Married Mothers Seeking a Bachelor's Degree

And Initial Teaching Certification: How Adult Educators can Structure

Appropriate Learning Environments

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There are at least four forms of adult learning: formal education, non-formal education, informal learning and incidental learning (Foley, 2004). Each of these forms of learning contributes to the development of adults as learners. There are many theories and perspectives on adult learning and adults as learners and each present different frameworks upon which educators of adult learners can structure appropriate learning environments. Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2010) state, "Adult participation in formal learning has reached unprecedented levels within the last decade…if current trends continue, more than 50% of all adults in the U.S. between the ages of 25 and 55 will be involved in some form of adult education by 2010" (p. 25).

There are many distinctions which can be made within the adult learner population in formal learning environments as well. In their research Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2010) also found that "participants in postsecondary education among adults 25 and older are predominately White, women (60%), married with children, and with above average family incomes" (p.27). According to the National Center for Education Information (NCEI) in 2011 84% of teachers were female and of those 49% where in the 30-49 years of age bracket. For the purpose of this focus project, the adult learner will be defined within specific parameters: 25 years of age or older, female, married mothers that may work part-time and are enrolled full-time in a formal educational setting seeking a Bachelor's Degree and initial teaching certification as either a full or part-time student.

As noted above, while married female mothers with above average family incomes make up the majority of students in formal education this does not mean that they may not encounter significant struggles in their roles of student, mother and wife.

Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) found "adult women may pose a particular challenge to institutions serving primarily traditional students (age 18-25), as they are often balancing household, work, and school demands and are more likely to need such services as child-care (p. 479).

One major struggle facing these female students is social and cultural in nature. Traditionally family roles have been appointed to women and work roles to men. Because of these roles women are more likely than men to follow disrupted and disjointed career and educational paths due to cultural expectations that they bear greater responsibility for child-rearing and household tasks. Certain motivational factors contribute to women returning to formal education later in life, these include life events such as divorce, geographic moves, and children's school entry or departure from home (Deutsch and Shmertz, 2011). Many women still feel the need to do something for themselves and/or their children when these life events occur.

Once a mother decides to enter formal education White (2008) found "For the mothers, the predominant feeling regarding all these scenarios [father's taking on "mother-dominated" roles, children in child-care facilities] seemed to be guilt, an emotion well documented in many other studies of women endeavoring to fulfill the roles of both mother and student…" (p.165). After making the decision that a formal education will be pursued an early study done by Gerson, (1985) found that women reported more gratification with more roles, supporting the notion that, when a role is validated, it may cause less strain (Deutsch and Shmertz, 2011). Therefore, what can adult educators do to foster an environment that supports these women throughout their program?

First, MacKeracher (2004) states, "Adult learning facilitators should *not* assume that a group of adults of the same gender and age with similar social, economic, occupational and educational characteristics will share common learning styles or abilities" (p.79). In this case, because these women have returned with the same goals in mind, their challenges and needs may be different in achieving their end goal. These challenges can vary from needing child-care to financial strain to adapting to the formal learning environment itself. Adult educators can provide some leniency when assigning due dates or have alternate assignments that can be done, or allow for some flexibility when an emergency arises for these students. In her research White (2008) found that her interview participants suggested that "beginning and experienced teachers who are also parents talk about managing their families while teaching full time and having access to such teachers to talk over issues one to one when needed" (p.169).

Second, Vella (2000) finds there are four assumptions that educators need to embrace when working with adult learners. These are:

1. Learners have the capacity to learn.

2. Learners learn when they are actively engaged with the content.

3. New content can be presented through a learning task.

4. Learning tasks produce accountability.

There appears to be great discrepancy between these assumptions and what may actually go on in formal learning environments. While most educators would agree that learning must be engaging and active and that learners must be held accountable for their learning, what some may do is different than what they believe therefore embracing the first assumption is vital. The adult educator should move away from

delivering content in lecture based format which may not engage this population of

learners. All human beings learn when they are engaged in a real-life struggle with new

content (cognitive, affective, or psychomotor) (Vella, 2000).

When a learner can be directly involved, whether physically and/or cognitively

they "learn not just the specific content but also the excitement and creative thrill of

being decision makers in their own work, of being active learners (Vella, 2000). The

third assumption builds upon the first two, the task does not need to come after the

material has been presented, the learner can learn the content while involved in a task.

The task should not be seen as something that is done to see if the student "gets it."

The final assumption is where "they (the students) discover that they are learning

how to learn" (Vella, 2000). In providing tasks that encourage autonomous learning,

adult educators can invite this kind of learning by producing and designing an

environment that creates a learning-centered dialogue (Vella, 2000). Wlodkowski

(1999) states, "there are at least four motivational conditions to be substantially

enhancing of adult motivation to learn-inclusion, attitude, meaning and competence"

(p.69). The first one of these is inclusion, which is the awareness of learners that they

are part of an environment in which they and their instructor are *respected by and*

connected to one another (Wlodkowski, 1999). In this kind of environment both the

instructor and students construct knowledge at the same time. The role of the instructor

is not the giver of knowledge rather they are the guider of the knowledge that is being

built.

A learning task has to be carefully crafted so the learner can learn both the

content and in the context of the learning task. Vella (2000) defines the learning task as

"an open question to put to learners who have all the resources they need to respond. The open question in the learning task is the heart of the matter, inviting critical thinking, demanding reflection, stimulating creativity" (p. 9). Learning tasks rather than teaching tasks allow the students to be accountable for their own learning. They are able to bring to the experience their varying points of view thus injecting something into their learning that a simple presentation of materials by the teacher may not achieve.

Third, adult educators must also realize that they are engaging with a whole being. Boucouvalas and Lawrence (2010) state, "…traditional schooling has focused on educating the mind, appealing to the intellect. We learn through many modalities and by engaging with various creative and imaginative processes" (p.36). Wlodkowski (1999) states,

> "As an instructor of adults, you can be quite assured that students' attitudes will be an active influence on their motivation to learn from the moment instruction begins. Adult learners will immediately make judgments about you, the particular subject, the learning situation, and their personal expectancy for success" (p. 73).

Walsh, Abi-Nader and Poutiatine (2005) found that "Students have a desire to learn practical content. They had little patience with the theoretical and often asked how what they were learning would help them be good teachers in the classroom" (p. 13). Tying together meaningful learning tasks with theoretical concepts will help adult educators maximize their time with students and may allow for overall student satisfaction of their courses.

Fourth is realizing the importance of past experiences. Adults may enter learning with experiences that have been unpleasant, or worse-painful. Recognizing how this

experience manifests in a learning situation is an important part of being an effective

adult educator (Boucouvalas & Lawrence, 2010). Adults bring with them an

accumulation of past experiences that will affect their learning.   Adults learn more

productively when learning content bears some perceived relationship to past

experience, or when past experience can be applied directly to new situations

(MacKeracher, 2004). White's (2008) participants state, "Parenting, had given them the

knowledge, experience and confidence to pursue this career, and had helped them

overcome their nervousness over returning to study" (p.164). Therefore, adult

educators must acknowledge these past experiences and encourage their students to

make these connections. MacKeracher (2004), states "Adults experience a sense of

well-being when they do learn and when their environments supports and encourages

learning" (p.25). Because these women are facing emotional concerns in regards to

their home life adult educators need to in a sense validate these feelings. They need to

acknowledge and be understanding of the emotional distress these students may be

under.

Experiential learning opportunities is another form of learning that is critical for

these students to develop teaching skills that they will need in the future. My

experience has been that if we are going to participate in an activity such as "Math Fun

Night" and a student works evenings, then they are assigned an alternate assignment or

will participate in a similar activity with another group of students during the day.

Generally, it would appear that most students will make every effort to attend these

activities as they view them as a meaningful learning experience. Because these

activities are family oriented we would also allow these students to bring their children if childcare became an issue.

Another unique factor affecting this group of learners is when they reach the student teaching portion of their degree requirements. Once a student successfully completes all the coursework and state testing, in Michigan they are required to participate in 15 weeks or one semester's worth of field experience. White (2008) found "another significant difficulty for mothers who are student teachers is lack of time to spend with their children, partners, extended families, friends, and to study and complete assignments" (161). White (2008) also found that the women in her study had a common thread among them they all wanted to be teachers earlier and somehow "life got in the way" (p. 164).

Once a student reaches this portion of the program they may face additional burdens such as finding additional child care before and after normal school hours because they are now expected to be at their assigned school before their children can be dropped off at their respective schools. Another financial burden may be additional commuting cost, apparel and additional materials needed for this experience. The research indicates that these women continue to rely heavily on extended family and friends to help with their children. It would appear that once these women are at this part of the program they do "whatever it takes" to finish. I was not able to find any research that indicated what happens in the case of a student that cannot meet this portion of their requirements due to work or other conflicts. This leads me to believe that a student is aware of this requirement ahead of time and will make preparations to be able to complete this portion of their degree requirement.

It is interesting to note that with the current state of public education one would assume that interest in the field of elementary education would decrease within this specific population. Yet data obtained from NCEI indicates that between 2005 and 2011 there has been an increase of about 5% in the 30-39 age bracket and a 1% increase overall in the 30-49 age bracket for current teachers. During the same time frame there has been an increase of about 7% in teachers with less than five years experience, indicating that there are new teachers currently entering the profession.

In her study White (2008) noted, "Mothers said they returned to study because they wanted to improve their employment and financial prospects, "to improve" themselves, and to enhance their self-esteem" (p. 163). Other participants in this study also noted, "That they were particularly motivated by doing something worthwhile for themselves-to move beyond the boundaries of their domestic roles. They acknowledged they were placing stresses on their families, but said their desire and commitment to succeed in a field of employment overrode this concern" (p. 163).

It would appear then that this particular group of learners may not necessarily be concerned with attaining employment once they are done with schooling; they appear to be more concerned with the short term goal of finishing their program first. While those of us in the education field know that the demands of the profession, combined with the salary, and working conditions that can be far from ideal can certainly detract from the job, it is I believe the rewards in the end that justify the sacrifices that are made to become a teacher. Once a student makes it through the program they may be for the most part willing to then take "any" teaching job in order to begin to practice and perfect their craft.

It has been my experience from conversation with former student peers that most of them elect to teach in charter schools for example. While most of them say that they would prefer to be in a traditional public school they are appreciative of the fact that they are teaching and gaining relevant experience in a classroom. They share that they are networking and building relationships that may help with attaining a more desired position. One common theme is that they are thoroughly enjoying their time with their students, whether they teach at charter schools, land long-term guest teacher positions, coaching positions, or day-to-day guest teacher jobs.

It would appear that in the end, what is important to these women is attaining their degree and knowing that with it they will now have the possibility of opportunities that they would not have had had they not "gone for it."

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