Why go back to school? Investigating the motivations of student parents to pursue
post-secondary education

Tricia van Rhijn, Donna S. Lero, & Taniesha Burke
University of Guelph

Abstract

This study explored the factors that motivate student parents to pursue post-secondary education. Student parents at four Canadian universities (*n*=398) completed open-ended questions on their reasons for attending school in an online survey. Using Possible Selves Theory as a lens, we conducted a directed content analysis and found that student parents' motivation to attend school has a strong future orientation. Primary motivators for engaging in post-secondary study included: to attain a valued job/career, higher education, and inspiration from family. Secondary motivators included: personal development, improvement in lifestyle and income, inspiration from relationships outside the family, the desire to be socially responsible, to overcome physical/mental challenges, and to develop a new hobby. The results indicate that student parents' reasons for pursuing post-secondary education are varied and complex; it is therefore important that government and university policymakers are aware of the uniqueness of this population when making decisions on policies and supports.

Keywords: Student parents; non-traditional students; motivation; post-secondary education

Why go back to school? Investigating the motivations of student parents to pursue post-secondary education

Introduction

While traditional students are typically characterized as 18-24 years of age and who have entered post-secondary study directly from high school, non-traditional students include part-time, commuting, and mature learners who often have increased familial and work obligations in their lives (Silverman, Aliabadi, & Stiles, 2009). Generally, students who are not considered "traditional" are put into a single group labeled "non-traditional". Macari, Maples and D'Andrea (2005) characterize students as minimally to highly non-traditional using the following seven characteristics: delayed enrollment after high school, studying part-time, being financially independent, working full-time while attending school, having dependents (e.g., children, elderly family members), being a single parent, and not having received a standard high school diploma (e.g., high school equivalency certificate). Student parents, those enrolled in post-secondary study that have dependent children, represent a unique subset of non-traditional students. Student parents are a minority population of Canadian post-secondary students and accounted for between 11% and 16% of total enrollment between 1976 and 2005 (van Rhijn, Smit Quosai, & Lero, 2011). Compared to traditional students (typically non-parents), student parents are more likely to be married or in a long-term partnership, studying on a part-time basis, and work longer hours for pay while studying (Holmes, 2005). In addition, student parents are more likely to be female and are older than traditional students with more than 60% of Canadian student parents being 30 to 44 years of age (van Rhijn et al., 2011).

The present study provides an in-depth exploration of undergraduate Canadian student parents enrolled in university programs and their motivation to enroll and persist in post-secondary study. Research is required to explore the motivations of student parents in order to develop an understanding of what post-secondary study means to this unique minority population, so that institutions can both recruit and retain student parents.

Student Parents in Post-Secondary Education

Researchers have demonstrated that student parents have some advantages to being non-traditional learners including benefitting from their level of maturity and life experiences by being more focused on what they want to pursue in their future career, having a greater awareness of their likes and dislikes, and being better prepared to make informed decisions regarding their education (Holmes, 2005; Murphy & Roopchand, 2003). At the same time, student parents experience unique challenges related to their circumstances and obligations including having less flexibility in continuing their academic studies (often related to class scheduling), family-related roles and commitments, child care responsibilities, and additional financial commitments (Butlin, 1999; van Rhijn et al., 2011).

Yet student parents have continued to enroll in post-secondary institutions despite the challenges they face. Their continued presence has led researchers to focus on understanding

how the academic environment influences their success and how personal and external factors (e.g., language difficulties, family support, financial position, institutional support and employment commitments) influence their psychological well-being and successful completion of programs (e.g., Michie, Glachan, & Bray, 2001; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Swain & Hammond, 2011). Student parents are influenced by the academic environment based on findings demonstrating that they are less likely to succeed when there is a perception of hostility on campus, a perceived lack of support by the university staff, and programs that are inflexible (Holmes, 2005; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996). Compared to traditional students, student parents are also less likely to be involved in campus-related peer activities and more likely to be involved in caring for family (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). This lack of connectivity results in student parents feeling less connected and having university experiences that are not as fulfilling as students without children (Holmes, 2005).

  In addition to challenges faced by the academic environment, student parents also face pressures from home and work. Their chance of success is decreased when there is a lack of support or hostility in the home towards their return to school. This is especially significant for female student parents from lower socioeconomic classes whose partner has a lower level of education, and the tension that can develop is one of the contributing factors that leads to increase marital stress and divorce (Hostetler, Sweet, & Moen, 2007; Scott et al., 1996; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998). Additionally, financial difficulties, transportation challenges, conflicts with work schedules, child care challenges, and health problems make it difficult for student parents to maintain a balance between their home lives, in addition to their work and school commitments. These challenges and resulting tensions can lead to questions regarding their self-efficacy in their student and family roles. This self-doubt is one of the reasons student parents take a leave of absence or terminate their program (Goto & Martin, 2009; Scott et al., 1996). The decision to return to school also directly impacts the children of these post-secondary students. The children of student mothers, in particular, are more motivated to do well in school and attend college when their mother successfully completes her program (Wilsey, 2013); however, this effect is decreased if the mother is unsuccessful in her academic pursuits. Furthermore, attending school results in spending less time with children (Wilsey, 2013). Although student parents experience challenging extracurricular stressors that impact their success and attrition level, they outperform traditional students academically (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Holmes, 2005; Murphy & Roopchand, 2003) and find the learning experience more meaningful (Murphy & Roopchand, 2003). Furthermore, non-traditional students, including student parents, have higher intrinsic motivation towards learning than traditional students and equal extrinsic motivation with traditional students (Bye et al., 2007).

  Although the extant literature has provided an understanding of the challenges student parents encounter and the characteristics that influence their success, very little is known about how they maintain their motivation to return to and persist in university study despite the challenges faced by taking on their additional role as a student. Furthermore, most of the research to date has been conducted using populations from Australia, the United States, and the

van Rhijn, Lero, & Burke, 2016

United Kingdom who may be qualitatively different and are situated within different social and political contexts from the Canadian student parent population. This lack of attention to the role of motivation related to the experiences of parents who choose to attend university combined with a paucity of Canadian-focused research provides the impetus for the current study. Actions taken without a comprehensive understanding of student parents' experiences may have an adverse effect on the government and institutional policies that affect the academic life of student parents, in addition to parents who may wish to further their education but face too many barriers to do so. A comprehensive understanding of the complexities of factors that influence student parents' motivation is required to have a meaningful long-term impact in assisting student parents to successfully complete their studies and have a fulfilling university experience that benefits themselves and their families.

Motivation and Student Parents

Motivation is considered to be a key driver of behaviour, providing "explanations for why we do the things we do the way we do them" (Forbes, 2011, p. 85) and is defined as the psychological drive or aspiration to work towards a desired outcome or goal. A focus on motivation to attend school is required in order to understand student parents' behavioural choices and experiences. Recent mature student work suggests that both goal orientation and perceived relevance of studies are influential for understanding the commitment and persistence of mature students in post-secondary studies (MacFadgen, 2008); however, although previous research examining the motivation of adult learners to attend university has been conducted, the findings have been unclear. In an earlier, qualitative meta-analysis on adult undergraduates in higher education, Kasworm (1990) concluded that the studies generally reported no distinct pattern of motives. Further, mature learners have been found to endorse more intrinsic than extrinsic forms of motivation (Bye et al., 2007; Hoyert & O'Dell, 2009; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Hoyert and O'Dell (2009) provide evidence that the higher grades earned by non-traditional-aged (i.e., mature) students are related to the types of goals they endorse. Mature students were significantly more likely to endorse learning goals (i.e., intrinsically motivated or self-determined) over performance goals (i.e., extrinsically motivated or non-self-determined) than traditional students. Hoyert and O'Dell note that learning goals have been demonstrated to promote adaptive responses to challenges and they propose that, based on their greater likelihood of endorsing learning goals, mature students may be more predisposed to adapt to challenges than their traditional-aged counterparts.

Nevertheless, mature students are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. For example, a more detailed examination of motivational orientations has demonstrated that both intrinsic factors (e.g., cognitive interest) and external factors (e.g., professional advancement, educational preparation) drive mature learners to enroll in post-secondary programs (Francois, 2014). These findings suggest that a deeper understanding of motivation to attend university is required. In their work on women returning to school, Sweet and Moen suggest that, "it is not just the demands of roles that are the important consideration, but also the personal identification

of the self with them" (2007, p. 234), suggesting that a focus on why someone chooses to take on a role and what motivates them to do so is important. This focus can move beyond common approaches using role conflict theory which often tends to focus on the structural elements of the roles (e.g., demands, boundaries, incompatible elements, typical behaviours), to recognizing the importance of individuals' motives and experiences within their roles.

As a subset of the mature student demographic, student parents may have distinct motivations for attending school. Despite the limitation in Canadian student parent motivational research, some literature exists that focuses on a similar population and begins to shed light onto the complex reasons student parents have to return to school. One of the reasons given is to take advantage of government incentive programs that target adults who wish to return to school to gain additional skills or to change their careers (Kerr, 2011). Similar to the mature student findings, Swain and Hammond (2011) found that there were both extrinsic and intrinsic reasons given for why student parents are motivated to study. Reasons include enjoyment, pursing interests, gaining qualifications, and improving employment opportunities (Durchholz & O'Connor, 1973; Swain & Hammond, 2011; Wilsey, 2013). Also student parents, particularly females, returned to school to improve the chances of an independent life. Wilsey (2013) also demonstrates the complexity and diversity in reasons given by student parents based on their age. In Wilsey's study traditional-age college student mothers emphasized the need to increase earnings for the family as reason to return to school, while non-traditional-age student mothers emphasized academic and personal reasons for their return. Critical life events such as the death of a spouse or divorce can lead to changes in self-perception, which influences the desire to re-engage learning (McCune, Hounsell, Christie, Cree, & Tett, 2010). Although previous studies identify what motivates student parents to return to school, they do not delve into the complexities and nuances of student parents' motivations to both enroll and persist in post-secondary study. As such, this investigation was conducted to examine student parent motivation to pursue post-secondary education.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the experiences of student parents and how they maintain motivation to engage in post-secondary study, *Possible Selves Theory* (PST; Markus & Nurius, 1986) provided the theoretical lens for this work. PST is a unique blueprint for understanding self-development. It espouses that individuals have ideas of what they might become, what they would want to become, and what they do not want to become in the future. These selves represent the individual's motives, goals, and fears which act as psychological resources for motivation of present behavior in working towards their preferably future selves and avoiding future selves that are considered to be unfavorable (Cross & Markus, 1991; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007). These selves are considered to be a representation of an individual's specific fears, hopes and fantasies. Possible selves are derived from an individual's history and images of potential future selves that are around them; it therefore means that possible selves are influenced by values, lifestyle, and self-efficacy (Markus & Nurius, 1986). We determined that PST was a

van Rhijn, Lero, & Burke, 2016

suitable theory to assess how student parents maintain their motivation because it focuses on the intrinsic motivation, its associated meanings, and student-parents experiences as they move towards the selves they want to become while managing the changes that are occurring in them.

Methods

Data for this study were collected during the fall of 2011 within a three-year study of mature students, the Mature Student Experience Survey (MSES). Following ethics review, mature students (undergraduate students aged 25 and older) were recruited to participate in the MSES through emails sent with assistance from Registrars' offices at four universities in southern Ontario. Data were collected using an online survey instrument with a mix of open- and closed-ended questions. A sample of 398 student parents who had one or more dependent children under the age of 18 was obtained for the current study. The student parents in this sample represented 25.3% of the mature student respondents.

Analytic Strategy

In addition to demographic details, three open-ended questions from the MSES were used to explore participants' thoughts about their motivation to attend university. The questions were: (a) Why did you choose to attend school at this point in your life; (b) Were there any precipitating events; and (c) What motivated your choice? A directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was conducted to validate and/or extend existing theory, in this case Possible Selves Theory. This type of content analysis is more structured in its approach than a conventional content analysis as initial codes can be drawn from existing theory or prior research (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005); this process has been described as both deductive and inductive (Humble, 2009). For this directed content analysis, initial coding used Possible Selves Theory as a framework, in particular, Cross and Markus' (1991) 11 categories for possible selves: personal, physical, abilities/education, life-style, family, relationships, occupation, material, success, social responsibility, and leisure.

All coding was completed using MAXQDA 10 qualitative analysis software (VERBI Software, 1989-2012). A team-based approach to the coding was adopted (Fernald & Duclos, 2005) for the initial coding which was conducted by two research assistants who were trained on the Possible Selves categories. To ensure trustworthiness of the data, weekly meetings were conducted with the research assistants and the principal researcher to discuss any issues, questions, or problematic text passages or codes; in addition, trustworthiness was ensured by the research assistants independently reviewing the codes before the meetings. Following the initial coding, the codes were reviewed, and codes that were unclear were revised and reintegrated into the data or removed from the analysis if they remained unclear. A subsequent analysis was then conducted by the principal researcher to refine the subcodes for each category based on the type and breadth of the category and to clarify overlapping codes. The subsequent analysis was conducted using the MAXQDA software followed by Inspiration (Inspiration Software, 2012), a visual mapping software that allows for the creation of concept and mind maps, in order to create

a visual representation of the codes and interpret the findings. Definitions for each category and subcategory were developed and exemplars were identified in the data to support reporting of the findings.

Findings

Participants

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants for this study. The sample consisted of 398 student parents who were primarily women (75.8%), partnered (79.4%), and an average of 38.2 years old (range: 23-70). Participants had an average of 1.8 children (range: 1-6) and the mean age of their youngest child was 7.1 years (range: 0-18). A majority of participants reported that they were employed (67.8%) and those who were employed worked an average of 33.6 hours per week (range: 1-66). Table 1 also presents a breakdown of the sample characteristics by gender and tests for differences between the groups. Men and women student parents were not significantly different in terms of their enrollment or employment status; however, compared to women, men were significantly older, more likely to be partnered, their youngest child was younger, and they were less likely to be born in Canada. In addition, among student parents who were employed, men reported working significantly more hours per week.

Table 1. *Demographics of Study Participants*

	Total ($N = 398$)			Men ($n = 96$)			Women ($n = 302$)			
	N	Mean/%	SD	N	Mean/%	SD	N	Mean/%		SD
Enrollment status										
Full-time[a]	175	44.0		36	37.5		139	46.0		
Part-time	223	56.0		60	62.5		163	54.0		
Age		38.2	7.5		39.8	7.5		37.7	*	7.4
Partner status										
Single	81	20.6		2	2.1		79	26.6	***	
Partnered	312	79.4		94	97.9		218	73.4		
Age of youngest child		7.1	5.2		5.8	5.3		7.5	**	5.2
Number of children		1.8	0.8		1.8	0.9		1.8		0.8
Born in Canada	210	61.8		40	48.2		170	66.1	**	
Employment status										
Employed	263	67.8	66		71.0		197	66.8		
Not employed	125	32.2	27		29.0		98	33.2		
Work hours/week		33.6	13.2		38.7	11.0		31.9	***	13.4

Note: *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. Significance tests conducted as follows: Independent samples t-tests used for continuous variables and Pearson chi-square difference tests used for categorical variables.

[a] Full-time status defined according to Canada Student Loans Program requirements of 60% or greater of a full course load.

Description of Categories

Through the directed content analysis, we determined that Possible Selves Theory is a useful and relevant framework for categorizing student parents' motivation to attend university. Student parents' motivations were coded within all 11 Possible Selves categories. The three primary (i.e., most dominant) categories emerging from the analysis were occupation, abilities/education, and family. The remaining eight categories were also evident and were labelled secondary motivators. One category, success, did not emerge as a distinct category; rather, it overlapped with many of the other Possible Selves categories in which success in different forms was captured. Some examples of this overlap include: wanting to be successful in order to be a positive role model to children (in the family category), to achieve a lifelong dream to complete a post-secondary education (in the abilities/education category), and to earn more money (in the material category). Much of the motivation to attend university was in some way contingent on the participants' varying definitions of success that drove them to pursue their education as opposed to a drive for success on its own.

An overview of the categories and sub-categories presented in the findings is provided in Table 2 and a description of each of them is supported with the inclusion of verbatim quotations from the participants; the quotations were selected based on their ability to clearly illustrate the category. The three primary motivators will be discussed first, followed by the remaining eight secondary motivators.

Table 2. *Overview of Findings*

Categories	Sub-categories
Primary Motivators	
Occupation	• Personal fulfillment through career
	• Future career opportunities
	• Current employment difficulties
Abilities / Education	• Personal fulfillment
	• Future personal opportunities
	• Current requirements
Family	• Inspiration
	• Support
	• Future-oriented focus on family
Secondary Motivators	
Material	• Future income
	• Access to financial resources
Lifestyle	
Personal	
Relationships	
Social Responsibility	
Leisure	
Physical	

Primary Motivators

The categories included as primary motivators – occupation, abilities/education, and family – were the most dominant based on the number of responses in the categories in addition to their immediacy and importance to the participants.

Occupation. This category related to motivation when the primary focus was the attainment of a valued job/career and education was considered to be the path to that occupation. The three distinct subcategories within occupation focused specifically on employment: personal fulfillment through career, future career opportunities, and current employment difficulties. Responses coded in the personal fulfillment through career subcategory included those who described their motivation to attend university in order to find a career that was rewarding, rather than simply a job; in other words, participants saw the attainment of a degree as *the* path to a fulfilling career. Many student parents expressed that they were now at a point in their lives where they were no longer willing to remain in a dead end job:

> [I] was not satisfied with what I was doing. After many years working for the same company I finally accepted that there was no future growth for me there. I needed to get further education to be able to make changes regarding my career. (Female, 50)

Other participants were motivated to attend university to have better future career opportunities, such as this participant who explained:

> I did not have a university degree and had noticed that many of my colleagues did. As new positions within the company were being posted, more and more of them were requiring that the candidate hold a university degree. It became apparent that in order to compete for future positions in my company and in my field that having a university degree would better my chances of success. (Female, 33)

Participants were keenly aware of increasing requirements to have university degrees in order to be competitive in the job market. Participants were also motivated to attend university because of current employment difficulties. Job layoffs, lack of security in their current position, and difficulty attaining employment without a post-secondary education were all reasons that were shared. As one participant expressed, "I was unemployed and every job I applied for required a degree" (Female, 48).

Abilities/education. Responses were coded as abilities/education when the primary focus was to acquire specific skills, and to attain an education, degree, or a particular certification or designation. In contrast, the occupation category also linked education and occupational attainment, but its primary focus was employment or career related. Subsequent analysis of the "abilities/education" category revealed three distinct subcategories focused on personal fulfillment, future opportunities, and current requirements. The personal fulfillment subcategory represented motivation to attend university based on a desire to grow as an individual and the opportunity to continuously learn. Many participants shared their long-term desire to be intellectually challenged as a means of developing a sense of personal satisfaction. As one participant wrote, "[I attend university] to not only feel complete as a parent, but to receive intellectual stimulation that lifelong learning affords" (Female, 37). Other participants

expressed the desire to integrate into the Canadian society through education, including this participant who was motivated "[because] education is a lifelong process. It is particularly important for an immigrant. It is the best way to learn the culture and language" (Female, 41).

Participants were also motivated to attend university to improve their futures by attaining a degree. As one participant stated, "I wanted to further my education. I have a diploma but I feel that having a degree will provide me with more opportunities in the future" (Female, 30). The final subcategory in abilities/education was current requirements. Many participants were motivated to attend university in order to meet requirements for their current jobs including attaining specific designations or certifications: for example, "I'm required to obtain 40 continuing education credits per year [as a Certified General Accountant]. Since I don't have an undergraduate degree it is logical to get continuing education points and an undergraduate degree at the same time" (Male, 46).

Family. Families proved to be very influential motivators for university. Subsequent analysis of the family category revealed three distinct subcategories: inspiration, support, and future-oriented focus on family. Firstly, family provided these student parents with inspiration. For example, one participant commented that her, "husband has PhD, children have Bachelors and now [it is] mom's turn to further education" (Female, 54). Others observed their children preparing for their own post-secondary studies: "Seeing my high school kids dream and plan for college inspired me to return to my studies" (Female, 46). Secondly, families (including partners, children, and parents) provided encouragement and emotional backing. One participant wrote that his motivation came from "getting married and having the support of a partner who was committed to helping me achieve success" (Male, 37). A future-oriented focus on the family was the final subcategory. This focus was evident in responses indicating that returning to school was motivated by respondents wanting to improve their family's life in the future, to have a "better future and life for me as well as for my children" (Female, 30). This future-focus included a strong desire to be a good role model to their children. This feeling was predominant within this subcategory, as very powerfully described by one participant:

> As a single mother I had to give up my time to pursue my education and provide for my child. I feel it is important to continue with education not only to secure a stable job, but to teach my child that no matter what obstacles life throws at you, never give up your goals as they give you a better chance to succeed in life. (Female, 28)

Participants wanted their children to learn from their own experiences, to internalize certain values including the value of education, hard work, and persistence. In essence, they wanted to model the behaviours they were hoping to inspire in their own children. As one dad stated, "[I] want[ed] to show my children I could do it so when they are older, they have no excuses. I want them to be the best, so I need to be the best" (Male, 37). In addition, student parents were keenly aware of their children growing up and evaluating their intellectual abilities and life choices. One participant remarked that, "I wish to give my child a better life and would like her to grow up and view me as an intellectual and recognize the importance of an education" (Female, 25).

Secondary Motivators

The next set of categories focus on the secondary factors that motivate student parents to attend university. These categories – personal, lifestyle, material, relationships, social responsibility, leisure, and physical – were determined to still be relevant but were less dominant based on the number of responses and level of importance to the participants.

Personal. Motivation in the personal category included a number of personal factors that influenced the decision. For some it was being motivated to do something for themselves and to achieve their greatest potential. For instance one participant remarked, "[I] wanted more opportunities to be all that I could be. Without an education I will never know what could be" (Female, 37). Some student parents were motivated to attend school because they turned a certain age such as reaching a milestone birthday (e.g., 40, 50), or that their current age was their motivation: "Midlife crisis (I am 43 years old)" (Male, 43). While the specific age varied, it seemed to represent experiencing a sense of urgency to attend school now rather than later. Other participants spoke about valuing education and lifelong learning and that these values motivated them to attend school. As one participant stated, "I guess it is the old adage of never too old and never stop learning!" (Male, 34).

Lifestyle. Responses coded in the lifestyle category included those who saw attending university as a means to improve the quality of life for themselves and their family. Some participants emphasized providing financial security and comfort: "Because I need a career which will give me the opportunity to be financially stable, in order to give my kids the lifestyle which I think they deserve" (Female, 32). Other participants felt that the timing was right for them to attend university; the timing was strongly linked to their responsibilities as parents in that their children were considered to be at a certain age or developmental stage that would facilitate their parent's school attendance. There was no consensus on when the timing was best; however, most participants who discussed this aspect felt that having older, school-aged children freed up needed time that allowed them to consider attending university. One participant stated, "My children are older now so it is easier for me to dedicate more time towards my studies, to upgrade from a diploma nurse to a degree nurse" (Female, 45). Despite this, some participants said that they wanted to finish their schooling while their children were young so that they would be working by the time their children began attending school themselves: "I purposefully had children when I was younger knowing that I would go back to school when they were older, I wanted to be a stay at home mom when they were young" (Female, 39). Regardless of age or stage, the timing was seen to be right because the student parents felt that they had enough time available to be able to fit school in. Lifestyle changes also included experiencing a reduction of hours in paid employment, retirement, and relationship breakdown including separation and divorce. One participant described her motivation to attend university as resulting from the realization following her marital breakdown "that I had been putting everyone else first" (Female, 43).

Material. There were two distinct influences in the material category: the first included those who wanted to earn a higher income in the future and the second was access to financial

resources to support school attendance. The goal of earning a higher income was typically related to a desire to be financially stable, in particular to be able to "provide for my family, pay all the bills, etc." (Male, 35). The more prevalent theme in this category was having access to financial resources to attend school. The most common financial resources included having an employer who paid for (or reimbursed) tuition costs, being financially stable and able to afford the extra expenses related to school, and being able to access student assistance (i.e., student loans).

Relationships. In the relationships category, student parents were inspired to attend university by friends and other important people in their lives. As one participant stated, "For many years I'd expressed interest in returning to school- friends and colleagues had also been encouraging me (Female, 35). In addition, some participants were inspired by seeing other student parents or mature students attend school: "My choice to return to school was motivated by seeing someone else my age doing it" (Female, 42).

Social responsibility. The social responsibility category included student parents who expressed motivation to attend university relating to a desire to help others and give back to their communities. These student parents were often motivated by their own experiences and, in drawing from these experiences, wanted to help others. One participant stated that, "after being a victim of domestic violence, I will (*sic*) like to complete my degree and help other people" (Female, 43). Other participants were motivated through experiences parenting children with learning exceptionalities, working with minority groups, and through contact with social workers.

Leisure. Some student parents were motivated to attend university for reasons related to leisure. University represented a way to fill time (e.g., during retirement), relieve boredom, or to keep one's mind active. Attending school and learning was sometimes conceptualized as a "hobby" (Female, 45). Another participant expressed, "I am semi-retired, and wish to return to school for the enjoyment of learning" (Male, 60).

Physical. In this final category student parents were motivated to attend university following an injury or issues related to the onset of a physical or mental disability that required them to change careers: "Due to messing up my back and needing to work a desk job, and wanting to advance I needed to attend school" (Female, 34). Student parents were also motivated to attend university once they overcame an illness (e.g., cancer) or to assist with recovery such as this participant who returned to school "to rebuild my memory which was damaged by a virus" (Female, 61). There were others who were motivated to attend to overcome mental health challenges such as depression: "I have proved to myself and have proof for others that I am no longer mentally disabled. That feels fantastic!" (Male, 66).

Beyond Possible Selves

Although Cross and Markus' (1991) 11 category conceptualization of Possible Selves provided a useful framework for understanding the motivation of mature students, it was not fully sufficient. Subsequent analysis of responses that did not fit the initial PST categories

demonstrated that student parents were also motivated to attend university by specific institutional factors that facilitated their return to school. These factors included accessibility and proximity. Accessibility included the availability of bridging courses, ease of enrolling, part-time and online options, and being able to take courses in a flexible order. Student parents also expressed that it was important to them to feel welcomed and understood with regards to their status as "mature" learners. Proximity to a school was also a deciding factor motivating attendance. Living or working close to a school or having courses offered through a workplace were influential motivators. One participant's response demonstrates both types of reasons when she described her motivation: "The school's proximity to home, the acceptance of mature students within a very diverse student body" (Female, 53).

Discussion

This study focused on understanding the factors that motivate student parents to pursue post-secondary education. The study found that all 11 Possible Selves categories were present as motivational factors for these student parents. Occupation (i.e., focused on a valued job/career for which education was required), abilities/education (i.e., to attain an education or degree, specific skills, or a particular certification or designation), and family (i.e., being motivated and/or supported by family members or wanting to improve circumstances for family in the future) were the primary motivating factors for attending university.

The findings provided evidence that there is a connection between motivation to engage in post-secondary study and the desire to attain idealized future selves for student parents. This connection was found in the clear goals set by student parents and their active pursuit in attaining these future goals. This future-driven orientation supports Possible Selves Theory by the way student parents readily speak about who they want to become or avoid becoming through working hard in the present to reap the benefits of the future (e.g., better careers and higher incomes). Plimmer and Schmidt (2007) contend that possible selves support individuals in managing career change because of their ability to "liberate people from feeling trapped or restricted in their options" (p. 64). Similarly, these student parents demonstrated a willingness to work through difficult situations now in order to achieve their ideal selves in the future. There was also some evidence that student parents were motivated to avoid feared selves such as avoiding future financial constraints or remaining in a job they dislike; however, like other studies examining educational possible selves, feared possible selves were less prevalent (Robinson & Davis, 2003; Yowell, 2002). It appears that student parents' visions of their future selves motivated them to pursue their ambitions; these ambitions were shared and supported by the significant others in their lives.

One unique contribution of this work is the findings extending the Possible Selves categories. Student parents were also motivated to attend university based on accessibility of post-secondary study and proximity to post-secondary institutions. Frazier and Hooker (2006) present a life span developmental perspective of possible selves for adults that include various contexts and factors that they found influenced possible selves. These contexts and factors

included personal and interpersonal factors, as well as social norms, expectations, and forces. These findings extending the Possible Selves categories to include accessibility and proximity as influential motivators for student parents provide support for Frazier and Hooker's discussion of social forces. As non-traditional students, student parents are following a non-normative developmental path. Post-secondary education focuses primarily on the traditional population, and programs, services, and resources are similarly focused. Student parents not only want to feel socially included and welcomed, but they are also motivated to study in programs and at institutions that are able to meet their needs. Given declining post-secondary enrollment of traditional students (i.e., direct entry from secondary study; see Brown, 2014), post-secondary institutions that are welcoming to diverse populations and offer flexibility in study options and supports may be best situated to deal with these changing demographics.

Student parents' motivation to attend university appears to be multi-faceted in nature. In addition to their idealized future selves, student parents' aspirations were influenced by social contexts such as work opportunities, financial ambitions, the need for personal development, being a model to their family, in particular their children, and the experience of critical life events. These findings support previous those reported in previous studies conducted in Australia and the United Kingdom (e.g., Scanlon, 2008; Swain & Hammond, 2011), suggesting that student parent motivations for post-secondary study may be widely applicable despite varying policy and political contexts. Nevertheless, the continued lack of focus on non-traditional students in general, and student parents in particular, within the Canadian context supports the need for further work. Calls for an adult education and training strategy in Canada are underscored for student parents by findings that nonparticipation in learning by those with unmet training needs are related to the competing pressures of work and family (Drewes & Meredith, 2015); while not unique to Canada, recognition of the multi-faceted nature of motivation highlights the importance of understanding how student parents' academic motivation and, by extension, their success to achieve their idealized selves may be supported and/or impeded by their contextual realties.

Limitations

There were several limitations in the study. Participation was voluntary in nature, which means that respondents may not be representative of the student parent population. Students who responded may include those who had more free time due to less home and work-related stress or were more involved in university activities than other student parents. A lack of information on parental status at the university level (as most institutions do not track this information) may also limit the representativeness of these data. Recruitment did not involve random sampling procedures which may have biased the results of the study, and the online format of the study did not provide opportunity for the researchers to ask for clarification or to probe participants' responses. Finally, participants were enrolled in university, which makes it difficult to determine whether there is a difference in motivation factors among those who are currently students, those who dropped out, and those who successfully completed their studies.

Implications

The present study provides insight into the varied and complex reasons student parents attend university despite the challenges they face. This study demonstrates the relevance of Possible Selves Theory and, in particular, the future-oriented focus of this population. This lens could be a useful tool for advising student parents struggling to maintain their motivation. To ensure the success of student parents, universities may need to conduct future research into understanding how student parents adapt to their academic life while attempting to maintain a work-home balance lifestyle. Also, as a general policy, universities may need to systematically collect information on parental status and the cognitive strategies student parents used to ensure success, in an attempt to understand and better service the needs of this section of the student population. The provision of flexible supports could improve student parents' access to services such as financial aid and high quality, affordable child care regardless of whether they are enrolled as part-time or full-time students. Future research should be conducted that tracks student parents throughout their studies, especially those who withdraw or take a break from school, in order to investigate the factors impacting their decisions and whether or not they return to their studies. This type of investigation could provide important information to not only support student parents, but also to enhance their retention.

Recognizing that student parents make up a significant part of the student population, it is important to understand their motivations and desires. There is no doubt that student parents are motivated to attend and successfully complete university. The inclusion of student parents enriches the learning experience for all students and faculty. Therefore, it is important that their needs and the factors that motivate and contribute to their success are clearly understood so that they are fully integrated into the university community while balancing the demands of home and/or work.

References

Brown, L. (2014). Ontario university enrolment down for first time in 15 years. The Toronto
    Star. Retrieved from
    http://www.thestar.com/yourtoronto/education/2014/09/22/ontario_university_enrolment
    _down_for_first_time_in_15_years.html

Butlin, G. (1999). Determinants of post-secondary participation. *Education Quarterly Review,
    5*(3), 9-35.

Bye, D., Pushkar, D., & Conway, M. (2007). Motivation, interest, and positive affect in
    traditional and non-traditional undergraduate students. *Adult Education Quarterly, 57*(2),
    141-158. doi: 10.1177/0741713606294235

Carney-Crompton, S., & Tan, J. (2002). Support systems, psychological functioning, and
    academic performance of non-traditional female students. *Adult Education Quarterly,
    52*(2), 140-154. doi: 10.1177/0741713602052002005

Cross, S., & Markus, H. (1991). Possible selves across the life span. *Human Development, 34*,
    230-255.

Drewes, T., & Meredith, T. (2015). *If at first you don't succeed: toward an adult education and
    training strategy for Canada.* IRPP Study 54. Montreal, QC: Institute for Research on
    Public Policy.

Durchholz, P., & O'Connor, J. (1973). Why women go back to college. *Change, 5*(8), 52-62.

Fernald, D. H., & Duclos, C. W. (2005). Enhance your team-based qualitative research. *Annals
    of Family Medicine, 3*(4), 360-364.

Forbes, D. L. (2011). Toward a unified model of human motivation. *Review of General
    Psychology, 15*(2), 85-98. doi: 10.1037/a0023483

Francois, E. J. (2014). Motivational orientations of non-traditional adult students to enroll in a
    degree-seeking program. *New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource
    Development, 26*(2), 19-35.

Goto, S. T., & Martin, C. (2009). Psychology of success: Overcoming barriers to pursuing
    further education. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 57*(1), 10-21. doi:
    10.1080/07377360902810744

Holmes, D. (2005). Embracing differences: Post-secondary education among aboriginal students,
    students with children and students with disabilities. Montreal, QC: Canada Millennium
    Scholarship Foundation.

Hostetler, A. J., Sweet, S., & Moen, P. (2007). Gendered career paths: A life course perspective
    on returning to school. *Sex Roles, 56*, 85-103. doi: 10.1007/s11199-006-9150-8

Hoyert, M. S., & O'Dell, C. D. (2009). Goal orientation and academic failure in traditional and non-traditional aged college students. *College Student Journal, 43*(4), 1052-1061.

Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*(9), 1277-1288. doi: 10.1177/1049732305276687

Humble, A. M. (2009). Technique triangulation for validation in directed content analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 8*(3), 34-51.

Inspiration Software, I. (2012). Inspiration 9. Beaverton, OR.

Kasworm, C. E. (1990). Adult undergraduates in higher education: A review of past research perspectives. *Review of Educational Research, 60*(3), 345-372.

Kerr, A. (2011). Adult learners in Ontario postsecondary institutions. Toronto, ON: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

Macari, D. P., Maples, M. F., & D'Andrea, L. (2005). A comparative study of psychosocial development in non-traditional and traditional college students. *Journal of College Student Retention, 7*(3-4), 283-302.

MacFadgen, L. (2008). Mature students in the persistence puzzle: An exploration of the factors that contribute to mature students' health, learning, and retention in post-secondary education. 116 pages. Retrieved from Canadian Council on Learning website: http://www.ccl-cca.ca/NR/rdonlyres/65C42165-C7AA-431F-841F-1B1513BF272A/0/MacFadgenFinalAL2006.pdf

Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist, 41*(9), 954-969.

McCune, V., Hounsell, J., Christie, H., Cree, V. E., & Tett, L. (2010). Mature and younger students' reasons for making the transition from further education into higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education, 15*(6), 691-702. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2010.507303

Michie, F., Glachan, M., & Bray, D. (2001). An evaluation of factors influencing the academic self-concept, self-esteem and academic stress for direct and re-entry students in higher education. *Educational Psychology, 21*(4), 455-472. doi: 10.1080/0144341012009083 0

Murphy, H., & Roopchand, N. (2003). Intrinsic motivation and self-esteem in traditional and mature students in a post-1992 university in the north-east of England. *Educational Studies, 29*(2/3), 243-259. doi: 10.1080/0305569032000092880

Plimmer, G., & Schmidt, A. (2007). Possible selves and career transition: It's who you want to be, not what you want to do. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 114*, 61-74.

Quimby, J. L., & O'Brien, K. M. (2006). Predictors of well-being among non-traditional female students with children. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 84*(4), 451-460.

van Rhijn, Lero, & Burke, 2016

Robinson, B. S., & Davis, K. L. (2003). Motivational attributes of occupational possible selves for low-income rural women. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 50*, 156-164.

Scanlon, L. (2008). Adults' motives for returning to study: the role of self-authoring. *Studies in Continuing Education, 30*(1), 17-32. doi: 10.1080/01580370701639869

Scott, C., Burns, A., & Cooney, G. (1996). Reasons for discontinuing study: The case of mature female students with children. *Higher Education, 31*, 233-253.

Scott, C., Burns, A., & Cooney, G. (1998). Motivation for return to study as a predictor of completion of degree amongst female mature students with children. *Higher Education, 35*, 221-239.

Shillingford, S., & Karlin, N. J. (2013). The role of intrinsic motivation in the academic pursuits of non-traditional students. *New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource Development, 25*(3), 91-102.

Silverman, S. C., Aliabadi, S., & Stiles, M. R. (2009). Meeting the needs of commuter, part-time, transfer, and returning students. In S. R. Harper & S. J. Quaye (Eds.), *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations* (pp. 223-241). New York, NY: Routledge.

Swain, J., & Hammond, C. (2011). The motivations and outcomes of studying for part-time mature students in higher education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 30*(5), 591-612. doi: 10.1080/02601370.2011.579736

Sweet, S., & Moen, P. (2007). Integrating educational careers in work and family: Women's return to school and family life quality. *Community, Work & Family, 10*(2), 231-250. doi: 10.1080/13668800701270166

van Rhijn, T., Smit Quosai, T., & Lero, D. S. (2011). A profile of undergraduate student parents in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 41*(3), 59-80.

VERBI Software. (1989-2012). MAXQDA (Version 10). Berlin, Germany.

Wilsey, S. A. (2013). Comparisons of adult and traditional college-age student mothers: Reasons for college enrollment and views of how enrollment affects children. *Journal of College Student Development, 54*(2), 209-214. doi: 10.1353/csd.2013.0018

Yowell, C. M. (2002). Dreams of the future: the pursuit of education and career possible selves among ninth grade Latino youth. *Applied Developmental Science, 6*(2), 62-72.