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# Parenthood and Persistence of Adult Learners in the Western Region of the United States

## **About the Author(s)**

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## **Keywords**

Adult learner, Academic experience, Persistence, Psychological experiences, Retention



## PARENTHOOD AND PERSISTENCE OF ADULT LEARNERS IN THE WESTERN REGION OF THE UNITED STATES

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### Abstract

This study explored the role of parenthood on adult learners who were parents of minor children and gaining an understanding of their needs while attending a college or university. A qualitative phenomenological approach and purposive techniques were used to identify and recruit adult learners who were parents of minor children located in the general area in the Western Region of the United States. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and Yüksel and Yıldırım (2015) guide used for phenomenological narrative data analysis. Recorded interviews were transcribed into text and NVIVO software was then used to organize the interview data and uncover any connections or themes of the data.

The key findings fully supported Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory of adult learner's attrition model. Study participants cited that time management skills, dependable childcare, and faculty support affected their decision to persist at a college or university. Additionally, adult learner - parents indicated that their experience would be less challenging if childcare was available at the campus at the times that their class & are scheduled. Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that higher education leaders tasked with serving a large population of adult learners who are parents to focus on promoting childcare centers or discounts to student enrolled at the institution at the times that they are scheduled to take classes and encourage faculty members a supportive relationship for learner-parents. Recommendations for future research include exploring the relationship between environmental, psychological, and academic supports and student-parents' decision to persist.

### Introduction

Over the last 30 years, adult learners have become an important part of higher education research (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013). Bean and Metzner (1985) were one of the first researchers to define adult learners as students 24 or older, enrolled part-time, and are college commuters. However, since the time of their study, the definition of adult learners has changed (Peterson, 2016). Today, adult learners are defined as any student over the age of 24 with delayed college enrollment, has dependents, is financially independent, or attends college full-time/part-time, and/or employed (Gordon, 2014; Markle, 2015).

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2016), between 2008 and 2016 the enrollment of adult learners increased by only 8.13%; however, it is projected that adult learners enrollments will continue to increase up to 23% between the years of 2016 and 2019 (NCES, 2016; Vale & Roat, 2015). At the center of this change surrounding the higher education community, adult learners confront challenges in completing their degrees combined with other competing responsibilities such as work and family, which require most of their attention (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016).

Degree completion, student persistence, and retention are vital in the higher education discourse and tied to the federal government's increased focus on college graduation rates and

state funding to performance metrics (Miller, 2014). The completion rates of college students with minor children can create profound consequences for the adult learner and create a harsh reality for many institutions that rely heavily on tuition revenue and state funding to support the overall institution (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016). Students' failure to complete a degree has a significant impact on the economy's labor market (Miller, 2014).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of adult learner attrition guide the attrition rate of undergraduate adult learners. Based on the criterion of adult learners, Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of adult learners' attrition provided the theoretical framework for this study. Bean and Metzner (1985) conceptualized that adult learners' decisions to drop out are based on (a) student demographics; (b) student academic performance; (c) institutional satisfaction; and (d) external factors such as work and/or family commitments. Bean and Metzner's (1985) model were built on Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model which emphasized that a student's background, academic/institutional commitments, and social integration are vital to student persistence and preventing attrition.

Environmental factors were particularly important to adult learners' persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985). For example, if an adult learner cannot adjust his or her work schedule and arrange for childcare to commit to college, then the learner will be less likely to persist regardless of academic support (Perna, 2012). In one study, Metzner and Bean (1987) tested the conceptual model of adult student attrition of 624 adult freshmen learners and found that environmental variables did not affect dropout directly; however, they had significant effects on intent to leave. Course availability, family responsibilities, job conflicts, and personal problems are frequently the cause for withdrawal in research regarding attrition and persistence among adult learners (Perna, 2012); however, Metzner and Bean (1987) argued that the effects of some environmental (external) factors might significantly affect the persistence of adult learners compared to younger nontraditional students.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) adult students' attrition conceptual model findings are still confirmable in current research regarding adult learners. Other researchers such as Bergman et al. (2014) have also found supporting evidence for the Bean and Metzner model. Using the theoretical groundworks from Bean and Metzner (1985), the researchers tested the construct of the model of adult learners' persistence to explore the effects of (a) student entry characteristics, (b) external factors, and (c) institution environments on adult students' persistence. The researchers found that persistence rates were lower among learners who felt that they were unable to manage the responsibilities from both work and college or there was a conflict between their work and school schedule. Learners who had high persistence rates felt a strong relationship with their instructor/advisor, and they received support from home.

Bean and Metzner (1985) presumed that higher education institutions should consider that age alone does not determine the needs of an adult learner. When working with an adult learner population, variables may include age, residence, enrollment status (full time or part time), ethnicity, socioeconomic status, dependents, and gender (Bean & Metzner, 1985). In addition, adult learners are likely to exhibit additional variables that can make their college experience less likely to be successful compared to other students (Tinto, 2012).

### **Nontraditional Adult Learners**

Although nontraditional adult learners represent approximately 38.2% of the postsecondary population in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009), the population is often neglected in postsecondary education. Nontraditional adult learners

usually defined as aged 25 and over include those under 25 but who have characteristics indicative of adult responsibilities, such as working full-time, being financially dependent, has non-spousal dependents, is a single parent, as well as having a nontraditional educational trajectory, such as delayed enrollment into higher education or did not complete high school (Chen, 2017). Given these characteristics, the majority of students in undergraduate programs can be classified as nontraditional, suggesting that the traditional student, who enrolls full-time and lives on campus, is now actually the exception rather than the norm (Chen, 2017), even though they, the traditional student, arguably receive the vast majority of attention and resources from colleges and universities.

Nontraditional adult learners are largely invisible to higher education, especially first-tier universities (Chen, 2017). An American Council for Education (ACE) survey found that over 40% of institutions indicated that they did not identify older adult students for purposes of outreach, programs, and services, or financial aid (Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson, 2008). When they do, the prevailing view of adult learners is that they are one-dimensional (Lakin, 2009 40) focused predominantly on lifelong learning. The assumption in this perspective is that learning is an ancillary activity implying less urgency or need. However, adult students seek higher education for a multitude of reasons related to retirement, career change, and career retooling (DiSilvestro, 2013; Yankelovich, 2005).

In the United States, more than 33% of total higher education enrollment consists of nontraditional learners and they make up approximately 50% of students enrolled part-time in a college or university (Bergman et al., 2014). The general problem is an adult learner with additional responsibilities, such as how parents influenced their children graduation rates. Adult learners' graduation rates have remained at 23% (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2012). In addition, 46% of community college students attempting to complete usually depart during their first year (Peterson, 2016). To increase the completion rates among adult learners, student persistence needs to be improved (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Lower graduation rates can negatively affect higher education institutions and the student (Stewart, Doo Hun, & JoHyun, 2015). Langrehr, Phillips, Melville, and Eum (2015) suggest that given the over generalized views of defining adult learners by age, studies should explore the diverse profiles of adult learners because adult learners have distinctive characteristics that contribute to their success. Understanding the specific needs, influences, and student success of adult learners who are parents of minor children is essential for college administrators tasked with implementing programs and policies for nontraditional learners (Morazes, 2016). Without further research on experiences with parenthood and persistence of adult learners who are parents of minor children, completion rates for adult learners will continue to decline (Mahaffey et al., 2015).

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the lived environmental, academic, and psychological experiences of adult learners with minor children enrolled at a college in the Western Region of the United States. Adult learners confront challenges in completing their degrees combined with other competing responsibilities such as work and family, which require most of their attention (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016). In examining this study, a phenomenological approach was utilized to examine the experiences of a specific subgroup of adult learners who are parents of minors because persistence has direct effects on academic success (Langrehr et al., 2015).

Using purposeful sampling, 10 nontraditional adult learners (a) aged 25 and over, (b) enrolled at college and university, and (c) are parents of minor children selected to participate in this study. Data collected from participants through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews.

Data analysis included Yüksel and Yıldırım's (2015) eight steps for data analysis in phenomenological research methods: (a) horizontalizing, (b) reduction of experiences, (c) thematic clustering, (d) comparison of multiple data sources to, (e) creating participants' individual textural description of the phenomena, (f) construction structural descriptions, (g) phenomenological reduction, and (h) synthesizing the texture and structure into an expression. To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the data from each participant's interview, the researchers followed measures of confirmability, dependability, and transferability.

### **Research Questions**

Higher education institutions play an essential role in promoting the successful college completion of adult learners who are parents of minor children (Mills, & Plumb, 2012). However, adult learners who are parents have a significantly lower rate of completing their degree. The design of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the lived environmental, academic, and psychological experiences of nontraditional adult learners with minor children. Understanding the adult learners' experience with parenthood and persistence was the driving force for this research study. The following research questions guided the investigation for this study:

**RQ1.** What are the lived environmental (external) experiences of parenthood that affect persistence among adult learners with minor children attending a college or university in the Western Region of the United States?

**RQ2.** What are the lived psychological experiences with parenthood that affect persistence among adult learners with minor children attending a college or university in the Western Region of the United States?

**RQ3.** What are the lived academic experiences that affect persistence among adult learners who are parents of minor children attending a college or university in the Western Region of the United States?

While college enrollment of adult learners is increasing, 46% of students' attempting a degree usually departs during their first year (Peterson, 2016). Adult learners' failure to complete a degree has a significant impact on the economy's labor market (Miller, 2014). Failure to persist for this group of learners is likely to cause higher unemployment rates, lower earnings, and increased dependence on public assistance (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Miller, 2014; Waktola, 2014). Completing a college degree may also result in higher earnings and lower unemployment rates (Nelson et al., 2013). This increased pressure has caused higher education leaders to reexamine policies in working with adult learners. Challenges with federal funding have also dwindled due to the increased focus on college completion rates (Miller, 2014).

From this study, college administrators can gain insight into the phenomenon of persistence for adult learners who are parents of minors. Educational leaders can provide the support necessary for student success by understanding their needs and experiences. It is in the best interest of college administrators to include adult learners in their solution to meet the federal initiative "Pathways to Success" of increased educational attainment of adult learners (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012). Understanding the needs of adult learners and their challenges will help educators develop support services on campuses that can enhance nontraditional student success. Such an understanding is crucial for college administrators to effectively respond to increasing degree completion rates in the U.S. Additionally, increasing degree completion among adult learners has important effects on the student, their children, and the economy in general (Bergman et al., 2014).

### **Characteristics of Nontraditional Students**

Adult learners who are parents of minor children are 52% more likely to leave school without a degree compared to 32% of non-parents of minor children (Nelson, Froehner, Gault, & Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2013; Sabol et al., 2015). This trend is problematic for higher education institutions, the economy, and adult learners. Degree completion rates are entwined with the federal and state government funding levels to institutions of higher learning (Miller, 2014). Failure to complete a degree has a significant impact on the fiscal viability of higher education institutions resulting in burdening students through higher tuition and fees (Dowd & Shieh, 2014). For the economy, failure to complete a degree will result in not having enough trained workers to meet the labor market needs (Miller, 2014). In a report from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), nearly one in five students who fail complete their degree program leave with an estimate of \$20,000 in student loan debt, and they are more than likely to be unemployed compared to degreed workers (Bowman & Denson, 2014). Moreover, chronically unemployed individuals and their children are at a high risk of experiencing persistent poverty (Grieger & Wyse, 2013).

The definition of 'adult learner' is fluid and varies from campus to campus. Literature shows that adult learners possess the following characteristics: (a) 25 years of age or older, (b) financially independent, (c) a single parent, (d) having dependents, and (e) received a general education diploma, (f) part-time enrollment, (g) delayed enrollment, or (h) work full-time while enrolled (Gordon, 2014; Markle, 2015). However, most often age has been the defining characteristic of this population (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012;

### **Adult Learners and Persistence**

Adult persistence is linked to intrinsic motivation to pursue an education (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Scott & Lewis, 2012). Nontraditional learners are motivated by intrinsic values that are beneficial to their self-esteem and self-concept (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). For example, scholars such as Kimmel, Gaylor, and Hayes (2014a) examined the motivations and barriers of nontraditional students by gender and there were significant differences regarding their motivations. The intrinsic factors that motivated women to pursue a higher education based on being a strong role model for their children and expanding their career opportunities. On the other hand, male intrinsic motivations based on the desire to retain their job. Kimmel, Gaylor, and Hayes (2014a) posited that since females are motivated by their domestic roles, higher education institutions could benefit by providing the support that addresses childcare at times when classes are offered. Similarly, Kimmel, Gaylor, and Hayes (2014a) observed that minority students' increased enrollment in higher education is due to the perceived motivations for a pay increase, the influence of a spouse, and significantly the desire to be a strong role model for a child.

### **Research Methodology and Design**

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to exploring a lived experience, and the overall goal is to allow participants to communicate their experience with the outside world (Charlick, McKellar, Fielder, & Pincombe, 2015). Phenomenology, unlike many other qualitative methodologies, creates more than physical descriptions for phenomena under investigation and allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the human experience embedded in a variety of forms such as thoughts, actions, and memories (Nazir, 2016).

Phenomenological research analysis starts with bracketing the researchers' bias throughout the study. The guidelines of Yüksel and Yıldırım (2015) for data analysis in phenomenological research methods were adopted: (a) horizontalizing, (b) reduction of

experiences, (c) thematic clustering, (d) comparison of multiple data sources to, (e) creating participants' individual textual description of the phenomena, (f) construction structural descriptions, (g) phenomenological reduction, and (h) synthesizing the texture and structure into an expression.

### **Population**

The focus of this research was on the lived experiences of adult learners who are parents of minor children and their persistence in a college in the Western Region of the United States. The sample size for this study was ten adult learners who are parents of minor children under the age of 18, attending a 2-year or 4-year university in the Western Region of the United States. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select adult learners who are parents of minor children from the study's population who are likely to have some understanding of college persistence. According to Yüksel and Yıldırım (2015), a phenomenological study entails a homogenous group of participants.

### **Findings**

Six themes related to adult learners who were parents and their lived experience in a college or university emerged: (a) maximizing time management skills, (b) access to dependable childcare, (c) being a role model to a child, (d) positive mindset as motivation and providing for their families, (e) support relationships from family, and (f) communicating with college administration. Study participants identified the skills and resources that they utilized in order to pursue higher education. Although participants reported that these skills and resources were beneficial to their success, the participants expressed a need to have more childcare available on campus at the time that their classes were scheduled.

**RQ1.** What are the lived environmental (external) experiences of parenthood that affect persistence among nontraditional students with minor children attending a college or university in the Western Region of the United States? The data showed that the student-parents in this study do indeed have a connection with environmental factors and their decision to persist in a college or a university. Data supporting theme 1 (Time Management) and theme 2 (Childcare) supported the answer to research question 1.

The experiences of these student-parents indicated that time management and childcare played a major role in their decision to persist in a college or university. For example, when the student-parents talked about "managing multiple roles" or, "my calendar", "determining my priorities", these student-parents were identifying key components of how they persist in a college or university while being a parent. Time management skills related to the skills that they used to juggle multiple roles. This was an important finding in this study and gave an insight into how these student-parents juggle multiple roles so they can persist in college.

**RQ2.** What are the lived psychological experiences with parenthood that affect persistence among nontraditional students with minor children attending a college or university in the Western Region of the United States? Data supporting theme 3 (Role Model to a Child), theme 4 (Intrinsic Motivation), and theme 5 (Family Support) were probably the strongest benefits to the student-parents of this study. Kimmel, Gaylor, and Hayes (2014a) observed that minority students' increased enrollment in higher education is due to the perceived motivations for a pay increase, the influence of a spouse, and significantly the desire to be a strong role model for a child. The participants of this study expressed that being a role for their children as the intrinsic motivation that influenced their decision to persist.

Respondents of the study described several ways in which being a role model their child(ren) played a major role in their decision to persist in a college or university. The

respondents used these reasons regardless of the stress of juggling multiple roles as psychological reasons to attain a degree. For each participant, the mentality of being a role model and intrinsic motivation played a role in their decision to persist in a college or university. For example, one of the participants emphasized how important being a role model is to her. “I want to set a good example for my kids. I want them to know that education is important and not optional. I also want them to know they can achieve anything if they work hard.”

**RQ3.** What are the lived academic experiences that affect persistence among nontraditional students who are parents of minor children attending a college or university in the Western Region of the United States? Data supporting theme six (College Administration Support), and theme seven (Introductory Course) showed a connection between student- parents academic experience and their decision to persist in a college or university. This finding supports Bean and Metzner’s (1985) theory that when academic and environmental variables are favorable students are more likely to persist; however, when both variables are poor students will drop out. One participant expressed that it is important to keep an open line of communication with faculty:

“So just having an open line of communication helps with that understanding level and things like that.”

In addition, another participant expressed that she never had issues with faculty members because they accommodate.

“Luckily I’ve not had any issues from any professors or the school itself. And just how they accommodate their students is a lot.”

The participants discussed how being a strong role model for their children and providing for their families motivated them to persist in a college or university. Participants also identified the importance of having a strong relationship with college administrators, especially faculty members. Support relationships from family were the fifth thematic finding. Participants reported that family support played a major role in their ability to persist in a college or university. Support relationships were provided from spouses, parents, friends, and the participants' children. The results of this study fully supported the remedial effect between environmental and academic variable assumptions of Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition model. The assumptions of Bean and Metzner's (1985) model concerning adult learners include the belief that when academic and environmental variables are favorable, students are more likely to persist. The participants believed that faculty would be supportive of any challenges they may face dealing with parenthood.

### **Recommendations**

To improve the retention rates of adult learners who are parents of minor children, higher education institutions should encourage faculty members to develop a positive relationship with students juggling multiple roles (Wyatt, 2011). For example, colleges could support this by providing faculty funding for faculty work overload, with support extended office hours and providing faculty with specific demographics on students to understand the context of their lives while pursuing higher education. The persistence of student parents who hold a positive relationship with faculty is contingent with their satisfaction with the institution and overall decision to persist (Mahaffey, Hungerford, & Sill's, 2015). From the findings of the study, it is important that colleges and universities create positions that are responsible for coordinating all efforts to support adult learners' matriculations. In conjunction, provide professional development for faculty and staff on helping nontraditional adult learners.

Findings from this study indicate that there is a need for additional research on the relationship between environmental, psychological, and academic supports and learner-parents' decision to persist. Specifically, higher education institutions support including dependable childcare and faculty's supports for learners who are parents of minor children. Higher education leaders, learners who are parents of minor children, and the economy could benefit from a better understanding of the resources needed to improve the overall institution's completion rates. More research into the various methods that faculty members can use to create a supportive environment without showing favoritism in the classroom is also needed to create a positive learning environment. Future data gathering and analysis of the findings of nontraditional learners who are also parents of minor children will provide an empirical base upon which to build theory and explore the uniqueness of such a broad population of students.

### **Conclusion**

This study illustrated the lived experiences of learners, who are parents of minor children, how those experiences influenced their decisions to persist in a college. The findings suggest that learners who are parents of minor children decision to persist directly relates to having favorable environmental, academic, and psychological variables. This finding provided practical approaches for higher education leaders in supporting adult learners who are also parents of minor children. Based on this study and other scholars' perspective, it is vital for higher education institutions to promote and foster programs and policies for learners who are parents. This initiative will create educational opportunities, economic competitiveness, increase graduation and completion rates by the year 2020 (Bailey & Belfield, 2012; Blumenstyk, 2010; Crosta, 2012; Jaschik, 2013; Jenkins & Rodriguez, 2013; Kotamraju & Blackman, 2011; Lewin, 2013).

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