future research in the field.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW"

The literature review starts with a brief overview of opportunities provided for women in the context of Abu Dhabi. It then examines: family life in the UAE; educational opportunities for Emirati women in Abu Dhabi; and the institute in which the study was conducted.

2.1 Overview of the Context of Abu Dhabi

The UAE, a constitutional federation of seven emirates, was established in 1971. The discovery of oil brought with it wealth and transformation to a modern, highly industrialized state with one of the highest standards of living in the world (Green and Smith 2006). With the advent of this transformation, Green and Smith (2006) note that an obvious shift for women tends to involve a break from the traditional cultural attitudes with a focus on the home and activities related to the home. The claim is that younger women are increasingly pursuing higher education and embarking on careers outside of the home (Al-Qazzat, 2003). Further, they have changed employment patterns, are entering the workforce at unprecedented rates, have surpassed their male counterparts in university attendance and are employed in high-status jobs and in key decision-making positions (Salloum, 2003). Salloum describes the modern UAE woman as educated, dignified, raising the children in a modern world and yet preserving traditional values and culture.

2.2 Family Life in the UAE

The current local population of the UAE is tribal in origin. Waves of Arab tribes started to migrate to the region in the middle of the first millennium BC. Within the fold of the Emirati tribe, the head of the family (i.e., the father) is traditionally bound by unavoidable obligations of mutual support and a notion of family integrity not only to his wife and children but, also, to his immediate blood relatives (i.e., father, brothers, paternal uncles and cousins) and to the tribe as a whole. As Islam is the common religion, it has also held the people together (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in Washington DC, n.d.). Due to this particular relationship, marriage between the son and his paternal uncle's

daughter is strongly preferred. However, age differences or other reasons may make such an arrangement impossible. Accordingly, marriage with a first cousin from the mother's side, or with a more distant cousin, is the norm in this society. Arranged marriages are still common in the Emirates (Rashad, Osman and Roudi-Fahimi, 2005) and marriage outside the extended family is the exception, but it does also occur. Although the UAE sets the legal minimum marriage age at 18, it is important to note that the average marriage age for women is rising (Bristol-Rhys, 2007). Regardless, early marriage continues to occur because of deeply entrenched cultural and tribal traditions that are unresponsive to legal reforms. It is also important to note that the divorce rate is increasing because of broader social change (Nereim and Almazroui, 2012).

The last forty years have brought many changes to the fabric of the Emirati society. Cultural, social and technological changes have merged together to create norms vastly different from just a few decades ago. The expectation that a woman's career revolves around staying home to care for children while her husband works a life time is no longer a realistic picture of Emirati family life. Accordingly, the position of women is changing. Despite the religious teachings and the UAE customs and traditions that encourage marriage at an early age, some Emirati women who want to pursue higher education and start a career choose to delay marriage and motherhood or not to marry at all. This significant shift in modern young women's perspective on marriage and their role in the wider world appear to be forming part of the culture (Elass and Seaman, 2009).

The woman's position is clearly defined in the UAE society. On marriage she keeps her maiden name (her father's name) and remains emotionally closely attached to her own family to whom she can return in case of divorce. The newly married couple may move to live as a unit in a single family home or into the house of the husband's family where separate accommodation is prepared for them and, if at all possible, for the families of all the other sons. The change is often considerable and problems in the fledgling relationship between the bride and her in-laws are common (Hellyer and Abed, 2001).

The traditional Emirati family is extended, often spanning three or more generations. An extended structure offers many advantages, including stability, coherence, financial assistance, and physical and psychological support, particularly in times of need. Although Emirati extended families are increasingly not living in the same home, they frequently live in the same neighborhood to keep in contact. In response to social and economic change in the UAE, the nuclear family has started to break away from the common extended family system and subsequently experience limited first-hand familiarity with the richness and complexity of living within extended family networks. Families in the UAE are also known to have domestic helpers like live-in maids and drivers to fulfill household chores. Domestic helpers tend to be from Asian countries (Hurreiz, 2002).

Although researchers such as Green and Smith (2006) observe that Emirati women are experimenting with other forms of work and pursuing tertiary degrees, their main job continues to be regarded as one of taking care of the family, concentrating on their children and fulfilling duties expected of them by their extended family. When the Emirati male agrees to a female member of his family working, then work environments are carefully scrutinized and might be limited in scope due to social requirements such as gender segregation which is encouraged by Islam. Despite the cultural considerations limiting career choices and career planning for Emirati women, teacher education, accordingly, may be viewed as a profession best suited as it is comparatively female dominated (Salem, 2011). Women in the education sector form the majority of practitioners and opportunities are available for them to engage in career planning and assume leadership roles.

2.3 Educational Opportunities for Emirati Women in Abu Dhabi

The UAE's development of its education system took place after the unification of the seven Trucial States in 1971 (Talhami, 2004). From 1971 until 1978, although the UAE dedicated the largest portion of its budget to defense, the second largest portion was awarded to education (ibid.). Rates of enrollment in higher education in the UAE began to dramatically increase during this period and this increase was rooted in the economic and reform changes introduced. The voiced ideal of the government is to promote reform and education as a means to achieve this. Government political intentions are supported by strong investments in education and in this context women are seen to significantly benefit (Barakat, 2012).

The stimulus for UAE women's development has largely been through access to education strongly promoted by UAE Government scholarship programs (Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affairs, 2009; Crabtree 2007). Based on the UNDP report of 2007, the number of UAE national women enrolled in higher education is actually 24 percent more than the number of UAE national men. According to a Pricewater House Coopers report discussed at the Arab Youth Forum in Dubai (2005), at 77 percent "the UAE is registering the highest rate of females in higher education in the entire world". Gokulan (2012) confirms, "the UAE has the highest percentage of women graduates in the GCC and the highest percentage of women in the workplace" (Gokulan, 2012).

The accelerated process of modernization has brought new opportunities for women to go beyond their traditional stereotypical role of mothers. In relation to the reforms, the gains made by women in taking up tertiary level studies and employment in the workforce are said to reflect outgrowths of the expansion of educational opportunities

and socioeconomic changes rather than gender-specific educational policies.

III. METHOD

This is an exploratory study. Quantitative (survey) and qualitative data collection tools were employed to understand perspectives of married female Emirati students in relation to: motivating factors to become a teacher, challenges faced during the course of their study and support strategies employed to complete their B. Ed. teacher training degree. For the first quantitative phase of the study, a survey instrument was designed. By way of follow up to the survey and in an attempt to gain a deeper perspective of motivational factors, challenges and support strategies, an invitation was extended to participants requesting engagement in conversation type interviews. In this paper, findings from the qualitative analysis of interviews with 30 married female Emirati students are presented to identify motivational factors, the nature and type of challenges faced and support strategies used in attainment of their B. Ed. teaching degree. The findings are presented in keeping with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and corresponding socio-cultural influences on 'self'.

3.1 Context of the Study

The college in question is the first and only specialist teacher college in the UAE. It is also the only non-federal higher education institution established by the Abu Dhabi government which does not result from a formal partnership with an overseas institution. It was established in Abu Dhabi and is licensed and accredited by the Commission for Academic Accreditation and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The college was created in 2007 by H.H. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE, and the inspired vision of H.H. Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces to provide world-class teacher education and to train the next generation of teachers for Abu Dhabi and the UAE (College Student Handbook, 2012-2013). It operates under the auspices of ADEC. The College currently offers a four-year B. Ed. teaching degree in English as the medium of instruction. Emirati students are prepared to teach cycle 1 students (grades 1 to 5) a range of subjects including English and Math and Science in English in accordance with NSM guidelines. A one-year Foundation Program for students who do not fulfill the B. Ed. teaching degree program entry requirements is also offered (College Student Handbook, 2012-2013).

The college provides an environment that contributes to the students' cultural, social, moral, intellectual, and physical development. Its Student Services policy applies to all students – married and unmarried alike (College Student Handbook, 2012-2013). This policy includes personal counseling, student orientation and student representation. In relation to issues of maternity care, married students are required to provide the college with early notification of their pregnancy and must return to classes no later than 2 weeks (10 working days) after their child's birth. The Students Services Department provides assistance with health queries relating to pregnancy and breastfeeding during college hours. At this college, childcare services are unavailable. Suspension of studies is permitted for all students commencing at the start of the first/Fall semester and concluding at the end of the academic year (i.e., the second/Spring semester). Under current arrangements, students granted suspension from their academic program for health or personal reasons are not entitled to practice teaching nor do they have access to laboratories. They do, however, retain their college cards and have access to their email accounts, electronic resources, and library facilities.

3.2 Participants

Majority of female students enrolled in the college commence their degree as unmarried but, over time, get married and, shortly afterwards, fall pregnant. Although in some respects the experiences of married female students are similar to that of their single counterparts, in other respects their experiences are significantly different. For example, in devising this study it was expected that there would be some commonly held perspectives among all students on delivery of the new curriculum using modern pedagogies. However, female married students have different roles as wife, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law as well as that of student. With their various roles come different responsibilities to be fulfilled. Often what drives them to pursue and sustain their studies takes on a completely different dimension to their single counterparts. The challenges facing them during their course of study are complex, often requiring coping strategies that vary in intensity and which draw to the surface the institution's capacity to meet their specific needs. For this reason, the decision was made to focus on married female students.

The number of married female Emirati students across all cohort groupings at the college who completed the survey numbered 100. From this, a cross section of 30 participants from year levels 1-4 participated in the individual interviews. Over 50% were from Year 4, 10% were from Year 3 and 20% were from Years 1 and 2. Age ranges of participants are as follows: 20-24yrs – 60%, 25-30 yrs – 28%, above 30 yrs – 12%. Numbers of years married is as follows: 36% married between 0-2 years, 34% between 3-5 years, 10% between 6-8 years and 20% married more than 8 years.

Married female Emirati students in this study acknowledged they received varying degrees of support reflective of their way of life and social cultural values symbolic of the Emirati society. As noted in the literature reviewed, newly married women usually live close to their families and receive assistance in various ways. Table 1 displays the nature of support available. This form of assistance, as noted in the findings, is considered a support factor in completion of the B. Ed. teaching degree. (See Table 1, for types of support)

Table 1.Types of support

Support Type	Emotional Support	Moral Support	Financial Support	Child Care	Home Management	College Work Support	Social Support	Support being a Future Teacher
1. Husband	17%	15%	40%	18%	26%	20%	14%	16%
2. Father	12%	11%	16%	4%	5%	13%	10%	12%
3. Mother	18%	14%	11%	26%	19%	11%	13%	14%
4. Father in law	5%	7%	5%	2%	3%	5%	6%	8%
5. Mother in law	8%	8%	4%	18%	20%	5%	8%	7%
6. Brother	8%	8%	10%	4%	4%	9%	9%	8%
7. Brother in law	1%	4%	0%	2%	1%	4%	5%	3%
8. Sister	12%	11%	6%	11%	11%	17%	11%	11%
9. Sister in law	5%	5%	1%	6%	5%	4%	5%	4%
10. Uncle	4%	6%	1%	1%	0%	3%	6%	6%
11. Aunt	5%	6%	1%	3%	2%	3%	6%	7%

3.3 Procedure

The survey instrument provided an overarching view of patterns and trends related to challenges and support strategies married female students experienced. Semi-structured interviews allowed entry into the inner world of the married female Emirati student to gain an understanding of motivational factors, challenges and support strategies from an individual perspective (Patton, 1990). Interviews afforded depth of data (Patton, 1990; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003) because participants were encouraged to reflect, discuss and share their thoughts, beliefs and experiences. To obtain rich data and verify authenticity, the following measures were undertaken: i) all interviews were conducted by the research team member fluent in English and Arabic; ii) interviews were conducted on a face to face basis or by phone depending on the wishes of the participants. Venue and times of interviews were negotiated with the participants; iii) to facilitate the interview process, a schedule or guide was developed with questions designed to probe deeper into challenges and support strategies from a qualitative perspective; iv) all interviews were audio recorded; v) audio files were translated into Arabic text by Arabic/English translators. The Arabic text was later translated into English; vi) all translators were instructed to provide verbatim translations of participants' responses; vii) confidentiality agreements were signed by translators in an attempt to minimize harm to participants; and viii) Arabic and English transcripts of interview data were cross checked by the member of the research team conducting the interviews to verify and check for accuracy and authenticity.

3.4 Data Analysis

In terms of data analysis, the researchers began with one interview transcript initially. Interview data was coded and grouped into tentative categories and subcategories using the following process. For example, the first transcript was read to establish data chunks related to reasons for pursuing the B. Ed. teaching degree, challenges encountered and

support strategies utilized. A second reading of the same transcript prompted the emergence of further categories such as 'Ramification of Challenges' and 'Future dreams'. Summary notes, made in the margin of the transcript, formed preliminary codes. This process was applied to other interview transcripts with the idea of determining similarities and differences related to challenges and support strategies. Once all the interview data was coded, a secondary analysis was conducted to confirm the categories and sub-categories that were established and determine which required moving and reconstructing as new perceptions and insights emerged. As the analysis proceeded, an analytical framework was developed that captured the motivational sources, challenges, ramification of challenges, support strategies and future possibilities. Inter-coder reliability was achieved by all researchers working in the data analysis/interpretation process.

3.5 Limitations

This study was limited to the cohorts from one college. The resulting sample size, although small, represented the majority of married female Emirati students in the B. Ed. teaching degree program at the time of the study. As researchers we had to consider that students may have felt the need to act politically correct in responding to and/or acknowledging the challenges they faced. This is a perceived limitation in that an honest response to questions asked by the research team may not be completely possible. Although we do not believe that we can draw broad generalizations from this study for the entire married female Emirati student population undertaking tertiary level studies in the UAE, we do believe we can identify areas of concern that can assist us and other colleagues in supporting this particular social group of prospective students.

IV.RESULTS

In this section, we begin with presenting reasons why the students chose to pursue a teaching degree. Motivation to pursue the B. Ed. teaching degree is strongly linked to how students view themselves in the various nested systems that make up their life experiences. Following this, we report on the challenges they face and establishment of support strategies used to complete their degree.

4.1 Motivation to become a Teacher

Motivation to become a teacher was described by the majority of participants as valuing education, wanting to be an educated woman, expressing a love of learning and teaching and eventually wanting to be a successful teacher. These factors relate to how they view themselves as individuals. Several participants claimed that having a university degree is a personal goal – an achievement: *I desperately need my degree; I do not like to sit at home and do nothing with only a high school certificate.*

Another motivating factor expressed by the majority of participants was the fact that the teaching profession is for women and is culturally accepted by their family. They claimed their spouse and parents preferred them to work in gender segregated environments. The majority confirmed that they themselves felt more comfortable working as a teacher in an all female environment with limited mixed gender interaction: *I prefer to work in a female only environment.*

When asked what motivates you to pursue teacher education, the majority mentioned that they would be able to teach their own children and their siblings. Several mentioned that going through the college had given them the knowledge, skills and strategies to effectively teach their children, monitor their development, deal with issues and positively contribute to their lifelong learning and development: *It is not just to be a teacher but to gain knowledge so that I teach my children.*

The majority of the participants considered that as a teacher they will make contributions to their nation. They were motivated to prepare the future generation, be part of the change movement and have a positive impact on the young students they teach by nurturing their minds and contributing to their development: *As a teacher, bringing up or raising good children is a benefit for the society.*

Encouragement and support from their spouse was another motivating factor in pursuing their teaching degree. Participants affirmed that their husbands felt comfortable that they will eventually be working in a female only environment and that having an educated wife would help in the development of their children. Some claimed that establishing financial stability was another motivating force for becoming a teacher: *Honestly he wants me to finish my degree and help him because he is the type of man who considers matters of husband and wives helping each other.*

4.2 Challenges

Participants expressed family and college responsibilities as major difficulties impeding their academic standing. Multiple non-college commitments and responsibilities interfered with their college work. Due to these responsibilities, the students expressed time constraints influencing their student academic status, perceptions and ability to persist. They felt limited acceptability and support for their 'student' role status both on and off campus. Challenges presented relate to: lack of support from spouse and extended family members, role conflict and lack of college support.

4.2.1 Lack of Support from Spouse and Extended Family

While the participants expected a great amount of consistent social support from their spouse and extended family members, many reported an absence and consequently the effects of stress of fulfilling college requirements were not buffered. There were students who confirmed modest amounts of social support. However, this vacillated or diminished as their 'student' role continued over time: *My husband and my husband's family were not so encouraging to me. Up to this moment I don't see any support from them.*

4.3 Role Conflict

Although these married students were achievement oriented and motivated to succeed, they often had other roles and responsibilities competing for their time and attention. In addition to their role as 'student', they typically reported having roles that included wife, parent and family member. Most of the participants reported their primary role was that of wife and parent and the role of student necessarily occupied secondary status. They believed that family, especially children, needed to come first and their student obligations were met only after all other responsibilities were completed. As full-time students, they expressed vulnerability to the strain and conflicts resulting from multiple role obligations encountered. Perceptions of student demands followed by family obligations were the best predictors of role conflict and role burden: *If I give time to my study, I have to ignore my children and visa-a-versa.*

Many students reported they felt as if the work they are expected to do never ends and being frequently preoccupied with one role while performing another was stressful. In other words, if they were taking care of children and home responsibilities, college demands were always present in their minds; conversely, while doing college work, that felt guilty about neglecting their children and household tasks. Some students reported that, at times, they felt that they did not perform any role adequately. Others reported that because their student role had a lower priority than family responsibilities, they often did not complete college assignments until their children and home responsibilities were met and this had ramifications: *Because of the pressure, I became careless as a mother and wife. I feel depressed because my son's achievement in Math differed negatively from when I used to teach him.*

4.4 Lack of Support from College

The nature of the institution itself did not greatly affect the students' needs; rather it was their status as married women which dictated their needs. Students commented that they realized they differed from other unmarried college students and this led to remarks that they needed external and internal faculty and systemic support to successfully participate in and complete college requirements: *We should be treated differently than the unmarried students and faculty should consider this.*

Participants perceived that not only did they receive little by way of social support from their spouse and extended family members but, also, from the college in terms of continuous support and flexibility:

- The majority of students reported that a definitive communication gap between the college and the students proved to be a stress contributor. The absence of student counseling services contributed to the communication gap: *We don't have counselors to advise us in our enquiries.* Participants also noted that only few faculty members and lecturers are aware and supportive of their status and needs: *I wish we could have supportive lecturers.*
- Inflexibility in course scheduling was viewed by participants as another aspect making the college less attractive to the married students. The absence of course delivery options such as online courses, weekend/evening course attendance options and compressed courses were considered disadvantageous to the married students in giving them the freedom to schedule their time so as to accommodate family and college responsibilities:

   I wish we were given the chance to select the mode of study. Married students need to select their timetable - morning or afternoon.

- The majority of married students expected specific on-campus consideration because of their married social status. They claimed they had anticipated that their unique situations would afford them some flexibility when events or situations out of their control that needed their input eventuated: *We need a well-equipped nursery, a better cafeteria, larger classrooms and library, and clubs.*

4.5 Ramifications of Challenges

Underestimating their own academic and personal capabilities and adjusting to somewhat conflicting role demands were sources of apprehension for the married students. However, positive self-evaluation and commitment to the 'student' role directly increased their persistence to continue and also contributed to their growing sense of ease in adjusting and juggling multiple role obligations. Achieving good academic standing positively affected their outlook and an increased commitment to their student role promoted their ability to cope with the challenges and continue the journey to attain their degree. Their commitment to what it means to be a 'student' nevertheless had both positive and

negative consequences.

Their commitment to the student role contributed to increased family and personal distress. The students expressed being torn between family and student commitments creating an imbalance in role adjustment. The breakdown in their ability to meet family and academic expectations led to symptoms of stress. The majority agreed that child care issues, family scheduling conflicts and household responsibilities are stressors that add strain in their lives. A critical factor in their ability to manage this stress was related to the acceptance and support they received from their spouse, extended family members and the college.

Some participants reported that their role as 'student' and the time constraints involved had negatively interfered with their marriage: *I have many problems with him (her husband).*

Many others reported guilt feelings related to their children. Students with young children felt the most strain and depression: *My children are completely in a state of mess.*

Although students indicated that they had experienced great amounts of stress, they also expressed satisfaction with deciding to enter the college and enrolling in the B. Ed. teaching degree. They claimed their participation in the degree course had increased their self-esteem largely through their ability to achieve academically: C*oordinating between my study and my kids study was so difficult, but, I managed to proceed and finish my education.*

The non-normative role married students adopt while pursuing their degrees combined with multiple role conflicts, role and time constraints, family stress, course scheduling conflicts, gaps in communication within the institution, common feelings of guilt, stress, and exhaustion caused some to seriously contemplate quitting:

> *After I had my last baby, I went through a very difficult period. I left the baby in the hospital and returned to college. Although I decided to quit and care for my son, my friends helped me change my mind.*

4.6. Support Strategies

Support strategies are presented accordingly: at the family level, support provided by the spouse, immediate and extended families and the family infrastructure is portrayed; at the college level, factors associated with the college are mentioned. Government support is noted by a few participants but worthy of noting here in line with policy promoting women in education.

4.6.1 Family Support: Spouse

Despite some evidence indicating that limited and/or sporadic support given by the spouse formed part of the challenges, a high response rate attested to spousal support to continue with their studies. Comments that spouses modify their behavior to show acceptance of their wives' situation is considered a form of support: *At the beginning when he sees me busy he used to complain but later on he just leaves me alone.* For some spouses, having a wife who is a degree holder is a source of pride leading to their encouragement of her pursuing and completing the B. Ed. teaching degree: *He was not educated not even high school certificate so he was happy to have an educated wife.* Support given results from negotiated identification of mutual benefit accrued during and following the obtaining of the degree. Here a 'give and take' reciprocal approach sums up the situation: *When I work, I will support him financially.*

The support given by their spouse takes the form of:

> ***Motivation.***
>
> > *Tells me that my daughter should motivate me to keep studying; He supports me psychologically; He always supports me and says that all of this will end one day and he provides a suitable environment for me to study; He even keeps telling my children that your mother should study and get high grades so he understands .*

> ***Child minding.***
>
> > *He will take my son outside to play with him so I can study and concentrate; He takes away some of the responsibility; He spends all the time with my daughter while I am busy; When the children shout, he takes them out and leaves me for my study.*

> ***Education.***
>
> > *He is familiar with the computer and he explained the Math for me; Whenever I get stuck and feel I can't think I ask him and he gives me ideas...I would say from the beginning why did I tire myself...he has a lot of ideas Ma shaa Allah; OK as a student he allows me the time I want to finish studying. If I have a project, he sometimes spends hours with me cutting and pasting.*

> ***Financial.***

He brings or buys me anything that is related to the projects; He provides me with everything; He does not use the stipend but keeps it for my own expenses; I remember that when I did not have a driver, he rented a daily taxi for me to take me to college and pick me up.

Shouldering extended family responsibility. *He says it is up to me supporting his family…it's your call; My husband accommodates my circumstances; He doesn't complain if I'm busy and I can't visit his mother.*

Family Support: Immediate and Extended Family. Support given by immediate and extended family members is related to child minding and is provided by the mother and/or mother-in-law: *Especially when I have exams or projects, my mother and my siblings look after my daughter.*

Family Support: Household Systems and Structures. All participants claimed they had support from people employed by them or their extended families to take care of household duties (see Table 1). The highest number of responses indicated access to housemaids in completion of household chores: *I live with my husband's family and I have a maid but she does not have anything to do with the baby. She does the cooking and cleaning;* and nannies for child minding purposes: *I have a nanny who looks after my daughter when I go to college.* Participants also drew attention to family employed drivers facilitating transport to and from college: *My husband provides a driver for me to take me to college.*

4.7. College support:

The nature of support offered by the college is presented according to the following categories: support from faculty, support from student services and systemic support which include aspects of academic programming and structures.

College Support Faculty. Students claimed that some lecturers understood their position and were supportive: *Some college mentors are very cooperative and consider our needs. They try to facilitate any difficulty facing the mentees. They try to understand our married situation.*

College Support, Student Services. Students' comments indicate that support received from student services falls under the categories of: facilitating communication between the student and lecturer, providing information of a general nature and providing overall care and support: *They helped me in my pregnancy. I know they are doing their best according to the power given to them.*

College Support Systemic. There are policies and procedures initiated by the college to generically support all students. One such example is provision of a yellow card which allows students to exit the college without seeking special permission from the administrator. Yellow cards have been granted to those students who have signed permission from their male guardian (father or spouse) to make their own decisions concerning exiting the college during lecture times: *Now after I have the yellow card I feel much better. I can go out and come back without the need for permission.* Some students commented that the general environment or college ethos is one of care: *I always say that our college is much better than other colleges as they appreciate and tolerate the students.*

Government Support. Four students mentioned that the financial support or stipend they received from the government is essential in helping them complete their degree:

> *The government is supporting us by all means. The government supports us financially. Some girls believe that the stipend is not enough but I say it is enough for a student and the government has supported and provided us with all we need and we should say thank God and appreciate our government.*

V. DISCUSSION

There is no doubt that the education of women is seen to be essential and necessary for the construction of a new society (Al-Qazzat, 2003). Current statistics attest to the significant improvement and the remarkable expansion of educational opportunities at all levels available for Arab women (Gokulan, 2012). This study of the married female Emirati students at the college completing their B. Ed. teaching degree amidst the many challenges they encounter yields interesting findings. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's nested systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and socio-cultural influences on role determinants, it is possible to account for the many layers of challenges they face in pursuit of their B. Ed. teaching degree. It is suffice to say that at all levels (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem) the married female Emirati student is confronted with shifting contextual determinants on a daily basis. Calls for economic, social and education reform at the macrosystem level have caused a shift in how they perceive of themselves as future contributors to the growth and future development of Abu Dhabi (Al-Qazzat, 2003). At the microsystem level, they experience conflicting role expectations caused by disparate college and family demands. At the college level, they have to meet course requirements within set boundaries generically applicable to all students. This causes the married women with family role obligations and the pregnant student with health care issues stress. At the family level they

have role obligations as wife, mother, daughter and daughter-in-law. A proliferation of different role types produces an over burdening of responsibility which then leads to claims of frustration and feelings of despair. At the mesosystem level where the demands of the college and home are most poignantly felt, we see an acceptance of both world realities and the emergence of negotiation, adjustment and modification type behavior patterns to establish support strategies used as buffers to help them succeed. The data analysis has revealed that the way in which married female Emirati students manage the challenges and utilize their support strategies produces a kind of resilience where a determination to succeed is an option they choose.

The existence of this group in a public educational institution is an example of a growing trend for married women to engage in education with intentions to contribute towards the future growth and development of Abu Dhabi. The uncovering of the actual situation that exists in support of the married female Emirati student at this college raises issues of a systemic nature in meeting the needs of this group. The married status of these women is not yet officially recognized by the college; that is, married and unmarried women are not distinguished by the institution as having separate needs. If the married woman's status was officially recognized then course delivery schedules could be altered to facilitate greater freedom of choice and control in managing the demands of their various roles in individual ways. The role of the college would then not simply be to graduate people in an established number of years but to develop strategies to attend to individual needs of this diverse social group in higher education.

One of the main deficiencies for a contextually relevant discussion on meeting the needs of married female Emirati women undertaking tertiary level studies is the lack of availability of current research and authentic data that allows an evaluation of program/organization structures aimed at supporting this group of students. Answers related to how best to support married women participating in tertiary level studies should come from a substantial research base which reports on their true situation according to life circumstances.

In the case of the married female Emirati student, their life circumstances showed many aggravating factors that present themselves as barriers to their completion of the degree. For example, once a student has children, the home/family/student role conflict she experiences affects her ability to manage the pressures of studies. Despite this, the desire to continue and complete the degree persists. Furthermore, the data analyzed revealed that married female Emirati students use the degree as a stepping stone for future success. They have dreams and aspirations to be successful in the workforce. This is a reflection of opportunities created at the societal level by the government for this social group to succeed in an environment of growth and change that abounds in Abu Dhabi. Without opportunities of access to education and institutional support, married women with children will be excluded from higher education serving as a mechanism for increased social mobility. This social dimension aspect of tertiary level studies should be included in all discussion of educational opportunities that draws on women to contribute towards a country's growth and development.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS TO EMPOWER THE MARRIED FEMALE EMIRATI STUDENTS

This study demonstrated that married female students' experiences at this college are varied with many diverse influences affecting their student status. Stressors and social support networks impact their ability to successfully participate in and complete college requirements. By studying the challenges and support structures of married female Emirati students within the conceptual framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and socio-cultural factors, approaches for helping this group reduce their levels of stress are made. The approaches are linked to insights contained in this article and are not considered exhaustive. They are designed to generate thoughts of ways to empower and alleviate stress felt by the group. The following are considered viable: 1) The college will need to develop flexible and innovative approaches in the delivery of the B. Ed. teaching degree. 2) The college can empower married female Emirati women by continuing to develop inclusive policies and procedures that are contextually and culturally relevant. 3) Tertiary level institutions that enroll married female students need to conduct research from an ecological perspective to fully understand their role obligations in multiple contexts. Utilizing the data gained, they need to make systemic decisions on what will empower these students to attain their degrees. A 'one size fits all' mentality will not suffice.

In conclusion, the married female Emirati students in this study demonstrated a commitment to the educational process, a willingness to succeed against odds, and a desire to make a valuable contribution to their families, the college community and to the nation. They have valuable knowledge and experiences to contribute and are an asset to the college. If this college and other educational institutions wish to attract this growing body of students, then they need to be proactive in meeting their needs.

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