Exploring Efficacy in Negotiating Support: Women Re-Entry Students in Higher Education

By Josephine Oriana Filipponi-Berardinelli

Abstract

The existing literature on women re-entry students reveals that women students concurrently struggle with family, work, and sometimes health issues. Women students often do not receive adequate support from their partners or from other sources in helping manage the multiple roles that compete for their time, and often face constraints that affect their choice to return to school (Jackson, Malcolm, & Thomas, 2011). The aim of this study was to identify and understand how women re-entry students learned to negotiate support strategies and resources that they could utilize to offset potential stressors in their daily lives and facilitate program completion. A basic qualitative design using an interpretive approach was used to examine the observations and experiences of women re-entry students as they continued to juggle multiple roles while being a student. The findings of the study revealed four emergent themes: (1) factors that motivated women students to negotiate support; (2) perceived barriers to acquiring support or resources; (3) the influence of self-reflection on how support is negotiated; and (4) external systems utilized for support.

This research revealed additional strategies women students resorted to not yet identified in the literature including resorting to unconventional measures to complete course work.

Introduction

Over the last several decades, increasing numbers of Canadian women have enrolled in higher education (Deutsch & Schmerz, 2011), surpassing male enrollment in a dramatic increase (Christofides, Hoy, & Yang, 2010). In 2010, women comprised 56% of the higher education student body (Association of Universities and Colleges, 2011). Reasons include shifts in the macroeconomic structure (Deutsch & Schmerz, 2011), change in social norms and expectations, greater access and the desire to improve job/life circumstances (Christofides et al., 2010). Relatedly, the number of women students over age 35 had tripled to 18,000 (Association of Universities and Colleges, 2011). These older, more mature women (McCune, Hounsell, Christie, Cree & Tett, 2010) can be classified as non-traditional students who cannot easily put aside family responsibilities (Home, 1998) or household work, the majority of which is still done by women (Gouthro, 2002; Mahalingam, Zukewich, & Scott-Dixon, 2006; Wharton, 2005).

While many studies have explored the motivators and barriers these women students face, fewer have examined how women re-entry students have learned to negotiate support and resources to complete their

studies. As this age cohort continues to expand, meeting the needs of these non-traditional learners is vital.

Purpose of Research and Statement of Research Problem

This qualitative research study aimed to identify and understand how women re-entry students across all socio-economic groups and age groups learn to negotiate support strategies and resources to achieve program completion. It fills a gap in existing research by exploring how women learners can alleviate the burden of their multiple roles and responsibilities (mother, wife, daughter, employee, community volunteer, etc.).Often placing the needs of others before their own needs affects how they study and learn (Gouthro, 2005; Padula, 1994). This information may help higher education institutions address the unique needs of these non-traditional learners.

Research Questions:

The primary research question is: How do re-entry women students learn to negotiate effective support structures and strategies to help them manage the multiple roles they undertake while completing college studies?

The specific research sub-questions are:

1. What does support mean to women re-entry students? Do they need support strategies to complete college? What support strategies do they access to support their return to school?

2. How do some women learners realize that they require support to manage their multiple roles effectively?

3. What factors do they consider in negotiating support?

4. From whom/where do they expect to derive such support?

5. How was the learning throughout the negotiation process transformative?

Research Methodology and Rationale

The research study used a "basic qualitative design"(Merriam, 2009, p.22) methodology to collect and analyze the data, in which women re-entry students were pre-selected to form the research group. All the participants were from the same educational institution but diverse programs. The study's focus was on arriving at a richer and deeper understanding, through researcher-led qualitative interviews, of how the participants learned to negotiate support systems. Since the approach was interpretive, it was necessary for both the researcher (me) and narrator (woman student) to verbalize her interpretation of the experience in order to arrive at a joint construction of meaning. This qualitative approach surpassed the capacity of a quantitative methodology in helping me explore women students' challenges, complications or successes as they managed their completion of coursework alongside other

commitments. Semi-structured interviews such as those I utilized have been recognized (O'Shea and Stone, 2011) as integral to helping women share the meanings of their stories.

Research Methods

Participants and Selection Criteria

My selection was a "purposive sample" (Merriam, 2009, p. 77) of female students chosen from a community college environment. After receiving approval (see "Research Site and Access" below), I solicited female participants via the college's student account website for an initial period of three weeks. Interested students could contact me by email. The pre-selected criteria for the study group included: female students; over age 30; working part-time or full-time while attending college; primary care-giver of others (children, spouse, parents, siblings, etc.) and/or domestic manager. I selected women who, in addition to having a minimum of two years of study, disclosed that they had experienced stress or fatigue as a result of their role as a student and full-time caregiver of others.

The five female participants, who were all between ages 31 and 52, were undertaking various certificate or undergraduate programs across the college's campuses (Newnham, King, and Seneca at York). Three already had a bachelor's degree or higher and two had some previous post-secondary education. All participants lived in one geographical area in Toronto, a city in southern Ontario, where I am a part-time faculty member teaching in the Faculty of Continuing Education& Training. None of the participants were my own students.

The group consisted of three single mothers who had pre-school children (ages six or under), and two older married women, one with adult children.

TABLE 1

The Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Race /Ethnicity	Marital Status/ No. of Children	Previous Education
Dana	32	White	Divorced/1 child	Undergraduate degree
Faith	31	Guyanese	Divorced/2 children	Undergraduate degree
Kate	52	Asian	Married/2 children	Undergraduate degree
Mary	44	Guyanese	Married/no children	College Diploma
Jane	37	White	Never married/1 child	College Diploma

Research Site and Access

The research was conducted at the participants' college. The college offers part-time and full-time certificate, diploma and degree programs. As a college faculty member, I have access to the college's email and internet resources. Prior to choosing the site for my research project, I approached the Dean of the college's Applied Research department for permission and provided him with a high level overview of the project's focus. Upon his consent, I received further approval from the college's communication department and its REB.

Data Collection / Research Methods:

The data collection methods included individual interviews, one focus group discussion and my related field notes.

The scheduled 1-hour interviews were informal and semi-structured. The time and location of the interviews were mutually agreed upon and conducted face-to-face or over the telephone. The interviews gave me the opportunity to establish rapport with the participants. I tape-recorded the interviews, ranging from 45 – 65 minutes in length and then transcribed them for analysis. Participants were given the opportunity to review the questions beforehand and access their documented material afterwards. All interviews were completed within a seven-week period.

The questions were designed to address the participants' experiences of negotiating support; tools or coping skills they had to develop; individual, systemic, and structural barriers to acquiring support; perceptions of and experiences with negotiating support; educational needs or alternative supports. I transcribed and analyzed the recordings almost immediately after each interview in order to keep the data manageable and organized.

The focus group was conducted a week after the final interview. It was intended to be an empowering session in a safe space where the five participants could voice their experiences and develop a sense of community. (The women noted that this was the first time they had formally discussed their educational experiences in a group setting.) Along with previously-drafted questions, I drew from interview responses to create the focus group discussion. Held in a private classroom in the main campus building, the participants expressed how they managed (if at all) to negotiate support structures from internal and external sources (educational faculty, family, employer, other) and how those supports affected them both as a student and outside of school.

Following both the interview and the focus group session, I immediately wrote up field notes. They were intended to pursue deeper responses to themes that emerged from the interview and/or focus group discussions.

All data was compared to the literature to reveal consistencies and divergences.

Data Analysis

I handled the qualitative data analysis by transcribing the interviews, which were immediately backed-up on an electronic device, and reviewing the transcripts against the electronic file for accuracy. My field notes were analyzed to identify pertinent characteristics or specific variables that might add further understanding to the participants' responses. The data analysis was an ongoing process with "some rudimentary analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p. 171) during the data collecting stage, as well as between collection activities.

For ease of analysis and coding, I then organized the transcribed responses by question into a master Word document, which I scrutinized for common themes. I then broke these responses into smaller units that focused on brief phrases and small paragraphs; labels were assigned, using each participant's exact wording and/or terms from the literature.

The next phase continued the process of extracting common words, expressions or phrases. Grouping them into themes, I transferred these into a new Word document. The themes were then subdivided by responses to the questions.

Taking field notes was critical for recording significant incidents or interviewee remarks. Each entry was clearly labelled with the date, time, interviewee name and location. My observations during the interview noted specific participant's surprising words or phrases. I also noted emotions or non-verbal cues. I watched for recurring phrases or expressions in each interview. After the interviews, I referred to my field notes to expand on what I observed. Any events that intrigued me were analysed in terms of my own assumptions or expectations of being a woman re-entry student. This process helped me become aware of unanticipated possible questions or topics for further research.

I maintained confidentiality throughout the study by using fictitious names in the transcripts, notes and the final article.

Delimitations and Limitations

One of the study's main limitations is its restriction to one institution. As such, the findings are not necessarily generalizable. Further studies could be conducted in colleges and universities with an emphasis on women's studies programs to compare and contrast the responses.

The study is also limited by the time of year the selection process occurred. The recruitment for participants began in mid-June – close to graduation, which limited the selection pool.

Further, the sample size (5) could be seen as another limitation. The sample size was a highly selected group (age, education, not my students, female, stress-encountering, etc.) and wasn't representative of all female college students or even all returning female college students. Perhaps further research could use a larger research base to explore the topic.

Definition of Terms

Important terms that may be open to interpretation are defined below:

Non-traditional Student: an adult student, typically over age 30, who also works full-time or part-time and/or is the primary caregiver to others (e.g., elderly parents and/or children). This definition differs from Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) who define non-traditional students as being "older than 24, work full-time, and/or are single parents" (p. 477).

Re-entry Student: a subset of non-traditional students who enrolled or have re-entered college after a discernible break in their educational careers (Sweet & Moen, 2007).

Support: any form of assistance or psychosocial encouragement women received from family members or others, along with the actual range of required support the women received in order to pursue their studies. Support could also include access to resources (e.g., tools, technology and information) or techniques that have assisted the women in negotiating for various supports.

Presentation of Data and Findings

From the participants' responses, four main themes were identified and discussed: (a) factors that motivated women students to negotiate support; (b) perceived barriers to acquiring support or resources; (c) the influence of self-reflection on how support is negotiated; and (d) external systems utilized for support.

Theme 1: Motivating Factors

The interviews revealed that the motivation for pursuing further education and negotiating supports was largely externally-driven (children, domestic responsibilities, etc.) but that internal motivators also existed (calmness, reduced stress and anxiety and less to manage). Based on their perceptions of their roles and responsibilities, the participants were motivated to pursue education and negotiate supports by: (a) an urge to provide security to their families; (b) feelings of fear; (c) an investment in their own education; and (d) possible career advancements.

Providing Security

Participants Dana, Jane and Faith were mothers of small children (aged six and under), and they reported their motivation to return to education was their children's future. They felt it was vital to have support structures in place, such as suitable childcare. Faith sought subsidies: "Being a single parent I have applied and I have been accepted for subsidies for my children to attend a decent daycare. I have had to look at supports mainly for my children because I am a single mother. They are still entitled to a healthy childhood and I need to think about how I am going to provide them with that."

Jane, a single mother who previously had been on social assistance until her daughter started school, turned to her mother for childcare. Jane attributes her educational success to her mother. She would one day like to return the favour:" the fact that I have support means that I can create a better life for my daughter and my Mom because my intention is to have a

home so that she can live with me." Attracted by the salary possible with further education, Jane enrolled in the Medical Office Administration Program and is facing a brighter future.

Dana also expressed her desire to provide her daughter with a stable home life environment, which she felt she could achieve through further education. She describes her job loss as two-fold: "it was an opportunity and good timing to decide to return to school to do what I have always wanted to study as well as feel good that I could give my daughter a mother invested in our future."

Fear

The subject of fear crept up during the interviews. Three participants described having feelings of fear about re-entering higher education after long absences away from school. Faith described her feelings of anxiety and self-consciousness; Kate shared similar feelings:" I had been away from studies for so long that I feared I could not keep up with the younger students, after all I had raised my family, and I was working full-time and feared that I could not relate to anyone in my program, not even the teachers!"

Another fear related to not acquiring the support needed to complete studies while managing other responsibilities. Some participants burned the candle at both ends to complete assignments while others sought special accommodations. Jane, a single mother managing mental health issues, explained: "I have issues with anxiety and my school accommodation gives me extra time and I can do stuff in the test centre. Sometimes just being able to be alone and focus well is wonderful because I never get that at home."

Instead of the typical responses to fear–retreat–this study demonstrated that fear was an emotional force that propelled them towards higher education. There was too much at stake to run. Faith describes the possibility of loss at a deeply personal level: "I don't want to fail as a parent and personally I don't want to fail as a woman, as an individual, as a parent. I do not want to find myself in a position where I am in need or dependent on other people."

Self-Investment

Some participants appeared to perceive their investment in their own education as a symbolic showpiece of an irrevocable and victorious achievement.

For Dana, a major life event triggered participants into making the decision. The loss of her job was an opportunity to focus on self-improvement through education: "Looking at losing that job as an opportunity was like, OK, I better not waste it since it (returning to school) was something I had always wanted to do."

Jane felt compelled to take on a dual role of mother and financial supporter: "Here I was a single mom and I had to ask myself, how I go forward and support myself and my daughter?" Faith, a sociology student

with a formal education in early childhood, perceived her education as one of role-modelling for her children.

Most of the students viewed having an education as a conduit to greater control over their future.

Career Possibilities.

The prospect of achieving a career goal was another motivator for all five participants. The common consensus among the participants was that their education enabled them to acquire knowledge and skills that they believed could be put to use to improve their lives.

Theme 2: Barriers to Support or Resources

Another theme to emerge from the research study was barriers to re-entry and/or success. These barriers created intense stress and sometimes guilt. The related sub-themes included (a) role conflict; (b) guilt; and (c) social barriers.

Role Identification and Conflict

All five participants acknowledged challenges relating to managing multiple roles and responsibilities. Dana, Faith and Jane, all single mothers with younger children, cited motherhood as being particularly challenging. They often felt meeting academic expectations and deadlines was impossible because of their preference for caring for their children. More than one participant devoted their time in the evenings to their children at the expense of their coursework.

Students with partners faced similar balancing acts. Of her relationship, Jane remarks:" It's not fair to him if I don't make the effort since he does step up and he'll do my laundry and babysit…"

Workplace demands were also a source of role conflict (for Mary and Kate). Expectations from both employers and college professors created stress. Kate describes: "The most stressful part is to prioritize both my work responsibilities and make sure my college assignments are delivered on time. Sometimes I think I've taken on too much."

Despite multiple commitments, the participants still found the time and inspiration for education.

Guilt and Self-Sacrificing Needs

The participants identified two sources for stress caused by feelings of guilt: their perception that they were a burden to those providing the support or their sense that they were prioritizing school over family. The single mothers in particular felt an incredible burden of responsibility to their children and would try to do coursework while their children slept. As mothers with the youngest children (aged six and under) in the research study, Dana, Faith and Jane continued to give supremacy to their children's needs, which added to their stress and affected their own wellbeing (lack of rest and time for study). The multiple demands led to guilt: "I always feel like I am juggling balls, and if I drop one, it will likely

affect someone or something important (Jane).Faith described how she awoke early to study before she woke the children: "I go to bed around 11:00 p.m. and then get up at 3:00 or 3:30 a.m. to study until 7:00 a.m. I wake up my daughters to go to day care and then go directly to the college. When I do give myself some extra time, I feel bad and think about what I could have used that time for besides sleep or relaxing."

Jane added that she also felt guilty about asking for child-support because it indicated a decrease in family-time: "I have the guilt that now I am going to be taking away more time from being with my daughter. My mom is great and can watch her if I need extra time to study but then I ask myself how do I balance it all out for us?"

Kate, Jane and Faith identified feelings of guilt related to being a burden on supporters. Jane especially has had to combat feelings of guilt she associates with her mental health issues. She explains: "There's a lot of guilt that goes along with trying to negotiate what you need and how much it's going to impact the people you are asking."

A related issue was coping with the self-imposed burden of repayment to, or acknowledgement of, the people who have offered support. "I've had situations where my mom was not available but I've had to negotiate with my neighbour to watch my daughter for an hour, and I'll bathe her dog on the weekend. It's like a trade off since my neighbour is elderly so she can't bathe her dog" (Jane). Kate also expressed related feelings: "I have guilt for imposing, but I also have guilt that I am not doing enough for other people".

When the women did find time to care for themselves, feelings of guilt were also identified.

Social Positioning

Another obstacle was the social barriers women students face due to the differential socialization of men and women. Traditional female socialization still emphasizes the importance of the mother as primary caregiver, which can lead some women students to resist asking others, including daycare providers, to watch the children. Kate described how her husband reacted to her interest in returning to school: "Our children were really young and I think I may have been contemplating whether to go back to school and he just said to me 'you have to think about how you are going to manage the household and our family' and I thought how can I possibly manage everything that I do and add studying to the equation?" Dana's husband was equally resistant. Dana recalled, "how he told me that I would have to think about what I was going to sacrifice, sacrifice time away from our daughter, time away from our marriage." She added, "I couldn't understand why I had to sacrifice things, why only me?" Consequently, at that time she decided not to pursue returning to school. The marriage dissolved a couple of years later.

Only one participant (Jane) expressed feeling some guilt if her housework was left unattended: "I have piles of laundry so I'm not the best organized homemaker anymore. The hardest thing for me is to be OK with

letting go of housework since good grades are what will get me a good job."

These insights demonstrate how social and gender role expectations intersect and persist.

Theme 3: Critical Self-Reflection

A key finding of the research study was that women students needed to reject the "women can do it all" approach because it is unproductive and stress-producing: "It's in us as women to not ask for help because we need to be super women that can manage absolutely everything and still look great! It's just not realistic! A lot of us suffer in silence" (Faith).

Each participant commented on the importance of women re-entry students recognizing that learning success is most possible with self-awareness and self-reflection. Jane commented that she has had to rely on previous life experiences to access information: "I have had to ask myself some tough questions, and in the process of being honest with my answers, I have found a way to navigate the system in a way that I could never have done it when I was 19."

The students felt that it was vital to be aware of the shift in their lives as non-traditional students and to be able to articulate the changing needs of such a group. They identified that personal growth distinguished them from traditional students. Four sub-themes evolved from the responses: (a) time management; (b) accountability; (c) setting boundaries; and (d) effective communication skills.

Time Management

Participants identified that learning to manage time was essential to successfully juggling multiple roles. The participants with day jobs (Mary and Kate) were particularly aware of how precious their time was. Mary noted how she capitalized on times her students were working on activities: "When they're doing an exercise, I will take my course paperwork and I will stand in class and read as they're doing their stuff." The result of their successful time management increased their pride and confidence.

Organizational Skills

All participants articulated the importance of organizational skills. Dana aptly remarked: "I don't know how women could juggle all that they do without having some level of personal organization and be effective at it or else they face the possibility of having their plans fail. That would only put them back to square one".

A variety of organizational tools assisted them: calendars, tracking personal and family schedules, and using online course schedules. Faith, a single mother with little family support, had a running four-calendar system; Jane worked around her mother's schedule. Dana recalled how she liked to use a course's outline to plan her semester and found that some online courses challenged her organizational skills: "I like having a series of handouts that specifies the dates of topics, readings and

assignments. Some online courses have the agenda on power point slides; we didn't know what we were doing from class to class. It had me in a tail spin." This statement can also reflect how having control over organizing their time alleviates some stress. This same student noted how she liked to work ahead on days she did not have her daughter so as to have quality time with her on days that she did.

Accountability

All students also observed the importance of owning the responsibility of managing their studies:" You need to take accountability for what you are going through at the time you re-enter higher education. I think one needs to be honest with themselves and then they need to start researching supports for how and when they will need them" (Faith). Another student commented, "Part of the dilemma is not admitting we're struggling, at least not right away. I did what I had to do to keep all the parts in place, except my part (my studies) got my attention behind other things. Then one evening, I made the decision to change this. I was done!" (Kate).

The discussion group highlighted that the realization that students needed to take responsibility for their learning and negotiate for support came at different times for different participants. Faith explained how she had been afraid to seek help until she realized that how she perceived support had been prohibiting her from forging ahead with coursework. When she began to accept her situation as a young divorced mother, she noticed her anxiety and shame dissipate: "Being aware is half the battle. If I did not change my perspective, it would have stayed that way, so I knew I needed to overcome my own inertia. It was a huge step forward for me" (Faith). This statement demonstrates how understanding accountability takes time; one must be reflective about one's own circumstances, and that may not happen immediately or without challenges and mistakes.

Setting Boundaries

The participants all agreed that one approach to negotiating for support or devising strategies is to scale back expectations regarding what women are able to manage. The shedding of the "I can do it all" persona is critical to student success. Mary and Dana set boundaries on course selection, opting for those offering flexibility or which accommodated their schedule. Dana commented: "I don't take a course that might conflict with when I have my daughter because then that takes away whatever time I get to spend her." These women students had learned to recognize the importance of personally assessing whether a learning context accommodated their obligations.

Communication Skills

A finding that resonated with every participant was the importance of communicating their unique needs to aid them in achieving their educational goals. While they agreed that requesting or negotiating support was essential, their methods varied with their circumstances. Mary expressed her supportive arrangement with her spouse: "One of the things that I have learned is that when I find out the details about when my

course is offered, I tell him about it and how much help I am going to probably need from him". Kate's response was similar: "Once I find out the night my course is delivered I tell my husband so that psychologically, it sets him up to know how busy I am going to be. "Communicating with other family members is also helpful for identifying further issues that may need to be addressed. "My husband and children understand that when I am back at school that they know that I will ask them to accept more responsibility" (Kate). Jane waits to register each semester until she has communicated her needs and determined what support she can expect from her mother.

Re-negotiation of Supports

Three of the participants described how established support plans sometimes needed to be re-negotiated or fine-tuned in order to adjust to last minute changes or unexpected events. Jane described how an illness set her back emotionally and physically and required her to re-negotiate her coursework with professors who had already assigned special accommodations for her. Mary remarked that her husband's dinner responsibilities often resulted in take-out. While she thought her husband took the easy way out, Mary did not mind his sudden change in meal plans provided she did not have to assume responsibility.

Dana described how she sometimes had to adjust childcare arrangements in order to accommodate her study needs. Her ex-husband was uncomfortable with hiring a babysitter: "He never would have said hire a baby sitter because he would take her first. He's crazy protective of our daughter so if I have ever had the need to get someone to watch her, I knew that about him." Interestingly, Dana's relationship with her ex-spouse flourished into a healthy support network after their divorce; he would support her in times when group assignments or heavy coursework required her to find a caregiver for their daughter.

Theme 4: External Support Systems/Strategies

Specific external systems that assisted the participants in completing coursework included: the use of workplace time and resources, managing relationships with key people, and the use of community supports.

Workplace Time and Resources

Two of the participants used workplace time and technological resources (e.g., computers, photocopiers).Kate commented: "I use the company's time to prepare my assignments. I know I'm not supposed to but when I have some down time or I am travelling on business, then I use that time." She also reported using illness days accumulated over a specified time period for the purpose of completing coursework or assignments: "I don't like the idea of using my vacation time to complete assignments so once in a while; I may call in sick even though I'm not" (Kate). Mary commented: "If I get fired, it's because I use their photocopier all the time!" Both women admitted they engaged in this illegitimate method of accessing support covertly.

External/Internal Relationships

This study discovered that solid relationships with faculty, peers and family were essential to the participants' ability to seek out support. Almost all of the participants commented on the faculty's care and encouragement. Faith highlighted that she deliberately reached out to her professors to explain her personal challenges (divorce and court appointments). Another participant agreed that faculty was supportive:" I once submitted an assignment and the professor informed me that I had missed an entire section without realizing it. That speaks to the support that I have experienced with some of my teachers" (Jane). Faith remarked," The support is there. It is there for a reason, you just have to ask."

Participants also expressed the importance of close relationships with peers, academically and socially. About her friendship and academic partnership with another learner, Mary explained: "We are best buddies and I know I can rely on her whenever I am having a bad day or I need to verify that I have understood the reading correctly."

The participants also discussed managing their relationships with partners. In some instances, they were prompted by guilt to strengthen these, as Jane indicated (above).Mary committed her weekends to her husband, noting that his general support exceeded her expectations; he even proofread her papers: "My husband has always offered support for me. Whether it's school support or household support, he is always there for me." Relationship management appeared to be vital to the participants' successful establishment of valuable support systems.

Community Supports

The participants were asked to describe the supports or resources they had received to help ease any stressors brought on by returning to school. Faith was grateful for the community services she received, the subsidies that permitted her children to attend a "decent daycare" and her loan from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). Other students echoed similar responses: "I have previously received financial support from OSAP. Without it, I could not have afforded to return to school" (Jane).

Regardless of the motivating factors that ignited a desire for the participants to return to school, or the barriers they faced in light of their decision, these women persevered. They established workable methods for negotiating support so that they could experience academic success. Their own circumstances forced them to learn to develop essential skills and to seek and navigate external systems to acquire support.

Discussion of Findings

The participants in this study unanimously revealed that returning to school was personally satisfying and enhanced their opportunities for growth and fulfillment. While the sample size was small, the study confirmed that women re-entry students who are additionally managing other roles require support and resources. It also revealed that they must be active agents in negotiating supports and that how they engage in negotiating varies, often in relation to their life stage. While certain barriers (e.g., guilt) hindered or prevented the participants from seeking out

support, motivating factors (e.g., better standard of living) were found to have an unanticipated greater influence. A major finding of this study was the critical self-reflection that positioned women students to discover their potential for seeking out required resources for educational pursuits.

Additionally, the older participants affirmed findings by Carr and Sheridan (2001): returning to school can signify a moment where women no longer have familial obligations that compel them to defer personal or career-related goals. The findings also align with Sweet and Moen (2007), who observe that returning to school "may be viewed by the wife as a 'right,' a means of recouping job or social rewards foregone for the sake of children and spouse" (p. 235).

Three of the participants discussed pressures related to divorce and single parenthood. Broughton and Van Acker (2007) examined the impact of early dissolution of marriages and/or early parenthood on educational aspirations. They found that some women experienced a sense of "enlightenment" after their romance "went wrong" (p. 281). Faith, Dana and Jane confirmed that they perceived education as a permanent and positive life-altering event, signifying a refreshing new start in their lives of crisis and loss.

While a couple of participants (Jane and Faith) acknowledged college assistance, particularly from faculty, they also expressed a belief that colleges generally catered to younger, financially stable, full-time students. Re-entry or non-traditional students, noted Jane, need different help to figure out how to navigate resources. If higher education institutions are more appealing to younger students, then older women re-entry students may feel restricted in their opportunities to continue their education.

Negotiating for support-What Was Found

Vaccaro & Lovell (2010) found that women sought a university degree as a means of asserting individual autonomy and identity, an observation of several of the present study's older participants. The participants' responses also echoed the literature that notes that higher education for some women is not associated with financial benefits or a career change, but is rather instigated by critical events in their lives (e.g., divorce or death of a close relative).All five participants echoed the literature about insufficient time as a barrier to completing coursework and social and familial expectations impeding the practical and efficient pursuit of higher education.

The participants' responses also matched the literature's remarks about role-juggling as a barrier to education (Home, 1998; Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2007; Zosky, Unger, White, & Mills, 2003). Consequently, two participants (Kate and Mary) timed their re-entry to coincide with a reduction in competing demands for their time.

One area where Kate and Mary differed from the literature was in their prioritizing caregiving over scholarship. Some literature notes that the woman's sense of entitlement to return to education can be negatively perceived as a disruption of divisions of labour (Sweet & Moen, 2007). The

married women in my study (Kate and Mary) seemed to maintain their role as caregivers, placing their families first, even when having adequate support.

Self-Investment

The theme of "self-investment" is common among women re-entry students. Vaccaro (2010) defines it as "the valuing of self enough to believe that personal growth, learning, and education are needed and deserved" (p. 173).Two of my study's participants (Faith and Kate) expressed that a return to school was an extension of personal identity. My findings were similar to those of a study (Palazesi & Bower, 2006) of baby boomers who returned to college for personal, work-related or upgrading purposes. Some of the women in the study experienced a change in their perceptions of how they saw their self-identity (p.51) by using the college as their change agent; their experiences at college modified their existing identity to form a new one.

Gender/Social Expectations

The literature revealed that gender and social expectations were barriers to women students' seeking support and resources. Two participants in my study raised this in relation to housework and childcare. They felt that despite recent shifts in gendered divisions of labour, they still carried the weight of traditional gender expectations. Only one of the participants revealed that her husband adopted the traditionally female domestic tasks (cooking, cleaning, etc.). Deutsch and Schmertz's study (2011) on gender's covert influence on women's education supported my findings that family played a fundamental role in women's educational decisions. Interestingly, amongst my participants, family was seen as both a support and a constraint.

The Burden of Guilt

The concept of guilt is not as yet well-documented. The present study found that guilt or being a burden impeded women students' attempts to negotiate support or resources. Only two participants identified no guilt in their pursuit of support; however, they appeared to request this help with great due diligence, which might suggest unconscious guilt.

Another significant point elucidated by several of the participants regarded the importance of self-care; some participants felt guilty when they devoted time to care for themselves. Consequently, they forewent meeting personal needs (sleep, rest, exercise, nutrition) in order to meet others' needs while still meeting course assignment due dates.

Alternative Measures/Strategies

Some of the participants engaged in deceptive strategies (using employer time); this indicates potential desperation to meet course expectations and demonstrates women students' determination to succeed academically. The participants reported that they did not feel any guilt since they perceived their education was of value to their employer.

As existing literature did not include this finding, the discovery suggests a closer look at how the work environment could better support women students is required.

Existing literature did report, however, the stress derived from course work and assignment deadlines. For women students juggling multiple responsibilities, this could be overwhelming. Previous studies have confirmed that both family and education are deemed "greedy institutions" (p. 62)for women (Edwards, 1993; Gouthro, 2005).Consequently, it was not surprising to hear that students who worked full-time found managing studies more challenging than students without employment. This study provided new insights around the intersecting systemic factors affecting women re-entry students' negotiations.

Consulting with Peers and Professor

A strong theme that emerged from this study was the importance of consulting and collaborating with peers and professors. The participants talked about the various ways they experienced support from managing the relationships with both peers and especially from their professors. E-mail, discussion boards and face-to-face interaction provided support and created a community that motivated and inspired the participants to succeed. This can be considered a community of practice.

In the Communities of Practice model, members have opportunities to develop skills and learn through community interaction (Wenger, 1999); it can create positive outcomes and be a great source of support in which sustained engagement and collaboration are based on shared experiences and knowledge systems. Often the team or group is able to represent a collective mind while allowing individual members to contribute unique information and skills. Members can give and receive helpful feedback; additionally, the presence of an encouraging professor is vital for the non-traditional student to feel committed to the group process as well as her own success. The strengths of a Communities of Practice lie in its shared existence.

Applying Principles of Adult Education to the Non-traditional Student

Three principles of adult learning are identified as most relevant to this discussion: (a) use of stories (Clark & Rossiter, 2008); (b) self-direction; and(c) capacity to change.

Narrative learning theory suggests that narratives can be used to create a stronger, more definitive sense of self. In several instances, when participants were asked about strategies that allotted them sufficient time to study, they told stories about experiencing personal growth and how reflecting on the process enabled them to ask for support.

Cranton (2012) notes that "self-directed learning" has long been central to adult education and that the term has evolved to mean several different things. One definition focuses on personal autonomy whereby learners exhibit independent acting and thinking by exerting control over their learning events (p.14). Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) articulate three main goals of self-directed learning: to encourage adults

to self-direct their learning process, to foster transformative learning through self-directed learning, and to promote emancipatory learning and social action (p. 107). Every participant in my study demonstrated some aspect of self-directed learning, with many having revealed independently choosing their educational pursuits.

In this study, a major finding was that the women students self-reflected on various life experiences that taught them how to negotiate support and resources, and define and execute strategies. The participants reported that their learning resulted in them having a change in perspective, and noticed that the changes affected their personal growth and confidence. Based on the responses of the participants as re-entry students, it was evident that these women had previous experience in specified events or actions that had triggered them to realize that they required support. At the core of Mezirow's (1991) perspective on transformative learning is the concept of critical self-reflection and this could be an effective tool for raising awareness. Providing an opportunity for reflection followed by dialogue may encourage women students to reflect on what they require to succeed.

Conclusion

The stories of the women in my study revealed the transformations and self-discoveries they experienced as students and the extent to which negotiating support was life-changing. This self-expression is crucial to women re-entry students' negotiation for support and academic success.

Women who decide to return to school continue to face challenges managing multiple roles and responsibilities. How successfully they are able to negotiate for time and resources and learn to possess critical reflective skills upon their return depends on several factors, many of which were uniquely identified in this study.

The main barriers to seeking support that this study's participants cited included feelings of guilt and social expectations. It is clear that social structures persist that oblige women to handle housework and be primary caregivers in their households; a consequence is overwhelming stress.

Yet, women re-entry students can only advocate or negotiate for support to a certain extent. They can only affect their immediate environment. They undoubtedly possess the knowledge of the value of negotiating support and resources, yet their reasons for sometimes failing to do so are interrelated and complex (too many barriers is a common explanation).In their student roles, they do not want to relinquish their educational pursuits, yet they often place themselves in situations not conducive to learning. There is a need to create opportunities for women re-entry students to engage in conversations regarding the various systemic factors that affect their inability to seek out or acquire support in order to experience academic success.

Although the data that emerged from this study would indicate that negotiating for supports and resources is critical for women re-entry students, we need to learn more about the quality of the various supports

that these women receive, if they receive them at all. This research study found that although participants clearly believed in a process of critical reflection, they were only able to articulate this superficially, pointing to benefits such as organizational skills, time management skills and setting boundaries. Of great benefit would be further examining how critical reflection fundamentally affects the negotiation process.

Significance of Research

Few bodies of research have explored how women learn to negotiate support and strategize techniques or practices. This study contributes to filling that gap by focusing on how women re-entry students can motivate themselves to do so in order to successfully manage multiple roles while fulfilling their educational goals. It has illuminated how some women re-entry students are innovative with the possible supports they receive and highlighted in what ways others can be sensitive to these non-traditional students' unique needs.

A focus for further research is how women can be empowered to self-reflect within existing social and educational structures so as to learn to negotiate supports or resources. The addition of women's studies or the inclusion of feminist pedagogy into professional development workshops for college faculty would prepare them with a solid foundation for understanding cultural and systemic factors that affect non-traditional students' – especially women re-entry students' – practice. Higher educational programs could see an improvement in participation and outcome attainment by offering alternate delivery methods that would address the various needs of these non-traditional learners. Further research would also be worthwhile on the effects on the family when a parent – in particular a woman – decides to enroll in higher education. Expanding related research to further diverse groups, such as lesbian re-entry students or women re-entry students with physical or intellectual limitations would be worthwhile. The focus for further research is particularly important in light of globalization, improvements to technology, and shifting social values.

Recommendations

The participants in this study clearly identified the benefits to women re-entry students of critical self-reflection, replacing guilt and shame, and strengthening communication and negotiation skills. The recommendations offered are based on the data collected from the students in the study.

Recommendations for College Service Professionals:

- Offer orientation programs targeted specifically to non-traditional students. Offer the programs prior to and at the initial registration stages with an emphasis on informing students on the program's expectations and requirements
- Create greater awareness amongst college faculty and staff by offering or mandating professional learning opportunities to learn and/or address the specific needs and supports of non-traditional students

- Reach out to women re-entry students to survey their needs and support – this would be done annually to keep support current and reach new students
- Post resources on a student services webpage offering contact information and links to outside support networks designed for non-traditional students
- Structure any forum designed to encourage dialogue on negotiating support for women re-entry students in a way that will allow flexibility, attention to spousal or day care issues, parking costs and any other issues that could impede participation
- Encourage college services to focus on wellness and self-care
- Re-assess the possibility of expanding tuition grants or scholarships for women re-entry students

Recommendations for Women Re-entry Students:

- Make proposals to employers regarding tuition reimbursement and/or flexible work schedules
- Establish social support within the college system with a focus on raising awareness of strategies that could alleviate stress
- Lobby for the inclusion of an orientation session specifically for women re-entry students prior to college admission

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Josie Filippponi-Berardinelli teaches in the Faculty of Continuing Education and Training at Seneca College. She can be reached at: Josie.Berardinelli@senecacollege.ca (mailto:Josie.Berardinelli@senecacollege.ca?subject=CQ%20Article)

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