

MULTICULTURAL AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES IN ADULT LEARNING: TRANSFORMING GENDER BARRIERS TO ACCESS IN CHALLENGING TIMES

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ABSTRACT: Adult learners globally face a multitude of challenges in learning and obtaining educational degrees. This can be due to a variety of reasons including academic stress, as well as additional responsibilities with managing families, childcare, household duties, careers, and jobs. Different cultures may face unique barriers in education; however, across cultures and socioeconomic divides, education has historically been valued as a way to improve one's circumstances in life. The purpose of this inquiry is to share from a narrative research methodology perspective the experiences and stories of different men and women in the United States, Africa, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Ukraine, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Italy, and Japan. Through their challenges they also recognize strengths as adult learners, students, and educators and transform gender barriers in their own lives. To gain a deeper understanding of how learning is impacted by physical, environmental, cultural, and psychological barriers and limitations, the practitioner researchers examined their individual pedagogical practice through a critically reflective lens and shared stories of the adult learners and teachers with whom they encountered through their efforts. Accounts were collected through verbal and written responses. In this way, considerations included how teachers in Nigeria, adult general education students in Virginia, and adults in ten countries, using a virtual mental health counseling platform, are not only unique, but also how they share similar challenges and barriers to educational matriculation and success. In considering gender differences, access to programming, time and childcare constraints, cultural expectations, the impact of mental health and domestic violence, and the commitment level required to complete an educational degree, it is easy to see how discouraging a process the capitalist educational system can be for adult learners and educators. In capturing the stories of adult learners as varied as the world is large, can bind one another from across great divides through our individual and collective fragility and vulnerability, while demonstrating persistence and resilience, we can better learn how to bridge the deep chasms that keep adult learners from achieving their educational goals. Practitioners will attempt to show, globally, that female adult learners have unique challenges to education and professional development compared to their male colleagues.

Keywords: adult learners, narrative inquiry, multicultural, gender barriers, nontraditional adult students, adult and continuing education, barriers to education, informal dialogue

Adult learners globally face a multitude of challenges in learning and obtaining educational degrees due to a variety of reasons. Demands include academic and financial stress, responsibilities managing families, childcare, household duties, careers, and jobs, as well as physical and mental health concerns. Across cultures and socioeconomic divides, education has historically been valued to improve one's circumstances in life.

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Methodology

Using narrative inquiry and stories from personal work experiences of three separate researcher practitioners in different settings, it was found that adult learners face challenges across cultures that continue to reinforce gender inequalities and educational disparities. Narrative inquiry as a research method crosses disciplines and explores and validates multiple perspectives and complex issues in a humanistic manner (Mertova & Webster, 2020). It records the experiences of an individual or small group, revealing each person's worldview to be respected within the cultural context in which the person resides, allowing counter narratives as meaningful contributions to the research and a way of communicating (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006).

Researcher/Practitioner 1

Clients Using an Online Counseling Platform: Ten Counseling Narratives

Nancy is a licensed mental health clinician with over thirty years' experience who worked with adults during the pandemic through a virtual counseling platform to comprehend their lived experiences related to barriers in education and career. The brief vignettes below have been changed for privacy and de-identification.

Ukraine. Male. 50s. Teaching English as a second language. Spoke about living in Odessa with everything shut down due to COVID-19 and quarantine rules. Expressed a high level of paranoia and unrest, gave examples of his distrust for the banking system, and feared lack of privacy. Cautious regarding everything and spoke about the Russian soldiers at the border. Barriers included fear, anxiety, mental health issues, and uncertainty regarding impending war while trying to teach among the impoverished.

United Kingdom. Female. 30s. University college student working full time. Sister had died a few years ago. Barriers included disability, stress, anxiety, depression, grief and loss, relationship issues, and challenges with meeting academic deadlines.

New Zealand. Male. 30s. Teacher. Just separated from live-in girlfriend who had issues with his work and friends yet confused because of mixed messages. Liked his life as a teacher, his career, and leisure activities. Conflicted because he loved her, although she placed unfair demands on him, especially since she wanted to separate. Barriers to career success included relationship issues.

Spain. Female. 30s. Teacher. From Australia living in Spain with her partner of eight years who left her suddenly. The relationship break-up was very hard followed by the death of her father. Barriers included physical disability, grief and loss, anger, depression, uncertainty, low self-esteem, and a sense of hopelessness, despair, and what seemed unimaginable.

Italy. Male. 30s. Student. Married. Father of two young children. Unemployed. Barriers included a high level of stress, frustration, and anger due to apartment living and financial

constraints. During one session the children were in the background screaming, fighting, and crying. He became angry, frazzled, and seemed unable to cope. Aggressive with therapist after recommendation for local resources.

Canada. Female. 20s. Student. Unable to continue education because of child and husband's work. Living in a remote area of Canada. Husband changed jobs making less money, but home at night. Barriers included her mental health, financial stress, and complex childhood trauma. Expressed frustration about wanting a college education to contribute to the family income.

Japan. Female. 20s. College student living with mother and sister in a two-bedroom apartment. Lack of privacy. Used local coffee shop during sessions. Barriers included conflict with mother, unhappiness about her major, and academic struggles.

Australia. Female. 20s. College student with medical issues living in a remote village. Barriers included extreme fatigue, depression, and feeling unsupported by family. Wanted to feel better physically and have the energy to live independently. Stated it was challenging to study and focus due to her debilitating condition.

Africa. Female. 20s. College student living with family. Lack of privacy during counseling sessions. Only used live chat feature versus talking. Due to scholarship initiative, a free month of counseling was provided. Barriers included access to counseling, financial limitations, and academic and career uncertainty.

Saudi Arabia. Female. 30s. Aspiring student. Flight attendant cohabitating with male partner uncommitted to marriage and child. Sent money to family in Asia. Barriers included economic responsibilities and a non-supportive, emotionally abusive boyfriend. Felt emotional distress and turmoil pleasing boyfriend while figuring out how to get her daughter back and returning to school.

Researcher/Practitioner 2

Women Teachers in Nigeria

Frances works with the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN), an Agency of the Nigeria Federal Ministry of Education established by CAP T3 of 2004. This organization is saddled with the responsibilities of approving teachers in Nigeria, setting standards that must be attained by teachers, and continually raising those standards. TRCN oversees the quality of teachers and teaching as a profession at all levels of education. TRCN determines the standards for education in Nigeria for persons seeking to become registered teachers. TRCN conducts Professional Qualifying Examinations for certifying and licensing teachers through Mandatory Continuous Professional Development.

Nigeria is a patrilineal society, which practices patriarchy thus giving the strong base for male dominance. Egodi describes patriarchy as promoting the differences in privilege between men and women (2022). Nigeria is also a multicultural society where strong

attachment to cultural inclinations is clearly visible. Culture is a strong factor and plays out throughout the lifespan where men dictate the rhythm of everything. Women in the African/Nigerian context are natural home keepers encumbered with the responsibilities of home care and maintenance of the family. This role, which is labor intensive, plays out in other aspects of women's lives including through educational and career pursuits. According to Onoriode (2011), African women blamed their academic performance on several factors including cultural practices, marital status, and financial constraints. The hindrances cultural practices imposed on their academic performance stemmed from the lack of focused study and attention span. Furthermore, the African Union Commission (2021) observed that even though women make up approximately 50 per cent of the population in Africa, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles across educational and entrepreneurial sectors.

Nigerian National Policy on education stipulates that access to education is a right for all Nigerian children regardless of gender, religion, and disability, and assures equal access, yet the reality is that a woman's place is in the home first and foremost (Alonge, 2016; BBC News, 2016; Denga, 1993). The United Nations Human Development Report (2005) underscores the lack of development and the inequality among children in Nigeria around educational access. Nigerian culture and socioeconomic concerns keep gender disparity in education a reality. Nwudego (2022) found that women feel discriminated against. Nwudego (2022) also found that women feel isolated and exhibit physiological symptoms that affect educational and career success. Women then are in fixed roles as primary caregivers despite what Nigerian National Policy portrays. Women remain limited and in ways, voiceless regarding their concerns and aspirations to obtain leadership roles in educational and career pursuits. There are no financial compensations for a woman's role in her family. Women experience lack of support from their male counterparts, which disadvantages them for appointment and ascension to leadership positions, a support network, career mentoring, and government positions. This disparity continues to degrade the status of the Nigerian woman and contributes to what is perceived as their low educational and workplace performance.

Nigerian women's roles include traditional and cultural expectations comprised of household duties, caring for family, cooking, washing, and many other domestic responsibilities. Women's lives are found to be inundated and overwhelmed, which impacts a woman's ability to attain career or educational excellence, which limits a woman's ability to reach her full potential. This is demonstrated in all aspects of Nigerian socio-economic life. In the Nigerian 2023 general election, women made up approximately 2% of the number of applicants for positions at local, state, and federal levels. This illustrates the expected, traditional, and societal roles of Nigerian women, which affects their ability to make significant financial gains, or have a voice in decision making and public policy.

A series of professional development measures for Nigerian teachers were implemented post COVID to equip teachers with requisite digital skills. The trainings exposed gender discrimination regarding educational attainment and teacher development in Nigeria. Women teachers raised concerns and awareness of the challenges associated with the

socio-cultural roles of women as home keepers. Discussions with women at trainings revealed that scheduled professional development did not accommodate women's domestic schedules, leaving professionals uneasy and disengaged due to unequal gender expectations, disadvantaging women in the workplace. Onoriode's (2011) research revealed that cultural practices and homecare commitments imposed a serious consequence on the academic performance of women. This study uniquely revealed that the academic performance of women students in higher education in Nigeria differed between married and single women. The study showed a significant relationship between the cultural practices in Nigeria and the married women's academic performance and is a true reflection of what most Nigerian women experience. Jamil (2003) summarized that women's commitments at home, and their community expectations created serious limitations to their education. To address challenges women face with disparities in education and professional development, Bolarin (2005) affirmed the need to institute a measure in which women would gain reasonable access to educational and professional development opportunities. The popular narrative in Nigeria that keeps a woman in the kitchen with her education ending there is archaic, limiting, discriminatory, and oppressive (BBC, 2016).

Researcher/Practitioner 3

Students in High School Equivalency/General Educational Development (HSE/GED) Programs

As an educational specialist with more than three years' experience in teaching adults, Victoria is a credentialed CHW and ESOL & GED Adult Instructor. Areas of expertise include curriculum development, public speaking, project management, writing and editing, and adult instruction and training. Her work focuses on adult literacy and the development of educational training, along with hands-on training for adult learners. Non-traditional students (working adults) aged 25 and older have faced many challenges to continue higher education and earn postsecondary credentials. Many need additional skills and knowledge to keep pace with the evolving high-demand careers of today. Unfortunately, many Virginians are still struggling to finish higher education. At the 2018 Hire Ed Conference, it was mentioned that there are over 1.2 million people in the United States between 25 and 44 that lack postsecondary degree (Dubois, 2018). Adult students trying to complete their education can be a daunting task.

A few reasons included that students work multiple jobs, with some students represented in Virginia's poverty statistics (ALICE, 2018) with violent crimes, drug culture and use, and incarceration affecting school graduation rates (Laari, 2023). Unengaged citizens and improper planning contribute to the criminal system preventing academic success – all of which remain barriers for students to reach their full potential.

Victoria's inquiry related how significant inequalities and adult learners' environments for non-traditional, adult students affected their ability to pursue their education and or gain needed credentials. Many educational programs depend on a capitalistic structure

which shaped the success of some students while other students resorted to desperate, short-sighted, and poor choices.

COVID reduced the number of students being admitted into the High School Equivalency Program (HSE) programs in Fairfax County Public and Alternative Schools. Online classes may have been offered, but this posed an increased challenge for parents who could not afford childcare. Many adult learners contended with online classes while keeping their children entertained. Students mentioned that they were more overwhelmed and less focused on their studies. Additionally, less students meant less learners getting into the program, passing, and obtaining their GED. Some in person classes only had one or two students enrolled, and this prevented more adult learners from reaching their goals.

Narratives of Nontraditional Adult Learners: GED Programs

Student # 1 - Male

A young Moroccan lost his father and became the main supporter of his household. Quit school to find a job to support his family. He worked to send his siblings to school and waited until he had a family of his own before going back to pursue his GED. He struggled with time constraints and work demands. After 4-5 semesters, this student finally graduated in June 2023.

Student # 2 - Female

Student desired to complete her GED to finish credits at a cosmetology school. She started the program but got incarcerated which is the main barrier to her education. Other barriers included laziness and lack of motivation. After her release, she hoped to finish her program and find work.

Student # 3 - Female

Uncomfortable with sharing her barriers to her education. Lived with her mother-in-law, who helped in some way continue her education. Did not share further. Unfortunately, she dropped the program a week later, the reason unknown.

Student # 4 - Male

Student shared that he supports his family financially as well as completes household duties. A two-person household, his role is to work then take care of the children and cook for the family. This was a main barrier to his limited attendance in class. His partner did not support him obtaining his GED; instead of class, he should be cooking or taking care of the children. Dropped the class after only three weeks. Main barrier was an unsupportive partner and tasks that the partner was unwilling to take on while he attended classes.

Student # 5 - Male

Student shared that he got into trouble while in high school. Kicked out of the school and removed from the area. His schooling included other disengaged students who were unhelpful with progressing. Mentioned friends were always involved in something, so he

just followed along which got him incarcerated. Attempted to complete classes before incarceration, but cost, transportation, and living situation were barriers to success. He realized that staying in trouble would not get him any further and needed his education. Encouraged by another friend who was released and finished his GED program to get his diploma, becoming a business owner. Student was interested in following the same steps after serving his time. After asking if he would get his GED if released before finishing the program, he stated that he would get in trouble again since he felt the only place he could finish his GED would be in jail.

Student # 6 - Female

Shared that she faced “mom guilt” when leaving children in the care of others while attending school. Found it very difficult to find caregivers during class time and needed to leave work early to finish the GED program. Admitted she had to overcome “laziness” to make it to class when tired or overwhelmed. Overcame these barriers by finding a good support system with both sisters who alternated days with babysitting. Discussed with boss to accommodate class schedule to leave early. Continued using the word “laziness” and mentioned that she overcame this challenge by envisioning her end goal: to pass her GED exams. Had immense feelings of accomplishment when she passed GED tests and felt it was so rewarding. Was proud to not have given up. Successfully passed all four tests and participated in graduation.

Researcher/Practitioner 3: Outcomes

Many students expressed that the main barriers in their lives were pivotal moments during their high school education. Many of the choices, mistakes, and challenges all traced back to when they attended, dropped out, or were incarcerated during high school. It was also noticed that during the narratives, only the women used the term “laziness” and or “mom guilt” when they were tired in moments of pursuing their education. These students would have full time work, take care of their families, and then attend class, even find time to study on their own for their exams. Anytime they would be inundated with responsibilities, adult learners would use the words like lazy or laziness to describe their barriers to education. Researcher reminded students they do a lot of work. It is okay to feel tired or overwhelmed from time to time and they just need to find ways to handle that stress in healthy or productive ways. It does not mean they are lazy. Unfortunately, this result could be due to many factors and needs further scrutiny. Why do the female students use the word “laziness” to describe their challenges? Is it something they truly believe? Is this phrase used by others in society to describe them? Where did this conclusion come from?

Collaborative Findings

In collaboration with one another, three researcher practitioners in the United States and Nigeria looked at gender barriers students face – women teachers in Nigeria, students in High School Equivalency Programs (HSE), and clients using an online counseling platform during the pandemic. The compilation of these narratives and experiences illustrated the power of how sharing one’s story can serve as a catalyst for change.

During the pandemic, many themes of privilege, power, poverty, inequality, race, gender, ageism, discrepancies with access, and marginalized populations existed. The number of students enrolled in High School Equivalency/General Educational Development (HSE/GED) programs was reduced, affecting enrollment and graduation rates. Women continued to merge professional, educational, and family roles. Historically, across cultures women are primarily expected to provide nurturance and care to the young, the unwell, and the elderly, creating significant consequences regarding educational and career pursuits. Ideally, it is said that education is the greatest weapon against poverty and that it is never too late to get an education. Yet, for many adults, the reality is that support and access can be very limited and, in some circumstances, and cultures, this is near impossible.

Researchers found common themes linking their individual interests and work to present a representative sample of barriers adults faced pursuing educational degrees or career advancement. Difficulties adult learners faced captured the unique life experiences of each student. These included non-traditional and students in HSE programs. Limitations showed how the experience of learning and professional development was discriminatory for Nigerian women teachers struggling to improve themselves via Mandatory Continuous Professional Development. Each of the findings represented difficulties adults faced pursuing educational degrees and career advancement while balancing personal and family responsibilities with educational pursuits and work-life balance.

Future Implications

Using narrative research methodology, themes emerged through the client stories that further supported that whether one is a teacher or administrator in Nigeria, or globally, or a student pursuing a GED, or other level of education that life challenges and circumstances exist. Especially with the pandemic, over the past several years heightened levels of stress, feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety, uncertainty, financial worries, and mental and physical health concerns have been found to exist. Among these and a host of other disparities that continue to be felt by the researchers and each of the study participants, barriers remain a challenge in completing educational degrees.

Specifically, to further this study for nontraditional students more must be found in high schools across Virginia to recognize and remove the inequities that have changed the lives of many adult learners. If interventions were present in the high schools where participants attended, leaders in higher education could redirect upcoming adult or non-traditional students, preventing negative records. Currently, the focus was adults in Virginia pursuing their GED and High School Diplomas in an Adult Detention Center and Adult High School Center. After these findings, observation is needed at local high schools to observe where these gaps occur and if leaders in Adult Education can circumvent these determining factors in preventing non-traditional, at-risk learners from entering the criminal system. It seems some high schoolers are entering the role of adulthood much quicker with less guidance and assistance to reach their educational goals. Practitioners can better define when and how adult education is structured with any learner. More conversations are needed for adult learners sharing that their feelings of

burnout, high stress, or juggling multiple responsibilities is considered laziness. Adult students complete enormous amounts of work; laziness is a confusing term used for how much adult students actually accomplish. Why do certain students have to succumb to postponing their education due to determining locations? Why do adult learners use the term “lazy” to define their struggles with delay to reaching their goals? Where are opportunities to provide every student with options to succeed, regardless of their residence in differing communities? These are questions practitioners can proactively address in the future.

Similarly, for Frances in Nigeria, future implications would include recognizing the uniqueness of the African married woman – understanding their needs, peculiar challenges, and planning educational advancement activities for them at times conducive to both professional and family life. This means scheduling realistic times for professional development trainings and giving female teachers options, so they do not have to choose between career advancement and family.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the researchers found that through their daily practice with students, teachers, and clients that gender barriers continue to exist across cultures despite public policy and aspirational national initiatives. Globally, women face challenges with child bearing, childcare, child rearing, and household responsibilities. This does not exclude men as responsible care-givers and in engaged parenting roles; however, gender bias as a barrier, allows men to pursue educational and career opportunities that otherwise would not be options for women, especially in certain cultures. Women who do achieve educational and career success in certain cultures, risk choosing education and career over family and marriage. Also, student narratives used terms like “mom guilt” and “laziness” when explaining their barriers to reaching their educational or professional goals. Inequities and socio-economic limitations exist globally for adult learners. Practitioners and educators are in a unique position to provide support and to ensure that these barriers can be overcome. Through a global narrative approach, regardless of background, adult learners continue to face a multitude of barriers that include gender and cultural biases, inequities, and socio-economic limitations.

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