

YES I NEED HELP! A DAY IN THE JOURNEY OF ADULT LEARNERS PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION: A CARIBBEAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: Within more recent years, there has been a gravitation of non-traditional adult learners to higher education. Despite the motivational factors associated with this decision, it is evident that compared to the traditional learner, the non-traditional learner journey in higher education is equipped with numerous barriers. Such barriers can hinder or delay the process of completing higher education. On this premise, it is crucial that adequate support systems are not only identified but utilized while pursuing higher education. This qualitative study explored the perceived barriers of 100 non-traditional adults who pursued or attempted to pursue higher education and the support systems needed for them to be successful. The major themes that emerged as influential barriers were (a) financial, (b) family, (c) work, (d) time management, (e) psychosocial and (f) institutional. Regarding support systems needed to ensure success, the major themes that emerged were: (a) family, (b) spirituality, (c) friends, and (d) work. This study has practical implications for the adult learner, adult educator and higher education institution.

Keywords: Adult learners, Higher Education, Determination, Caribbean

Within the field of higher education, there has evidently been an escalation of adult learners returning to the classroom (Ross-Gordon, 2011) despite the countless barriers encountered while pursuing their academic quest (De Vito, 2010; Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009; Russell, 2006; Villarruel, Canales, & Torres, 2001). These motivated adult learners, despite such barriers, are yet fueled--whether intrinsically or extrinsically--to pursue higher education.

The appeal to establish perceived motivation and support for adults pursuing higher education is not new to the field of adult education. Original work of Cross (1978); Cross and Zusman (1977) were the underpinning for many scholars in adult education. Since the original discussion, there has been much contribution regarding motivation in more recent years. Bowl (2001) identified several factors that motivate the adult learner to pursue higher education, which included a combination of economic necessities due to unemployment, career change or promotion. Despite the motivational factor, it is evident that adult learners would encounter some barriers. Weil (1989) affirmed adults entering higher education can experience shock, and a sense of personal powerlessness. Additionally, many adult learners encounter the struggle for personal, academic, financial and emotional survival. As a result, many adult learners are afraid to return to higher

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education due to fear of failing, instability, barriers associated with pursuing higher education and inadequate support systems. In an attempt to conquer such barriers, it is evident that effective support systems are needed for adult learners while pursuing higher education to be successful. Such support systems can mirror kinship, family, financial and positive attitudes about the value of schools, all of which can assist adult learners while pursuing higher education (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003).

Study Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First it was intended to identify barriers that inhibit adult learners from pursuing or attempting to pursue higher education in the Bahamas. Second, it was intended to identify possible support systems adult learners identified as being instrumental while pursuing higher education. This study is significant because it provides insight into the adult learner regarding potential barriers that may be encountered while pursuing higher education, yet highlighting some support systems that are crucial for success. The information gleaned from this study is also critical for higher education institutions when designing and developing programs specifically for adult learners.

The theoretical framework that acts as a foundational platform for this study is The Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What are adult learners' perceptions of barriers that influence their attainment of higher education?
2. What are adult learners' perceptions of support systems needed to ensure success while pursuing higher education?

Literature Review

The Adult Learner

There is much variation when defining the adult or non-traditional learner in higher education. Non-traditional adult learners are customarily defined as individuals over the age of 21 entering higher educational institutions for the first time. However, some higher educational institutions consider 25 years and older as non-traditional adult learners (Bowl, 2001; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Weil, 1986.) Knowles (1980) identified adult learners as autonomous and self-directing. They pursue areas of interest to them. They accumulated a wealth of life experience and knowledge that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities and previous education. Adults are relevancy-oriented, and they must see a reason for learning something. Therefore, many adult learners who return to the classroom do so to either gain additional qualifications for job opportunities, career advancement or job promotion, so they can ultimately increase their financial income (Roths, Lemos & Goncalves, 2014).

Adult learners exhibit multiple characteristics. They manage a variety of social roles while pursuing higher education. Being a worker, spouse, or partner, parent and actively involved in community activities are a few examples. However, these many roles pose challenges for adult students to contribute time for academic study/work and involvement in college life (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Motivation of the Adult Learner

Adult learners are motivated to pursue higher education for a number of reasons such as to secure additional qualifications for opportunities for employment, or promotions which ultimately lead to financial gain (Rothes et al., 2014; Teowkul et al., 2009). It is imperative for higher educational institutions to understand the motives, beliefs and goals of adult learners to be able to promote enrollment, persistence and successful completion of courses (Rothes et al., 2014). Teowkul et al. (2009), defined motivation “as people’s needs and desires that influence their behaviors” (p. 27). Their study showed that the motivation for pursuing graduate studies for 321 Thai master and doctoral degree students studying at a large state university in Thailand were for self-development, career enhancement, career change and environmental factors. The achievement, recognition and growth, self-confidence and respect from others help with the self-development. Career enhancement is obtaining professional credentials needed for advancement, which also improves one’s income, financial stability, better benefits and so forth. Career change allows transition from one career path to another or changes from one area of specialty to another. Environmental factors relate to esteem and belonging; esteem from others, love, affection and being a part of a group or organization (Teowkul et al., 2009). Ultimately, adult learners are motivated to pursue higher education for a number of reasons, economic or rational motivation being the most common.

Barriers to the Adult Learner

Adults have many responsibilities that they must balance against the demands of learning. Due to these responsibilities, adults have barriers against participating in learning. Some of these barriers include lack of time, money, confidence, interest, lack of information about opportunities to learn, scheduling problems, and problems with child care and transportation (Lieb, 1991). Within the last decade, there has been much discussion in the literature regarding barriers that influence adult learners pursuing higher education distance and e-learning (De Vito, 2009; McGivney, 2004; Morris, Finnegan, & Sz-Shyan, 2005; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005) institutional (Falasca, 2011) or ethnicity (Villarruel, Canales, & Torres, 2001). The common theme that emerged, is adult learners compared to the traditional learner are confronted with a myriad of barriers.

The new phenomenon of online instructional learning has been growing rapidly for many years. Numerous researches have also shown there were no significant differences in students’ performances among online learning and face-to-face learning (Arbaugh, 2000; Johnson, Aragon, & Shaik, 2000; Neuhauser, 2002; Nichols, Shaffer, & Shockey, 2003).

However, four barriers identified were social interaction, administrative/instructor issues, learner motivation and time/support for studies (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).

Villarruel, Canales & Torres (2001) in their study on barriers experienced by Hispanic nurses revealed the more frequent barriers as financial, institutional, perceived discrimination by faculty and peers and cultural values such as family and gender roles. Within this study, it was also revealed that some barriers were equally viewed as bridges in higher education. McGivney (2004), whose focus was persistence in adult learning, revealed similar barriers of adults not completing higher education. Such barriers included personal factors, open and distance learners, gender differences, lack of family or partner support, financial, course related and institutional-related factors, inadequate pre-course information and guidance, perfunctory interviews, managing study time, institutions that are not 'adult friendly' and lack of support. Despite these barriers, research has shown that adult learners of any age can learn and succeed in their pursuits if they are afforded the opportunity, assistance, and support they need.

Support Systems

Although there is limited research on support systems for adults pursuing higher education, a number of support systems are paramount for adult learners to overcome barriers that inhibit academic success. Counseling support services (individual and group), cultural support services (parents, spouse, siblings, close friends), and systemic support (student-centered services) were identifiable supports to help adult learners overcome barriers and obstacles while pursuing higher education (Gary, Kling, & Dodd., 2004).

Counseling support services include individual and groups counseling services offered on campus or within the community. Individual counseling services help encourage and assist learners to overcome the barriers of anxieties and other emotional issues that the adult learner may experience while pursuing higher education. The group counseling services can assist support groups that emphasize effective transition adjustment to academic life and help learners to become cognizant of the expectations of higher education. Additionally, participants in the group counseling can meet others with similar concerns, where they realize other learners struggle too, and can support each other who share similar thoughts, feelings, anxieties, and emotional reactions (Gary et al., 2004).

The cultural support services which consist of relatives, partners, and close friends also aid in the academic success of the adult learner while pursuing higher education. Adult learners can feel empowered and less guilty about not spending time with family and friends if they receive support from family and friends. Furthermore, kinship support, family support and positive attitudes about the value of schools are a few findings that help young adults while pursuing their secondary education (Kenny et al., 2003). These kinds of supports were also found to be the case with adult learners while pursuing higher education. Having a strong support system from family members, and individual motivation help make adult learners' educational journey more meaningful and successful (Gary et al., 2004). Additionally, institutions that give information and/or spiritual support also help adult learners while pursuing higher education.

Systemic support which is at the institutional level includes student-centered services. The cooperation between counselors and staff in several campus departments with academic support services (e.g., tutoring), new student services (orientation programs, and child care services) would greatly impact the academic success of adult learners.

Method

Study Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

A qualitative design was employed in this study and was reflective of structured interviews. Approximately 100 in-depth interviews were conducted over a period of seven months. Participants were selected for this study utilizing convenience sampling. This sampling technique was utilized, because of feasibility and access to the participants (Andrews & Frankel 2010). The inclusion criteria for participants were: participants must have been 25 years or older, all genders, must have completed high school or have attempted to complete some higher education courses. Participants were informed of their rights not to participate in this study.

Data were qualitatively analyzed through open coding to establish themes and main concepts coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin 2008). Recurring topics in the text were recognized as themes and sub-themes utilizing the research structure provided by the research objectives, research questions and the theoretical framework. This process allowed a deeper understanding and explanation of issues that were being studied. To ensure greater validity and reliability, a peer reviewer read through the data to ensure themes and categories corresponded with the research questions.

Participants' Demographic Profile

There were a total of 100 participants in this study, local residents from The Bahamas, which consisted of 26 males and 74 females. The participants' age range varied from 25 to 51+ years. The educational level of the participants was reflective of participants who completed high school education and some college ($n=20$) to those who completed higher education ($n=79$). Employment status of participants varied. See Table 1 for Participants' Demographic Profile.

Findings

Research Question 1

What are adult learners' perceptions of barriers that influence their attainment of higher education?

The results from this study confirmed that non-traditional adult learners encounter numerous barriers while pursuing or attempting to pursue higher education. Participants were specifically asked in order of priority, what were the major influential barriers that prevented or influenced them while pursuing higher education. The major themes that emerged as influential barriers were (a) financial, (b) family, (c) work, (d) time management, (e) psychosocial and (f) institutional.

Financial

It was revealed that approximately 85% of the participants indicated that finance or the lack thereof was an inhibitor or influenced participants obtaining higher education. Some excerpts that represented the sentiments of the participants' financial concerns were:

Because I had to struggle with funding, it became a hassle to make payments for tuition and I really wished I was able to receive a scholarship or qualify for some other assistance. I have yet to return [to higher education] after two years but I am saving funds to go back.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	26	26
Female	74	74
Age Range		
25-30	39	39
31-35	27	27
36-40	20	20
41-45	7	7
46-50	4	4
51 and over	3	3
Marital Status		
Married	30	30
Single	54	54
Divorced	2	2
In relationship	9	9
Separated	4	4
Widow	1	1
Children		
Yes	64	64
No	46	46
Educational Level		
High School/Some College	20	20
Associates	29	29
Bachelors	37	37
Masters	3	3
Doctorate	3	3
Professional Certifications	6	6
Other	1	1
Employment Status		
Unemployed	19	19
Part-Time	7	7
Full-Time	74	74

Note. N=100

One participant, despite the constraints of finances, stated, "...lack of finances, I borrowed, begged and sacrificed to complete higher education." Meanwhile, other participants were compelled to undertake a second job. A married male doctoral student stated, "... I did some overtime to earn sufficient funds that were needed to obtain my degree." The sentiments of the other participants were that they had to manage their finances very carefully to ensure they could pay their tuition while other participants had to resort to student loans or social services for financial support.

Family

Approximately 48% of the participants identified a number of barriers associated with family as a crucial factor that hindered them from pursuing or obtaining higher education. The theme, family, included sub-themes: family commitment, childcare and responsibilities, lack of family support, and barriers associated with spouses and/or significant others. Some excerpts that echoed the experiences of the participants were: "Having to deal with my daughter full time and go to school full time was a challenge because family time is important. I had to help with homework, projects etc. along with my class work." A married male with two children explained, "It takes a lot of time, money and sacrifice of raising a family along with attending school. It's difficult balancing both." Another female participant explained, "Family obligations caused me to be reluctant to pursue higher education. I felt as if I was abandoning my younger children." It was also the sentiments of the participants that death, sickness and spousal separation and/or divorce also had a negative impact on the non-traditional learner pursuing higher education

Work

Approximately 35 % of the participants concluded that barriers associated with work influenced their obtaining or pursuing higher education. When asked specifically how work influenced the attainment of higher education, some participants explained, it was extremely difficult balancing work scheduled with class schedule, likewise balancing work assignments with school assignments. Further, in some instances it was difficult obtaining study leave, flexible work hours or employee rotation to attend classes. This situation resulted in participants either missing classes, taking a reduced course load which resulted in an extension within their respective programs or having to quit schooling. One participant indicated that because of her work commitment, the attainment of her Bachelor's degree, which was scheduled for four years, took her 15 years.

Time Management

Approximately 34% of the participants indicated that barriers associated with time management were obstacles to their obtaining or pursuing higher education. Most participants said the art of balancing time was a skill difficult to acquire. Most adult learners because of their respective social roles, family and work commitment found it extremely difficult to manage their time while pursuing higher education. The lack of time management had a significant impact on assignment completion, grades, project

meetings all directly associated with higher education. It was evident when participants were faced with the challenge of higher education compared to family and work commitment in most instances family and work commitment outweighed the desire for higher education.

Institutional

Approximately 34% of participants identified institutional barriers within the respective institution they were obtaining higher education as a barrier to obtaining or pursuing higher education. Institutional barriers included: registration and advisement process, course availability, course time, and overall institutional bureaucracy pertaining to non-traditional adult learners. Some concerns expressed by the participants were that the infrequency and inconsistency of courses offered was a challenge to complete higher education. One participant went to the extent of saying "Trying to get the classes I need for each semester is a test...classes are only being offered at specific times."

Furthermore, it was difficult for the adult learner who is employed full time with family responsibilities to take time off from work to stand in lines for course registration and to physically meet with academic advisors.

Psychosocial

Approximately 31% of the participants indicated that psychosocial barriers impacted their pursuing or obtaining higher education. Psychosocial barriers, in this instance, extended to include mental, emotional, physical, social and environmental factors. A number of the participants expressed concerns regarding the "emotional roller coaster" while obtaining higher education. One participant stated, "It seems stress and depression are quite normal for college and graduate students." Discouragement and lack of motivation were also apparent. Barriers associated with part-time enrolment was a general concern because students who were fully enrolled completed higher education quicker. Also, some adult learners that began the program when they did "dropped out" because of various barriers. This situation resulted in many students feeling discouraged and unmotivated. Additionally, many students expressed concerns that they have lost their former social life. The number of previous friends with whom they socialized diminished and were replaced with classmates whose focal point was class assignments.

Research Question 2

What are adult learners' perceptions of support systems needed to ensure success while pursuing higher education?

The results from the data revealed that support systems are needed to ensure the success of adult learners while pursuing higher education. The major themes that emerged were (a) family, (b) spirituality, (c) friends, and (d) work. Conversely, the data revealed that family and friends were identified as barriers that negatively impacted adult learners pursuing higher education. However, they were also identified as support systems needed to ensure the success of adult learners while pursuing higher education.

Family

The major theme that emerged as a crucial support system needed by adult learners pursuing higher education was family. Approximately 97% ($n = 97$) of the participants concurred with this support system. Family in this study included parents, spouses or significant other, siblings and extended family members. Most participants indicated that continuous encouragement, motivation, and financial assistance were needed by adult learners during their journey in higher education.

One participant explained the importance of family as a support system. She stated, "Family give[s] support and financial assistance...they also encouraged me during difficult times in school." Family also served as a motivational factor for adults pursuing higher education. A single mother explained, "I am no longer just doing things [pursuing higher education] for me but also my child. Knowing this causes me to hold on to my dream of finishing school and even pressing harder to obtain a new job." A male participant explained the importance of support from a spouse while pursuing higher education. He believes that spousal support is crucial and impacts the adult learner tremendously. He stated,

My girlfriend is just amazing. When I have a problem [while pursuing higher education] she is always there to support me mentally, physically as well as emotionally. The first thing she will do is pray for the wisdom, knowledge and understanding. It's hard to explain but once I have her support, my mentality is automatically programmed to persevere and pursues greatness in school.

Spirituality

The second theme that emerged was spirituality. Approximately 53% ($n = 53$) of participants revealed that spirituality as a support system was crucial while pursuing higher education. Spirituality in this instance included faith in God and prayers (individual and collective). Many of the participants were of the belief that they would not have been successful while pursuing higher education if it were not for their faith. Female participants authenticated this belief and stated, "My faith and spirituality was strengthening during this journey [pursuance of higher education]." Another participant stated, "I prayed for guidance and focus. I also believed and trusted in God throughout my walk in college. I knew He would be a provider and develop my mind." Other participants explained the importance of spiritual support from priests, pastors, and church members during their endeavor to pursue higher education via prayers, and fasting and prayers.

Friends

The third theme that emerged was friends. Approximately 33% ($n = 33$) of participants revealed that friends were a support system that was instrumental while pursuing higher education. Friends included both individuals that were enrolled in their respective programs and those who were not. Friends evidently served as a source of motivation to the participants during difficult times while pursuing higher education, in particular when participants were at the point of giving up. One participant stated, “My friends continued to push me to pass class and get good grades.” Friends were also instrumental within respective courses when the participants may have missed classes, assignments and needed support from peer during challenging times during their respective programs.

Work

The final theme of significance that emerged was work. Within this study, 74% ($n = 74$) of the participants were employed whether part-time or full time with financial obligations to self and/or family. Approximately 18% ($n = 18$) of the participants revealed that work as a support system is critical to the adult learner while pursuing higher education. The theme work included sub-themes of co-workers, administration and institution each of which had a significant but distinct roles as a support system. Many of the participants revealed that it was imperative that they received at level of support from co-workers and administration while pursuing higher education. This support was defined as encouraging words during difficult times, motivation or flexibility with work schedules and assignments. From an institutional perspective, some participants revealed that their respective workplaces provided financial assistance to help them complete higher education. Further, their institutions had policies and procedures that support employees desirous of pursuing higher education.

Discussion

Implication for Practice

The endeavor to pursue higher education by an adult learner is commendable.. However, the decision to pursue higher education should not be an individual decision but should require contributions from family, spouses and significant others who would all be impacted by the adult learner’s decision to pursue higher education. Unlike the traditional adult learner, who would transition to higher education immediately after high school, approximately 18 years or early 20’s and not encumbered with the constraints of life, the non-traditional adult learner does not have this luxury. On this premise, it is strongly encouraged that adult learners properly plan for the journey of higher education taking into account possible barriers, opportunities, and strategies to ensure success.

It is paramount that the nontraditional learner does not only examine self, but is cognizant of the types of higher education institution that would be a best fit; understand the institutional accommodations, policies and procedures with regard to the adult learner. Additional factors that should be considered by the adult learner from an institutional

perspective are: mode of delivery of courses, enrollment requirements, availability of financial aid, and support systems for the adult learner and course requirement with the thought of work/school balance as an underpinning.

More than 30% of students can be classified as adult learners within higher education. Therefore, from an institutional perspective, it is crucial that proper provisions, policies and procedures should be reflected to accommodate the adult learner. Likewise, it is paramount that there are proper support systems necessary to ensure the success of the adult learner. Such support systems may include financial aid, adult learning centers, and credit for experience, counseling/advisement personnel and a mentoring program.

Lastly, it is imperative that adult educators understand the concept of "the adult learner," characteristics of the adult learner, barriers associated with the adult learner, and support systems needed by the adult learner in comparison to the traditional learner. It is paramount that adult educators are cognizant of the principles of adult learning and utilize it as a theoretical framework for all classes, assignments, and assessments. As it relates to the adult educator and the adult learner, educators must learn why their students are enrolled (the motivators) and determine what is keeping them from learning. Furthermore, adult educators must plan their motivating strategies. An effective strategy involves showing adult learners the relationship between training and an expected end (Lieb, 1991).

Positive reinforcement by the adult educator can improve learning, as can proper timing of the instruction. Learning results from stimulation of the senses. Students learn differently and have different learning styles. Adult educators should incorporate different methods to ensure all of the learning styles are being stimulated to increase optimal teaching success.

Additionally, the learners come to the course with precisely defined expectations. Unfortunately, there are barriers to their learning. The best motivators for adult learners are interest and selfish benefit. If they can be shown that the course benefits them practically, they will perform better, and the benefits will be longer lasting (Lieb, 1991).

Conclusion

The results from this study contribute greatly to the field of adult education, higher education and workforce education. It provides awareness of some barriers adult learners encounter while pursuing higher education. Additionally, it provides insight on perceived support systems to ensure the success of the adult learner while pursuing higher education. The findings gleaned from this study are consistent with the literature within the fields of adult education and higher education regarding barriers the adult learner encounters while pursuing higher education. Furthermore, the support systems referenced provide practical guidance to the adult learner pursuing higher education.

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