Time-Management Strategy as a Parent and a Ph.D. Student

"Professional Development Corner" article by Yoko Mori, University of Otago

Time management for Ph.D. students is a crucial matter—even more so if you are a parent. Both a parent and a Ph.D. student myself, I would like to share my insights from Asian philosophy: "The bamboo that bends is stronger than the oak tree that resists." This philosophy comes in various forms and contexts. It is embodied, for instance, by the image of "willow trees" that sway along with the wind. Rather than being rigid, lend yourself to the flow. Adapt as necessary to live a meaningful life—the important point is, though being flexible, the bamboo or willow is firmly rooted in the ground. In my context, as I sway in the wind as a Ph.D. student, I am firmly rooted in the ground as a parent. I have come to apply this philosophy through trial and error. In the initial stage of my Ph.D. journey, I tried to accomplish everything on my plate—TOO ambitious!

Leaving room for flexibility in planning schedules is a very important time-management strategy for Ph.D. students. To illustrate, I divide my plans roughly into "to do" and "want to" lists. I include core study plans (e.g., workshops, meetings, project timeline) and my daughter's school events that require my attention in my "to do" list. At the same time, I keep my "want to" list (e.g., going to the gym, shopping, having coffee with my friends) in my head. In this way, I try to avoid stress by being unable to accomplish "want to" items—even if I don't get to accomplish them, I needn't feel bad. They "didn't exist" anyway! As a matter of fact, leaving room to play around with the items on this list and finding the best moment to accomplish them creates enjoyment in itself. However, achieving balance between the two requires attention. I see this equilibrium like a seesaw. An occasional kick from the other end ("want to" list) invites motivation and productivity. So, at times, it is important to consciously prioritize items from the "want to" list. Yes, this is also an essential part of a Ph.D. student's journey!

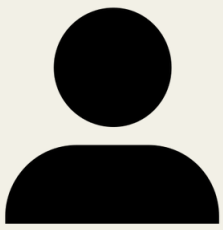
Meanwhile, what about time-management for my little one? Where does she fit in? Mother bamboo is firmly rooted in the ground as a parent. So basically, when I am with her, "OUR time" becomes the top priority. How is this possible when the "to do" list is always full? The point is inviting her to participate in my "to do" list activities. Teamwork is a form of bonding! Occasionally, I ask her to help me create slides or to listen to my presentations. My daughter seems to enjoy these collaborative moments, and I benefit from them, too. For instance, when preparing for presentations, if a child can understand the content, it is certainly clear enough—a great reassurance before the big day!

I also have conversations with my daughter regarding current topics (e.g., COVID-19, leadership, social justice, Sustainable Development Goals). Our exchange of views usually starts when we watch the news or have dinner together. With fewer preconceived notions of the world, very often, children invite us to think outside the box. I find these moments valuable for my daughter and me to grow together, and for our identity development. Many studies, especially in medicine, psychology, and education, have shed light on the importance of empathy and compassion in identity development. Viewing reflection of 'the self' and 'others' through a transcultural lens, a recent research study by Rodrigo-Alsina and Medina-Bravo (2016) reveals that this process of identity development is "an exercise in freedom and will" ("Conclusion," para. 3). That said, some issues like death, sickness, or unemployment may cause emotional and cognitive dissonance even for adults. However, I find that not avoiding conversations over such topics supports my daughter in becoming an understanding person who will be able to put herself into someone else's shoes in the future. Reflection time, however brief it may be, is indispensable for me as a parent with the responsibility of bringing up a child of the future generation.

Life can be complicated with multiple roles, but whether one sees it as a challenge or an opportunity will make a big difference in the Ph.D. journey. So far, I see it as an opportunity—a precious one that enables my daughter and me to grow together. At times, the bamboo may get very close to snapping with so many things on the plate. However, by following the essence of bamboo philosophy, I believe one is able to sustain a healthy Ph.D. life. With all its challenges, the Ph.D. journey is, indeed, full of worthwhile moments!

References

Rodrigo-Alsina, M., & Medina-Bravo, P. (2016). A reflection on identities, culture models and power. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, *40*. Retrieved from https://repositori.upf.edu/bitstream/handle/10230/32710/Rodrigo_ int_refl.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y



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