

Caribbean Women Finding a Balance Between Returning to Higher Education and Being Successful: Voices from Jamaica

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Abstract

Over the last two decades there has been a dramatic increase in continuing education enrollment among non-traditional-aged females both in Jamaica and overseas. This article explores the academic experiences of Jamaican women returning to college, placing emphasis on support services within the higher education institutions attended and on these women's successes, challenges and strategies for successful academic and social integration into the higher education environment. A narrative inquiry and a feminist approach to research making women more visible provided this study's findings, which include the women's valuing education, feeling accomplished, and feeling empowered. Integration into these environments, a major challenge, includes physical and psychological pressures, family obligations and financial difficulties. Amplifying these women's voices is of the essence, in understanding the efficacy of this student population. Recommendations for further research are provided and the study's findings hold significant implications for non-traditional/part-time/evening college students in higher education in Jamaica. Recommendations include, higher education institutions and policy makers learning more about the academic experiences of women over 25, and increases in the flexibility of the environment as it relates to support services.

Keywords: *Academic experiences; higher education; Jamaica; lived experiences; non-traditional students; women*

Institutions of higher learning have evolved, and as such, can no longer assume homogeneity. The changing demographics of higher education include an influx of students over the age of 25 years old, many of whom are returning to complete their degrees or who may have delayed college until they are older than the traditional-aged student. The challenge of accommodating these older students has been overwhelming for some higher education institutions. With reference to the Caribbean, these same students have created additional challenges because they are more demanding of faculty and the higher education institution to which they are enrolled, which results in their academic experiences being different from those of traditional-aged students.

Problem Statement

History reveals that women have always been neglected both in research and have been less likely to have shared their experiences. That women dominate higher education today in terms of performance and enrollment in contemporary Jamaican society is noteworthy, as decades ago, the system favored men and Hunte (1978) in his ground breaking study, found that between 1710-1834 the educational organizations were analogous to those of England and favored men. However, Senior (1991) highlights that since the 1960s there has been an increase in the equality of education opportunities between sexes, and women in the Anglophone Caribbean have taken full advantage of this. Likewise,

Bailey (2003) highlights how women dominate the higher education at all levels across the region. Howe (2003) noted that there was almost a 2:1 ratio of females to males with a total of 15,950 females and 7,978 males registered at the University of the West Indies in both its on-and off-campus programs. In close examination of all tertiary institutions in Jamaica, male enrollment stood at 9,955, and female 19,583, excluding enrollment from the University of the West Indies with the largest pool annually (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010). With such increasing enrollment, it is important to understand the challenges returning students face as well as to highlight their successes because the majority of these returning students are women, and more so, the higher education landscape has now changed where more women are now enrolled in college compared to former years when the system was designed to accommodate men.

In the context of this study, understanding more mature female students' academic experiences and the reasons for their return is important. Thomas (2001) suggests that the terms "reentry" and "returning women" became popular in the 1970s and were used to describe the cohort of women who did not complete higher education at the traditional age, but returned to school while simultaneously maintaining other responsibilities such as full-time employment, family commitments, and other obligations of adult life. Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) note that for the past decade, the number of students entering postsecondary institutions immediately following high school has progressively decreased. Conversely, the registration of non-traditional students, defined as "mature," "reentry," or "adult" learner over the age of 25, has substantially increased (p.141) and women are in the majority.

Consistent with these arguments, Beckles, Perry, and Whitley (2002) and Howe (2003) express similar sentiments, that in the Anglophone Caribbean, these students over the age of 21 have created additional challenges for higher education institutions. These students are not easily satisfied with the quality of teaching and learning because they have high standards, and many are stressed as a result of family and other commitments. For this study, focus was placed on non-traditional/part-time/evening college female students, their academic experiences, their reasons for return, and the support they receive from institutions as they pursue their studies.

In support of women and education, Ward and Westbrook (2000) put forward that non-traditional female students occupy every fourth seat in the classrooms of U.S. state-supported colleges and universities with a similar trend in Jamaica. Higher education institutions are faced with the task of examining the role they play in meeting the needs of non-traditional students, especially women who are returning at a rapid rate; consequently, the academic experiences of non-traditional female students are needed to inform emergent scholars, as well as higher education institutions.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines the academic experiences of women in higher education in Jamaica, specifically women who are 25 years and older and, have returned to school to continue their education. The women in this study are identified as non-traditional students. From a Jamaican perspective, these women are acknowledged as part-time/evening college students, since Jamaican scholars have not formally began to address them as "non-traditional" as they would be called in other parts of the world, such as North America and Europe. Neither have Jamaican scholars formally addressed the issues pertaining to non-traditional students; their academic experiences, reasons for returning to pursue further studies, and unique needs. Emphasis is placed on non-traditional female students' reasons for returning; the support they receive from family; support services within the institution they attend; their successes,

challenges and barriers; and their strategies for successful academic and social integration into the institutional environment.

Such an investigation seeks to provide a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the challenges, motivations, and efficacy of this student population. In the course of this study, these women have described their personal adjustments to college expectations and the extent to which they have engaged in support services that facilitate their persistence. This is a significant contribution because the narratives of these Jamaican non-traditional/part-time/evening college female students' academic experiences are almost nonexistent elsewhere in the literature.

Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

It is extremely difficult for women, as a group, to break with tradition, to challenge customs, and to dispel the myths about their place in society. Marxists and materialist feminists have shown how women's position is different from men's, and so too are their lived realities, Hartsock (1997). Because Marxists and materialists feminists have shown how women's realities are different from men's, I have used a feminist standpoint epistemology to inform the exploration of Jamaican women's academic experiences in higher education, as Caribbean women's academic experiences is quite different from that of Caribbean men. Considering the historical context of Caribbean higher education institutions and their androcentric nature, to be informed about Jamaican women's academic experiences, knowledge-building is important. Consequently, Brooks (2007) states that a feminist standpoint epistemology is a unique philosophy from which such knowledge building can occur.

When the nature of the education system in the Caribbean is questioned, Ellis (1986) states that "by and large, the education that Caribbean women have received has not equipped them for such a task" (p.100) the task of taking a place in the society as leaders and educators. Granted, education is the key to women's empowerment, and a woman's educational level will affect the opportunities meted out to her in society. Therefore, by making women's experiences the "point of entry" (Brooks, 2007, p. 58) for research and scholarship, and by exposing the rich knowledge contained within women's experiences, feminist standpoint scholarship begins to fill the gaps on the subject of women in many disciplines. Using these perspectives allows for further exploration of the issues pertinent to non-traditional female students in higher education, as well as outside the academy.

Literature Review

Defining Non-traditional Students

Silverman, Aliabadi, and Stiles (2009) assert that at higher education institutions, there are four populations that have been historically underserved when compared to traditional students. These are commuter, part-time, transfer, and returning (CPTR) students. In light of such revelations, "non-traditional" is usually the term used to describe CPTR students; however, this term fails to account the realities faced by members of these groups who have needs different from those of "traditional" students (i.e., residential, full-time and first-year enrollees directly out of high school). Additionally, several definitions have been put forward, for example by research bodies such as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2002), and by researchers such as Roberts (2003) and Ting (2008). Ting defines non-traditional students as "those who have a variety of backgrounds and a different set of experiences. These include older students, women..., students of color, students from low-income families, and first generation college students" (p. 13).

The Anglophone Caribbean has also identified as new, a group of mature students over the age of 30, which is on the increase as well (Roberts, 2003). Specific to the NECS (2002) study, non-traditional students are defined as, not entering postsecondary education in the same calendar year he or she completed high school, attends college part-time, works full-time and has dependents. For this study, the target group was defined as non-traditional students who are identified as part-time/evening college students over the age of 25 years old, with or without dependents, who attend college part-time, work full-time, and are returning to complete or further their education.

The Academic Experiences of Non-traditional Female Students

Usually, women's education is often shaped by their experiences of formal schooling. Along that journey new identities may be formed, as "individuals are influenced by experiences in the world and continuously redefine themselves as a result of those experiences" (Baumgartner & Merriam, 2000, p. 3). For non-traditional female students, many may be able to construct knowledge through their educational experiences. The many narratives presented by Pascall and Cox (1993), Shiber (1999), and studies conducted by Schindley (1996), Clarke (2001), and Raj (2008) on non-traditional female students, depict changes in their personal lives as they embark on their educational journey. Consequently, the changes non-traditional female students go through, is as a result of their academic experiences.

Caribbean Women and Education

The experiences Caribbean women have in education is analogous to that of women in other parts of the world, for example the U.S.A, where history shows the education system being very androcentric. In examining trends in women's education in the Caribbean since the 1970s, the UNESCO Institute for Education (1999) found that women have taken more advantage of educational opportunities and have demonstrated higher levels of achievement than men. The UNESCO Institute for Education found two reasons for this unique situation in the Anglophone Caribbean. First, women are socialized to be independent, and second, the education of women tends to result in lower returns than similar investments in the education of males. That is to say, a woman needs to be more qualified to occupy the same job as a man, and this is evident in patriarchal societies such as the Anglophone Caribbean. Accordingly, the UNESCO Institute for Education states that one of the tasks of adult education is to address the limitations and concentrations of formal education and to foster a critical re-examination of the social, political and economic system as it reflects the situation of women.

Looking into classrooms across the Anglophone Caribbean, the typical undergraduate demographic has changed. With the expansion of education in the 20th century, girls began to participate more in education and, by the 70s, the percentage of females enrolled in schools had increased significantly compare to former years (Ellis, 1986). Figueroa (2004) mentions that on a number of indicators, women have come to dominate the education system, as the large number who enter and pass at the secondary and tertiary levels has received a great deal of attention. Despite this attention given to females in education, however, substantive research has only been done on education at the primary and secondary levels (Bailey, 2003), whereas the literature on adult women has emerged through analysis of "family and household structure and organization" (Gonzalez, 1985, p. 419). However, both of these sources of information are important as they provide salient points about the education system and the biases found within it, as well as those in women's broader social context.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (2010) study divulges critical information about the realities of Caribbean women, indicating that in higher education women easily exceed men in terms of the percentage of graduates in some parts of the Caribbean. The study reveals that

in 1994, 10.5% of young women and 9.6% of young men had at least 13 years of education. By 2007, the equivalent figures had risen to 17% for women and 13.4% for men. These figures indicate that women tend to stay in school longer in order to gain higher qualification than men and achieve equal footing. Specifically, the enrollment figures in selected independent tertiary institutions in Jamaica by gender show that there are more women enrolled. Figures show that of the total enrollment of 24,619, 7533 were males and 17,086 were females. Jamaica's enrollment in 2009-2010 for public tertiary level institutions indicates a total of 29,538, and of that, 19,583 were females and 9955 were males (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010). Based on these data, the Anglophone Caribbean education system favoring men have changed overtime, and by the early 90s had already began changing in Jamaica (Miller, 1992).

Research Methods

The data reported here come from a larger study examining the academic and lived experiences of women in higher education in Jamaica, specifically women who have returned to school to further their education. The study is qualitative in nature, which allows for an understanding of the academic experiences of non-traditional/part-time/evening college female students at their higher education institution. A detailed profile of these women's internal and external experiences and circumstances was formed, to allow for a better understanding of their academic experiences.

Narrative reports brought the study together (Creswell, 1998) and four rhetorical foci were examined: "audience, encoding, quotes, and authorial representation." Knowledge was built through a feminist approach of examining women's lived experiences, used here to capture the participants' in the academy. Verbal descriptions (Krathwohl, 1993) were gathered to gain insight into participants' experiences and perspective through a true-to-life voice (Creswell, 1998). The first-person accounts of experiences formed the narrative text, as narrative has the power to "organize and explain, to decipher and illuminate" (Packer, 2011, p. 103). In essence, narrative's power is in how it offers a way to see what is happening. In Clandinin and Connelly (2000)'s characterization, it also always demonstrates a kind of collaboration carried out between researcher and participants.

In this study, interviews were the main source of data gathered, which provided context and depth to the description and analysis (Saldana, 2011). Information gathered was at the core of disciplinary works feminist have fought for, because as Hesse-Biber, Leavy, and Yaiser (2004) note, research was always androcentrically biased. The participants told their stories, and according to Seidman (2006), telling stories is really a meaning-making process, because individuals are able to share their experience from their consciousness, thus giving researchers access to the most complicated social and educational issues from the perspectives of those experiencing them.

Twenty participants from five higher education institutions in Kingston, Jamaica, were selected using snowball sampling, which produced a sampling frame (Mason, 1996). The targeted group included female students who met the following criteria: attending school part-time to complete or further their education, undergraduate or graduate student, 25-years or older, single parents, married, and were working full-time. The data collection process included face-to-face interviews and was similar for each participant. Permission was obtained from the Office of Research Compliance, and the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects approved the study. Data collection was done through locating site/individuals, purposefully sampling, collecting data, recording information, resolving field issues, and sorting data (Creswell, 2007, p. 118). A consent form was signed by participants to confirm their participation in the research, and pseudonyms were used to identify each participant.

The design included semi-structured questions. Follow-up questions were asked and as way to encourage participants to expound on their answers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Most importantly, I asked the participants in the interviews to “reconstruct” their experiences, as according to Seidman (2006) participants who reconstruct rather than remember avoid the many impediments to memory that abound. Interviews allowed me to be confident in getting comparable data across subjects, as well as, to focus on the topic during the interview. Data was then analyzed and transcribed, which provided important cues to understanding the experiences of the participants in their particular setting (Packer, 2011). Most important to the study was the orthography of the written language; such as the way the participants expressed themselves, as this achieved a better understanding of the interview and the experiences shared by the participants.

The information was then reviewed, identified, and organized through comparison, after which the data were reduced into categories through colour coding. Coding allowed for a progressive process of sorting and defining the collected data (Glesne, 1999) as well as organization of the excerpts from the transcripts. Through analysis, transcription laid the foundation for more in-depth analytic work (Saldana, 2011) and provided cognitive ownership of, and potentially strong insights about the data gathered. Credibility of the data was ensured through consensus, and the validation strategy used was member checking (Creswell, 2007). To further ensure credibility and accuracy of the data, the transcripts were reviewed and tapes were played repeatedly and compared to the typed transcriptions.

Findings

The major themes that emerged from the participants’ interview patterns included, 1) valuing education, 2) academic accomplishment, and 3) empowerment. Challenges include physical and psychological pressures. The overarching category is academic experiences in higher education, which explored non-traditional female students’ experiences at their higher education institution. The findings revealed the academic experiences of twenty participants from five higher education institutions, and of which, twelve will be highlighted in the following sections. Pseudonyms are used for anonymity as the participants Ren, Kearol, Cady, Kay, Kee, Pat, Tryph, Trish, Ely, Ann, Roch and Ruth share their stories on: How do non-traditional female students describe their academic experiences in higher education?

Valuing Education

Non-traditional/part-time/evening college female students described their academic experiences as being of great importance, and as such the findings revealed that they valued their education. Hausmann, Tyson, and Zahidi (2011), believe that countries and companies will thrive if women are educated and engaged as fundamental pillars of the economy. This study revealed that education does have an impact on women, and this impact showed how much value they placed on their education. By valuing their education they have also increased in enrollment in higher education, and for the last 40 years, the majority of students in higher education have been women (Allen, Dean, & Bracken, 2008). Miller (1992) parallels Senior (1991) by stating that, in the Caribbean, there have been high levels of achievement by women and girls. For women on Jamaica, this study supports the observations of Miller and Senior.

Tittle and Denker (1980) state that, a non-traditional woman’s goal in higher education is to further prepare for employment. In describing their academic experiences, the participants in this study expressed that they were more prepared for employment by the time they graduated. Their academic experiences allowed them the opportunity to value their education. Their academic success, exposure to

technology, and opportunities to engage in various areas of research has made them more prepared for the world of work. Importantly, Kelly and Slaughter (1991) highlights the point that when women become qualified and secure their credentials through higher learning, they equip themselves for various professional positions. Ren who is a part-time student, and a teacher, expressed that her academic experiences had been great and said, “The knowledge I have gained has been phenomenal and I have been applying it, such as making inference and judgments while reading, so I am not limited in scope.” She also believed that, as a reading specialist, her academic experiences and the knowledge she gained had helped her to implement a reading program at her workplace with very limited resources. Pascall and Cox (1993) stated that the women in their study used education to assert the primacy of the self and to explore their limits. Like the women in Pascall and Cox’s (1993) study, Ren believes that the knowledge she has gained while in college has enabled her to be more proficient as a teacher, as she has also found instances where she had to explore her boundaries with limited resources.

Many of the women in this study expressed that their academic experiences gave them a greater appreciation for the courses they took while enrolled in college. Kearol who is a teacher at an all boys’ school reconstructed her experiences, and said, “I did a speech course, and I must say I feel very proud of myself that I have overcome pronouncing the letters.” Technology was an integral part of the participants’ academic journey. Cady also a teacher said, “I have learned that technology is very important...they encourage us to use it and use PowerPoint... make videos...so it is not just chalk and talk.” Having the opportunity to do research also helped the participants prepare for classes, thus reinforcing the importance of education and the value they placed on it. Kay is returning to pursue her bachelors in education, and for her, furthering her studies has been meaningful, as she stated.

I will always be doing research before going to teach my students, because children are getting very smart, so I don’t want to go in front of them and give them incorrect information because that will look bad on me, so at college they teach us to be well prepared and to be always researching and be current with our information, so I have always tried to do that.

Ann reflected on her academic experience as one that has been good, as it has prepared her for the world of work as teacher in training.

Now I have the opportunity to use what I learn while being trained as a teacher in my classroom. Make it very hands-on and explain to my students the significance of calculating the math problem the way it should and not just telling them. So because I am getting that exposure, I am now able to use it in my classroom, so being at college, I can now impart it that way. So, my experience has been good and if I should relive my life, I would not change this part; the academics it has been good and teaching has been good.

As Kee reflected on her academic experience at her college, she stated that, professionally, her academic experience being trained as a teacher has helped her conduct herself in a professional manner.

I have learned from my program as a teacher in training, because I am a more hands-on person, and I have realized that as a teacher, it is my duty to encourage students to be more tactile and creative, while I get them to be as involved as possible. In-terms

of knowledge, I found it to be very useful and even taking the Classroom Behavior and Management course was very helpful, as it has taught me that as a teacher, I have to know how to deal with the students, and as a teacher, I have to make the necessary steps to deal with the problems the students have instead of ignoring the problems.

Kee's academic experience illustrated that as a returning adult, she has had to respond to life changes as she prepared to become a trained teacher, and because she values her education, she has had the opportunity to also instill in and emphasize the importance of education to the students she teaches.

Academic Accomplishment

The women provided insights into their academic accomplishment as many had challenges and had to overcome such challenges in order to become successful. Kee mentioned that as a teacher in training, the practicum exercise was a significant educational experience as at the end she was prepared for the classroom. She also recalled how accomplished she felt when she received a scholarship. In order to receive this scholarship she had to demonstrate a financial need as well as well as being involved in community work. As a teacher in training, she also had to maintain good grades, which was part of her academic accomplishment.

I received a government scholarship, which helped me for the past two years, the CSJP, where I received \$165, 000 (JA) and that was of great help as long as I maintained As and Bs, which I did.

She also talked about making sacrifices in order to do well academically, and said.

I had to sacrifice a few things, but I was successful with the diploma and I have now moved on to the degree, where I am pursuing the Bachelor of Science to teach at the primary level.

When Cady enrolled for her second master's program, she immediately realized that she had to complete a practicum, and for her this was an important academic accomplishment.

The most significant thing for me was when we had to do Micro Teaching and we had to prepare lesson plans and teach. I had a number of things to fix, and I got a lot of feedback and understood what I needed to do differently and initially, it broke my spirit, because I have been teaching for so long and I thought that I had everything all figured out, and after getting the feedback and implementing what was suggested and making improvements, now I really feel accomplished, so to speak, because originally the first grade for the teaching experience wasn't my best grade, and then eventually I ended up getting one of the best grades in the group.

Most programs require the use of technology, and while some participants spoke of using their own computers to complete assignments, for Ruth, passing a technology course was a significant academic accomplishment.

I had to complete a methodology and technology instruction course. I am not computer savvy, but I was determined to do well, so what I did was I made sure I took all the notes that the instructor gave and studied really hard, ran all the tests, and I did well. So that really made a difference for me because there were technology students in the class and they received an A, so for me, my A was just as good as theirs or even better, as I had to work twice as hard.

Like Ruth, Tryph spoke of the challenges she encountered during her technology course; but she was able to overcome some of these challenges.

Because I am not so technology savvy, and when it was time to go to computer class, I just wanted that part to be done with quickly. I had to get help from my friends, but eventually I got the hang of it and eventually managed to overcome it.

The value these women placed on their education and the academic accomplishment they achieved were all a part of their successful academic experiences. And as Kabeer (2005) notes, access to education can bring about changes in the cognitive development ability of women as they act on conditions of their lives and gain access to knowledge. For these women in this study, maintaining good grades was important, and acquiring new knowledge and skills was phenomenal, as they embraced the academic changes that took place in their lives.

Empowerment

Seeing education as a necessity, Pascall and Cox (1993) reiterate that women return to the educational system in an attempt to change their perceptions of themselves, and the women agreed that education gave them authority and self-fulfillment. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, and Tarule (1996) suggest that the knowledge individuals construct results in empowerment and the ability to effect change in their personal lives. Kearol explained how her viewpoint had changed as a teacher and switching her field from social sciences to pursuing language and literacy.

Taking on a life changing experiences is important and if I can help to eradicate illiteracy then that would be wonderful, so if I am upgrading myself towards helping the youth in a better way, then I am all for it and I want to reach to a place where I can help the youth of tomorrow do things for themselves.

Kay mentioned how her academic experience has been good for her: "I can say I am more disciplined," and for Kerry, her program has helped her academically and influenced her outlook on the students she will teach in the future. As she described this program and its influence on her, she said:

Language and Literacy is a very good program, as it has led me to appreciate the English Language even more and enabled me to understand that prior to this course, I didn't really understand the English Language (laughter) and a lot of misconceptions have been cleared up from what I was taught in elementary school. The literacy level needs improvement in Jamaica, and if I can become a part of that change, then it would be great.

Pat's academic experience has also allowed her to reflect on her life, and she said she has seen some growth as an educator and aspires to be a lecturer one day.

I have grown as a teacher and the program has helped me to think differently as opposed to when I just started especially as it relates to my pedagogical skills and now I am even thinking much further than teaching in high school. I am looking at even moving from high school to college so that I can actually utilize my skills.

Participants also spoke of the connection with their lecturers and professors, and for Ren, she noted that her lecturers have influenced her in a positive way.

I have had lecturers that have left an impression on me and I was afforded the opportunity several times to be lecturer of the evening, [laughter] yes and I felt empowered, so that has really impacted me and maybe I will become a lecturer one day.

Formal schooling does shape women's experiences. According to Baumgartner and Merriam (2000), the journeys that women take that allow for the formation of new identities as individuals are influenced by experiences in the world, and women continue to redefine themselves because of those experiences. Tash explained how returning to school has impacted her life in a positive way, and said: "It has impacted my life as it makes me feel more mature and I have a sense of self worth and independence as a woman." Roch, who missed a couple of classes because she was not working and could not afford to travel to attend them, reminisced on her experience despite these setbacks, and said,

When I got my exam results, it was rewarding as I got some As and Bs, so again it makes you feel good and then you can go and look back at some things you have been thorough and it empowers you.

Challenges Identified When Returning to College

Returning to college to pursue further studies was perceived as very rewarding. The many narratives highlighted the importance of education to these women regardless of the myriad of challenges they faced and given their unique experiences as college students. Similar to other women who return to college, these participants returned for professional and personal growth. The challenges these participants identified with returning were physical and psychological pressures, family obligations, and financial difficulties.

Physical and Psychological Pressures

Several participants mentioned that they were tired as they tried to balance work and school; mention was made of time management, group work and the structure of their program. For others, it was a mixed reaction and some felt unmotivated. Roch's lack of motivation came when she returned to pursue her bachelor's at the same higher education institution after being out for two years. She explained that

when she returned as a part-time student, her experience was much different. “I have found that this institution has not put in a lot for part-time students, as most times we feel like outsiders.” When Kearol changed her major, she had mixed reactions because she now had to seek out help while trying to cope.

At times I feel a little bit out of it, because when I did the diploma, I was a social studies and computer major and now I am in Literacy which is a lot of English, so I have a lot of questions as times. Sometimes the help doesn't come as readily, but I just had to find my way.

Even though many participants felt unmotivated and had mixed reactions upon returning to college, others like Ann used her challenge as a motivating factor, as she explained,

Leaving high school in 1991, I worked for 19 years and went to college in 2009. After leaving school for so long, I had some apprehension, but I saw older people there in the classroom and that was a motivating factor for me.

Returning adults sometimes have reservations about the structure of their program, especially after being out of school for a while. Trish expressed a sentiment most returning adults have about writing exams. “As adult learners, we tend not to like exams,” but said, “my most challenging academic experience to date has been completing my research paper.” Cady, who is enrolled in a master's program and takes classes during the summer, said,

This program has been the most shocking thing ever for me, because [higher education institution] requires so much, because almost every day or every other day we have an assignment due, whether individual or group. So sometimes I am extremely tired, but I get the work done though.

For many of the participants, working in groups, or even failing a course were among the challenges they encountered. Ely, who returned to college 26 years after leaving high school, faced her biggest challenge: “Working in groups. I had a group I worked with and I found myself doing all the work, so I had to drop that group and join another.” However, Tryph mentioned that to solve some of her challenges when she returned, she learned the benefits of group work. “The first year of school was stressful, but in the final year, it has not been so bad, as we worked in groups.” Even though Kearol smiled, she recounted that failing a course was her most challenging educational experience. “[Laughter] failing a course in addition to doing the degree in Language and Literacy Studies was a real challenge.”

Studies conducted by Schindley (1996), Clarke (2001), and Raj (2008) on non-traditional female students depicted changes in these students personal lives as they embarked on their educational journeys. This study also found education to be beneficial, and that for these women, education was a necessity. The value they placed on education, and their academic accomplishment allowed them to believe more in themselves as women, wherein, they had more of a positive outlook on life. The challenges they encountered also served as a pillar for success.

The study revealed more about these women than just their value of education, their academic accomplishment and their feelings of empowerment. It uncovered issues internal and external to the group understudy. Getting support from faculty and their higher education institution is important in creating

balance for these women. Higher education institutions may provide access to acquire higher levels of academic education; however, the students' decision to be successfully enrolled from semester to semester are contingent on the individual's life circumstances and the support systems that exist at the higher education institutions.

Conclusion

This study examined non-traditional/part-time/evening college female students academic experiences at their higher education institution. Acknowledging that education is important, the participants expressed how their academic experience fostered both personal and educational growth. Many were appreciative of the courses they took, the emphasis on technology, feeling empowered and being able to take on new academic challenges. Some appreciated the support from faculty and were beneficiaries of scholarships, as such scholarships helped when they encountered financial difficulties.

A majority of the women interviewed did not refer to themselves as non-traditional, as many thought the term was not applicable to them, but instead referred to themselves as mature or adult learners. All stakeholders in Jamaica will need to understand terms applicable to students over 25 years old as well as, implement policies to facilitate this particular group similar to what other countries such as U.S.A., have done. This is important in keeping with international standards, as we now live in a globalized world. Also, because they faced personal issues such as balancing work and school, self-esteem, and being frustrated to name a few, these students could benefit from more counseling sessions as well as having a support group. The literature shows that students over 25 years old approach their education differently than the traditional-aged student, as they are now seeing education as an investment and are more success oriented.

With the changing demographics of higher education, the academic experiences of these non-traditional/part-time/evening college female students, illuminates the need for change. For higher education institutions, educators, and policy makers, the knowledge and insights gained from this study will serve as a tool for further developing programs and policies, as well as influencing their own methods and practices. Sharing these women's stories from an Anglophone Caribbean perspective and how they have balanced returning to higher education and being successful is phenomenal.

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