

Reflections on Motherhood and Earning a Doctorate: Yes, You Can Have it All (Just Add a Dash of Superwoman)

[Kirby Grabowski](#)

Teachers College, Columbia University

Abstract

On more than one occasion, I've heard that writing a dissertation is comparable to giving birth. After having just given birth to a dissertation and a baby within a couple of months, I can say that writing a dissertation is decidedly nothing like having a baby. One of the most obvious differences is that at the end of the day, you don't get to "hand in" your real baby to the folks in the Office of Doctoral Studies after you've been up all night for months! However, upon further reflection (and the fortuitous phenomenon that leaves your mind absent of any memories of the birth soon after the fact), I do see a couple of similarities. The first is that you get to be part of an exclusive club only made up of moms who know exactly what you have been through to get to the other side. The second similarity is that, whether dissertation or child, you pour your heart and soul into your "baby." In both cases, the beautiful fruits of your labor are a part of you forever.

Finishing a doctorate is no easy feat. Between coursework, certification exams, professional development, jobs, and a dissertation, there doesn't seem to be room for anything else. When you add family obligations, leisure, errands, and other pursuits to these academic pressures, it's a wonder anyone makes it to the end in one piece. As luck would have it, the doctoral Programs in TESOL and Applied Linguistics at Teachers College saw an inordinate number of births this past year, of both dissertations and babies—and for some, the two births were nearly simultaneous. Apparently, these students—myself included—didn't get the message that trying to have it all can be unimaginably difficult. Our programs also have several students who have been balancing motherhood and doctoral work for quite some time. Even with the unexpected trials and tribulations that define life as a mom, they forge ahead, following their dream of earning a doctorate (albeit often more slowly than they would have otherwise). As one of the newer moms in the mix, seeing these veteran miracle workers gracefully balance their two worlds over the past few years has been an inspiration to me—one that convinced me that I, too, could have it all. It is in the spirit of appreciation for these women that the idea for this Forum was born (pun intended).

The following Forum contributions are from moms pursuing an Ed.D. in TESOL or Applied Linguistics at Teachers College. Their writing is meant to instruct, inspire, and make you laugh. It is our hope that this Forum will help curious readers understand that being a mom and a graduate student do not have to be mutually exclusive. Yoko Ameriks, a 2009 graduate, provides step-by-step advice for tackling a dissertation with a young child at home, and another on the way. Catherine diFelice Box, both a veteran mom and a recent new mom again, proves that being a mother can make you a better student. Jee Wha Dakin, another veteran mom, elegantly captures the diametrical opposition between dissertation writing and child rearing. Donna DelPrete, also one of our veteran moms, stresses the importance of flexibility and balance in motherhood. Kristen di Gennaro talks about the paradigm shift that comes with a new baby, and how our former intellectual self can be harmoniously blended with a new identity as Mom. Heather Tatton-Harris uncovers the humor that

can be found amidst sleepless nights and scatological mishaps. Finally, Santoi Wagner, a veteran mom of two and 2009 graduate, captures her daughter's amusing perspective on Mom's life as a doctoral student.

I'd also like to acknowledge the student-mothers who were unable to contribute to our Forum. In most cases, their inability to participate was a matter of the time commitment involved —this should be an indication of how little time moms have for additional pursuits! They are Rosette Finneran, Ji-Young Jung, Hyunjoo Kim, Hyun Jung Kim, and Maria McCormack.

Kirby Grabowski recently defended her dissertation in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include the assessment of pragmatic knowledge, language test development, and language program evaluation. She is also the Managing Editor of Teachers College, Columbia University, Working Papers in TESOL and Applied Linguistics.

Commentaries

Becoming Dr. Mom

Yoko Ameriks

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

Catherine diFelice Box

East is West

Jee Wha Dakin

Academic Life and Motherhood: A Skillful Balancing Act

Donna DelPrete

“A New Language Tester is Born”

Kristen di Gennaro

How Motherhood Might Be Like a Volcano

Heather Tatton-Harris

“I Don't Know What My Mummy Does”

Santoi Wagner