MATURE WOMEN STUDENTS AND THEIR UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

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by

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Judith Suzanne Wright, candidate for the degree of Master of Education in Educational Psychology, has presented a thesis titled, *Mature Women Students and Their University Experience*, in an oral examination held on August 28, 2012. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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ABSTRACT

This research study included 12 women - six who were in the process of obtaining their degree and six who had obtained their degree, for at least 10 years, from the same mid-sized Canadian university. All of the women were at least 30 years of age at the commencement of their program. This research study utilized qualitative interviews and examined the lived experiences of these 12 mature women for their experiences, barriers, and supports they encountered while obtaining their first undergraduate degree. The epistemological perspective, theoretical perspective, and methodology utilized were constructivism, feminism, and Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory, respectively.

The women identified both the barriers and the supports they experienced while in the process of obtaining their degrees. Some barriers they identified include multiple role strain, sexism, poverty, ineffective teaching methods, marginalization, health issues, circuitous paths to education, nonsupport for their specific needs, and programs that were not designed for the mature student along with uncertainty of how their programs might benefit them in the future. However, the women also identified male mentors as effective and supportive to their learning, which counters research examined that stated women learn more effectively from women mentors.

The women also identified peers, family, and friend supports as important supports in their educational success. Other supports that were identified included receiving assistance for children, while the women attended to homework or classwork; assistance with more concrete chores (i.e., housework, groceries, editing papers); and supportive comments. Some of the women identified that a smaller campus environment supported them because they felt like they belonged and were a part of a family. These
women identified the smaller campus as a major factor in their educational success. Workplace supports included flexible time off, financial assistance, and encouragement, these factors were also identified as major factors that assisted the women in their educational success.

The women began their university program, either through self or other (i.e., friend, family member) guidance, to further develop as a person. The overarching goal, for the women, was that they wanted to “Make a Difference” in their lives and/or the lives of others. “Making a Difference” is the overarching, theme of this research, and it was this that kept the women motivated to continue through their degree program. A graphic model illustrates the women’s journey to their destination of “Making a Difference” through achieving their degree.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

I examined literature on the historical route of women university students. Miller Solomon (1985) states that women’s entrance into higher education gradually lifted women from society’s expected roles of wife, mother, and primary caregiver. In this study utilization of the term higher education may include universities, colleges, and other forms of post-secondary education. Historical factors contributed to women obtaining higher education, such as the industrial revolution, significant decline in fertility rates, and the introduction of formal youth schooling. Another factor was that certain segments of society, specifically religious and community leaders, thought women had more influence on children and, therefore, would make excellent elementary teachers (Miller Solomon, 1985). Women elementary teachers fostered Christian and educational values in America’s new frontiers facilitating the United States Common School reformers making teaching a “woman’s profession by the end of the 19th century” (Eisenmann, 2007, p. 4). Primarily two strategies were utilized. One focused on preparing women to become elementary teachers and the second focused on salary; women teachers were paid one-third of their male counterparts. Colonization practices utilized white women as elementary school teachers who then acted as harbingers of civilization; foretelling women’s acceptance into universities and the impact on society.

Gillett (1998) states that women’s inclusion into higher education, could be categorized into four phases that overlap from the 11th century to current history. The first phase was characterized by women’s exclusion from higher education, due to monastic educational values. Women were considered intellectually inferior to men. Patriarchy
predominated and became deeply entrenched within educational settings and higher educational institutions for centuries. Patriarchy is a social system that favours men over women and supports male dominance. Male dominance is a system that mostly benefits males and those males who represent the dominant class. Dominance is established and maintained often at the expense of others; which could include other males, but often only those who are in minority classes. The second, overlapping phase began with the Age of Enlightenment, which spanned from the early 18\textsuperscript{th} century to the beginning of 19\textsuperscript{th} century. During this period, societal values and traditions were challenged and women’s colleges were organized. Women were granted limited access. During the third phase, which spanned the last half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the number of women enrolled in higher education dramatically increased. According to Gillett (1998), the fourth phase encompasses recent time and it is proposed that women will begin to influence higher educational decision making from a woman-centered perspective. Nevertheless, women are still marginalized by hierarchical repression and male dominance.

Donaldson and Emes (2000) state that societal awareness of the challenges of women’s educational historical development has been, and continues to be, limited. One of the main reasons could be that women’s knowledge and intellectual contributions are minimally transferred to the next generation. Donaldson and Emes relate that “unlike men, women’s intellectual contributions are not individually acknowledged and passed from one generation to another because women have lacked access to formal education which institutionalizes such knowledge” (p. 34). However, historically some women have gained access to higher educational institutions which has enabled them to challenge
some societal norms. Women’s participation in higher educational has facilitated that some of women’s knowledge forms a contribution to mainstream academia.

The Canadian perspective was explored to identify a more current position for Canadian university, woman and mature, students and graduates. Canadian Statistics were examined, for women and mature students, when available, in terms of gender parity, earned undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, and mean age for university students. Unterhalter, Gold, and Morely (2003) note women, throughout the Commonwealth countries which consists of 54 independent member countries and includes Canada, had reached “gender parity in enrollments in higher institutions” (p. 363). Gender parity is considered as equal access for males and females to education. Canadian statistics, as of 2008, also display gender parity in earned bachelor degrees for women (Turcotte, 2011). Gender refers to the social construct of biological sex. In 2008, out of the entire Canadian population that held earned bachelor degrees, 62% were women (Turcotte, 2011). It was difficult to obtain specific Canadian statistics for the mature women age group 25-54, for earned bachelor degrees. I was able to locate Canadian statistics for this population segment that included both earned bachelor and postgraduate degrees. Between the years of 1990 and 2009 the number of Canadian women, between the ages of 25-54, that held earned bachelor and postgraduate degrees doubled. In 1990 the number of women, between 25-54 who held earned bachelor and postgraduate degrees, equated to 14% of the total population of Canadian women, who held earned bachelor and postgraduate degrees and in 2009 that equated to 28 % for the same parameters (Turcotte, 2011). This demonstrates that that there was an increase in the number of mature women, for this age bracket, who obtained bachelor and
postgraduate degrees. However, 28% of the entire population of Canadian women, who hold earned bachelor and undergraduate degrees, does represent a large percentage. There is room for growth.

Statistics were sought that examined whether the mean age of Canadian university students reflected an upward trend. If an upward trend was identified then that would support that the mature student’s presence is increasing within Canadian universities. However, when examining the mean age of Canadian university students for both male and female in “2007 [it] was 22.8 years, while the mean age at graduation was 24.8 years in both 1992 and 2007” (Dale, 2010, p. 1), which does not demonstrate an increase in the mean age since 1992. Therefore the mature student, ages 25-54, did not hold the majority presence in Canadian universities for that time period. This is further demonstrated by Canadian 2007 statistics which shows that “17 to 24 year-olds accounted for 65% of university students” (Dale, 2010, p. 2). These statistics were not broken down by undergraduate and graduate studies, but overall it demonstrates that the Canadian university population, as of 2007, for both students and student’s age at graduation, is not the mature student.

For the purposes of this study, mature student equates to students age 30 and older. However, if the term mature student is utilized in conjunction with other studies and if that definition differs, for that study, then that will be noted. Based on the Canadian 2007 statistics the mature student could therefore be considered a minority. Also obtaining a bachelor degree does not mean that the multitude of other issues that are present for women have been addressed. One such issue is earnings. Turcotte (2011) reports that as of 2005 women with bachelor degrees, compared to men with the same
education, women earned 89 cents for every dollar men earned. Canadian women, as of 2005, obtaining undergrad education, potentially faced financial discrimination.

An area where women do not have gender parity is in the more traditional male disciplines. Traditional male disciplines are those disciplines where women students’ numerical presence is reduced, i.e., Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)). Perhaps gender norms that discriminate against women have contributed to the reduced number of women students in STEM disciplines. Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, Umbach, and Kuh (2007) relate that despite women’s higher educational advances they “still face gendered norms and expectations that constrain their choice of field of study and occupation and consequently perpetuate tangible inequities including lower wages, underemployment, and segregated occupations” (p. 145). Kinzie et al.’s (2007) study relates that some women students are still marginalized in regards to the type of discipline studied.

Gender norms may influence a woman’s choice of study. Turcotte (2011) examined the types of studies women choose and found that women are still choosing more female “appropriate” studies. This is demonstrated by the fact that in 2008 Canadian women accounted for three out of four university graduates in education and health studies (Turcotte, 2011). One of the reasons women do not choose traditional male disciplines could be the lack of women mentors. Schlegel (2000) states that some women students function better with women mentors. Since some women perform more effectively with women mentors, then having access to women mentors should help some women students gain greater parity within traditional male disciplines. Access to women university professors seems to be important in increasing some women student success,
especially in Natural Sciences and Engineering (NSE) disciplines where women students are still a minority.

The following Canadian statistics demonstrate the reduced numbers of Canadian women in traditional male disciplines, specifically NSE. In Canada, in 2008, women graduates in the fields of “architecture, engineering and related services programs were only 22%” (p. 21) and “in mathematics, computer and information science programs, 30% of graduates were women, down from 35% in 1990” (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, NSERC, 2010, p. 21). If women mentors are instrumental to women NSE student success, then establishing adequate access to women mentors within NSE disciplines would be important. However in Canada in 2008, 39% of university professors were women, only a 5.3% increase since 1999 (NSERC, 2010). Compound that by the fact that in Canada in 2008 there were already a limited number of NSE female professors; 19.2% of the total NSE full-time faculty were women (NSERC, 2010). Those statistics translate into the various NSE disciplines as follows: 29.5% Agriculture and Biology, 13.7% Engineering and Applied Sciences, and 17.1% Math and Physical Sciences. Total increase of women full-time faculty in NSE between the years of 1999 and 2008 was only 2.5%. If that rate of growth of Canadian NSE women university professors remains similar then their availability to Canadian NSE women university students will remain limited.

The issue of why women are not enrolling into NSE disciplines is not due to numbers as NSERC (2010) noted that women enrollment in Canadian universities at the bachelor level is 40% higher than males. The report went on to state “therefore, the lack of women in the university system cannot explain their under-representation in the
natural sciences and engineering” (NSERC, 2010, p. 9). Other factors need to be explored to examine what might be contributing to women’s reduced numbers in the NSE disciplines. NSERC’s report identified two issues that may potentially contribute to some women university students’ lack of success which were the learning environment and the lack of female mentors. Those factors are further examined. This study identified that women students found managing the added demands of the family difficult to incorporate. This could be another contributing factor to some women’s lack of success in NSE fields.

Another possible issue for the woman student is the type of university learning environment. Some women continue to find the campus environment unsupportive to their personal and professional growth (Seifried, 2000; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999). Seifried (2000) and Whitt et al.’s (1999) studies found that higher educational learning environments, with an underrepresentation of women leaders, negatively impacts some women students (i.e., with decreased self-esteem, confidence, and learning outcomes). Duncan, Wentworth, Owen-Smith, and LaFavor (2002) found that women who attended all female higher institutions were more successful, especially in nontraditional studies. The examined literature suggests that some women learn more effectively from and with women.

Two issues Donaldson & Emes (2000) examined were if Canadian university women students were learning in gender sensitive environments and had the volume of women’s scholarly research increased. Donaldson and Emes continue that women leaders are needed within academia in order to provide a gender sensitive environment for women students. Gender sensitivity is the awareness of preconceived societal
constructions that place people in dichotomous positions and sensitivity to the fact that gender can have many meanings, not just male and female but also, i.e., gays, lesbians, transgender, bi-sexual. Social constructions define how people within those constructs should behave and what behaviour is considered normal. Gender sensitivity promotes awareness of these issues and proactively works towards creating equality and respect for all. In order to accomplish a more gender sensitive environment, Donaldson and Emes state that “a critical mass of women academics must, through their collective effort, sustain core level accomplishments and introduce change by maintaining and promoting gender sensitivity within the institution” (p. 33). However, Gouthro (2002a) cautions that women have multiple social roles, often unaccounted for but which they are still expected to perform and therefore expecting women academic leaders to add one more objective, even if it benefits women students, needs to be approached with caution and respect. Gouthro continues that in order for women to succeed, for both academics and students, adjustments need to be made that take into account their multiple roles.

Donaldson and Emes (2000) studied another factor that might place more of a focus on women’s issues within academia, for both students and faculty. Donaldson and Emes note that women “rarely study the participation of women in the academy” (p. 39) and this factor represents the “marginalization of scholarship about women and by women scholars” (p. 39). Donaldson and Emes and Gouthro (2002a) support the production of more female scholarship. Gouthro expanded and felt that educators, both those in academia and adult education, need to broaden their understanding of the specific issues that women face while undertaking higher educational paths and thought these issues should be explored from a critical feminist perspective. Although this
research study did not specifically examine from a critical feminist perspective, it did however adopt an overall feminist perspective. A critical feminist perspective offers critiques of culture, society, and focuses on issues of power imbalance. I do concur that these issues are important and deserving of examination. Culture can be defined as specific behaviours and beliefs of a particular social, ethnic, age bracket, or other group of peoples that organize and are identified by specific common actions, beliefs and attitudes for that specific group.

**My Story**

In my exploration for my thesis topic, I began to consider my experience as a mature woman student obtaining her first undergraduate degree. I thought about other mature women and wondered what they had experienced as they worked towards obtaining their first degree. What research had been conducted on this subject? I wanted to choose a theoretical perspective that would best support the examination of the findings that the women participants would bring to this study. The theoretical perspective is the philosophical stance that informs the methodology and provides context through which the findings are examined. The women participants, in this study, have knowledge that only they could share, from their perspective. I therefore chose the theoretical perspective of feminism to examine that knowledge. For me, for the purposes of this study, feminism is a perspective that focuses on women and women’s issues.

Feminism is a movement that focuses on women’s political and social status. Social status is privilege that is attached to a person’s position within the social hierarchy. Feminism also focuses on issues of gender equality. Gender equality is where men and women enjoy the same status and where women have equal opportunity to contribute
within the political, social and cultural spheres. It should be noted that there are many types of feminism, i.e., liberal, socialist, third wave, ecofeminism, and black feminism. Some of the issues that feminism examines are ways in which gender influences knowledge, sexism, patriarchy, and issues of power. Sexism means the oppression of women through such things as behaviours, attitudes, rules, and stereotyping which are negative towards women. These are relevant issues that relate to the women’s stories, in this study.

I chose the ontological/epistemological perspective of constructivism and the methodology of Charmaz’s (2000) constructivist grounded theory as I wanted to adopt both an ontological perspective and methodology that would facilitate constructing the theory from the women’s own words. I was also informed by Glaser (1978) and Strauss and Corbin’s (1990, 1994, 1998) iterations of grounded theory, each offering insights in order to better understand how it applied to some of the theory and techniques that I utilized, i.e., data analysis, participant’s constructions, and the construction of the theory.

History

I obtained my undergraduate degree in 2 ½ years, completing it at 52 years of age. I, during that time, managed the multiple roles of career and family and followed a winding path. Prior to starting my undergrad degree there were barriers to me obtaining an undergrad degree, due to family, career, and financial demands. I found, as stated in the literature explored, that two major life events, divorce and remarriage, facilitated my return to university. I obtained some classes in the early 1980’s in administration, but only completed four classes and then left due to pressure from my then current husband. Similar to findings in the literature review, I found that both the smaller college
atmosphere and my women mentors were key contributors to my undergraduate success. I also found that returning to university stirred fears of inclusion, worries of dormant study habits and of schedules not suited to adult learners, and concerns about the relevance of some of the content that was taught. I realized I was not an anomaly, but one of many nontraditional, mature women students who desire to be included, not marginalized.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this grounded study is to examine the experiences of mature women, who have completed, or are in the process of completing, their first undergraduate degree. Specifically, the following research question, which originated from my own experience and from my review of the literature, guided this study.

**Research Question:** *What is the lived experience of mature women who have graduated or are in the process of obtaining their first degree?*

And

**Subsequent Questions:** *In addition, this study examines the (a) motivations, (b) barriers, and (c) supports that the women experienced while in the process of obtaining their degree.*

**Organization of the Study**

The study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction to the study and includes: background of the study; my story; purpose of the study, including the research question; and the study’s organization.

Chapter 2 presents relevant literature that relates to the mature university student and includes: the mature student’s presence in higher education; identity of the mature student; supports, barriers, and categories of adult learners in higher education; age as a predictor to academic success; factors that impact student’s learning; women students in
universities, historical background; women in male-dominated fields; reasons women return to obtain a degree and the barriers they experience; and summary of the literature.

Chapter 3 introduces the ontological and theoretical perspective of the research and includes: method; grounded theory; and data collection which includes ethics approval, participants, qualitative interview; and data analysis.

Chapter 4 is a presentation of the findings and includes: participant profiles and demographics, followed by a presentation of the findings of the participants which are presented within four categories: “Do It for Me,” “More in Me,” “Do it for Them,” and “Achieving Milestones,” as well as subsequent subcategories and dimensions. My understanding of the findings resulted in the construction of an overarching core theme of “Making a Difference.” This chapter concludes with the presentation and explanation of a graphic model which I created from my understanding of how the findings interrelate.

Chapter 5 is an analysis of the findings and the relevant literature. The findings are arranged in the order of the categories, subcategories, dimensions, and overarching theme as presented in the process model (see Chapter 4).
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Mature Student’s Presence in Higher Education

The mature student, specifically the mature woman student, has become more visible within higher education. British universities have focused on “increasing attention to the recruitment and retention of mature students” (Blaxter, Dodd, & Tight, 1996, p. 187). Several researchers note that the number of mature students in British higher educational institutions has increased over the past few decades, an increase of 77% between 1980 and 1990 (Blaxter et al., 1996; Reay, Ball, & David, 2002; Trueman & Hartley, 1996). Blaxter et al., define the mature student as one who is significantly older than the standard age cohort which, for undergraduate degree, would be an average age of 21. Along with the trend of seeing more mature students there has also been a shift, since late 1980’s to early 1990’s, to the type of students that have been recruited. Rather than full-time students the recruitment has shifted towards part-time students. It is interesting to note that the majority of students are part-time, within British universities.

Identity of the Mature Student

Schuetze and Slowey (2002) conducted an analysis of “nontraditional” students within ten countries, Austria, Australia, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Schuetze and Slowey report that nontraditional students are now the “new majority in higher education” (p. 313), but student expansion does not necessarily mean increased access to “higher education for all groups” (p. 313) and therefore these groups could be marginalized. The researchers identified four groups of people who do not have increased access to higher education as (a) older people without traditional entry qualifications, (b) people from working class
backgrounds, (c) people living in remote or rural areas, and (d) people from ethnic minorities or immigrant groups. These groups of individuals are still greatly underrepresented in higher education because “they still face greater barriers than the ‘traditional’ student” (Scheutze & Slowey, 2002, p. 313).

Nontraditional learners is an umbrella term that often combines mature student learners with other learners who do not meet society’s definition of the norm of the average higher education student. Schuetze and Slowey (2002) state that there are issues with combining all adult learners under one umbrella, stating that although age is “convenient way of focusing on one of the essential features of ‘non-traditional students,’ the definition falls short of a more comprehensive understanding of what types of learners are included” (p. 314). Similarly, Osborne, Marks, and Turner (2004), in their large-scale UK-wide project, state that “mature students do not comprise a homogeneous group” (p. 295). Schuetze and Slowey point out that, mature students may be traditional in some ways, but nontraditional in other ways. The authors identified three criteria that define nontraditional students (a) education routes, usually non-direct or winding; (b) entry routes, both traditional via secondary school credentials and prior learning; and (c) mode of study, full-time, part-time, and interaction between study and other major commitments. Prior learning, for the purposes of this study, is defined as credentialed, non-credentialed and informal learning. Schuetze and Slowey note that the definition criteria for nontraditional students of education routes, entry routes, and mode of study, that “each needs to be refined in practice to reflect significant underpinning dimensions including socio-economic position, gender, ethnic group, disability and location (urban/rural)” (p. 315). The mature student does not comprise one homogeneous group.
Rather as Schuetze and Slowey relate there are many different ways of classifying the mature student. The authors identified three criteria; education routes, entry routes, and modes of study, to classify the mature student. Reay et al. (2002) examined 23 mature women students, within an inner London, England education college, on their rationale for university enrollment. Reay et al. found mature women students enroll for reasons of “personal development and an interest in education itself” (p. 7) and their basic love of learning is their motivation to learn. Osborne et al. (2004) found that mature students return to higher education because of economic and individual reasons. Reay et al. clarified that the highest motivator, more than any other academic outcome, was the actual process of taking the degree, stating the “prioritizing of process rather than … outcome” (p. 7) was the reason for completing the degree that differentiated between mature and younger students. Osborne et al. and Reay et al. both reported on the reasons that mature women enroll in university. Reasons included love to learn, personal development, economic, the process of taking the degree, and individual reasons.

Supports, Barriers, and Categories of Adult Learners in Higher Education

The literature was examined to explore the supports, the barriers, and the categorization of adult learners who returned to higher education. Osborne et al. (2004) proposed six classifications for adult learners who returned to higher education. These classifications included (a) delayed traditional – adult learners share similar interests and commitments as traditional 18 year olds, but are a few years older, (b) late starters – adult learners who have undergone some type of life-changing event, for instance divorce, and require a new start, (c) single parents- this group of adult learners is
predominantly women who have social and financial support, (d) *careerists* – this group of adult learners want to increase their qualifications to advance in their career, (e) *escapees* – these adult learners are in ‘dead-end’ jobs and want qualification to escape their current employment situation, and (f) *personal growers* - these adult learners have a love of learning and can be any age bracket. The adult learner is not simplisticly categorized into one generalized term, but rather consists of different defining characteristics. The return of the adult learner to higher education, impacts many areas of their lives and involves many factors which will be covered next.

Osborne et al. (2004) state that the decision to return to higher education often involves a complex decision/motivation process and invokes a huge lifestyle change for the adult learner. The positive factors that influence the decision to return include “cognitive interest, anticipation of benefit, self-confidence, self-belief and self-respect, support from family, support from employers, opportunity, and altruism” (Osborne et al., 2004, pp. 295-296). The negative factors that influence the decision to return include “attitude to debt, anticipation of limited beliefs, lack of confidence and self-belief, unresponsive institutions, family constraints, and employment constraints” (Osborne et al., 2004, p. 295). Reay et al. (2002) studied 23 mature students to “explore the range of opportunities and constraints that mature students confront” (p. 7) when transitioning to higher education. They found that “complexities of ethnicity, gender, and marital status intersect with, and compound, the consequences of class, making the transition process particularly difficult for working-class, lone mothers” (Reay et al. (2002, p. 7). Osborne et al., identified both positive factors, (i.e., self-development and support from family and career), and negative factors (i.e., negative self-concepts, financial, and career), that
impact a mature individual’s decision to return to higher education. Reay et al., found that class, gender, ethnicity, and marital status may compound issues for single mothers returning to higher education. Mature adults have various factors that impact them when making educational decisions. How mature and younger students make educational decisions seems to differ. Reay et al. note that younger students have a “strong sense of having a variety of choices” (p. 7) which often is not the case for the mature student. Rather, mature students make choices based on what one “cannot have, what is not open for negotiation and then looking at the few options…[that are] left” (Reay et al., 2002, p. 9). According to their research, two primary factors that a mature student considers when deciding on a university are financial commitments and time commitments required to travel to the university. Those two factors, financial and time commitments are two important factors to consider especially when also balancing both work and family commitments. Schuetze and Slowey (2002) argue that the modes of study that meet the special needs of these learners are just as important as their admission needs, suggesting that flexible models of study such as “open learning, modular courses, credit transfer and part-time study” (p. 313) should be more broadly implemented. Financial commitment, travel time, and flexible modes of study were identified as factors the mature learner considers in regards to higher education.

Gray (1994) identified other factors that impact mature students. Gray notes that the path of the traditional student is often smoother and more defined than is the path of the mature, nontraditional student. For instance the mature, nontraditional student who returns either later in life or has had a “disrupted pattern of academic achievement” (Gray, 1994, p. 77) often finds the higher educational system is not designed to meet their
needs. The professional contacts, supports, and procedures needed to guide these individuals are often absent. Another consequence of returning to higher education later in life is that funding available to the traditional student is often unavailable to the nontraditional, mature student. That lack of funding is especially taxing on mature students, since they often do not have the financial support of their birth families, as younger students do. Mature students may also have children of their own to support, or they may be a single parent and therefore the financial strain would be even greater. Lack of funding for the mature student may also be an issue. Gray also notes that “previous jobs and life experiences fall outside the realm of the academic and therefore count for very little” (p. 78). University systems that do not value previous career and life experience are other examples of how the nontraditional student finds themselves within a system that does not meet their needs. University systems are still somewhat limited to examine and potentially honor other types of knowledge that span beyond knowledge that has been acquired within the walls of academia.

**Age as a Predictor to Academic Success**

Richardson and King (1998) state that “interest in the role of age as a predictor of academic attainment is often motivated by a stereotype of older people as being deficient in intellectual skills” (p. 67). This stereotype is not accurate as cross-sectional studies have found only a slight decline in intellectual function between the ages 18 and 60, with a more pronounced decline thereafter (see Nyberg, Backman, Erngrund, Olofsson, & Nilsson, 1996; Richardson & Woodley, 2003). Therefore age of a mature student does not seem to be a significant predictor of academic success.

Richardson (1994) commented that although there is a perception that older
students have “age-related intellectual deficits” (p. 373) that would make them less effective within higher educational settings, this is not factual. Other studies concur with Richardson that age does not cause students to be less effective (Trueman & Hartley, 1996; Woodley, 1984). Wlodkowski (2008) states that according to longitudinal studies “most normal, healthy adults can be efficient and effective learners well into [their] old age” (p. 36). Wlodkowski’s study alludes to a negative stereotype that older adults experience difficulty in learning. Richardson’s study addresses that negative stereotype. Richardson states academic performance of younger students is often thought to be better than the academic performance of the older student, based on two stereotypical beliefs. Richardson identified those two negative stereotypes and found that these two beliefs were not accurate for adult higher educational learners. Richardson (1994) stated that one belief was that adult learners may “be out of practice in the art of learning” (p. 383) and the second belief was that adult learners “are impaired in their studying by the intellectual deficits associated with the normal process of aging” (p. 383); again both were found inaccurate. Richardson examined potential difference between mature and younger students. Richardson found mature students have a higher academic performance in the arts and social sciences than younger students, due to mature student’s “extra life experience” (p. 375). However the converse was true for science disciplines and Richardson thought that could be attributed to the fact that adult learners often have experienced a period of time between studies which results in a “decline in their mathematical and scientific skills” (p. 375). Therefore Richardson found some difference between mature and younger students’ academic performance that could be traced to the mature student’s life experience and their dormant mathematical and science skills.
Trueman and Hartley also examined the differences between students’ performance. The researchers examined the difference between mature and younger students and their ability to manage their time. Mature students were found to have more effective time management skills, but this did not impact overall student performance.

**Factors That Impact Students’ Learning**

Many factors impact students’ learning, but the literature identified four factors that were: the student and the teacher’s learning belief systems, the diversity of the learners’ educational needs, the varied learning styles, and the size of the university. Yorke and Knight (2004) state there are two belief system types that interact with a person’s ability to learn; fixed and incremental. An example of a fixed belief system is the concept that intelligence is constant. Students who have a fixed belief system tend to seek out learning goals and situations that confirm the belief in their fixed abilities and avoid learning situations that would counter this fixed belief system. An example of an incremental or malleable belief system is one that sees the “possibility of development as learning takes place” (Yorke & Knight, 2004, p. 27). One believes that learning facilitates personal growth. Students with a malleable belief system will adopt learning goals, seek challenge as an opportunity to learn, and view lack of success as “a stimulus for learning” (Yorke & Knight, 2004, p. 27). These students adopt more of an optimistic learning style. Not only is it important for the learner to have a malleable belief system to assist in more effective learning, but the teacher also needs a malleable belief system. The most effective teacher/student belief system match occurs when both the teacher and the student have malleable belief systems. Then the teacher will offer feedback that assists the student in building a “malleable self-theory rather than undermining it” (Yorke &
This supportive feedback assists the student in moving to the next level of achievement. Fike and Fike (2008) identified another factor that contributes to some students’ success. Fike and Fike identified that the atmosphere of smaller colleges is more supportive for mature adult learners, stating that “ease of access, low tuition and the open-door policy…[as well as the tendencies to encourage] part-time enrollment…[and] enroll more under prepared students than university,” (p. 70) contributes to the increasing number of minority students. Two factors were identified for student success, malleable belief systems for both student and teacher and a smaller college environment which seems more supportive for both mature and minority students’ successes.

Women Students in Universities

Historical Background

Women’s progression to being accepted as American university students can be traced from the early 1900’s. Suarez-Mccrink (2002) states it was 1830 when American women were allowed into Oberlin College. The prevailing social thought was that women’s responsibility was, first and foremost, home and family and “intellectual and familial responsibilities for women…[were thought]…to be incompatible” (Crocco, 1999, p. 9). Subsequently, most women who obtained a college degree remained unmarried. In the United States women were trained for elementary school teachers and this became one of the first professions that was acceptable for women. Early barriers to women participating in university included the belief that women were physically and mentally incapable of study (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2007). Another practice that was fostered and inhibited women’s continued participation in university was the
socialization of women towards marriage (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2007). Even as late as 1980’s, women were still, “being socialized towards marriage and family as their primary vocation” (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2007, p. 97). The belief that women were somehow incapable to study at universities and the practice of socializing women towards marriage and family set in motion gender biases that would continue to limit women for decades. Gender biases are limitations that are placed upon an individual due to gender, by individuals, social, and political structures. However, within the province of Saskatchewan focus was placed on educating women, for as early as 1910 through to 1963, the University of Saskatchewan extension was delivering programs to women (McLean, 2007). The University of Saskatchewan based its extension programs on the extension movements from United States and England. England had the earliest extension movement in 1870 (McLean, 2007). The University of Saskatchewan was a forerunner of education for women as it was the “first university in western Canada to establish a department of university extension” (McLean, 2007, p. 4) and between the years of 1913 and 1950 a “separate Department of Women’s Work delivered extension programming to women” (McLean, 2007, p. 4). The University of Saskatchewan valued women’s education, even when women were not yet considered persons within Canada.

Despite the barriers that Canadian university women students have faced their presence is growing. In Canada the number of women students in universities has increased from the early part of the 20th century until now. The number of women undergraduates and professional studies in 1901 was 12%, of the total population of undergraduates and professional studies, 1925 it was 20%, 1931 it was 23.5%, but that number declined to 21% following World War II (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2007).
Canadian women students saw few gains to their numbers in universities between the years of 1945 and 1960 (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2007). The turning point for women student enrollments in Canadian universities was between the years of 1960 and 1970, where women’s numbers increased from 25 to 37%, of the total number of student enrollments (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2007). Canadian women university students’ presence continues to increase as Turcotte (2011) noted that as of 2008, 62% of the entire Canadian undergraduate population was women. However, women still are in the minority in traditional, male educational faculties, such as STEM. NSERC (2010) concurs that there are limited women students in STEM disciplines. NSERC also noted that one factor that may contribute to women students’ low enrolment is the reduced number of NSE women professors.

**Women in Male-Dominated Fields**

Literature was examined for barriers that have been identified for women in NSE disciplines. Glazer-Raymo (2008) examined reasons why women do not succeed in traditional male pursuits such as math and sciences. One factor that Galzer-Raymo research indicated is that women and minorities, which would include males, will switch their majors if they find their marks are too low, this is different from non-minority males. A second factor that Glazer-Raymo noted was that women learn better from women. However, Glazer-Raymo state that women’s colleges are in competition with many other universities for funding and often do not receive as much funding. Funding factors into the attractiveness of universities and colleges and unless these institutions are able to keep competitive they potentially will lose students. Women colleges have been
identified as a factor in the success for some women and the reduction in the number of placements or the loss of a college could be detrimental to some women students.

Two more factors that may support women student success is culture and mentors, specifically woman mentors. Suarez-Mccrink (2002) states that “culture plays a vital role in the lives of all college students” (p. 239) and asserts that women students require effective women role models to succeed. However, currently, there are a reduced number of university women leaders who can act as mentors for women. To produce more women leaders in universities there would need to be women in leadership roles to support upcoming mentors. Suarez-Mccrink states that the number of women in university leadership positions is limited, but emphasizes the importance of women in leadership positions to students. Suarez-Mccrink alliterated that “women in the higher echelons of academia and/or their service as faculty members may make an important difference on the lives of female students, especially those who are in dire need of a role model” (p. 241). Establishing more power in women’s lives is one reason women return to university.

**Reasons Women Return to Obtain a Degree and the Barriers They Experience**

Parr (2001) states that women returning to university are “a reflection of the women’s need to have more power over their lives” (p. 64) and the participants in her study viewed returning to university as a means to change their social position. Parr commented that women who had achieved higher education spoke about how these processes assisted their true identities to emerge. This author noted that independence, not just financial independence, was an emerging theme among the women, and this was associated with “resistance to the power and control that others have or have had over her
identity, in the public and private spheres of her life” (Parr, 2001, p. 65). Parr’s participants wanted to change their social location, improve their confidence, foster their true identities and establish more power in their lives; not just financial power. The women in Parr’s study had identified social location as a barrier to their development. Social location is a means of classifying or determining a person’s place in society and this placement often defines the degree that a person can interact with other parts of society and the resources that are available to that person through such interactions. Social location can often be tied to a person’s race, gender, and/or sexuality and which could also include the concept of social class which is where people are grouped together in the same class based on similar social, economic, or educational status. These two factors, social location and social class could act as barriers to a person’s self-development.

McGivney’s (1993) study examined what acted as barriers to women wanting to access education, training and employment, and identified three broad areas of constraints. These three areas of constraints were: personal and domestic, dispositional or psychological, and structural. In the context of personal and domestic categories, examples of constraints included “lack of qualifications and work experience, negative school experiences, lack of childcare [eldercare], lack of support from male partners and families, pressure or discouragement from others, and lack of money for education/training” (McGivney, 1993, p. 10). In relation to disposition or psychological constraints, the women identified “lack of confidence, drive or motivation, fear (of not being clever enough), lack of a clearly identified direction and the ‘guilt factor’ (vis-à-vis domestic/family responsibilities)” (McGivney, 1993, p. 10, brackets in original). In
regards to structural constraints, the following were identified: “lack of jobs, lack of training schemes, lack of information on the opportunities available and lack of guidance” (McGivney, 1993, p. 10). One of the constraints, lack of confidence, matches an outcome that Parr’s (2001) study participants wanted to overcome. McGivney notes that the constraints, identified in the 1993 study, were similar to those identified by many other surveys and studies in the United Kingdom.

**Summary of Literature**

Literature was examined that explored the motivations, supports, and barriers for the mature student and, specifically, for the mature woman student within university. Mature students are becoming a more dominant presence within higher educational institutions. Reay et al. (2002) states this factor has been on the rise since the 1990’s. Schuetze and Slowey (2002) relates that one of the issues for the mature student is that they have been categorized along with other nontraditional learners and often this categorization does not address mature students’ specific needs. However, Osborne et al. (2004) state that this group of learners may be traditional in some ways. Osborne et al. conclude that mature students return to higher education for economic, career, and personal reasons. They identified barriers for the adult learner as transition issues, gender, marital status, working-class mother, and programs that are not designed for adult learners; however, age was not considered a barrier to learning (see Richardson, 1994; Richardson & King, 1998; Richardson & Woodley, 2003; Wlodkowski, 2008). York and Knight (2004) identified both the student’s and the teacher’s learning belief systems, the needs of diverse learners, the different learning styles, and the size of the university campus as factors that impacted students’ learning abilities.
The historical background of women’s attendance in universities was explored in the literature. Historically, the numerical presence of women in universities was not large, but the numbers have significantly risen. Canadian women’s presence in universities has steadily risen since 1910. The University of Saskatchewan was the first university in western Canada to establish an extension branch that delivered programming to women. When choosing fields of study, women can be restricted by gender biases. The availability of women mentors was identified as key for some mature women to be successful as students. Multiple role strain and economic factors also impacted women students. Finally, limited research was identified about the mature woman student and even less research was identified that related to either women students or mature women students in Canada.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Ontological Perspective

Adopting constructivist ontology, the current study utilizes Charmaz’s constructionist approach to grounded theory. Constructivism “assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims towards interpretive understandings of subjects’ meanings” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510). Kulka perceives constructivism as existing on three levels.

Scientific constructivism [which] takes all scientific facts to be constructed; ‘strong constructivism’ declares that ‘all the facts we can ever possess are constructed’; and ‘very strong constructivism’ adds to the thesis of its strong counterpart the claim that ‘there is no independent reality.’ (Costelloe, 2001, p. 470, italics in original)

Vanderstraeten (2002) examines Dewey’s transactional constructivism, which departs from dualistic assumptions and does not “begin from the opposition of subject and object, of consciousness…and matter” (p. 241) nor from a position of knower and object, nor from a position of where the known world is “purely universal or ‘objective’” (p. 241). Vanderstraeten continues that Dewey: (a) aligns with Kulka’s concept that reality is constructed and (b) concludes that the “construction of knowledge [is]…the organism-environment transaction, [one] can acknowledge both that knowing is not a passive registration of the world outside but an active construction, and that this construction ‘refers’ to reality…[and] that this construction is real” (Vanderstraeten, 2002, p. 242). Nonconstructivist theories place the concept of resistance (i.e., which is how a person comes to understand that something is outside of them) as external. External objects are “characterized by the resistance they oppose to us” (Vanderstraeten, 2002, p. 242) external to, and not an illusion of, that person’s mind. However, a
Constructivist theory of knowledge cannot situate this resistance in the external world. It has to focus on the resistance of constructions to constructions, on the opposition of experiences to experiences. The question is whether or not particular operations trigger further operations. In this sense, resistance is a problem of internal consistency. (Vanderstraeten, 2002, p. 242)

Similarly Charmaz’s (2000) constructivist grounded theory, through which the individual’s interpretation of an experience is analyzed, recognizes multiple realities within the world and “generalizations [that] are partial, conditional and situated in time and space” (Charmaz, 2009, p. 141). Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory takes into account that “there is an interaction between the researcher and participants in the research process and in doing so brings to the fore the notion of the researcher as author” (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, p. 6). Charmaz (2009) relates that the researcher should explore the data, not from preestablished social norms or latent patterns, as Glaser (1978) advocated, but derive the theory from the participants’ descriptions. Charmaz’s (2009) approach is a constructed reporting of reality, an approach that takes into account the process between the researcher and the participant.

**Theoretical Perspective**

**Feminist Constructivism**

I framed the research through an epistemological lens of constructivism and from a theoretical perspective of feminism. Reinhartz (1992) supports that, “feminism is a perspective, not a research method” (p. 240). I chose the broad brush of feminism as this research study is informed by many different feminist perspectives (i.e., Adair, 2001; Gouthro, 2002; Gouthro and Grace, 2000; Home, 1997; LeVine, LeVine, & Schnell, 2001; Lewis, 2005; Lirio et al., 2007; Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2007; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003; Waller, 2004; & Yoder, 2007, 2010). I wanted to draw from the
The richnec of many different feminist perspectives as I thought that approach would best match the various findings the women participants framed in their stories. However within the various feminist perspectives there is still agreement on the main foci. Lips (2003) concurs that different feminist perspectives maintain the same foundational viewpoints.

Feminism comes in many different versions, but all of them share certain premises: the notion that inequalities between women and men should be challenged; that women’s experiences and concerns are important; that women’s ideas, behaviors, and feelings are worthy in their own right. (Lips, 2003, p. 13)

The desire to find a theoretical perspective that would honor the women’s stories was of utmost importance to me. Brooks and Nagy Hesse-Biber (2007) suggest that “feminists engage both the theory and practice of research” (p. 4). Also, these authors state that the epistemological foundation contains a set of assumptions about the social world that outlines, “who is the knower and what can be known” (Brooks & Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 4). These assumptions influence the researcher. Feminist research and values emphasize the “private, supportive, informal, local social structures in which women participate most frequently” (Brooks & Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 5). Feminist research also values women’s “unique and situated experiences as knowledge [but that] some feminists make the case for validating the importance of emotions and values as critical lens in research endeavors” (Brooks & Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 9). Women’s lived experiences, emotions, and feelings play an important role in not only giving rationale and direction in the field of research, but also in building the foundation of new epistemologies. These issues are relevant to this research study.
Qualitative Methodology

Grounded theory

Brooks and Nagy Hesse-Biber (2007) state that the methodology, which is “the theory of how research is done or should proceed” (p. 4) and the method, which is the techniques or tools for gathering the research, should support each other. Grounded theory, specifically Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory was chosen as the methodology for this research study. I adhere most closely to Charmaz, however I was also informed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Glaser (1978). Mills, Bonner, and Francis (2006) describe grounded theory’s journey from Strauss and Corbin to Charmaz’s (2000) constructed grounded theory:

Constructivist grounded theory can be traced from the work of Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1994, 1998) underpinned by their relativist position and demonstrated in their belief that the researcher constructs theory as an outcome of their interpretation of the participants’ stories. Strauss and Corbin’s focus on the provision of tools to use in this process confirms their constructivist intent. Following Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1994, 1998) Charmaz (2000) is the first researcher to describe her work explicitly as constructivist grounded theory. (p. 7)

When designing the research I felt Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory method best fit the type of data that would be derived from the study. The goal of this study is to explore individual experiences as they relate to the motivation, process, and consequences of earning a first degree. I wanted to utilize a methodology that would facilitate the construction of a theory from the women’s data. I also wanted to use open-ended questions to facilitate the women participants to tell their stories with as little interference from me as possible. Open-ended questions are less directive and do not begin with an assumed end. Nagy Hesse-Biber (2007b) states that open-ended questions are best suited to research goals that seek an outcome of more in-depth understanding.
from exploratory data gathering because more of the respondent’s experience is collected by “eliciting frequency of behaviors and experiences, because closed-ended questions suggest general norms, which may be outside the respondents’ experiences” (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2007b, p. 213). Closed-ended questions do not support the outcome of a more in-depth understanding. When surveying women from a feminist perspective, and if the research goal is to understand the “point of view of those you are studying, then conducting a survey with closed-ended questions gleaned from the research literature on this topic would not capture the lived experiences [of those women]” (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2007a, p. 119). Thus, I chose to use an interview style that utilized open-ended questions.

Grounded theory that is structured with open-ended questions was chosen as the most appropriate method. It comes with no predetermined hypothesis, but allows the theory to be discovered throughout the course of the research. The discourse of participants’ experience is delivered symbolically and metaphorically. The language is descriptive and is therefore conducive to qualitative analysis. Grounded theory is a methodology that is best suited to research that explores feelings, thought processes, and emotions, processes that are difficult to extract through quantitative research. It is the descriptions of people’s experience that provides the raw data with which to work. Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that people use their descriptions to persuade, arouse passions, convey believability, and expound moral judgments.

This study integrated more of the constructivist grounded theoretical approach as put forth by Charmaz (2000). Charmaz (2006) succinctly explained grounded theory when she states, “we can view grounded theories as products of emergent processes that occur through interaction” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 178). Charmaz expanded:
[What] you try to do is to understand as best you can, knowing that it always comes out of your own perspective, but you try to understand how the people that you are talking with or studying, construct the situation. I think grounded theory can be an enormous help with the checks to catch the kinds of constructions, and to have a sense of them. But it always comes from our perspective. (p. 10)

Consequently, within this study, I endeavored to be constantly aware of my positioning within the study and my own reality, generated constructions, and the concomitant or associated biases.

Data Collection

Ethics approval.

Ethics approval was sought and granted, by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board, Regina, Saskatchewan (see Appendix A).

Participants.

Qualitative researchers often utilize purposive samples and the type of purposive sample is based on the research question and on the resources available to the researcher (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2007b). This study includes six women who had graduated, at least 10 years ago, and six women who were in the process of completing their undergraduate degree. All 12 women attended the same mid-sized university. All of these women were 30 years of age or older at the time of enrollment to their degree program. The rationale was to have women from the two categories, those who had graduated and those who were completing their degree program, to explore if the women’s experiences would draw any similarities and/or differences, and if so, what those would be. A period of 10 years was chosen so that the women had the time to integrate their skills and gain life experiences so they might speak from a richer knowledge base. A further specific requirement was variety. Purposive and snowball sampling, as described by Neuman
(2006), was utilized to obtain the participants. Purposive sampling was initiated and a recruitment package was emailed to the various faculties throughout the university. Various professors made announcements or advised their students of the opportunity to participate in this research study and provided access to research information packages. After 2 months, there was one response, but the person declined. I contacted various faculty offices to explain the research study and ask if there were other avenues to seek potential participants. Some professors replied that they had placed the research package on student bulletin boards, but no student had requested additional information. Two professors said two students had requested information and the professor provided the information; however, no participants were obtained through this process.

After 3 months I began to employ snowballing sampling. I contacted three women’s business organizations and provided the research information, which was sent along to their membership. From this, one woman joined the research study. I contacted two Catholic schools and the information packages were circulated within their teaching staff. From this, four people became part of the research study. I also contacted two smaller affiliate colleges of the university, and the information packages were provided to the professors who advised their students of the research study. Two more people joined. Finally, I contacted business associates with information packages, and five people became part of the research study.

An initial assessment was conducted to ensure that study respondents met the criteria. The consent form (see Appendix B) was reviewed with the respondents to ensure their understanding of participating in the study and their rights as participants. A
meeting time was arranged, and it was determined that the interviews would be conducted at a private location.

**Qualitative interview.**

Each of the women chose to participate and signed the consent form demonstrating their informed consent to participate in the study and that they understood their rights. One of these women decided to withdraw from the study, but another person from business contacts was interested in becoming part of the research study. The consent process was reviewed and she became a part of the research study. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality, but not anonymity and their identities were disguised, as much as possible, within the research. No real names or obvious identifying features were utilized.

After acquiring consent to participate in the study, each of the women were interviewed. The length of the interviews varied from 1/2 hour to 1 ½ hours. The interview was scheduled at a time suitable for both the interviewee and interviewer and, for the most part, interviews were conducted face-to-face. However, two participants could not take time away from the home and requested an interview over the telephone. The researcher used a speaker phone and recorded the interview. Also, one interview was conducted twice, because of a technical problem.

Interview questions (see Appendix C) were developed that would best answer the study’s research questions. The interviewees were free to respond to the questions with the level of detail they wished to disclose. Strauss and Corbin (1998) state, the purpose of this type of grounded theory study is to hear the voice of the respondents. The interviews were digitally recorded. In addition, the interviewees were asked a series of demographic
questions via a short questionnaire (see Appendix D). The interviews were transcribed professionally by Verbal Ink Staff. The original recorded interviews were compared to the transcribed files for any errors; minute errors were identified and corrected.

**Data analysis.**

After each interview, any relevant ideas that had developed were entered into a memo that contained the date of the interview and an identifier for the interview. After all the interviews were transcribed, the process of initial coding began. The data were analyzed line by line. As a category was identified, its name was placed underneath and/or in the margin to indicate the applicable words from the interview. Also, memos were recorded in pictorial form. After completing the initial coding of all 12 interviews, initial categories were identified.

Next, focused coding was conducted. The process of focused coding “means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Each interview was segmented into words, phrases, and paragraphs. Each category, as well as its applicable data, was saved as a computer file. The result was an accumulation of each interview’s data around a category that was combined with all the interview results for the same category. At this point, the data were reexamined for themes, relationships, and concepts and reoccurring patterns; dissimilar patterns were also noted. Data were continually sifted into more robust categories. Focused coding “requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize [the] data incisively and completely” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). Therefore, it is important for the researcher to take their time at this stage to ensure, as much as possible, the most effective coding. Charmaz noted that the “strength of
grounded theory coding derives from this concentrated, active involvement in the process” (p. 61). The process of examining and reexamining the data to ensure the data fit the categorical assignation is what creates goodness of fit to the coding categorizations. Throughout the writing process, it became apparent that certain categories could be collapsed and merged more effectively into different categories. This sifting of the data continued through many months and through many drafts. Black (2009) explains this process as follows.

An iterative spiral of purposive data gathering and analysis lies at the heart of the GTM (grounded theory method). This spiral drives a process through which the researcher constructs, assesses and develops theoretical concepts from the data, up through increasingly higher levels of theoretical abstraction. This movement back and forth between the data, and the conceptual elements being developed is continued until a theory has been constructed which accounts for the variation in the data. (p. 92).

The final process, theoretical coding, is a reexamination of all the categories, subcategories and dimensions to establish what relationships are present. After a more concrete stage of analysis crystalized, it became apparent how these relationships operated and a co-created theory began to emerge. At this stage I created several graphical matrixes until I was satisfied that I had one matrix that best identified the relationships and interconnectedness of all the categories, from which an emergent theory was developed.

**Summary**

The presentation of this chapter covered both the ontological perspective, constructivism and the theoretical perspective, which was the broad brush of feminism. This was followed by an overview of the methodology, Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory. Then discussion centered on data collection and data analysis.
The ontological perspective was constructivism. Constructivism supports that reality is not external to the person, but rather consists of an active process of construction between the person, their environment, and relationship processes between people. Reality is constructed, by the person, through a process of interactions between these spaces. These constructions, it is argued, are reality. Nonconstructivist theories place reality external to the person and conceive that external objects offer resistance and are not a constructed creation of the person’s mind. The objects, in and of themselves, have properties that are defined and not constructed from a person’s mind; the properties are fixed. This then represents reality from the nonconstructivist theoretical viewpoint.

Feminist constructivism was chosen as the theoretical perspective. I chose the broad brush of feminism as this research study was informed by many different feminist perspectives. I thought it was important to involve different feminist perspectives as there was richness and complexity in the women’s findings. I felt this study would be better served by being informed by many different feminist perspectives.

Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory was chosen as the methodology that best fit with both the ontological and theoretical perspectives that were chosen. Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory supports that each individual’s interpretation of realities is analyzed. Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory also recognizes that there are multiplicities of realities that are not complete, but rather represent generalizations that are captured within the barriers of different contexts and divisions of time. Charmaz recognizes that the researcher is involved in their own constructions when interviewing participants and specifically in the data analysis process. Charmaz invites the researcher to be aware of their constructions. Grounded theory facilitates exploring
the data and constructing the theory from the findings. Grounded theory utilizes open-ended questions which support the participants in telling their stories. Participants’ stories contain language that is descriptive and metaphoric. Grounded theory incorporates the usage of clients’ descriptive and metaphoric language during the process of data analysis and theory construction. A participant’s exact words may be the best choice to describe a category, subcategory, or dimension. Utilization of the participants’ exact words is *in vivo* coding.

Data collection involved seeking ethics approval, which was granted, from the University of Regina Research Ethics Board, Regina, Sk (see appendix A). Following ethics approval 12 participants were sought that matched the criteria of 6 women, who were still in the process of obtaining their degree, and 6 women, who had competed their degree, at least 10 years ago. All women attended the same mid-sized Canadian university and all were at least thirty years of age at commencement to their degree programs. Purposive and snowball sampling was utilized to gain participants. Initial assessment was conducted to ensure interested participants met the criteria for this study. All participants that were a part of this study signed a consent form (see appendix B) to demonstrate their informed consent to participate in this study. Interviews of ½ to 1 ½ hours were conducted in a private location. Data analysis was conducted utilizing open and focused coding to sift the data into as robust categories as possible. A graphic matrix was constructed from my understanding of the relationships between the findings and a theory was developed.

Chapter 4 is a presentation of the findings, organized within the categories, subcategories, and dimensions that I co-created, based on my interpretation of the
findings and includes relevant quotations from the women’s interviews. Chapter 4 concludes with an explanation of the process model, followed by a graphic presentation of the process model that I constructed, based on my understanding of the findings.
CHAPTER 4: THE FINDINGS

Discussion in this chapter is divided into the “Participant Profiles,” “The Findings,” and “The Core Theme – “Making a Difference: The Process Model as Summary.” The participants are presented, each with a brief profile. In “The Findings,” discussion centers around four main categories that emerged from the data, including the subcategories and dimensions that resulted in the overarching core theme of “Making a Difference.” These outcomes were the result of interviews with 12 women participants, combined with the researcher’s understanding of these interviews via grounded theory methods. This chapter concludes with the presentation and discussion of a grounded theory model.

Participant Profiles

Demographics

The twelve participants were all women who ranged in ages from 33 to 62. The participants’ ages translated into two participants in their 30s, five in their 40s, three in their 50s, and two in their 60s. The participant pool was equally divided between six participants who were completing their degree and six participants who had graduated for at least 10 years. However all the participants were 30 years, or older, at the commencement of their degree program. Marital status: six married, four single, and two divorced.

Profiles

The following 12 profiles give the reader a general overview of the participants. The first group of six profiles is women who had graduated and the following six profiles are of the women who were in the process of completing their degree. These brief
profiles do not reflect these women’s deep inner resourcefulness, their richness of character, and the complex ways they differed.

**Pam.**

Pam is a 60-year-old woman who graduated from Education in 1982. It took her 15 years to complete her degree. During her program, she was a single mom of three children. She remains single and involved with her children and their families.

**Elizabeth.**

Elizabeth is 47 years old, a graduate of Vocational/Technical education in 1994. At the time she was taking her degree, she was married with no children. She remains married to the same partner and has chosen not to have children.

**Mary.**

Mary is 50 years old. She graduated with a BA in 1992. It took her 4 years to complete her degree. While completing her degree, she was a single parent with one daughter.

**Jill.**

Jill is 62 years old. It took her 5 years to graduate with a BA (achieved in 1984). In the last year of her program, she worked and could only take part-time classes. While obtaining her degree, she was married and had no children. At the time of her interview, she was married to the same person.

**Pandy.**

Pandy is a 46-year-old woman who graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work in 1998. It took her 15 years to graduate. She was single at the time of the interview with no children.
Sue.

Sue is 48 years old and graduated with a Bachelor in Music Education, with a minor in Religious Studies. She graduated in 2000, and it took her 4 years to complete her program. She was married at the time she worked towards her degree and her children were mature.

Cathy.

Cathy is a 37-year-old woman who is in the 4th year of a Bachelor of Arts in the Nursing Education program. At the time of the interview, she had been working on her degree for 5 years, expecting to complete it in April 2010. She is married with two children, a boy of 10 and a girl who is 17. She was unemployed while taking her degree.

Shelley.

Shelley is 40 years old and is working on a BA, with a major in Psychology. Currently, she is in the 4th year of her program, which she expects to complete in the month after her interview. It has taken her 4 years to reach this point in her program. Shelley is a single mother with a special-needs daughter and was unemployed while taking her degree.

Marie.

Marie is a 33-year-old woman in the process of completing her BA in Administration. She is currently in the 3rd year of the program and expects it will take 3 years to complete her degree. She is working full-time and taking part-time classes to complete the degree. She is married and the mother of three children.

Claire.

Claire is 50 years old and is in the process of completing her BA in Religious
Studies. She is in the last year of a 4-year program and expects to graduate in spring 2010. It has taken her 8 years to reach this point in her program. She was divorced at the time of her program, and her two children had moved from home.

**Anna.**

Anna is a 42-year-old woman who is working on her BA in Social Work. She is in the 4th year of the program, which she expects to complete in December 2010. While completing her degree, she worked full time, taking some work leave to complete part of her program. It had taken her a long time to reach this point in her program as she completed only two or three classes each year. While taking the degree, she was married with children, the number of which was undisclosed. The amount of time that had transpired since the start of her program was also undisclosed.

**Dawne.**

Dawne is 55 years old and is working on her BA in Administration. She was in either her third or fourth year of the program, anticipating it would take an additional 5 years to complete it, if she continued. She worked full-time during her studies, but did not disclose how many years it took to get to this point in her program. She was divorced with three grown children and four grandchildren.

**The Findings**

This study primarily employs a constructivist grounded theoretical approach as proposed by Charmaz (2006). A feminist lens was utilized to analyze the findings. Plummer and Young (2009) state that “Charmaz herself assumes a constructivist stance in GT…it is this shift toward a more interpretive and constructivist GT position that we feel fits with feminist inquiry” (p. 307). Like Plummer and Young the current study
adopts Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory with a feminist lens. The categories, subcategories, and dimensions that emerged from the data analysis of the women’s interviews were developed through the processes of initial and focused coding. Focused coding involves “synthesiz[ing] and explain[ing] larger segments of the data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 87) and was utilized to reduce the number of categories, subcategories, and dimensions into a more distilled map. Charmaz stated that an overarching core theme may or may not be deduced from the data; however, in this study an overarching core theme of “Making a Difference” did develop. As well, four main categories “Do It for Me,” “More in Me,” “Do It for Them,” and “Achieving Milestones” - were derived from the data, including various subcategories and dimensions. The first three of the main categories, “Do It for Me,” “More in Me,” “Do It for Them,” pertains to the factors that motivated the women to take their degree program. The fourth of the above main categories, “Achieving Milestones,” addresses the women’s experiences as they worked to complete their degree.

The above-mentioned four main categories built upon each other and culminated with the core theme of “Making a Difference.” The participants identified many ways that completing their degree was “Making a Difference” in their lives and the lives of others. These categories and subcategories are not a rigid, clear cut, top-down arrangement of concepts and ideas. Rather, the categories and subcategories flow in and through each other, as water from the same pond, but as separate droplets of water, when combined, form waves, tides, and larger masses of water; separate, yet joined. These categories, subcategories, and dimensions are illustrated in excerpts from the women’s interviews. It should be noted that the number of participants whose excerpts were added
to a specific category, subcategory, or dimension were marked by an ‘x,’ out of the total number of participants in the study (e.g., x/12), that in no way suggests significance. It should also be noted that repetitive comments were not included to the relevant category, subcategory, or dimension. Each woman who commented on a category, subcategory, or dimension was counted in the number of participants; however, repetitious comments were not quoted. The excerpts are direct quotations from the women’s interviews modified only by placement of punctuation and removal of non-fluent interruptions. Thus, we enter a world of multiple perceptions to uncover what we can of the women’s experience and lives through the categories. A discussion of the main categories, subcategories, and dimensions follows.

**Do It For Me**

“Do It For Me” reflects that self is the main motivational factor. “Do It For Me” is divided into the two subcategories of “Newly developed concrete skills” and “Nurtured self-confidence and self-development.”

**Newly developed concrete skills.**

Here new skills were developed. The women often said they had known for years that they had the capability to develop but, until that time, had not made that transition. Participants (7/12) stated they had developed concrete skills. Often, they became aware of these skills as they advanced through their program, and the subsequent feeling that the skills were valuable kept them engaged in their program. Mary started to see concrete changes in herself and shared, “you start getting to the point where you can see the results…in your way of thinking, in the way you approach things, in the way you answer things.” She expanded that, “it’s a great place to learn how to think [and] to get that
clarity of thought.” Mary related that the university experience gave her a different perspective, “rather than looking at it from a ‘me’ perspective, I was able to stand outside myself and say, ‘OK’ what does this really mean? [I learned to look at the] bigger picture.” Shelley’s experience was that

*One learns to think critically...[and] explore things on your own...the challenge and biggest thing that’s evolved is that I no longer believe something that I’m told point-blank. I have to learn both sides of it and judge for myself.*

Shelley tied this developed skillset to the professor’s “goal [which] was to improve my critical-thinking skills and mission accomplished.” Pam shared that she learned, “about writing papers and expressing self with the written word. That’s a life skill.” She found the degree helped her develop, “time organization [which] is a life skill you can take with you.” Elizabeth said that, “it helps you get a few learning skills and some research skills.”

Dawne spoke about communication in her various social groups. She explained, “there’s a lot of basic knowledge that they teach in those 100 courses that people talk about and especially in social circles that I had no idea what they were talking about.” Claire found that she had developed concrete skills stating that, “I found that I was a good writer...something that I didn’t know about before...I could quickly bring an idea concisely together and be able to explain myself in a way that was understandable.” Claire said that because of her experiences she felt that “as a person you just start fuller. Not of knowing more things and it’s not becoming an expert.” Claire then related, “it’s being able to initiate or carry a conversation about something that you actually have things to say that are grounded.”

1 Participant block quotes were italicized to assist in reading the document.
Participants found that by taking the degree they developed new internal qualities and characteristics. Mary developed thinking, perspective taking, and self-referencing skills. Pam and Claire both shared that they developed more effective writing skills. Claire and Dawne developed communication skills. Pam shared that she developed three different skillsets of time organization, effective learning, and research skills. Shelley expressed that she developed in critical thinking skills. Mary, Claire, Shelley, Jill, Pam, Dawne, and Sue (7/12) all commented on skills that they developed.

**Nurtured self-confidence and self-development.**

Within this subcategory the women (8/12) speak of development of self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-determination. Marie stated, “It’s impacted my life, like I said on my confidence level [I be]came more confident in myself.” Sue related how her confidence improved, saying, “it’s a huge confidence builder to be able to say that, yes I did go to university. I do have a degree. It’s helped me to expand.” Cathy shared that

*It has made me a more confident and I’m just surer of myself. I did it. I know I can do it . . . I feel like I can conquer anything if I put my mind to it.[It] was a struggle, but I got through it.*

Mary was emphatic she needed to take the degree to feel good, stating that university, “was just a choice. I just needed to do it…I needed to do this for myself. I just needed to get a degree. It was more about self-esteem.”

The women discussed how taking a degree had personally impacted them. Jill elaborated, “I think having that degree in my back pocket…[and] just knowing that I have been to university makes me feel better as a person.” Anna stated, “it’s matched my values…fill[ed] it out or ma[de] me more well-rounded… more of a good complement to my life.” Shelley said, “personal-wise you grow as a person; you can’t help it.” Pam felt
completing the degree was a character builder:

_You care, you have a goal in mind and you’re able to achieve it. How long it takes to complete the degree does not lessen its impact…The return proves your character . . . it did help with self-esteem, just knowing I had done 4 years at a university. And I think in a way I’m almost pleased with myself that I did it, and I did it in a tougher environment than what some people have to do….so that helps on a personal level._

Marie, Mary, Sue, Cathy, Jill, Anna, Shelley, and Pam (8/12) found that taking the degree fostered their personal self-development. Mary, Sue, and Cathy commented they developed self-confidence. Cathy and Pam felt they developed their ability to remain determined and accomplish goals. Jill, Mary, and Pam felt the degree process increased their self-esteem; Pam, that it further developed her character; and Anna and Shelley, that it assisted in their over-all self-development.

**More in Me**

This second category in “Making a Difference” further refines the participating women’s concept that there were inherent characteristics they wanted to develop. Within “More In Me” are the two subcategories of “I see” and “Other’s see.” These subcategories indicate that it was either an internal or an external motivator that assisted the women to pursue a degree program.

**I see.**

In this subcategory, the women realized they wanted to pursue personal development in order to see what they could accomplish. Often they identified what these characteristics were, knew they were capable, and felt they could accomplish more. Realizing they could develop acted as an internal motivator to take the degree (5/12). Claire’s driving force to pursue the degree was “I wanted to see what else was in me, in my head, in my heart…I purposely chose classes that were challenging and that I didn’t
know a lot about.” She wanted to challenge the personal perceptions of herself and shared,

I had always defined myself as somebody who wasn’t that bright. I wanted to challenge that thought. I knew I had the capacity...more listening to voices in my head that maybe weren’t grounded in this.

Anna knew, “[I] want[ed] to develop more as a person.” Shelley, also, knew she wanted the opportunity to develop and, “I knew that I had a lot to give.”

Claire, Anna, and Shelley shared their experiences on how they chose their degree program for their personal development. Pam and Dawne also commented in this subcategory. Claire wanted to see what she was capable of, both intellectually and character-wise, and also wanted to challenge her self-perception of having a low intelligence. Anna wanted the opportunity to develop personally, and Shelley knew she could develop her inner capacities to better contribute to the world. Each woman wanted the opportunity to develop personally. Their motivation was self-initiated, and the degree became the vehicle for their personal development.

Others see.

In “Others see,” discussion is about the process of moving forward in a degree program because of external encouragement (4/12) from, for example, a family member or friend who perceived their potential and encouraged them to advance in their education. The women seemed aware of these qualities, but had been unable to develop these on their own. The encouragement of another person motivated the women to enroll in a degree program.

Jill’s encouragement came from an acting dean.

It was actually him that suggested that I take educational psychology, which I never did. . . . I went into the Faculty of Education, but it was something that I
really hadn’t considered before…obviously he saw something there that I should do.

Pandy shared how, “someone said ‘You’re so good with people, why don’t you go into social work?’” She did enter social work, with encouragement from her coworkers.

_The educated women had their degrees that I worked with. Even when…new ones came in, they all had one thing in common - they all had a degree . . . all thought I was capable of more and they all…encouraged me._

This started her thinking about obtaining a degree and she related,

_A special ed teacher or something like that [suggested a path] and I struggle[ed] with it. I didn’t quite know . . . then my mom just out of the blue said, ‘What about a psychologist at the children’s program? We always need psychologists.’ And I honestly didn’t look into it that much. I just applied and got in._

Jill, Pandy, Sue, and Shelley received encouragement from others to pursue their educational paths. Jill’s encouragement came from an acting dean; Pandy’s, from an unnamed source; and Shelley’s, from her coworkers. Either directly or indirectly, the women were to follow the advice they had been given.

**Do It For Them**

This category is about the motivational factors that influenced the women to take a degree program. The data within this category point to externally driven motivation. The factors that influenced the women’s entrance into a degree program were primarily for the benefit of other people. These influencing factors are discussed under the three subcategories of “Community,” “Children,” and “Career.”

**Community.**

This subcategory relates the women’s desire to assist society. Participants (5/12) spoke of wanting to address inequalities and give something back to a particular group of individuals, or to the broader community, or to a specific cause, such as ADHD
(Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). Shelley said that, “when I came into the program, I wanted to help kids…specifically to work with kids…with ADHD and autism.” Cathy related, “as I’ve unfolded in my program, my interests have changed. I knew I wanted to be out there giving back and I felt the best way was through nursing because you do a little bit of everything with that.” Anna also spoke of how wanting to help people aligned with her profession.

My values are in direct alignment with those of social work, like addressing inequalities . . . giv[e] back to other people, not just doing it for myself, but doing it for others too. Like being able to help other people to put your stamp on the world, say, ‘Hey, I was here and I helped and I wasn’t just a mom and a wife. I did a lot more with my life.’

Pandy also spoke of giving back to the community.

I...start[ed] to do some work in the community to give back and hopefully give voice to people who didn’t have voices and do a lot of volunteer work on boards and stuff that I wouldn’t have done without an education. I think it’s helped me and my community as well.

Shelley wanted to impact society as a whole, emphatically stating,

I think that’s what my destiny here is, is to improve the lives of other women. That’s why I’m in this struggle. It’ll improve the life of my daughter in the long run, but I’m not stopping there. It’s going to be bigger than that.

Pam, Shelley, Anna, Cathy, and Pandy all found ways to combine what they valued in helping people into their educational paths. Cathy and Shelley both wanted to give back to people, but Shelley especially wanted to help improve women’s lives. Anna enrolled in social work as it best suited her personal values in helping to address inequalities. Pandy wanted to help the community. These women spoke passionately about “Making a Difference” in the world and helping people have better lives, with a strong sense that this could be achieved by getting a degree.
Children.

The participants (4/12) spoke of how their children influenced them to enroll in a degree program. Cathy related that,

*I wouldn’t have been able to provide what I wanted for my children. I wanted better for my children’s future . . . having my degree I am able to now put them through university instead of them settling for minimum wage jobs.*

Mary also “wanted better for them [her children].” Sue said, “I wanted to do it for Jolie, so pretty strong motivators.” Anna spoke of wanting to influence her children.

*One of the reasons I wanted to persevere is I want to be a mentor or role model to my daughters. . . [that] if you have a dream and you want to do it, it doesn’t matter how old you are…I want them to learn [this]. I want to model that.*

Cathy, Sue, Anna, and Mary shared how their children motivated them to get a degree. Cathy wanted her children to have the opportunity for a university education; Mary did it for her children. Sue’s daughter was her strong motivator; and Anna wanted to be a role model for her children.

Career.

“Career” also includes a discussion about external motivating factors. Some of the motivators the women mentioned were the desire to advance, to achieve professional recognition, or to be more effective at work. Three dimensions were within “Career” - “Professional recognition,” “Monetary gains,” and “Breaking preestablished roles.”

Professional recognition.

“Professional recognition” is the first dimension in the subcategory of “Career.” The women (10/12) shared that achieving professional recognition was important, whether it was professional acknowledgment, or whether it opened up opportunities, or fostered feelings of equality, or supported further advancement. Elizabeth felt that
obtaining a degree was like joining a club. “I am going to join the club. So I started
taking university night classes.” The inference can be made that belonging gives certain
rights and privileges and, also, there are those who belong and those who do not;
furthermore those who do not belong will not do as well as those who do belong. A club
card often opens doors.

The women spoke of how having a degree opened doors to opportunity. Elizabeth
shared, “it’s nice to have all this paper to be able to put on a resume when I’m going to
apply for something . . . I have had lots of opportunities…that I wouldn’t have had
without it.” Mary shared that,

It [the degree] didn’t help me get a job, that’s for sure. It helps me in my job now,
but I’ve got a second degree, so if I didn’t have the first degree, I wouldn’t have
gotten the type of teaching assignment that I have.

Pam also found the degree helped her to advance in her career. Pam shared, “I
could put on my resume and I knew it made a difference to a lot of people when I was
looking for jobs . . . it made a huge difference in that I could get a job as a teacher.” It
also helped as she continued her career path. Pam continued, “when I left education, just
having the degree helped me get advancement, in jobs, in other areas.”

Others spoke of acquiring professional recognition through attaining a university
degree. Marie felt,

That I’m equipped and I have the knowledge…the resources…the understanding
of what we’re dealing with on a bigger picture and a bigger scale and I’m not just
a worker. I’m a thinker and I’m contributing back to my workplace.

She related that professional recognition was a strong motivator.

It was one of the requirements [to] getting your designation is now you need to
get a business degree. [For instance] my career path and what I’m doing, there’s
more recognition once you have a degree. You may have all the knowledge in the
world of the business, but the recognition doesn’t come until you have the degree.
Jill shared how her degree assisted in her work with professionals.  

*In my profession now, you better believe that one little degree makes a whole difference in the people I meet because we do a lot of professors and lawyers and doctors. . . . you better believe that makes me feel a little bit better about approaching them, about working with them.*

Elizabeth also found the degree offered some equality. Elizabeth related, “because I’ve got that piece of paper that lets me have the “F--- you’ card that I needed in the first place . . . if anybody that pulls that card, I just pull [mine]. It’s nice to have that card.”

Elizabeth, Pam, Jill, Marie, and Mary shared how obtaining the degree had assisted them professionally. Elizabeth and Mary shared how having the degree provided more employment opportunities. Marie expressed how the degree helped her to move from the perspective of a worker to that of a contributing member of the workplace. Jill and Elizabeth related that they now felt more equal to their peers at work. Each of the women found that having a degree equated to some type of professional recognition.

**Monetary gains.**

Women participants (5/12) spoke of wanting to improve their financial situation. They wanted out of minimum wage jobs and monetary gains became a huge motivator.

Pandy said that wanting a better paying job was a strong motivator.

*What motivated me of course was to find a better paying job. Because before the degree, before I was going to the university I was working in very low paying jobs and I quickly realized I wasn’t going to get any better paying jobs unless I had some education.*

Mary’s motivation was, “getting a better paying job.” Shelley’s motivator was also financial; “I wanted to be paid what I was worth…I think at the time it was maybe $6.00 an hour. It wasn’t fulfilling.” Cathy also wanted to escape from a minimum-paying job and shared, “You know instead of just being at minimum wage and happy with that.”
Pam “remember[ed] those years as not being fun at all. It was something that I had to do to get the degree because I needed the degree to make more money.” Pandy, Mary, Shelley, Pam, and Cathy shared the desire to be in a better paying job, recognizing that to be paid more, they needed more education.

**Breaking preestablished roles.**

Pandy, Jill, Pam, Claire, Shelley, Anna and Elizabeth (7/12) spoke on how they felt limited by their gender roles. Gender roles are often limiting roles that are defined for individuals, by society, based on their gender. These limiting roles are defined based on what society has constructed as the norm or most suited for that gender and are often built on preconceived stereotypical perceptions, i.e., males are strong, women are weak. Historically, roles for women were reflected by the types of education they could seek, the jobs they could acquire, or the roles they were expected to play, such as wife or mother. Pandy, Elizabeth, Claire, Pam, Jill, and Shelley recognized that in some ways they were restricted because of their gender which translated into the type of educational path they sought, how their families viewed their educational pursuits, and the career paths they were expected to pursue. The women who were in the process of attaining a degree also identified some of these same issues.

Gender issues continue to influence women and the role they play in society. Pandy reflected on how women’s roles were viewed in past decades.

*[When] I started 25 years ago most women went...*[to university] part time until they got married... I think my gender had lots to do with it, especially when I was applying through the administration because there were very few women... I don’t think, for sure in the sciences I wasn’t taken seriously.*

As well, Jill’s family supported such preestablished roles for women.
When I broached my family and said, ‘I’m going to quit my job and go to school,’ they thought I was crazy. ‘How could you do that?’ It wasn’t in their vocabulary to go to university at that point in time.

Jill shared that her family’s expectations of women were, “you just don’t do that, you work and raise a family. That’s what your job as a woman is supposed to be, right?” Claire’s family, also, had a narrow expectation of what women could pursue. Claire stated,

*I’m 50...back when I was like 18 or 19, I was told by my parents I could be a secretary, a nurse or a teacher . . . I didn’t even know there were other choices. There weren’t as many other choices back then, but there were, obviously, choices.*

Claire also shared how a person’s gender could limit them. Claire continued, “you were limited in what you could do because, you know after all, you’re not quite as smart as your brothers, or the guys.” She stated how women’s educational expectations were limited to, “the areas that you could do [were] teaching, nursing because they were areas of compassion working with people. Women do that very well.” Pam, also, found the career-path choices were limited and predetermined.

*I guess it was just one of the choices that I had always had from like about grade nine or ten. I was thinking of teacher, secretary, airline stewardess. I remember those being the three . . . education was the one that I felt that I gravitated to the most, so that’s what I picked.*

Shelley felt limited at her workplace, stating that the work hierarchy and the feeling of being “at the bottom of the hill” motivated her to take a degree.

*There’s a certain mindset that goes with being in a subordinate position like that, and it’s - excuse my language – ‘shit rolls downhill,’ and if you’re the secretary, you’re standing at the bottom of the hill . . . I don’t want to be [there anymore].*

Elizabeth, Pandy, Shelley, Anna, and Jill (5/12) shared that they were the first ones in their families to obtain a degree or go to university. Both Elizabeth and Pandy
shared that they were “the first one in my family” to get a degree/go to university.

Shelley spoke of how breaking preestablished roles had impacted her and her family.

*I guess it’s maybe a little hard for them, because I’m the first person in my family to go to university and it’s not that I was trying to be better than anyone. I was just trying to better myself and better my situation.*

Anna would also be the first one in her family to obtain a degree saying, “I’ll be the first in my family to have a degree and I’m the youngest of five kids.” Jill stated that

*There was nobody in my family, at that point in time that had ever gone to university. My dad had his Grade 12, my mom had Grade 8. My older brother had quit school in Grade 10. I was first in my family to complete a Grade 12.*

These women were trailblazers.

Pandy, Claire, and Pam shared that women were encouraged into four career roles: nurse, secretary, teacher, or airline stewardess. Jill and Shelley found that, although they had not grown up when there were fewer choices for women, their families still thought the choices for women were limited. The families often pushed back, attempting to keep their daughter in a more traditional role, and often this meant they did not want their daughter to seek an education. Five out of 12 of the women shared that they were the first in their family to obtain a degree. Shelley spoke of being in a low-paying job and of deciding she had to get some education to move beyond her predicament. Each of the women felt a type of preestablished role existed for women.

**Achieving Milestones**

This category filters out the many milestones these women experienced while obtaining an education. “Achieving Milestones” consists of four subcategories: (a) “Roads to Education,” (b) “Breaking the Poverty Cycle,” (c) “Time Constraints,” and
(d) “Substantive and Psychological Types of Support.” “Wearing many hats” is an *in vivo* code which is a coding label that is derived from the participant’s actual words as those words best describe what is happening within that context; in this case Anna’s interview.

**Roads to education.**

Here excerpts from the participants’ interviews that relate to their experiences while completing the degree are explored. This subcategory has the dimensions of: (a) “Winding paths,” (b) “Learning environment,” (c) “Mentors effective vs. ineffective,” (d) “Mature vs. younger students,” and (e) “Prior learning.”

**Winding paths.**

“Winding paths” relates how circuitous the women’s (6/12) paths were to obtain their degree. Sue shared how her decision to obtain a degree had changed.

*I had just been working when my kids were small, and I didn’t have any intention of going back to university . . . [she did] register for university when I was 16 years old in Grade 12, as you normally do, and then I got pregnant and had children and never went and had decided I didn’t really need to do that.*

Then Sue found an interest in singing.

*I started getting involved in singing quite a lot and went from one place to the other . . . finally the woman I was taking lessons from, she said, ‘I can’t teach you anymore. You need to go to the university and take from someone there.’*

Sue was still convinced she was not going to get a degree.

*OK, I will go there, but I’m not going to go get a degree. I’m certainly not going to take a music-performance degree, because I don’t plan on performing. I’m just doing this for myself and what I want to do.*

However, after thinking about it, Sue decided that she would, “get a Music Ed degree, because that’s the next best thing…but I’m not going to be a teacher, because my mom

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2 a, b, c These three subcategories contain dimensions.
and dad are both teachers; been there, done that.” She was emphatic about “not going to do that, not going to happen, but I do want to have something to show for this when I’m done.” But her path took another turn because of her marriage and subsequent religious affiliation. “I became a Catholic when I married my husband…So I said, ‘Well, OK, I’m interested in this. I’ll do a minor in religious studies.’” This was how events in her life shaped her educational path and how she “ended up doing [this degree].”

Claire already had a career as a nurse and originally she thought a degree program would add to her nursing experience, but her interests took her in another direction.

*I'd always thought it would be nice at some point to try to go back to school. I'd been a nurse for a long time, back in the days when it was a diploma. So I'd never had undergraduate. And I always thought it would be nice to be able to do that.*

Claire shared that:

*Originally, I had just assumed that I would pursue somehow in nursing and just do it that way . . . I was also at the point in time where I've been in nursing a long time, and although it's been a place that I always felt comfortable, maybe I just felt a little bit too comfortable and I wanted more change, too.*

She became aware of another possibility. Claire related, “religious studies, I'd always done a lot of reading in different religions and I think I've always had friends of different religions. And so that just seemed like, you know [the right choice].” It was Claire’s interests that helped her to choose the degree program that was right for her.

Excerpts of Sue’s and Claire’s interviews were shared because their choice of degree program was not an immediate decision. Jill, Anna, Shelley, and Pandy also commented on this subject. Their lives progressed and, eventually, they were led to the university. For these participants, it was not a direct path, but a winding path of experiences, and sometimes coincidences, combined with their own choices, that led them to take a degree program.
**Learning environment.**

This dimension explores the women’s experiences in their university learning environment with their professors and their student peers. Pam, Elizabeth, Dawne, Mary, Sue, Anna, Claire, Cathy, Pandy and Shelley (10/12) commented on their learning environments within the university they attended.

Pam found it fun and, “it was an adventure…exciting…quite new. Sometimes I was out of my comfort zone…that was sort of the first year, and it would have been the most fun year.” Claire echoed Pam’s enthusiasm.

*Fabulous, fabulous...except for maybe one particular class. I think every class I've taken has been enlightening, just a real wonderful [experience]. It was fun because those [education classes] were the ones that I found the most interesting because it was really applying to what I was going to do.*

Mary also thought university was a great place to go and, “to learn how to think [and] to get that clarity of thought.” Sue found the learning environment rewarding.

*I think the reason so many kids go to university is because the environment is really cool. You're learning . . . You're with people who want to learn, for the most part . . . there's lots of the party crowd, too. There is in every section...[but] I had a good experience...Going back to school kind of reminded me that it’s really cool to learn new things and to keep learning and to keep challenging yourself.*

Anna said, “It’s very self-fulfilling [be]cause it’s giving me information that I can apply, but I like it because it challenges me.”

Many of the women shared positive aspects about their professors. Pandy said that,

*Like anything, there were some really good profs and there were some that weren’t very good . . . I had a few profs that I was on terms with that I could go back to for help even though I wasn’t in their classes.*

Pandy also found that as she became familiar with the system, she could access help.
Pandy shared, “the beginning was really challenging, but as it went on I went through the system and I became familiar with some of the profs and I could go to them for help.”

Shelley expanded saying,

*Most professors are encouraging. They want to see you succeed and there’s been a few that have kind of gone above and beyond to encourage and make their students feel special or there are some professors that you just click with and you do better in their classes and things like that.*

Shelley concluded that university was a positive experience.

*The wonderful thing about Jane…she doesn’t single out any particular students. She treats all the students [equally]. . . every student…is important, is supported, is nurtured. Their opinion is important. How they’re feeling is important.*

Shelley implied that her professor, Jane, was her role model. Shelley related, “and if I were ever to be a professor, I would want to be a professor exactly like that, exactly like that.” Claire also shared a positive experience about her professors, stating that,

*Once [the professors] realized my interest and my desire to do well, they were more than happy to be of extra [help]. . . whether it was extra reading that would help me see something more completely or just extra, like just sitting down over coffee to discuss something just so that you learn to verbalize it better so that you understand it better too.*

Anna, contrary to Pam, Elizabeth, Dawne, Mary, Sue, Claire, Pandy, and Shelley, focused only on the positive aspects of her experience and on how much she enjoyed her learning experience. Anna also felt her attitude contributed to her excellent experience.

*I must like being a student because I actually really enjoy doing that all that stuff. I love research . . . for the most part I really enjoy studying, reading, and I guess that’s what kept me going, doing it. And I love – yeah, I like exams even better than papers.*

After 1 year, Pam found her university experience changed.

*I mean all these years later and cognizantly knowing that my attitude towards university doesn’t make any sense, I know it’s still there . . . that environment for me was not pleasant. I came away…thinking that I never, ever wanted to set foot on campus again, ever. And I haven’t…oh my god, that was horrible.*
Elizabeth also had negative feelings about her learning experience.

Well, it was discouraging, and I think it probably, it became an experience like then let’s just get through this. This isn’t going to be that intellectual expansion type of learning experience that I had hoped.

Pam, Dawne, and Cathy shared their frustration about meeting class requirements.

I was taking classes because I had to take them. Not...ones that I would really want to take, but it was one of the requirements....I still carry from that is...[that] there were things that you had to do to meet the requirements. (Pam)

Dawne related that,

Most of the time I would just go because I needed that class to move on to a different class . . . there’s so many classes you have to take to get to those [classes you want.] I would usually just take them and write the exam...just to get to the next stage.

Cathy found a complication with prerequisites.

I had to retake my nutrition class and I wasn’t able to take the classes that were in the clinical area . . . that put me back a whole year 'cause if I couldn't take the classes in the clinical area, the next year I had to take it all over again.

The women spoke of some of their experiences with their university professors.

One professor did not leave a good impression with Sue.

I think the teacher of the class really sets the environment a lot of times, and it’s funny, the one teacher that I remember that was just insane was my ed psych professor [who said] ‘I want you to know about me first,’ so we had these overheads of his resume...[and for] three classes he told us... totally no one in the class had any respect.

Pandy related:

Basically, I remember one prof just telling the whole class to go home and figure it out, and that was in a calculus class . . . . [I found that] ...some of the classes, some of the pros, there was just no support there, even in terms of asking questions.

Pam, also, was confused by the disparity between the content that was taught and what was examined.
It didn’t make sense that the profs sometimes would stand up there and talk about certain things, but those were never the things on the exams. The things on the exam were things from the books that they never, ever talked about.

Dawne, who had a diverse background in business, shared negative teaching experiences.

Often times what they said, especially in the business classes, wasn’t applicable, really, or sometimes I’d say to the prof, ‘It’s not right, you know. That isn’t the way taxes [are] filed.’ And they don’t know . . . and so, and I just sat there. I knew the prof was the person [supposed to be the expert] in communications, and I thought, ‘Yeah, he never knew. . . . It was really hard to sit there, because I knew he got fired from every job that he had ever done because he really didn’t know much about communications…that was one bad experience. It was a business class that often had things that were actually wrong.

Shelley, also, experienced times when she knew the information being taught was incorrect.

I said, ‘Excuse me, but I happen to know that this is the process’… She [the professor] wasn’t too happy, but…she didn’t use that example anymore . . . I’ve had some unfavorable reactions,...I understand, because you’re supposed to be the expert, like getting a 68 on a paper...or just a look.

Shelley said that when the professor is not open to feedback, there is backlash.

You know when you just get the feeling like, OK, now I’ve really stepped on someone’s toes or maybe an unwillingness to help . . . it is not blatant. I probably internalize it more than it’s a blatant, ‘Get out of my class,’ or anything like that . . . [also] you have the odd professor that’s a total dick. [Like] showing off his superior intellect...but very few professors were like that I found in my experience, anyway. . . . I don’t really have a lot of complaints about the environment, except for the pressure aspect of it. I think a lot of professors don’t understand that their class isn’t the only class you’re taking and so you have more of a load than just what they’ve assigned you.

Pam, Claire, Mary, Anna, and Sue shared positive experiences of the learning environment as a wonderful, stimulating place to learn. Claire found it fun because she would be able to apply what she was learning; Anna found it self-fulfilling and challenging. Nevertheless, Pam, Elizabeth, Dawne, Cathy and Sue mentioned negative
aspects in their learning environment. They found it difficult having to take classes they
did not want to take. For example, Cathy had to take more classes because of a program
change. Pam found her university experience so negative that she never returned to
university. Pandy, Sue, Dawne, and Shelley all experienced negative examples of
teaching that impacted their learning environment.

**Mentors effective or ineffective.**

In this dimension, Mary, Sue, Elizabeth, Pandy, Shelley, and Claire (6/12) discuss
their thoughts about their mentors. Mary’s mentors were men.

*One [mentor], both were men, was the person who was the acting dean of
psychology at the time . . . I hadn’t had him until my fourth year...I didn’t go and
talk to him about psychology stuff a lot, but just would end up going in and asking
him logistical stuff about getting through my degree . . . he was just really
helpful, very down to earth and just very helpful and gave good advice along the
way of what I should do.*

Mary considered him, “more of a mentor, just giving ideas about different things I could
do in my life and that because I was getting a psychology degree that I wasn’t limited to
psychology.”

Sue shared about her mentor.

*Very humble, one of the most humble people you would ever meet, and he had so
much. . . . he just really led you to open your mind and to be open to new ways of
thinking about things, challenging the status quo kind of thing. (Sue)*

One of Elizabeth’s professors really put extra effort into helping her understand
things.

*I remember taking this class...I wasn’t getting it...and it wasn’t sitting in my
head, and I can be quite stubborn when I don’t get something and I’ll figure my
way through, and I was having trouble. So I remember going to her office and not
being able to figure it – she needed...to leave...but she said, ‘You come to my
place tonight and I’ll show you this.’ And I brought like brown sheets of rolled
paper with all my stuff stickied and taped all over it, and I remember her on her
hands and knees in her apartment going through and she’s like ‘oh no, it’s this*
way, and this is how it falls over here.' So her taking the time to do that was really impressive…she knew I wanted to learn.

Pandy’s mentor helped her in her transition to the university.

*I had a couple mentors. One was an English prof and she was a female. She was one of the people I could take questions to from other classes and she would just help me figure out what they were looking for . . . she would help me with resource manuals and all different kinds of things.*

Pandy attributed her success in university to her mentors. Pam stated, “I mean if it wasn’t for her, there was a couple profs in the social work department were easy to talk to. So without them I wouldn’t have made it.”

Shelley shared a memory of a professor who exerted a very positive, lasting impact on her.

*She understands. She was raised by a single parent. She understands what it’s like to be a student and a parent, so I don’t find her expectations unrealistic . . . I think she almost coddles me too much, but she’s just very encouraging. I can be very down on myself very easily, and she doesn’t let me go down there, which is amazing.*

Claire speaks of her positive relationship with her mentor.

*Really helped to kind of help refine my work and show me areas that maybe I wasn’t thinking of when I was writing…and he was always open to me just handing something off and then he’d give me feedback on it.*

Claire was surprised that her relationship with this mentor continued.

*Even to this day, like I just recently had a short story published at the university. And so I sent him a quick note email saying ‘You know that story that I was working on, like, 3 years ago. Well, I’ve finally made enough revisions that it’s been published.’ And so he sent back, like within hours, sent back this email saying, ‘Fabulous.’ He said, ‘Let me see it. I want to see the changes you’ve made.’*

The women related many positive experiences about their mentors. Mary appreciated her mentor’s guidance for school and life issues. Sue’s mentor assisted her in being more open-minded. Elizabeth’s mentor went out of her way to help Elizabeth
understand the work. Pandy felt that if it were not for certain professors, she would not have made it through the process of getting her degree. Shelley’s mentor, who had had been a single parent herself, could better understand her students. Claire’s mentor not only assisted her in school, but he also assisted her in a writing project long after she had graduated.

*Mature vs. younger students.*

In this dimension, discussion includes the women’s thoughts about being a mature student and their perceptions of their younger classmates. Shelley, Pam, Elizabeth, Cathy, Jill, Mary, Sue, Dawne, and Claire (9/12) commented on this subject.

Cathy found it difficult to return to school. “It's just hard to come back as an adult. It's hard 'cause you don't fit in. It's hard because you don't have the time.” Shelley found the younger students more pre-occupied with their social lives.

*There was a very wide range of ages...most of them are coming right out of high school or in their first or second year [and]...and they were in it for the whole university experience...like going out...getting together, and mixers . . . I didn't go to those things because I had a family to think about and my study time came in the evening hours. So I didn't really make those bonds, but a lot of the other students did. I was always kind of sitting on the outside. I made friends, but they were just school friends.*

Contrary to Cathy and Shelley, Jill connected with the younger students.

*It was kind of different because again I was a mature student. The majority of the students... are 18, 19 years old. So it was odd being that much older at that point in time in my life . . . I hang out with a lot of younger people, so it wasn’t too tough. I’m a very social person so I can almost fit in anywhere and I really enjoyed that communication with the younger people.*

As a mature student, Pam’s concerns were about her abilities and multiple demands.

*When I reapplied as a single parent that was scary....would I remember how to study, do I remember how to write paper? How am I going to manage this with
three little boys? Like they were almost like 5, 3, and 14 months. How am I going to do this? . . . where am I going to live? How am I going to get to the university? How am I going to have enough money to live?

Pam coped by “getting up every morning and just walking through the day. Stay focused on what I was doing and not worry about all the other things that were happening.” She struggled with the added pressure of school. “For somebody…who was a more mature student, who had a very busy life full of responsibilities, to then add into that lifestyle a whole set of other requirements it didn't always make sense.”

Cathy found that her age impacted her ability to study and learn. “It's hard to pick up those study habits again. And your mind doesn't work like it used to when you were young. It takes longer to retain information. It’s difficult, but it’s worth the struggle [and]…the hard times.”

Both Sue and Cathy commented on preparing and studying for exams. Sue found studying for exams overwhelming.

_The first few things that I had to study for, I was like, ‘Oh, my God. I don’t know how to study . . . everything came pretty easy for me and as I got to Grade 12, though, my marks dropped, because I didn’t study . . . I never learned to study, which was really bad._

Cathy, however, had preestablished study habits.

_Just by having written so many before, kind of knowing what to expect on the exams now, knowing what to look for, to study for . . . instead of studying all the material, just focus on the main points of the material...[and be able] to apply it...It was just because I had been out of school for so many years._

Cathy employed another strategy. Cathy shared, “I would just mostly memorize stuff until I got it right on the exam.”

Shelley found that it took time to learn how to write papers.

_I [am] in fourth year now, I do my research and I kind of fiddle with that as spare time allows and then I type the paper in one day . . . I don’t screw around with it_
for days and days and sit there and freak out, but it took me 4 years to get to this point . . . there was a lot of entire weekends sucked up by papers and a lot of trying different things. I think that’s the key, you kind of have to try different things to try and make it fit into your life.

Elizabeth was a mature student without children who found the university experience very manageable. “I think a lot of people think it’s harder than it is to do that. It’s not that hard. I didn’t have the kid factor in there. That would obviously be a big factor.” She thinks priorities need to be adjusted: “I think a lot of people put too much emphasis on TV and things like that. It’s not that hard to fit in a class.”

Mary thought her maturity and life experience assisted her in doing better at university.

_I think because I was older, I might have budgeted my time a little bit better, because I had a big responsibility in my life, so I had to budget my time . . . I looked at it as a job, so if I were at work, I would spend 8 hours, so at that time it was the four credit hours you did, so for every 4 hours in a day that I was at school, I put in another 4 hours’ worth of homework. I was looking at it like a full-time job . . . I think because of that, I did some pretty thorough research and...I had a...slightly different attitude than the people who were younger than me taking the same classes._

She did note that students are different.

_Not everybody is the same, but they don’t have that responsibility as a child, so they were free to do what they want and might have put those papers off a little bit longer than they should’ve and booked something off in the end._ (Mary)

Sue also thought that being a mature student was an advantage.

_You have so much more life experience that when you’re sitting down, you’re listening to a lecture. You get a lot more out of it than someone...just beginning, because you have a lot more, well, just life experience and background to relate stuff to._

Shelley found that people acknowledged her past experience. She shared, “I don’t look my age...The most common reaction is, ‘Oh, well, you’re so lucky you bring with you all this life experience.’”
Claire thought that mature students and younger students have a different focus.

*I mean we're at school for different reasons. I was at school to follow a particular interest or maybe just to grow even philosophically... it wasn't about getting a job, you know, whereas our young people are there to finish as quickly as possible so that they can work because they're starting their life.*

Dawne shared how class schedules were not geared for adult learners.

*I often left at 9:30, whether the class was over or not...they said you would fail if you left...I'm an adult. I don't want be told exactly when I can go... if you flunk me, then you flunk me. It never happened. Nobody ever did that, but they're saying that for the kids.*

Thus, Dawne made her choices according to her schedules and found that, “sometimes I’d have to get there late and sometimes I’d have to go home early; I’d have an early morning flight or something and it’s not geared for that at all.” The university schedules did not accommodate Dawne’s mature student needs.

The women identified obstacles that complicated returning to school for a mature student. Cathy and Sue found it hard to fit in; however, Jill, who had younger friends, did not find it difficult. Pam found the multiple demands and the extra pressure of school difficult. Cathy, Sue, and Shelley found some difficulty in studying, writing papers, and exams. Elizabeth and Mary found the demands manageable because they had no children. Claire thought that as a mature student her focus was different, more focused on the experience of learning. Dawne shared scheduling concerns. All the women noted differences between mature and younger students.

**Prior learning.**

This dimension includes discussion about the mature women’s prior learning experience. Many of the women felt their professional experience was not valued and that, often, they knew more than the professor. They questioned the rationale of the
course content and the methodology. Dawne, Mary, Anna, Claire, Jill, Shelley, Sue, and Mary (8/12) related information about this dimension.

Dawne, who had extensive experience in the business community, could identify the accuracy of the material taught in the business classes.

Nobody’s ever going to go to a job and find out that they have to add things by hand, and what is that testing? . . . I found that if you’ve been in the business world for 30 years, you know that this isn’t what it’s like, and they would tell you ‘at work you would have to do this’, and I’m thinking, ‘No, you wouldn’t.’

She could not fathom that “sometimes they [the teachers] were even wrong.” Dawne questioned the validity of the material taught.

He was trying to teach board governance and things...I know there [are] three people in the entire province that do board governance at a high, high level, so why are you teaching [this to] somebody in first-level communications?

She did suggest, “Why aren’t you teaching them how to draft something consistently, come up with a communications plan?”

Mary related that life experience could be taken into account for her degree program, but questioned its appropriateness.

I was actually going to get a degree in social work, but ...if you didn’t have any work experience in the field, then you had to write a letter saying you’ve had all these things happen in your life . . . [so that one] could potentially ... [be] a social worker...[because] you had an understanding what a social worker would need to do . . . I was a single parent. My dad was alcoholic, but he had recovered. I had a whole list of things [that] could be counted as applicable life experiences.

Mary stated that people in her life were telling her to,

Just write them a letter and tell them about all these things in your life so that they’ll let you into the faculty. . . . Well, this is nuts. This is an academic institution, and I’m getting accepted into a faculty based on all the crappy things that have happened in my life? . . . I didn’t want to do it.

Anna related her experience regarding credit for work experience.
When I first started the degree program...I could get credit for my work...but now it’s changed and I can’t...oh great, I’ll get credit...I can get some references from work saying...it pertains...it was all good...[then] all of a sudden [it] got changed.

Anna did not receive prior learning credits.

Claire shared how her prior learning was accepted. “Initially, it was almost like, ‘Oh well, you're just one of a 100 people...there isn't the same kind of interest, right?’”

However, the registrar considered Claire’s accomplishments.

You've done this. You've had your nursing career, and yes, I think we should be able to accept that...[but the administration] had to struggle a little bit to get some of my nursing classes accepted, but I eventually...five to seven classes...apply[ied]...[as well] some techniques that I knew from my work as a nurse and psychology...helped me too.

Sue was accepted into a program because of her prior learning, but related some difficulties.

I was very, very behind though. I was very lucky to get accepted into the biblical program, because I could sing...I was so far behind in my theory, when I actually got my placement back...I progressed in my theory stuff...[it] was a struggle to me... Everything that I did as far as music theory, music history, the kids that were there, they totally had all this background and knowledge, and I didn’t have any of that. So that was a bit of a struggle.

Anna, Claire, and Sue received credit for their prior learning. Nevertheless, Sue had to struggle to catch up with course content. Dawne questioned the relevance of 100-level classes. Although Anna was originally told her work experience would contribute to her degree, in the end it did not. Mary questioned giving credit for prior learning, feeling that her life experience did not justify her being accepted into a program. However, women’s prior learning did factor into their educational experience, whether officially credited or not.

**Breaking the poverty cycle.**

In this subcategory, discussion is about the women’s experiences, hopes and
struggles to achieve an education while mired in a cycle of poverty. Pam, Pandy, Marie, Claire, Shelley and Cathy (6/12) had experienced financial hardship, but its most painful aspect was how it impacted their children. The women desperately wanted their children to have safe housing, good food, and proper clothing. Also, they were concerned about their own placement in life, specifically their professional occupation, and wanted to be able to earn a good income.

*It still wasn’t enough money to be able to support my daughter. It was still paycheck to paycheck . . . there’s got to be more to life than this....my daughter deserves more than the apartment we were living in – [it] was very bad . . . there was black mold in the laundry room and in the landing, and I tried so hard to find another apartment that I could afford and I couldn’t . . . maybe if you’re willing to work three jobs, but then you have the added childcare expense.* (Shelley)

Shelley related that poverty had impacted her whole family: “they kind of see their own struggles and they’re saying, ‘Well, I don’t have to live like that anymore.’” Shelley related how poverty continued to haunt her.

*There’s the financial barriers...you’re digging yourself into a gigantic hole of debt . . . that you’re not going to be able to dig out of it for at least 10 years after you finish, so that’s pretty depressing . . . you’re still going to be living in the same shitty situation that you’re trying to get out of for potentially another 15 to 20 years, which absolutely sucks.*

Cathy explained there were things her minimum-wage job could not provide. She wanted to:

*Buy my own house, . . . instead of just being at minimum wage and happy with that. I wasn't happy with that . . . [she] wanted more. There was just no future for me...I would have been working minimum wage forever, and I wouldn’t have had a future.*

*Money was the biggest barrier because I was coming from...I was supporting myself on a minimum wage job and it takes money to get into university . . . I had to...get the degree because I needed the degree to make more money.* (Pam)
For Shelley, “money was the big barrier”; it was for Marie also. Marie said, that, “we didn’t have enough money to send me to university. So after high school you go out and get a job, so I did.” Shelley was still in the process of completing her degree and was unsure how it would impact her life. She wondered if she could break out of the generational cycle of poverty.

*I think until I see what ultimately becomes of having the degree and whether or not I get into grad school. That will be the real measure of how it’s impacted my life; if there’s any kind of payoff in the end for it. Right now, it feels a little bit hopeless, but that’s not necessarily how it will play out, because I’m waiting to hear if I got into grad school or not and because it has been financially devastat[ing].* (Shelley)

Pam, Pandy, Marie, Claire, Shelley, and Cathy shared how poverty prevented them from realizing their dreams and being able to get things they wanted. Shelley, Pam, Cathy and Marie knew how poverty had negatively impacted their families. The women wanted better futures and felt that getting a degree would help them.

**Time constraints.**

“Time constraints” discusses the women’s experiences with time in relation to fulfilling the obligations of work, family, and education. It also includes how time constraints affected their physical and emotional health. The two dimensions in this subcategory are “Wearing many hats” and “Feeling grey.”

**Wearing many hats.**

“Wearing many hats” is an *in vivo code* from Anna’s interview. Pam, Shelley, Dawne, Sue, Mary, Anna, Marie, Cathy, and Jill (9/12) all commented on time issues.

Pam shared her experiences with multiple demands.

*I was teaching part time and going to university part time and the travel was horrendous because I didn’t have a car . . . I’m trying to do all this by bus and so*
trying to drop Dave off at daycare and running to catch the next bus connection so I’m not going to be late for class.

Pam felt her time was precious.

I was going to these classes and wasting my time, because I didn’t have time to waste and I didn’t have energy to waste . . . the second and third years I was a single parent with three kids. I was doing it as night classes and classes in the summer, like May, June, July, August . . . for most of that I was also teaching part time, going to university part time, being a mom . . . [in] the fourth year I did take a sabbatical and went full time to university, but still I had kids at home and they were playing hockey and [etcetera].

Shelley shared how going to university impacted her and her family.

I had to find out kind of the hard way that Jenny’s best going to grandma’s if I’m writing a paper...I don’t like being away from her, but it’s best for her if she’s not there.

Sue found the demands overwhelming: “I remember moments where I’m like, ‘I don’t know if I can do this, because it’s pretty heavy.’” She noted how personal choices and missing family events added additional pressure.

We did something stupid, like we bought a new house...I think I packed during midterms and moved during finals...then Jennifer graduated somewhere in the middle of that...all kinds of things like that. . . . I did miss out on some of the kids’ things...the girls were in choir and band and all those things at school and drama. I missed some of their performances, which I wish I hadn’t now . . . they all played sports...I know I missed games...that was kind of tough.

Shelley found her time was very limited.

It’s been frustrating for the personal factors, the barriers...it’s hard to find enough hours in the day to do everything . . . it’s a choice all semester long, whether you want to be a good parent or a good student...you can’t be both. . . . If your paper is due, other things wait. You don’t have any groceries? Well, your paper’s due, there’s got to be something that we have to eat, so we’ll have peanut butter crackers and then tomorrow, after I hand in my paper, I’ll go for groceries.

As a single parent there was “a lot of it was academic pressure,” which was difficult for her daughter.
There are times when I can’t drop everything and do our nails...there are times when she has come to me with that look on her face with the deck of Uno cards. ‘Mommy, [sobs] can you play with me?’ (Shelley)

Shelley reflected on school work and being a student and a single mother.

Sometimes things take longer than they should. You set aside maybe an hour or two to read a chapter in one of those big textbooks and it takes longer than that . . . and she wants to play a game or she wants you to do something, and it’s like, ‘I have to finish this because it’s not that this is more important than you; it isn’t’ . . . I’m working towards something, and that’s something she’s heard a lot for the last four years is, ‘I’m doing this for you. I’m doing this for us. I know it’s hard, but just hang in there just a little longer . . . it’s been very difficult emotionally...it’s a choice all semester long. Do you want to be a good parent or do you want to be a good student?

Cathy also found school demanding.

I found it very difficult at first because I had been out of school for so long, and I wasn't used to the whole pressure of it. It was very, very demanding . . . it wasn't only two or three classes a term, it was five classes a term, and there was an abundance of assignments . . . the first year, I was very, very, very stressed out. I found it very hard to time manage everything. It was all school and no family until – and I think with me failing that class, it was the best thing that happened.

For Cathy, failing a class was a good thing.

Because I was able to take a lighter workload, and I was able to spend more time with the family and concentrate on class work . . . [I] wasn’t quite prepared for five papers due in one week...it’s a very demanding program.

Sue also shared how difficult life was with the demands of both the university and a family.

Hours of writing essays and stuff, which I really didn’t have time for, ‘cause I had three kids at home, and one was in Grade 7...Jen graduated [from] high school [and] I graduated from university . . . can remember sitting down in the basement on the computer saying, ‘Nobody bug me now. I got to finish this paper, and I don’t have much time.’

However, as the degree progressed, Sue said, “you get to be better...at it.”

Jill’s sacrifices were compounded because her husband worked out of town.
It was hard because I had two kids. My husband worked out of town so I was the sole caregiver of them... with the group assignments and stuff that we had to do, it was hard to make time around them... [if] a person didn’t have to work it would be a lot easier.

Aside from the work, Jill said her social life was nonexistent.

I often tell young students now...be prepared because you won’t have a social life and your whole life is going to be university. You’re going to be reading, reading, reading. You’ll be lucky if you get to read a novel.’

Because she worked, Anna reduced the number of classes she took each year.

Anna stated, “well because I work. I am only taking two to three classes a year, so it’s a very slow process. It’s been a long process, to say the least.”

Marie, also, was working while completing her degree program and could only fit in one or two classes per year, but found this a welcome challenge and rewarding.

However, she expressed some difficulty in ‘switching gears.’

I find it difficult, not only for the fact of just the busy life, but for the fact of not being in education full time... you’re on a different pace when you go to work and you’re at different pace when you’re dealing with family. Then you go and take one class or two classes... it’s a different mode, different gear shift. It’s a mindset. So once you get into the school mode, it’s hard to shift into that... that would have been the difficult part with that, but at the same time kind of refreshing to change things up and remind yourself that this is what you want to be doing... [however, you need to] remind yourself that this is the right place for you.

Marie found that family, work, and the demands of university conflicted.

I guess one of the barriers to going into school is the scheduling of the classes and continuing on with a career and a family... classes were only offered either in the evening or not every semester, so you had to be taking a class when it was available, regardless of the other situations in life.

Dawne’s work schedule and university schedules often collided. “Well, you have to get up for work in the morning when the class doesn’t end ’till 10:00, that’s late. You have to get home and get ready for work.”
Marie and Anna were two women who were able to somewhat manage their educational commitments, as well as their lives. Anna related some of her struggles.

*Challenging because I’ve had to be many things, like full time employee, take some classes. I’m a mom of young children. I am a volunteer…you wear many hats . . . I’ve found it harder or more challenging or it just takes more organization so that you’re getting your homework done as well as helping your kids get their homework done, kind of thing. So that’s challenging at this stage.*

Anna attempted to focus on getting the main things done, but stated,

*You’re taking care of others while you’re trying to get some of those core things done, and how many times have they had the stomach flu while you’re writing a paper…and then you’re up with them and, ‘Oh no. I’ve got to get this in’ . . . I find that as long as you’re disciplined and you stick to the program or the readings and the assignments, it’s not really an issue and it saves me the time. Let’s say it’s a 7:00 class, then rush home, make supper, get out the door. Either my husband is still at work, find a babysitter. It’s all those extras. Like I can do it on my own time, so if I only get to it at 9:00 and it takes me till 1:00 in the morning…when the kids are asleep and I can focus and I don’t have to go pay for parking or find a parking spot [which wastes more time] . . . as long as you can be disciplined to stay on top of it…to me isn’t an issue . . . [I can] abide by the syllabus and do what needs to be done, but I really enjoy having it done on my time.*

Mary shared her theory about what is possible to accomplish in life.

*I’ll say this ‘til the day I die. You can do three things, you can go to university…you can work full time, or you can be a parent . . . you can only do two of those three things at the same time, so you can’t work full time and go to school full time and be a full-time parent, so you can only pick two.*

Pam, Shelley, Sue, Mary, Anna, Marie, Jill, Dawne, and Cathy all commented on the complications and stress of multiple demands. These women shared that obtaining a degree was not a simple life addition, but when one more huge commitment is added it makes it almost impossible. Dawne, Mary, Anna, Marie, and Jill all related that adding school, in addition to family and/or work, was difficult. Anna felt she was wearing many hats. Shelley and Mary found they let go of their social life, their family life, and even the
decision to be either a good student or a good mother. Overall, all the women experienced the complications and stress of wearing many hats.

**Feeling grey.**

In this dimension, the women (3/12) discuss how the degree process affected their physical and emotional health.

Pam often felt she lacked enough sleep; “The university experience for those last 3 years really felt like it was an energy drain….something that I had to get through and …was really…an energy drain.”

Sue found the first years of university very draining because of,

_Having to put aside other things like putting aside things with kids or just putting aside not getting enough sleep and running on not enough sleep . . . really hard, too…When you don’t sleep and you have to function even though you’re not – haven’t slept enough to function well. I did find it hard learning at first . . . [but] by the fourth year, though it was a breeze, by second year it was OK. First year was tough, really tough._

Shelley, also, found, “I’m exhausted a lot…I get headaches a lot, especially after writing a paper.”

Pam, Sue, and Shelley related how the multiple demands of family, work, and school left them feeling exhausted to the extent that their health suffered. Often, they did not get enough sleep and found it difficult to function. However, Pam found that as she progressed she was able to cope better.

**Substantive and psychological types of support.**

In this subcategory, the discussion is about the types of supports that were or were not provided to the women in both their university program and personal life and how these supports/non supports affected their lives. These findings are presented in the three dimensions of “Financial,” “Concrete,” and “Emotional.”
Financial.

Mary, Jill, Shelley, Cathy, Sue, Marie, Anna, and Claire (8/12) discuss their experiences with financial support.

A government grant assisted Mary in maintaining her lifestyle.

There was a federal government grant... for single parents... it gave me a living expense so, based on how much I was making at my job and how much I was getting for a living expense, I didn’t have to change my lifestyle too much... not to say that it was too high on the hog or anything, but it – I didn’t have to sell my house. I didn’t have to sell my car. I didn’t... have to move. I could kind of keep everything stable, which was very important, because I, like I said, I was a single parent at the time, so to keep things on an even keel for my daughter so she could stay involved doing what she was doing.

Sue spoke of receiving financial support.

One really good support was going through Mountain College... I got a number of scholarships from them just because I worked in the community with my church... that was the only paying job I really ever had as a musician was singing at Mountain for Mass... that was a financial support, because I did have support at home, but... we had three kids we were raising and all this other stuff too, so financially, that was really good.

Both Marie and Anna received financial support from their workplace. Marie said that, “my workplace has been [financially] supportive.” Anna, “received some tuition subsidy as well from my place of employment.” Claire, contrary to Marie and Anna, did not receive financial support from her workplace, which affected the number of classes she could take and, subsequently, how quickly she could finish her program. “I started off my degree [in] the fall of 2002 by taking one class per semester for the first year or two. And that was for reasons of not having enough money to take more than one class.”

Mary, Sue, Anna, and Marie all spoke of the importance of financial support. A government grant assisted Mary in maintaining a stable living style. Although Sue was married with three children, the scholarships helped maintain her family’s life style.
Marie and Anna received financial support from work. Finally, Claire, who received no financial support, was affected in the number classes she could take.

**Concrete.**

This dimension explores the kinds of tangible supports the women received/did not receive. Elizabeth, Anna, Cathy, Shelley, Marie, Mary, Pam, Pandy, and Dawne, (9/12) all spoke about concrete supports.

Elizabeth spoke of how her husband assisted her.

*My hubby, John, proofing everything I ever did... he was very, very supportive... because face it, I started back in the mid-80s. Some young[er] couples might not have had the support of their partner as they went through the process, you know, for either spending the money on it or taking the time to do it. . . . He would be my only support...everything else I paid for, I did, all of it.*

Although Anna’s husband was her main support, she also received help from her workplace, family, and friends.

*My husband first because obviously he’s been a huge support, having to help, and even though they want mommy when they’re sick and stuff... he’s been very supportive and helps when he can... if I do have an assignment, they go out and go bowling or something to give mommy some time to work on something... Work has been supportive. I had to apply prior to and basically give some sort of support as to why I felt that I could go to school and do this because I’m going during work hours... [she had] to make up the time, but at least they’re letting me go, and so in that respect they’ve agreed to it, and they also see the benefit of that, and they’ve supported that... Friends and extended family too. I have a sister that’s helped out and taken care of kids while I’m working on – or either catching up because of time I’ve missed at work or doing homework.*

Shelley and Cathy shared how their families supported them. Shelley’s mother

*Is very supportive in the sense that, if I am working on a paper or studying for an exam, she will take my daughter for a sleepover or something like that. If it’s not for that, then the support isn’t there as much.*

Cathy had only her family to support her.

*In support, I just had my family... that was about it... they just helped me with – well, with the hours. It was whacky hours; early in the morning, late at night.*
And if I needed someone to watch them or take them to their activities while I worked on things... that’s about the only support that I had.

However, Marie had, “to bring support systems in, whether it be help with the children [or the]...family.

Marie, Anna, and Pam spoke of their experiences with program changes and the administration. Marie said, “there’s been no [barriers] with the education system...Just maybe not knowing what my next step was to get the degree... I was always able to contact a student counselor to help me make those decisions.” Anna related that program changes impacted her progress.

That’s been one of my bigger challenges because I didn’t realize they changed... like it’s not like I got a letter saying, ‘this is now changed within your faculty... and I mean I guess I should be reading more in that respect. I have to take responsibility too. ... I was finding out after the fact. I’d all of a sudden sign up or get how many credit hours I had towards my degree, and I’m like, ‘What? Oh, I don’t get these anymore. Okay. They changed it.

Pam also talked of how change in program standards affected her. Pam shared, “I need[ed] to get the second year [done] before they changed the standards and you had to have 3 years.” However, Anna identified how one new change in program delivery was supportive. Anna stated, “I’d have to say that [one thing] I love now is their web courses. It’s made it easier for me to take some classes.”

Mary, Elizabeth, Cathy, and Pandy expressed their thoughts about how the university environment and social structure affected their program. Mary found that a smaller university campus was very helpful.

I was a student [in a small affiliate college]. I think that helped with getting my degree, because you go up to the registrar’s office and she would know who you were... rather than going to the university, where they didn’t really care who you were. It was just, ‘Have you filled out all the requirements?’ and it’s not, ‘This is what you need to go do,’ and then it was, ‘Bye-bye, now’... I always
liked that there were fewer waiting lists, because you always have those extra spots in every class for Mountain.

Elizabeth did not find a social structure to support her.

I didn’t have a social structure around me to say, ‘Well, you could do this or you could do that, to help me guide the waters, go through the waters that way . . . it’s not like I could go and ask a bunch of people . . . I might not have taken the path that I did if I would have had people coaching me about what to do or where to go.

Cathy spoke of reaching out and asking for help from other people.

The most difficult part was asking people for help. . . . if you needed notes . . . advice . . . guidance or someone to fill you in, it was hard to make those connections because everyone else was friends outside of school and [it was hard] to feel comfortable approaching someone else.

Pandy spoke of feeling lost in the vast student body. “The classes were huge, hundreds of people in a couple of the 100-level classes. I just felt like I was one person in a sea of people. So I really felt that it lacked support and individualism.”

Dawne and Elizabeth spoke of the importance of having a program specifically designed for working people.

I found the supports really lacking for mature students out at the regular university. I couldn’t find anybody to talk to about that. I couldn’t find the prof, because he didn’t work during the week. I couldn’t find anybody to talk to about that finally, I just didn’t finish that class, because I asked for a tutor; I tried to find out all those, all these supports, so I just couldn’t find them, so I just didn’t do it. (Dawne)

Elizabeth expressed thoughts about her program.

One of the reasons it worked so well for me to take those degrees is that all those programs were geared for adult learners so you could take it after work...The programs I picked actually fit with somebody who’s working. So that probably is an important point.

The women received help with the children, with time off from work, with words of encouragement, and other, various types of support. Elizabeth’s husband read her
papers; Anna, Shelley, and Marie got help with their children; and Mary found that a smaller campus was of benefit. Dawne and Elizabeth identified that classes suited for adult learners were important. Nevertheless, Pandy felt lost within a “sea of people” and Anna struggled with program changes that lengthened the time it took to complete her degree.

**Emotional.**

In this dimension discussion is about the types of emotional supports the women received. Sue, Shelley, Claire, Pam, Mary, Marie and Jill (7/12) spoke about emotional support. At first, Pam didn’t find support. “I don’t really remember that there were any. In the first year I probably wasn’t looking for support.” Yet, when she returned to teacher’s college she found that the campus,

> was smaller [and] all the education students [were there.] That in itself was a support . . . I did belong to co-op housing and... that was big help that I was living in a complex with other teaching students...There was a community there and that’s why it was the most fun...and a big support.

However, when Pam returned to complete her degree,

> When I went back I don’t really remember there being any support at all . . . I think I always felt that I was on my own. I didn't get together with the other students to go over things . . . I felt quite isolated doing that whole degree program. I much felt like I was on my own.

Marie, contrary to Pam, did find that having other students her age helped her to feel supported. Marie shared,

> I didn’t feel like I was out of place or anything I guess probably because when I was getting that degree I was the same age as probably most graduate students . . . there were a lot of people about my age in the university, but not taking the same classes as me.

Mary shared how the smaller college environment assisted her.
They really took a personal interest in you. I appreciated that part of university...I always liked being affiliated with a smaller college and having that extra personal touch, where you weren’t just another being. You were really part of something.

Shelley, too, found a college environment helpful. Shelley found, “the Mountain environment is a real family affair, really supportive, really encouraging, and so maybe that also helped with my own perception of what it was, because I did feel like I was supported in a lot of ways.”

Claire also belonged to the same small college and she, too, found a sense of connection and belonging.

It has been a joy, such an extreme joy that I have great sadness of not walking those halls anymore and of not seeing people on a daily basis that I have come to really enjoy and love some of them.

Jill “was involved with the women’s center on campus.” She found that, “at that point in time they really wanted to support female students and make sure they did well in school... practically anything and everything we did was for support of the female students on campus.”

Sue spoke of fellow students and how much she appreciated their support.

I can’t say enough about the support of the young kids that I went to school with...I’m still friends with them.....six of us .....we’d go to [a restaurant in town] and sit there for 3 hours... they were so supportive. I couldn’t get over it. They really were good.

Shelley spoke of mixed support from her family.

A few members of my family have not been supportive. My oldest sister has said on several occasions, if I get a bad mark or something, she’ll say, ‘Well, you’re not going to continue with this. Isn’t it important for a psychologist to be able to, I don’t know, do psychology?’

However, her other sister was very supportive.
My middle sister was on maternity leave last year, and she was very supportive...[she] went to a community college, and so she kind of understands what I’m going through, and so she’s been very supportive and just with her words and always kind of there, always willing to give support. (Shelley)

Shelley’s parents wavered between being supportive and not being supportive.

Even when I went to school and my dad thought I was crazy, and he said, ‘Why would you want to leave your union job and go and do something like this?’ but – and ‘I don’t know who you’re trying to be better than... if I get a good mark, she’s [her mom] saying, ‘Woohoo, way to go.’ If I get a not-so-great mark, like something in the 70s, she’s like, ‘Whoa, wow, you’re going to pull that up.

Although Shelley’s related that, “[my daughter] she’s a great kid and I’ve had her support,” Shelley returned to the underlying theme of nonsupport. Shelley stated that, “for all the support that there’s been, there’s always been a little element of, ‘We don’t support you and we don’t give a hoot about this and we’re pretty sure you’re going to fail.’” Since she is soon to graduate, their attitude has somewhat changed.

My dad has since changed his tune. He’s pretty excited about my graduation coming up here, except for his partner is not very thrilled... I said, ‘Well, it’s only going to screw things up for one day. It’s a pretty big deal, so maybe you could just kind of let it go for that day.’ (Shelley)

Claire did not have her husband’s emotional support.

I was married 25 years before that marriage ended. And he certainly never said [anything encouraging towards university]. But there was never any support to do anything else either... like there was never any sort of initiative to say, ‘Hey, you should try that. You’d be really good at that sort of...thing.’

In discussing support, some women spoke of receiving support, yet others did not. At first, Pam found support in a teacher’s college when she first began her degree; however, when she returned to complete the process, she found herself very isolated. Claire felt a sense of belonging and a family atmosphere in a small college. Sue found the younger students very supportive and friendly; for Jill, it was a women’s center; and for Mary and Marie, it was their families. The family was not always a good source of
support. Shelley and Claire did not find their families supportive. Often, their family members were critical and sometimes negative in their comments and actions. Despite all, the women continued with their programs, although the women who did not receive positive support found it more difficult.

The Core Theme, Making a Difference:

The Model as Summary

This section describes and presents the graphic model (see Figure 1), “Making a Difference.” Discussion centers about the structure of the process model and the thoughts that led to the construction of the core theme, “Making a Difference.” The process model is representative of the women’s education journey, made up of categories, subcategories, and dimensions, that leads to the women’s potential achievement of “Making a Difference” in their own and other’s lives. The graphic model (Figure 1) is presented after the discussion.

The Structure and Process of the Model

Phase 1.

Within the first stage of the process model I organized findings that related to what motivated the women to begin the process of their degrees. The women thought that they had the capacity to self-develop – “More in Me.” How the women became aware that they had the capacity to develop was either through self or other awareness. The women were motivated by either internal awareness –“I See” or external awareness – “Others See.” This initial stage of the process model demonstrated the motivator to start the degree process.
Phase 2.

Within the second stage of the model is where I organized the findings around why the women continued on their degree process. Here these findings were also organized within an internal or external lens. As I organized the findings it became apparent that the women were either doing for themselves, “Do It for Me,” internal lens or “Do It for Them,” external lens. Within the category of “Do It for Me,” the desire for personal development was organized within two end results, concrete skills or self-development. Therefore two subcategories were derived, “Newly Developed Concrete Skills” and “Nurtured Self-Confidence and Self-Development.” The women began their programs as a process for their own personal development. Within the category of “Do It for Them,” three subcategories and subsequent dimensions were derived, “Community;” “Children;” and “Career” (“Professional recognition,” “Monetary gains,” & “Breaking preestablished roles”). The women were taking the degree for more external reasons rather than strictly for self; external lens. These external reasons acted as strong motivators for the women to complete the degree. Those external reasons were organized into the three subcategories of “Community”, “Children”, and “Career.”

Phase 3.

Findings were organized that focused on aspects of “Achieving Milestones” within the women’s lives. Two aspects that became apparent, to me, were experiences that were found within the university setting and those within the women’s more private lives. Both areas of findings related what milestones the women undertook and mostly overcame in order to accomplish their goal of obtaining a degree. “Roads to Education” and its dimensions of “Winding paths,” “Learning environment,” “Mentors effective or
ineffective”, “Mature vs. younger students,” and “Prior learning” findings were organized that more directly relate to experiences and milestones within the educational experience. “Breaking the Poverty Cycle;” “Time Constraints” (“Wearing many hats” & “Feeling grey”); and “Substantive and Psychological Types of Support” (“Financial,” “Concrete,” & “Emotional”); findings were organized that are more about the women’s experiences and milestones within their personal lives, as a result of obtaining the degree. I would like to note some supports and barriers that were placed within the category of “Substantive and Psychological Types of Support” related to the university experience. I still chose to place “Substantive and Psychological Types of Support” within the frame of the women’s private lives, as I felt the impacts from their university supports more directly impacted the women’s private lives.

**Phase 4.**

Each of these categories, subcategories and dimensions build and intertwine, as I understood it, to create a final result of the women being able to achieve “Making a Difference” within their families, their community, their career and most importantly their own lives. None of this might have been possible if they had not been first motivated, then entered and finally continued through their degree process. Each woman, no matter how far along they were in their degree process, found that somehow and most of the times, that the degree process had impacted their lives and facilitated them in “Making a Difference” in their own and other’s lives.

**Four aspects of the process model.**

I identified four aspects of the process model. Those four aspects are: circuitous educational paths, exit points, parts of the process model that exert pressure on other
aspects of the process model, and the objective of “Making a Difference” which might not be met and/or the process model could be repeated. “Winding paths” is a dimension within “ Roads to Education.” In this dimension findings were organized that identified how some women had a circuitous path to education often due to marriage, children, careers, finances, and/or various personal choices. Their paths were not only circuitous prior to university, but sometimes the same pattern followed within their university experience, i.e., due to moving from one field of study to another.

An exit point within this model happened at the stage of “ Roads to Education”. One participant in this model exited, at “ Roads to Education” as the current educational experience did not grant the desired results. This participant was adamant that the desires of “Making a Difference” in her own life and the lives of others would be better accomplished via another educational route that was more geared towards the adult learner. This aspect of the model is demonstrated on the graphic model by a small arrow coming out of “ Roads to Education.” Another woman did not exit the process model and earned the degree, but was unsure if obtaining the degree really would end up “Making a Difference” that was desired in her own life and/or the life of her child. This aspect of the model is demonstrated by one side of the arrow, coming out of “Making a Difference,” does not repeat back to “ More in Me.” These factors point to the possibility that some women may move through the whole process and may not achieve their desired outcome. It also highlights that there are complexities beyond the scope of this process model, things that are unknown and factors that cannot be foreseen if people do or do not complete the process. However, the majority of the women noted, they felt that they were well on their way to “Making a Difference” in their lives and/or the lives of others.
The third aspect of the process model highlights the interactive nature of the model. The experiences within the university, as organized within “Roads to Education”, seem somewhat self-contained and the university administrators and professors seem somewhat unaware of what was happening in the women’s lives and how those experiences impacted their university experiences. However, the converse does not always seem to follow. Most of the women participants were very much aware of their own lives, what was happening within their lives, and how those factors were impacted by their university experience. This phenomenon also impacted supports and/or barriers. Supports that were in place to assist students seem to have been put into place to meet the general needs of some students. However, what assists were in place did not always seem to meet the specific needs of the mature woman student, as identified by some of the women participants in this study. The same might be stated as to the barriers the women identified. The university administration and professors seemed to be somewhat unaware or perhaps currently unable to meet all the specific needs of the mature woman student. For example the mature woman’s complex scheduling issues due to the multiple responsibilities of home, family, career, and university. This research study did not explore this potential issue; rather, it just identified the fact that it seemed to exist for some women in this study.

The fourth aspect of the process model is that people may move through the entire model and may choose to recycle through the entire process. Another potential outcome is that people may move through the process model cycle and then find that they did not achieve their desired outcome. I represented these two potential outcomes by an arrow that splits as it leaves “Making a Difference.” One arrow goes off to nowhere,
demonstrating that some women may cycle through the whole process and may not achieve their intended outcome of “Making a Difference,” or that it is beyond mine and or the women’s understanding, as there are factors beyond this model which cannot be foreseen or predicted. The second arrow directs back to “More in Me” potentially demonstrating the possibility to recycle through the model.
Figure 1. Graphic Representation of Overarching Theme “Making a Difference.”

Figure 1. A process model depicting the changes in the women’s lives as they move towards obtaining their degree program to “Making a Difference” in their own and other’s lives.
CHAPTER 5: THE PROCESS MODEL AND THE FINDINGS

Analysis of the Process Model

Chapter five is an analysis of the findings of this research study and includes relevant research. The order that the analysis is presented follows the same order as in Chapter 4, with one exception. “More in Me” now precedes “Do It for Me” because, as the model evolved, it became apparent, to me, that it fit more appropriately at the beginning of the model.

More In Me

“More in Me,” is where the women became aware of their potential to develop academically either through self or other awareness. The literature indicates that people are driven towards positive growth through developing skills, expanding their awareness, and gaining mastery over their environment (Maslow, 1998; Rogers, 1989). The women in this study exhibited a capacity for adaptive change and openness to pursue self-growth. Johnson and Geal (2009) relate that people who have a malleable self-image can change their self-perceptions, develop self-potential, and potentially influence their life goals. Carver and Scheier (2001) state that motivation compels people to initiate and maintain behaviours that they believe will lead to desired outcomes or goals. These authors elaborate that when people set goals, they construct their goals either based on, what they realistically believe they can become, what they expect from one’s self, or what they aspire to be. Goals constructed on what one aspires to be are more difficult to achieve because often it requires that more goals are achieved in order to attain the aspired self.

I see.

In this first subcategory, the findings are organized around the concept of intrinsic
motivation. Intrinsic motivation means that motivation comes from within the person. Vallerand (2000) states intrinsic motivation has three constructs, “to know, to accomplish and to experience stimulation” (p. 312). Some women, in this study, identified they wanted the experience of taking the degree to foster self-development; intrinsic motivation. Kasser (1999) connected intrinsic motivation with self-development, competence, and autonomy and stated that “intrinsic goals are those congruent with people’s inherent tendencies to grow and actualize, to desire feelings of competence and autonomy” (Kasser, 1999, p. 224). Some of the findings in “I See” coincide with Vallerand’s model to know and Kasser’s concepts of the desire “to grow and actualize” (p. 224). Some women in this study knew they were capable of achieving more and desired to become more; they were self-determined. Research ties self-determination to motivation and self-change (Anderson & Lux, 2004; Wehmeyer et al., 2011). Wehmeyer et al., (2011) state that “self-determination is driven by the intrinsic motivation of all people to be the primary determiner of their thoughts, feelings, and behavior” (p. 21) and that the ultimate goal of self-determination is to obtain effective control based on what one thinks is important, that is, self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, as developed by Bandura (1977), is one’s belief in their own competence and is a skillset that assists one to accomplish tasks and realize goals. Also, it is a belief in one’s capacity to create changes in behaviour to reach a desired outcome. Cervone (1997) concurred that effective self-efficacy depends on the person’s ability “to consider their capabilities for performance [and that]...the relevant schematic self-knowledge should come to mind and contribute to a relatively consistent pattern of self-appraisal” (p. 45). Some of the women, in this study, displayed autonomous behaviour in analyzing their abilities and determining they had the
capacity and competence to earn a degree, which would align with Bandura and Cervone’s analysis of self-efficacy.

**Others see.**

The analysis of findings in this subcategory reflects the external factors that motivated the women to obtain a degree. Here, another person influenced the women’s decision to pursue a university education. Cast, Stets, and Burke (1999) mention three reasons why people are more open to influence by another, which are: (a) one may protect their view of self and be unaware of their own potential, (b) sometimes it is the context of it being the right time to hear, and (c) sometimes it involves an openness to change. An openness to change seems evident in some of the women participants because they offered no resistance to another’s encouragement to obtain a degree. In fact, some women acted quickly, with limited or no self-analysis and sometimes with little or no thought as to whether they should pursue a university degree. The literature indicates this could be because the suggestion came from a respected or legitimate source (Cast et al., 1999; Raven, 1990). Another factor that influenced at least one of the women had observed others obtain their degree and witnessed how they had benefitted from earning the degree. Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, and Griskevicius (2008) state that “normative social influence is potent and widespread [and that ]… witnessing the actions of other people has a powerful effect on behavior” (p. 913) and Raven (1990) related that certain types of power can influence another. Three such types of power include informational power (i.e., more information was provided on which to base their decision), or legitimate power (i.e., people in authoritative positions who made a suggestion), and expert power (i.e., those who made the suggestion were perceived as
experts in their field). Some of the women were influenced by informational power, information about possible university programs, and some were influenced by those they perceived to be experts.

**Do It For Me**

I analyzed the findings in this category and its two subcategories “Newly Developed Concrete Skills” and “Nurtured Confidence and Self-Development.” I determined a pattern within these findings that indicated the women had strong, internal motivation that facilitated their self-development. Batra, Homer, and Kahle (2001) conducted research that sorted motivating values into an internal or external lens and explained that, “external values should depend on others for fulfillment, whereas individuals can fulfill their internal values by themselves” (p. 117). The highest internal motivating values were identified as, “self-fulfillment, sense of accomplishment, and self-respect, which are all less dependent on others” (Batra et al., 2001, p. 117). The women, within this category, were earning the degree for themselves and for their own sense of accomplishment. Therefore they should be were less vulnerable as they would be less dependent on fulfillment through others. Batra et al. somewhat concurs with the current analysis as they noted internal motivating values do not depend on the external world for fulfillment and are, therefore, less dependent on others for fulfillment.

**Do It For Them**

“Do It for Them” is the subcategory where findings are organized around the external motivating factors of “Community,” “Children,” and “Career.” Batra et al. (2001) identified the highest external values as a “sense of belonging, being well-respected, security, and warm relationships with others” (p. 117). Some women could be
seen as motivated by these external values. This could also be analyzed as placing these women in a more vulnerable position as fulfillment depends on others, not self.

**Community.**

Through my analysis of the findings within this subcategory I identified a main concept in all the women’s objectives of “giving back,” they wanted to work within the community to discover its needs, then work with the community to build a more effective community; an egalitarian approach. An egalitarian approach is one that seeks equality where all people are treated as equals, no matter what their social status; decentralization of power. LeClair (2010) states that, when working with communities, it is important to promote self-reliance. The concept of self-reliance differs from community-based approaches where the professionals define the problem and set about to develop strategies to solve the problem; a hierarchical approach to power. A hierarchical approach to power is where the power is arranged according to a top down approach; those at the top have the most power and those at the bottom have limited power. An egalitarian approach to power approach utilizes community’s resources to define, develop, and implement strategies of assistance. The findings organized within “Do It for Them” relate to an egalitarian approach to power.

**Children.**

The findings in this subcategory are organized around the women’s desire to improve conditions for their children. The results indicate that the women wanted to give their children a better life and financial stability, to be a role model and foster their educational achievement, and to teach them how to persevere. This outcome could potentially be achieved as demonstrated by Ricco, Sabet, and Clough’s (2009) study that
concluded a student, who is also a mother, could more appropriately understand student demands and develop effective student strategies. The shared experience could be beneficial for both the mother and her student children. However, examined literature relates that within single-mothered homes there is often poverty that can, and more likely will, disrupt educational learning; potentially for both mothers and children (Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Some women in this study identified poverty issues as stressful and difficult for themselves and their children. This created additional stress to the women’s student roles. The examined literature on nonsingle mothers, who were in an above-poverty income bracket, noted these mothers potentially had a greater potential of realizing their hopes for their children (Crosnoe et al., 2002; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Erdwins, Buffardi, Casper, and O’Brien (2001) state that women make others, especially their children, the primary focus in their lives: “the central or organizing principle of women’s lives is their relatedness to and mutual support and empathy with others” (p. 230). Women have been socialized to be caregivers. Within that social construction women then begin to identify themselves as those who must support and offer empathy to others; women’s identities become entangled with the function of caring. The women in this study, who had children, related their strong hopes and dreams for their children which then acted as the women’s prime motivators. The women wanted to protect and provide for their children.

Career.

The findings organized within this subcategory and its dimensions all relate career motivations that became the rationale for the women to pursue their degrees.
**Professional recognition.**

From the findings I identified that achieving professional recognition could be defined through: (a) professional acknowledgment, (b) employment opportunities, (c) peer equality, and (d) recognized workplace contribution. Women expressed that professional recognition created a balance, among them, their peers, and other professionals, in their workplace, through a perceived equalization of power; a power often acquired through earning a degree. Earning the degree also assisted some women in obtaining employment. The women who had a degree seemed to feel differentiated from other job applicants without a degree, which seemed to give the women with a degree more power to obtain employment. Davies (1998) explored the idea that achieving a higher education represents a type of power which, in turn, increases opportunity and assists in obtaining employment and achieving a better life. This author states that “education has become a positional ‘good’ of commodity which people seek to invest in for personal gain [and it]…. is also a social ‘good’ and a means of ensuring equality of opportunity and routes to a better life” (Davies, 1998, pp. 175-176). This research study does acknowledge that achieving a university degree often ensures professional recognition and an enhanced lifestyle.

**Monetary gains.**

Some of the women, in this study, identified the ability to earn higher wages as one motivation to obtain a degree. Like participants in this study, Menon (1998) identified participants whose motivation to earn a degree was solely for the purposes of making more money. Menon’s participants also determined prior to entering the degree program what amount of monetary increase would they like to earn, after completion of
their degree. Menon examined longitudinal studies carried out in six countries to examine if the students’ initial motivators were met. The United States and the United Kingdom were two of the six countries. Menon concluded that not only were the students’ monetary goals met, but also, in all cases, were exceeded. Therefore, according to Menon’s study, the probability of some of the women, in this study, obtaining their goal of earning more money, after obtaining their degree, is possible.

**Breaking preestablished roles.**

Some women in this study found their gender created barriers. These barriers translated into the type of educational path they sought, how their families viewed them and their educational pursuits, and the final career path they were expected to pursue. Some women were the first in their family, and often their social group, to have attended university. Gender bias still exists and still impacts a woman’s career and educational choices. Yoder (2007) stated that “women and men are concentrated in different occupations, in essence, creating a work force characterized by “women’s work” and “men’s work,” with some gender-neutral occupations” (p. 202). Some women, in this study, still found they were encouraged by family to pursue more female appropriate, as defined by society, vocations i.e., teacher, nurse, or secretary. One woman found her family critical of her education pursuits and wanted her to return to a more gender appropriate career. Tan (2008) found women face unique challenges because they “face stereotyping early in their life and were often directed toward self-selection that favors certain career paths in the future” (p. 549). Statistics from the United States 2002 census still points to the fact that a large majority of the women occupy more female careers “30% of about 66 million employed women were concentrated in just ten occupations,
with secretary topping the list” (Yoder, 2007, p. 202). When the occupation of administrative support is added to the secretary pool, then this combined occupation now describes the occupation of one out of every four women. As of 2002, one quarter of employed women were allocated to eleven different occupation types. Secretary was the number one profession, within those eleven professions, for women. When compared to men, women are “bunched up” within a limited number of professions and “men outnumber women in many more occupations than women outnumber men” (Yoder, 2007, p. 202). The examined literature also identified how gender bias still impacts women in their educational pursuits, higher educational institutions, and their families (Beard, Clegg, & Smith, 2007; Cabrera, 2007; Gouthro & Grace, 2000; Solomon, 2007; Winn, 2002). One woman identified that she started in a STEM discipline, but left due to her perception of an unwelcoming atmosphere. Other women in this study felt silenced and belittled within the university setting. These studies exemplify how women are still limited by issues of sexism and traditional viewpoints.

**Achieving Milestones**

The analysis of the findings within the fourth and final category and, its subsequent subcategories and dimensions, have been separated into the women’s educational experiences that relate to the university setting and those that relate more to the women’s personal lives.

**Roads to Education**

These findings are organized into those about the women’s external experiences that relate to the university setting, which the women chose to further their advancement towards self-growth and fulfillment. Self-fulfillment is identified as one of the top three
reasons for pursuing a college degree (see Lemoine, Mayer, Gordon, Johnson, & Budden, 2011).

**Winding paths.**

The findings in this dimension describe the participants’ circuitous paths which led them to start the process of earning a university degree. Analysis of the findings indicates that educational paths were often circuitous due to young families, staying in unrewarding careers because they paid the bills, and due to unfulfilling marriages that eventually ended in divorce. The literature examined affirms that women often walk a more indirect path to achieving a university education. Four main reasons that women’s educational paths are circuitous include children, financial, self-concept (Cragg, Andrusyszyn, & Fraser, 2005), and gender barriers (Ong, Wright, Espinosa, & Orfield, 2011). All of these four reasons were identified by some of the women in this study. Yoder (2007) notes that women’s educational and career paths involve many interruptions, exits, and reentries that make their paths winding and circuitous. This finding correlates to my analysis of the findings that some of the women experienced circuitous paths.

**Learning environment.**

Findings were organized around the context of learning within the university. An ineffective learning environment was a specific concern that emerged from this study (i.e., positive/negative learning environment, pre-requisite issues, and mature students thinking they knew more than professors). Various studies investigated student engagement and effective teaching practices. Gray Tinnesz, Ahuna, and Kiener (2006) state that professors should seek ways to engage students, both within and outside the
classroom. Learning is a joint responsibility between the student and the professor as both require clear understanding of their roles. (Gray Tinnesz et al., 2006). Hativa, Barak, and Simhi (2011) conducted research on exemplary college teachers and found that exemplary college teachers differed from other teachers in their teaching-related thinking, in their beliefs and knowledge, and in their characteristics and classroom behaviours. Some of the women, in this study, identified exemplary teachers and teaching methods. The women noted how much extra effort these teachers made; it was appreciated. Ineffective college teachers displayed an “inconsistent relationship between teachers’ thinking and knowledge and their observed practice” (Hativa et al., 2011, pp. 702-703). The authors also discovered a “substantial discrepancy between faculty’s perceptions of their most important teaching goals…and student’s perceptions of their [teachers’] success” (Hativa et al., 2011, pp. 702-703). An inconsistency was found between the faculty, who thought they were good teachers and their students, who found them “unclear, boring, and generally ineffective” (Hativa et al., 2011, p. 703). Therefore, when university professors are unaware of the discrepancy, they may not seek strategies to improve the situation. Some of the women’s comments, from this study, correlate with Hativa et al.’s findings that university professors may utilize teaching practices which a portion of students might find unsupportive or ineffective. However, other participants, in this study, found the learning environment supportive and encouraging.

**Mentors effective vs. ineffective.**

The women in this study related the positive impact of their mentors on their learning careers. Mentors can intervene at both a formal and an informal level, as noted by González (2006). Some women, in this study, identified some formal mentoring
arrangements, i.e., assistance with class materials or administrative details within the more formal constructs of the university; and informal arrangements, i.e., mentoring from professors at coffee meetings, home settings and after completion of the women’s degree programs, that were often about more personal aspects of the women’s lives. González noted some of the differences between formal and informal mentoring. González stated that informal mentoring arrangements have “more consistent positive outcomes…[than formal ones]” (p. 29) and that informal mentoring arrangements are more important for women and minorities. In stating her definition of a mentor, González said “it is important to remember that the definition of mentor includes the concepts of sponsor and advocate in addition to guide, tutor, coach, and confidante” (p. 29). Some women in this study would concur that their mentors met with González’s definition of a mentor. The examined literature also suggests that because of the increase in the number of women and minorities in higher education, there is a greater need for more mentors (Casto, Caldwell, & Salazar, 2005; González, 2006). Casto et al. (2005) also state that “women who mentor women can help counter possible feelings of isolation or fears of failure that may be engendered in the course of pursuing higher education, especially in a male-dominated field” (p. 331). Contrary to the examined research there were women in this study who found their experiences with their male mentors positive and rewarding. The women noted that their male mentors often exceeded class requirements and even supported the women with direction on life goals and purposes. One of these male mentors continued to mentor a woman after the women had graduated. Other male mentors were available to discuss school and unrelated school topics, such as life transitions. The women commented on how much they appreciated and often felt
supported by their male mentors. These women also commented, when the mentors were also their professors, how much they enjoyed their classes and how much they learned from them. There seemed to be a genuine respect that was conveyed by the women about their male mentors. It should be noted that where it was a woman mentored by a woman mentor, the women mentors often over exceeded the expectations of a mentor. Mentoring was especially important to women students if they “are to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to effectively contribute to their field” (Casto et al., 2005, p. 331). Most of the women in this study thought mentoring was important to their student success.

**Mature vs. younger students.**

The findings of this dimension were organized around the experiences, similarities, and differences between mature and younger students. Experiences translated into women often feeling different from younger students. That feeling of different translated into not making friends with younger students. However other women were easily able to make friends with younger students. The women in this study shared insights about learning issues in relation to study habits, retention, and performance (i.e., writing and exams). Most of the women, in this study, commented about how fearful they were about their academic performance at university, especially in the areas of studying, writing papers, and exams. Some of the women, in this study, found it difficult and they invested a lot of time learning how to write papers, study, and write exams. Some women commented that it took them two to four years to learn those skills. Other women, in this study, stated they learned those skills within a year. Most of the women, in this study, commented that once they learned these skills that studying, writing papers, and writing exams was not that difficult. In fact some women designed their own strategies to
accomplish these tasks more effectively. Those strategies included learning how to determine what was important to study, strategies to read and write exams, and how to reduce the amount of time spent writing papers. Some women found the skills developed as they moved through the process of their degrees. In some cases some women found dormant study skills that were developed in secondary school emerged. There was overall recognition that differences existed between the mature and the younger students.

Wiesenber& Aghakhani (2007) proposed that postsecondary institutions are not geared towards adult learners and this causes complications. “Post-secondary institutions often present “unfriendly” sic (double quotation marks in original) environments for adult students returning to learning who have complex non-student lives that include family and worker roles” (Wiesenber& Aghakhani, 2007, p. 110). Often, learning institutions do not recognize and are not prepared to assist mature students in overcoming their specific learning obstacles and in providing services that are geared to this populace (Richardson & King, 1998; Wiesenber& Aghakhani, 2007). Some women in this study did identify how university programs were not designed for adult learners, especially those that worked and those that had families. The women often thought their families were neglected, because they placed their study demands first and because of that the women felt guilty.

Richardson and King (1998) note that mature students are more likely to embody the deeper manifestations of studying and display higher learning characteristics. Richardson and King differentiated between a deep approach to studying and a surface approach to studying. The two approaches are identified by the following characteristics. Deep approach to studying is: comprehend materials being learned, acknowledge abstract
forms of learning utilized in higher education, and are motivated “by the relevance of the syllabus to their own personal needs and interests” (Richardson & King, 1998, p. 72).

Surface approach to studying is: rote memory to produce material required for assessment. Through exploration, these researchers concluded that adult students utilize a deep study approach, whereas younger students utilize a surface approach. Richardson and King’s study countered the beliefs of some women, in this study, who had expressed fears of not being able to study and learn. Yet there were women in this study who concurred with Richardson and King’s findings, that mature students adopt a deeper approach to writing papers and studying. A few of the women participants had the perception that they thought their papers contained more knowledge and were constructed better than those produced by their younger counterparts. Richardson and King note that professors found that the performance of adult students was better than the performance of some of the younger students, due to the different study approaches. However, contrary to Richardson and King’s study that found younger students adopt more of a surface approach to academics, some women’s perceptions, in this study, found their younger student cohorts very intelligent, in their approach to paper writing and exams and overall how they applied themselves to their education. However not all of the younger students were viewed that way. Some women commented on how they thought some younger students just rushed through their assignments.

Jacobs and Berkowitz King (2002) found that younger students are more likely to be enrolled in university education as full-time students, and that there is a direct correlation between being registered full-time and completing a program faster. Paid employment was a factor that, depending on whether the student was full- or part-time,
decreased the chances of their completing the program. The authors also found that “older women who are enrolled part time, who delayed their entry into college, and who have become mothers are much less likely to complete their degrees than are younger women” (Jacobs & Berkowitz King, 2002, p. 222). Indeed, the women from this study who were working, noted how long it was taking them to complete their degrees; in many cases, it was several years. However Jacobs and Berkowitz King also found that older women, because of their experience in balancing multiple demands or being more aware of the importance of obtaining educational credentials, are more able to balance the demands of family and university, than are younger women. Some mature women, in this study, noted they thought they were more effective at multitasking than were the younger women students, in this study. Mature women bring certain strengths that may actually make it easier for them, than for their younger cohorts, to manage the multiple demands of university and family.

**Prior learning.**

Findings were organized around the women’s perceptions of accreditation for prior learning. There was a general acknowledgement that prior knowledge does count, both professional and to some degree personal, and should be taken into consideration. Taylor and Clemans (2000) state the broader issue of prior learning assessment (PLAR) is that of academic inconsistency. The authors identify the difficulty of maintaining a consistent assessment among institutions and, therefore, the lack of validity in the assessments that are made. Other issues that arise with PLAR are those of power. Conrad (2008) elicited the underlying issues of power and control around PLAR which undermine whether accreditation is granted. When non-university-trained individuals
represent themselves for PLAR assessments, they are typically unfamiliar with, and do not utilize, the “language of the university” (Conrad, 2008, p. 142), and will not receive a fair assessment, which creates an imbalance of power. This imbalance of power relates to similar hierarchical issues that Harris (2002) identifies within university settings. Leaker and Ostman (2010) advocate that individual prior learning assessments not only “acknowledges those overlapping spaces, [home, work, family, life] but actually takes seriously the kind of learning that can occur with them” (p. 694). This acknowledgement begins to collapse barriers to higher education and address some of the issues around the imbalance of power so that knowledge of prior learning finds a space in the university setting.

One of the conclusions, derived from this study, was that most of the women in this study thought both work and life experience should receive credit. There were times, within some of the women’s educational process, that these women felt that their knowledge was not respected. These women felt frustrated. These women thought that some information taught was incorrect. Some women did not feel they were in an environment where they could discuss the discrepancy of information taught. Most of the women thought it was better for them to remain quiet about this issue. They did not think they would be heard. Although this is not a direct issue of PLAR, perhaps if institutions were more PLAR focused then that might impact the learning environment and bring awareness to other areas where the mature women’s knowledge is silenced. However, one woman, in this study, disagreed with prior learning being credited, especially personal history, even if it was relevant to the degree program. Research was identified concerning the pros and cons of PLAR and whether or not it benefits the adult learner and
the institution (Conrad, 2008; Gray, 1994; Taylor & Clemans, 2000). While the process of PLAR is imperfect, it does seem to have a place within postsecondary institutions.

**Breaking the Poverty Cycle**

The findings in this subcategory were organized around the experiences of the women in this study who were impoverished, yet continued to pursue their degree program. Adair (2001) relayed that single, poor mothers often experience circuitous and frustrating paths in their attempts to be accepted and to obtain a university education. One single mother in this study related that she had been struggling with poverty throughout her degree and had amassed a large amount of debt. She completed her degree program only to find she could not obtain employment. Andruske’s (2001) study revealed that women who make the long walk from poverty seek, education [and then ] often enroll in costly or lengthy educational programs. Then they are encouraged to take out student loans to shift them from welfare roles. However, when they find no job awaits them, they discover they are now saddled with a large student loan debt. Thus, they are now finding themselves among a growing number of women shifted from the welfare roles to student loan debt. Consequently, the “revolving door” back to welfare often begins (p. 65).

Zhan and Pandey (2004) note that poverty among a “single-mothered family is well documented” (p. 662). For children in poverty, there are many barriers that inhibit their ability to perform well in educational environments. The examined literature notes how poverty can disrupt educational learning, especially within poor, single-mothered homes (Lawson, 2008; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Wagner (1999) states that some of the barriers that low-income families face are the lack of financial resources for children’s extracurricular activities which may decrease these types of social interactions that do assist in learning. One other barrier, that these authors noted, was an increased stress which places more demands on the children to perform household tasks. All these factors
decrease the potential for the child to do well in educational environments. One of the participants longed to move beyond the grips of poverty that had enveloped her and her child for most of their lives. At that time, they were living in a mold-infested apartment, with limited resources for food and clothing. This woman had hoped that attaining a degree would help her and her child move beyond poverty; however, she had amassed a large amount of debt, had no employment prospects, had continued expenses, and was not hopeful. Another woman, who had graduated, took her university program while she was a single mother of three young children. She had continued in the program so that she could move beyond minimum-wage jobs to provide for herself and her children, a point that other participants also stressed. There were other women in this study that were thankful for funding they received that kept these women and their families out of poverty while these women earned their degree.

**Time Constraints**

Within this third subcategory and its dimensions is where I organized the findings about limited time. The impacts of limited time were especially apparent for women managing multiple demands.

**Wearing many hats.**

Findings were organized in regards to how the multiple demands of work, education, and family, and whatever semblance of a personal life that still existed, were often unmanageable. Often, the women in this study felt they were unable to handle everything effectively; they could effectively manage two, but not three roles. One of those roles was childcare. Yoder (2007) states that women students found “the parental role [was]…most responsible for role overload” (p. 162). Women, in this study, were
concerned about the decreased time with children; and worried about how the family would be impacted. Cragg et al. (2005) found that “women in North American society still feel pressure to be the primary caregiver to children and ill relatives, as well as taking the major responsibility for household tasks” (p. 36). Women in this study, sometimes found help from their partners, families, or both, but sometimes the household chores waited until the women had completed class requirements. Most of the women in this study who had children continued to be the major caregiver. This is part of women’s invisible work. This work is not counted as work and women often receive no monetary reimbursement. However, women are still expected to silently carry on with this work and often continue to manage other multiple roles. Contrary, Ricco et al. (2009) found that “college mothers do not experience the school and family microsystems as merely involving competing sets of demands on available resources” (p. 101), but that there are positive byproducts for both mother and their student children. Most of the women, in this study, who had children, did not agree with Ricco et al.’s findings as they found their multiple roles taxing. However one woman, in this study, who had children and a career, did agree with Ricco et al.’s study, as she thought her schedule was manageable. However, this woman had a partner who assisted with some childcare.

The women in this study commented on how time to travel to various places, i.e., work, university, or childcare, complicated their lives and exhausted them. Cragg et al. (2005) note “when the barriers of travel and relocation [were] removed, women in particular are freer to add the student role to their many others” (p. 22). This study seems to be pointing to the fact that if university is accessible and does not involve travel time then this makes it easier for women to add the student role to their many others. Another
issue of travel was reported by Andruske (2001) who states that often poor women students do not have a car, which makes it difficult for them to get to either an educational institution or to childcare facilities. One woman in this study commented how not having a car made it very complicated for her to get to school and to childcare. This woman, in particular, was exhausted from the many different places she had to travel, using the bus, which included childcare and university. All women in this study had more than one function they were attempting to balance while attending university. They either were balancing home, family, and university; or home, career, and university; and sometimes they were attempting to balance all four responsibilities, home, family, career, and university. Some admitted they could not balance it all. Overall, the current study reflected the reported findings in the examined literature that for some women students balancing many roles, i.e., career, education, family, and home, is difficult.

**Feeling grey.**

The findings organized within this dimension concern the issues of health, potential burn-out, and overall feelings of exhaustion, due to the multiple roles the women in this study maintained. Lawson (2008) states, multiple demands potentially lead to stress and burnout. Oplatka (2002) adds that stress and burnout are often because of “women’s tendency to deny their own needs while seeking to satisfy others’ needs and desires, and the need to cope with the work family conflict” (p. 213). Women have been socialized for generations to deny their own needs. “Woman”, as a gender construction, has become associated with nurturing others, denying one’s own needs, sacrificing “silently” for others, caring, helping, and other traits that are only associated with the female gender. Cragg et al. (2005) concurs with Oplatka’s findings that women are
exhausted from the many roles they assume. Cragg et. al. states that “for some women, the desire to do it all may lead to exhaustion, frustration and stress” (p. 34).

Some women, in this study, identified how exhausted they felt and how this exhaustion never seemed to leave them. Numerous studies mention that stress and the potential for burnout affect women who attempt to balance career and family; and/or career, family, and education (Home, 1997; Lawson, 2008; & Oplatka, 2002). Some women, in this study, found they could not manage it all and were very stressed and tired attempting to manage everything. The findings in this study concur with the examined literature that multiple demands can be overwhelming, frustrating, and potentially exhausting.

**Substantive and Psychological Types of Support**

The findings within this fourth subcategory, and its dimensions, were organized around the supports and barriers that the women experienced while obtaining their degree.

**Financial.**

The analysis of this dimension demonstrates that regardless of financial status, all the women agreed that financial support was important in their achieving a degree. Some women in this study received financial support in the form of grants and bursaries, student loans, or support from their partner. Some women in this study received some financial assistance from their workplace. Cragg et al. (2005) note that for women who were employed and attending college “support from the workplace was an important factor…. [and one manner of support from work was] financial reimbursement” (p. 32). In Cragg et al.’s study, some employers funded most of their employees’ educational
program. Other women, in this study, did not receive financial support and found they and their families usually had to make sacrifices. Home (1997) states that the financial expense of a degree is a huge stressor and that

Existing student aid schemes are not well fitted to the needs of multiple-role students . . . in an era when financial support for university education is shrinking and costs are rising, many students are forced to invest enormous amounts of energy in ‘scraping money together. (p. 343)

Participants in Home’s (1997) study were asked why they went to work instead of studying, the participants responded, “I do it to pay the rent and feed my family” (p. 343). Many of the participants, in this study who were mothers, when faced with the same decision as Home’s participants made the same decision and for the same reasons.

Concrete.

The findings in this dimension were organized around the tangible types of support the women received, from family, (i.e., childcare, housekeeping, grocery shopping), university (program changes, professor assistance, class times designed for adult learners, smaller class size), and workplace (i.e., time from work to study or attend classes, emotional encouragement). Wiesenbein and Aghakhani (2007) identify that “workplace supports should…offer education leave and resources…as well as a positive attitude by management towards employees who decide to return to school full or part-time to further their careers” (p.111). Some women, in this study, identified that they received workplace support, both in the form of time off and emotional encouragement from colleagues and management. However, some women noted they had to make up the time they took off for classes. Cragg et al. (2005) note that to be successful in their education process, women with a family need established supports in place. Concerning supports in the home, Lemoine et al. (2011) stated that “12 percent of men and 20 percent
of women – felt that women should do the majority of the housework…[and only] three percent of the participants surveyed felt that men should take care of housework” (p. 10).

Some of the women in this study identified that their partners helped with household chores, in order for these women to focus on their studies. However, other women noted they completed household chores mostly by themselves. Lemoine’s (2011) study also reports that only 51.3% of the population surveyed wanted their spouse to achieve a bachelor’s degree. One women in this study noted that her former spouse did not support her in earning a bachelor degree or any type of postsecondary schooling. These factors suggest an underlying, cultural dynamic that may influence the amount, type, and willingness of support that is provided.

**Emotional.**

This dimension presents the findings that relate to emotional supports. This study identified emotional supports from peers, from attendance at a smaller college, and from an on-campus women’s center. On the other hand, this study also identified negative factors such as discounting comments, unavailability, lack of understanding, and lack of emotional support. Research identified that support is important to women’s success. Lirio et al. (2007) state that Canadian career women who balanced both a career and a family mentioned it was their spouse who provided the greatest emotional support. Some women, in this study, identified their partner as their greatest support. Dixon Rayle, Robinson Kurpius, and Arredondo (2007) state that social support is the greatest contributor for first-year, women college students to persist and succeed in their academic programs. Social support is defined as support from friends, peers and “contact with faculty as mentors and teachers, inside and outside of the classroom” (Dixon Rayle
et al., 2007, p. 327). Some women in this study identified emotional support from peers and contact with faculty as significant factors that contributed to their student success.

**Making A Difference**

The theme of this study, “Making a Difference”, is the perceived goal in the model (see Figure 1) and is the overall motivating force of the women in this study. They wanted to make a difference in their lives and/or others. “Others” could be family (in most cases their children), their workplace, or their community. Obtaining a degree was the vehicle the women chose to enable them to make a difference. LeVine et al. (2001) carried out studies with foreign women and girls who attended schooling. The authors found that schooling directly impacted the women’s ability to participate more actively in societal structures and was a strong determinate in their children pursuing a higher education. The authors suggest that providing women with an education is a key factor to promoting effective social change. Some of the women in this study would concur. They felt their educational path could provide them with confidence, skillsets, and knowledge to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others.

Some of the women in this study wanted to make a difference in their children’s lives by being effective role models, i.e., demonstrating effective study habits, by finishing their degrees so they could earn money to save for their children’s education; demonstrating determination and the accomplishment of goals; fostering a love for learning, through example; and demonstrating leadership. Most of these women had a career and those that did not were working towards obtaining one, especially hoping earning the degree would assist them in gaining a career. All of the women were working towards their education. Zusman, Knox, and Lieberman (2005) indicate that women who
were raised by educated, career mothers show a higher degree of independence and possessed the belief that “women can achieve any of their aspirations” (p. 624). These findings point to the probability that since some of the women in this study had female children and were working on their education and either had a career or were working towards obtaining a career, then those women could fall into the same bracket as Zusman et al.’s (2005) classification of educated career mothers. Therefore the women in this study, who met Zusman et al.’s criteria, and who wanted to be a more effective role model would probably exert some effective influence on their female children.

Women in this study (5/12) identified that they pursued their degree to make a difference in their community. Lazzari, Ford, and Haughey (1996) note that mothers who participated in community service directly influenced their female children who, in their adult years, also undertook community service. These mothers “were important role models by actualizing community involvement, helping others, and instilling a sense of self-confidence and self-value” (Lazzari et al., 1996, p. 201). Lazzari et al., noted that “seeing the need, feeling personal satisfaction, receiving support from others, and having personal beliefs and characteristics” (p. 201) are factors that support and sustain community involvement for women, factors with which the participants in this study concur. Community service benefitted the community, the women, and their female children. Lazzari et al.’s study raises the possibility that the women in this study with female children, too, could potentially influence them more than they had hoped or dreamed.

Most women in this study were taking their degree program with the hope of “Making a Difference” in the area of their career. Their hopes included receiving
professional recognition, making monetary gains, and breaking preestablished roles for women. Several studies do connect completing an undergraduate degree with career success (Cabrera, 2007; Duncan et al., 2002). However, there is the possibility that the women may complete their undergraduate degree and still not find career success.

All the women in this study identified “Making a Difference” in their personal lives as extremely important. Stone (2008) interviewed 20 mature students who had completed their undergraduate degrees. The end-results were “growth in confidence, the increase in opportunities for the future and the sense of dreams and ambition being achieved” (Stone, 2008, p. 288), findings that correlate with the findings in this study.

Schueller and Seligman (2010) state that

Activities that increase engagement and meaning may have the strongest impact on an individual’s well-being. Pursuing engagement and meaning may increase social and psychological resources. Whereas pursuing pleasure may not build resources . . . . education is a prime example of a resource builder that may not be great fun. (p. 260)

All the women, whether they had completed their degree program, or not, found that progressing in the program added meaning to their lives, increased their social and psychological resources, and assisted in building resources for others.

In her book, Women Gender: Making a Difference, Yoder (2010) echoes the desires, of the participants in this study, to make a difference in their and others’ lives. Yoder states that when women make differences in women’s lives, the focus shifts from the personal to the political arena. Impacting more than one life begins to challenge and change the collective viewpoints of women and society. Yoder relates that “the activist goal of making a difference continues to make a difference in the individual women’s
lives, in women’s relationships, and in a social justice agenda” (p. 173). Yoder (2007) urged each feminist to continue to make a difference in their own and others’ lives.

Thus my ultimate challenge to you (and for me as well) is to take what we talked about here and be mindful about making a difference. We can follow the path of least resistance by giving in to the powerful systems of inequality that privilege and oppress us, that divide us into in-groups and out-groups, and that serve to disrupt our fundamentally human connections. Or, we can empower ourselves—personally, in our relationships, and by working collectively to challenge and change these social structures. Each of us CAN make a difference (p. 344).

It is interesting to know there are many published articles with a theme of people “Making a Difference” (Kasser, 2010; Lipton, 1993; Waller, 2004; Yoder, 2007, 2010). The ones I located were mostly about women. I am pleased that the women’s voices in this study will add to feminist literature, through publication of this thesis. Then these women’s stories will be on record for some people to access and read.

**Incorporation of a Feminist Lens**

Gouthro and Grace’s (2000) work mentions a number of structural and cultural barriers that inhibit mature women students from experiencing success. One barrier is that some of society views women as the primary caregiver, for children and the elderly. Gouthro and Grace state that women form their identities in regards to self, career, and relationships within the home environment. Society expands on this viewpoint so that the home is “expected to be the center of women’s allegiance” (Gouthro & Grace, 2000, p. 5). Various articles also note the societal expectations that maintain women as the primary caregivers (Gouthro & Grace, 2000; Home, 1997). Such expectations create tension within women’s lives, especially those who are students.

According to Canadian studies, women students are often torn between the needs of the home and the needs of the educational institutions that “demand complete obedience and loyalty” (Gouthro & Grace, 2000, p. 5) and Home (1997) perceives both
as “greedy institutions that demand exclusive loyalty, virtually unlimited time commitments and high flexibility” (p. 336). Some women, in this study, did feel that some of the educational demands were all consuming and insensitive to those with other obligations, i.e. family and career. Stone (2008) notes that juggling the demands of home and family present a significant barrier for women who attempt to become successful. The findings in this study concur. Add to this the fact that higher educational institutions, reported by Canadian studies, are modeled after “the singular, ‘bachelor male’; that is, one who is unencumbered with domestic or family responsibilities” (Gouthro & Grace, 2000, p. 5) only compounds the problems that women encounter in their journey to achieve within the higher educational institution. Some women in this study mentioned that one could succeed with two, but not three different foci within their lives, for example, children, study and work. These women commented on their fatigue and the constant pull of various demands. They did not match the singular bachelor student model.

When designing courses and establishing programs to assist women to succeed, higher educational institutions could factor in the concept that not only do the mature women in their programs have the role of students, but they also have many additional roles. Many mature women students are emotionally committed caregivers, yet even this is only part of the invisible work women do. Some women in this study were concerned about the amount of time that the degree process took them away from their families. Some women in this study also noted the many times they missed children’s school concerts and other activities, the times they had to push their families away, and the times they had to shut down so they could accomplish their course requirements. Other women
struggled to maintain the home with minimal help from partners. Although all these factors create a great deal of stress women are expected to effectively manage.

Many women value relatedness and caring for others and they may find this negatively impacts their lives, often to the detriment of their careers and/or educational pursuits. Cabrera (2007) states women often sideline their career or educational goals to care for their children and others. Thus, women’s careers and educational pursuits can involve many starts and stops, and it takes longer for them to achieve their goals. For this reason, many women miss opportunities. Some women in this study commented on the length of time it was taking them to complete their degree because of the added responsibilities of work and children.

It appears, gender is an area not often considered when delivering higher education. Gouthro and Grace (2000) relate that within the “university structures there is a blindness to the concerns of women students” (p. 6). This blindness appears to affect all levels of the university, both the administration and the faculty, and because of this, there is “an unwillingness to address policies that create structural forms of discrimination” (Gouthro & Grace, 2000, p. 6). University policies may be created thinking that the policies will be equal for both the male and female populations and with the assumption these populations will be “equally affected” (Gouthro & Grace, 2000, p. 6); however, this is not the case. One difference between male and female populations is that women’s greater focus in learning includes relationships and emotions, an issue that is sidetracked by “social control, power and gender relations [which are] involved in the splitting and privileging of the rational over the affective” (Beard et al., 2007, p. 237). Another difference is that the majority of educational institutions base their teaching methods
around male androcentric models which do not facilitate women’s ways of knowing. Androcentric models are models that act as guidelines to encourage people to act and think in ways that privilege males and support societal structures associated with males as the norm. Severiens, Dam, and Nijenhuis’s (1998) research some ways women build their knowledge base by incorporating others’ perspectives, focusing on their peers, and learning cooperatively within collaborative learning environments; whereas men focus more on individual work and “their own learning process” (Severiens et al., 1998, p. 328). Further, Oplatka (2002) relates that women “tend to have non-polar perspectives and are not inclined to divide the world into polarities, as opposed to men who segment reality by coupling concepts and terms in pairs of polar opposites” (p. 223) and tend to use an egalitarian approach to power that includes close relationships, helping and being sensitive to others’ needs, and nurturing. Some women in this study found some of their learning experiences non-inclusive and focused on negative competition and achievement. These resonate with findings of this research study. Severiens et al.’s., research found that women may place a greater focus on relationships, learn in collaborative environments and value inclusion. Some findings pointed to learning environments, within the university, that seemed to lack these organizing principles.

There were participants in this study who experienced discrimination because of their gender. These women felt isolated. Some found their learning experiences to be noninclusive and focused on negative competition and achievement. Some women knew the information or teaching methods were inappropriate, but the women felt their observations would not be welcomed by their professor. In fact, there were situations
when the women did address their concerns and then the women felt they were punished either by a professor’s remarks, a “look,” or by receiving a lower grade.

An historical sense of gender-appropriate roles for women still exists, not only within the academia, but also within culture and families. Wiesenber and Aghakhani (2007) found that younger women are still being marginalized into more “feminine” careers such as nursing, teaching and social work. This orientation leads girls and boys to choose careers, which maintains a gender division of labour. Ong et al. (2011) note that in the fields of STEM women still face issues of sexism. Solomon (2007) states that women studying mathematics are most likely to deal with issues of feeling that they have “less right to be there and experience high levels of anxiety” (p. 80). Also, “mathematics teaching is frequently excluding, and that it treats many students as powerless and unimportant ‘outsiders,’ permanently marginalizing many” (Solomon, 2007, p. 92). Many women, already marginalized, will remove themselves from STEM studies. Some women in this study wanted to study in STEM fields, but were discouraged by their families. Instead, they enrolled in programs their families thought suitable. One woman, in this study, began her studies in a STEM discipline, but left due to the “chilly climate.” Chilly climate, for the purposes of this study, is used to describe educational learning environments that foster behaviours that undermine women’s self-confidence and self-esteem, especially those behaviours that could influence a woman’s academic abilities. However, another woman noted that currently women seem to have more access to STEM disciplines than when she entered university a few decades ago.

Harris (2002) notes universities train Western scholars “to reproduce themselves in the Western cultural image” (p. 187) which is firmly grounded in an ethnocentric
paradigm. Western knowledge is based on objectivity, reductionism, and empiricism, not the intuitive, relationship-based knowledge to which women relate (Harris, 2002). Examined literature suggests that relationships, support, and empathy are main organizing principles for women’s learning and yet these principles are often not valued by higher educational institutions where individualistic, competitive values are supported and fostered (Erdwins et al., 2001; Hanley & Abell, 2002). Some women in this study commented on their appreciation of inclusive learning environments and on peer student relationships, noting they felt isolated when they did not have these relationships.

O’Brien (1989) states that “adult learning theory informs us that learning needs flow from the characteristics of the student population and that higher education should be reflected in the approaches, strategies and techniques employed to address these needs in the actual learning situation” (p. 306). Therefore, the population of women students should drive effective learning approaches and strategies for women. Nevertheless, O’Brien notes that the “process of learning…has its roots in the teaching of males” (p. 307) and that adult learning is designed as if the adult population were one classless whole, with women’s educational needs being silenced. O’Brien continues that, If the factors that shape most women’s lives are unique, if their life experiences are different from those of men and if they do….speak in a different voice, it can be assumed that they also have unique learning needs which should inform the approaches, the strategies, and the methods used in the actual instructional setting. (p. 307)

Gouthro (2002a) elaborates that in higher education women’s unique experiences and needs should be recognized and taken into account, including the relational aspect of women’s lives and women’s deep desire for self-fulfillment. Some women in this study identified times when their lived and/or career experiences were not taken into
consideration, both within class settings and the administration processes. Other women in this study thought that taking into account personal aspects of their lived history was not relevant to course admission. Non recognition of a portion of society’s populations needs diminishes that portion of society and fosters dominant societal norms. Societal norms for women have been based on male values and models. Lazzari et al. (1996) commented that women had been “constrained by theories based on traditional white-male models of development” (p. 202). They commented on what would assist academia in being more inclusive. Lazzari et al. stated that “becoming more knowledgeable about gender and ethnic aspects of diversity supports the professor’s efforts to eliminate discrimination, oppression, and injustice” (p. 197). The processes of discrimination, oppression and injustice align the non-dominant portions of society to be “othered.” “Othering” involves making one segment of society seem different, not normal and marginalized compared to the more dominant normalized aspects of society. The norm is established and those that do not fit within that norm are seen as not belonging and as others. People are marginalized. Most women in this study identified that in some manner they felt othered by some university practices; specifically those practices that were not flexible towards the mature learner, i.e., class times, course content, and acknowledgment, both formal and informal, of their prior learning. Some of the women did not feel marginalized by their class peers and some did. Some of the women identified that they were othered by their families.

Read, et al., (2003) noted that since 1992, British universities have seen the greatest increase in nontraditional students, yet the student norm continues to be white, middle-class, and often, single male. The concept of student norm as white, middle-class,
and single, supports the othering of nontraditional students (Read, et al., 2003). University culture is imprinted upon students’ minds even before they step onto the university campus, through promotional materials and fostering of what makes a good or normal student, and students who are not of the norm “do not often question their right to ‘belong’ in such an environment” (Read et al., 2003, p. 263). Read et al., notes that despite this influx of nontraditional students elitism still prevails within higher educational institutions. In fact “higher education has become increasingly differentiated in terms of status” (Read, 2003, p. 268). Universities that accept nontraditional students receive a lower status rating among universities and are considered substandard, by ranking boards and students, while universities that support the norm of “‘normal’ young White, middle-class student [the universities authenticity] is maintained [and they are viewed as] the elite ‘real’ universities” (Read et al., 2003, p. 268). Mature women do not fit the traditional student norm, but are relegated to the category of “other.” Many women in this study felt the university was not geared towards the adult learner, especially one who is a parent or is working. Some thought the classes were held at inappropriate times for working adults. Some thought the materials - specifically those in the 100-level classes, were not geared for the mature, adult learner. Finally, some women felt there was no recognition for the adult learner who had been exposed to a life time of learning, having been merged with younger learners with not as much life experience.

Reay et al. (2002) noted that a sense of belonging is considered a major factor of mature student success. Read et al. (2003) propose that it is clearly a cultural factor when family and friends offer negative comments about one who wishes to attend university: “[This] highlight[s] how socially dominant discourses of the ‘normal’ student are
culturally prevalent and contribute to a student’s self-conception of ‘otherness’” (p. 267). The women in Winn’s (2002) study experienced high resistance towards their educational pursuits not only from their partners, but also from their families. Some of the women in this study, had families who were critical of their attending university and who continued to criticize by pointing out every perceived failure while at university; in fact, the women were encouraged to quit. Moreover, Reay et al. state that even when the individual enters university the feeling of “otherness” does not disappear. The internal conflict results in an individual who feels like a fraud - a discourse that runs deeper when the individual enters the higher educational structures.

Many mature students experience a dominant culture within the university setting. The large classes create distance between the professor and student, who must struggle on his/her own to learn, with little guidance from the professor. Distance between the professor and student ingrains a “perspective of ‘place’ as ‘subordinate’ in the hierarchical academy” (Read et al., 2003, p. 270). Wiesenberg and Aghakhani (2007) note the university can present “unfriendly environments for adult students [who] return to learning [and] who have complex non-student lives that include family and worker roles” (p. 110). Some women in this study commented about feeling lost in large classes and about the unfriendly learning environment. Some commented on the hierarchal teaching practices that placed the professor above the student. Some expressed feeling they knew more than the professor and, in some cases, knew that the content material was inaccurate; however, they felt they could say nothing. Two women left their university programs; one stated she would never set foot again on a campus; and another left
because of the program structure, the unavailability of professors, and the weak course content.

Education is the greatest predictor of those who will achieve financial stability and those who will not (Adair, 2001). Adair states that, “postsecondary education can unlock the door to economic opportunity and thus enable disadvantaged women to live lives of dignity, supporting and nurturing our children” (p. 223). However, in Adair’s study, poorer women students who were also mothers stated they often felt stupid even though they had:

studied and were well prepared for class…[and found] professors represent[ed] their experience of poverty in ways that they felt mocked and humiliated them….low-income, single-parent students who have little support, few role models, and a severe sense of dislocation, disidentification, and class anxiety [and] their experiences need to be recognized, validated, and addressed if this population is to survive in postsecondary academy. (pp. 235-236)

Adair (2001) notes that substantial research has been conducted which supports that higher education may assist single mothers to overcome poverty. Some women in this study hoped that their education would assist them to overcome poverty. Lewis (2005) notes that the systems that support gender inequality, sexism, and the marginalization, which is a social process of moving peoples to the fringes of society, of women has moved into the broader political systems of globalization and privatization. Lewis continued that universities are now more funded through private funding rather than public funding. Lewis stated that this privatization of funding then determines where research dollars are spent and therefore what fields of study are deemed worthwhile.

Gouthro (2002a) and Lewis (2005) related that universities have moved from the concept of learning institutions into the capitalistic concepts of market and market driven goods and sales due to funding practices that are driven by private companies. Lewis
related that these trends then have students “measure[ing] the value of their education not in terms of their intellectual development but in terms of the marketability of their credentials” (p. 17). Gouthro and Lewis stated that the trend of measuring education in terms of marketability positions students as consumers. Gouthro and Lewis stated private companies, which fund research studies, place greater importance on the return of the dollar. Price tags are placed on what fields of study will gain the greatest enrollment driven again by what the market deems as viable occupations. Where do research dollars become allocated in order to gain the greatest market benefit? Which fields of study are marketable? These are two of the driving questions that determine where research dollars are spent. The fields that are losing access to research dollars are the fields of humanities, arts, and social sciences. These are also the fields where the greatest volume of woman students and graduates reside (Turcotte, 2011). What will happen to society if the voice of women and their issues are not represented by having research dollars focused and directed towards women’s research and feminist inquiry? Lewis has sounded the warning in this regard. Within the more than “chilly climate” Lewis shared concerns about the future of feministic research. Lewis related:

Indeed, it has been suggested to more than a few of us that gender and openly feminist approaches to research questions and methodologies are not only no longer of interest to research funders or even as a programme focus in some Faculties but may in fact be a liability. We might wonder if such positioning of feminism and the question of sexism in the academy as an anachronism is the next turn in the masculinist ideological agenda aimed at the control of knowledge and power. It may be this same turn that prompted an academic administrator, who has direct control over the assignments and evaluations of my work to suggest that perhaps feminism is no longer a viable teaching and scholarly endeavour. (p. 18)

Both Gouthro (2002a) and Lewis (2005) have echoed warnings about the major implications to universities, fields of studies, and the implications to all students, not just
women. Women’s numbers have increased within universities and as seen in Turcottte’s (2011) report women’s presence resides within the fields of studies that are not valued by privatization. Therefore if the forces of globalization and privatization are allowed to continue in this same trend then the impact to universities might be that universities are forced to cut and reduce the arts, humanities, and women’s programs and research. Universities would be driven by private funding which does not value disciplines that do not translate into creating graduates that can compete in competitive market careers. Potentially the future for women to achieve equal status in academia is threatened.

**Response to the Research Question**

*What is the lived experience of mature women who have graduated or are in the process of obtaining their first degree?*

When reviewing the literature and comparing it to the findings of the current research study, I was surprised to find that women still deal with issues of gender, sexism, marginalization, poverty, otherness, multiple-role exhaustion, invisible work, and are still held responsible for the majority of relational caring, within both the family and career structures. Some women in this study did not address university practices that they thought were wrong, due to fear. Two women exited the university program determined they would not return. Women endured multiple roles, exhaustion, and poverty in their attempts to have a better life. Are women still second-class citizens?

Women in this study wanted to make a difference in their lives and that of others. After reviewing the literature, I wondered how much of a difference these women would make. I looked at how they wanted to grow both personally and establish power, but realized it might be more limited to the sphere of self in their individual lives and somewhat to those with whom they worked. I began to recognize how political systems
can limit women’s ability to really make a difference. In academic political systems, women hold a limited number of tenured positions. This creates a small pool of female mentors for female faculty and students. NSERC identified the low number of female faculty and students in the NSE disciplines. The issue is not lack of a student pool to draw from; perhaps it is the lack of women mentors in these fields. Although the current study’s findings do not support that hypothesis. I examined current research (i.e., Gouthro, 2002b; Lewis, 2005), which states that privatization will determine which faculties are worthwhile and faculties that receive less funding are those in which the majority of women are enrolled. How will this impact society and future generations? When I started the study I had no idea whether any of the women’s experiences would relate to each other. Yet as I examined and re-examined and coded and re-coded their interviews, I found engaging stories that interconnected throughout the women’s lives and educational experiences. I hope this research will contribute to the field of feminist scholarly research.

Implications/Applications of the Study

The findings that emerge from this research could be used as a springboard for further inquiry in the field of feminist research. One of the main areas that could be further explored and which became evident in this study could be the experiences faced by mature students. Women, in this study, identified areas that universities and higher educational bodies could focus on to improve situations for mature women students. The women identified that class times could be structured to more effectively suit working adults. Some women thought that prior learning could be incorporated that would not only recognize professional learning, but also lifetime learning. Some of the women
thought deleting unnecessary pre-requisites and reducing mature adult programs to only include classes that were focused on the main field of study, would be especially helpful to mature students. Some of the women pointed to issues that arise when taking a degree over a longer period of time. Course content and degree requirement changes were made that added more time to an already lengthy process. Most of the women wanted more flexibility with class deadlines and requirements that worked in conjunction with and not against their career demands. Most of the women thought that some of the teaching methods could be improved. Some of the women identified professors that spent class time expounding about themselves. Other women noted that some of the material being taught seemed incorrect and yet, in their perception, they did not feel supported to mention their concerns. Some women related examples of non-inclusive teaching methods, where in the women’s opinion the professor did not foster open class discussion or based on some of the women’s perceptions, professors gave lower grades or “a look” that deterred student comments or interactions. Some of the women stated that some of the material taught was more designed around rote learning rather than a deeper exploration of topics. These were observations that some of the women made in regards to the mature student’s university experience. Perhaps some of these ideas could be further explored in research.

Another area of potential research that the women identified focused on the learning environment. Some of the women noted how unprofessional some of the professors were and the women desired to have supportive, professional, and engaging learning environments. Some women noted that they would like to experience more learning environments where more discussion was fostered and they had the chance to
share more of their own opinions and experiences. This is an area that could be further explored. I think examining both perspectives, what might support mature students and what support professors might require for them to facilitate a more productive learning environment, would be valuable. Some of the women also identified the area of student support. Some of the women thought peer support was important, but many of them were overwhelmed and did not have time to connect with other students. When the women found it difficult to connect with other students, either due to the women’s busy schedules or sometimes the fact that some of the women found it more difficult to connect with their younger peers and this caused issues when the women needed class notes or other assistance and they felt they had no one they could turn to. Examining ways to effectively foster student support for the mature student may offer an opportunity for research examination. Almost half of the women, in this study, identified that they were first-generation university students. These women found that they: (a) lacked guidance, in regard to their degree-field of study; (b) disliked some class choices; (c) struggled with administrative issues i.e., unsure of how to register, what pre-requisites were changed and how that impacted their degrees; and (d) culture, i.e., some women’s perceptions were that the atmosphere was unwelcoming, their knowledge was not valued, and they identified issues where they felt isolated and sometime degraded by some professor’s actions. Some women identified that they would have appreciated guidance: (a) to assist them through the degree process, i.e., to identify program changes and how that impacted class prerequisites, (b) assistance with prior learning accreditation; (c) assistance in connecting them with resources to help in the process of obtaining the
degree i.e., mentors, writing assistance; and (d) support with administrative issues, i.e., registration, potential funding. These are areas that might be further explored.

Some of the women in this study had children and mentioned how much childcare support assisted them in being able to focus on their studies. Some of the women mentioned how difficult it was for them to study or attend classes when they had the added responsibility of childcare. One of the women was a single-parent and noted the difficulty and expense of finding safe and affordable housing. Exploring supports and barriers for student women with children and student single-mother homes might be of interest for further research. Other issues that were raised within this research study that could be further explored could be: gender bias within educational institutions; fostering more effective and respectful communication between professors and students; poverty issues; power issues, specifically within the academic institution; gender and culture; support for the development of women professors and women mentors within universities; and issues of barriers and supports for the mature student.

**Delimitations of the Study**

A delimitation of this study was that the context of the study was a master’s thesis and therefore made it difficult to carry out an in-depth exploration of the findings. In this study, there were numerous channels of potential research identified within the findings, but all those could not be explored within the context of time and size of a master thesis. Another delimitation of this study is that it focused only on mature women, not younger counterparts. Therefore the findings from this study do not address that population base. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this study will add to the field of feminist literature.
Closing

The current research study included 12 women, 6 in the educational process and 6 who had graduated for at least ten years, both groups of women were at least 30 years of age at the time of commencement to their programs. All women were working on obtaining or had obtained their first undergraduate degree as a mature woman student within a mid-sized Canadian university. This research study utilized qualitative interviews and examined the lived experiences of 12 mature women including their perceptions of their experiences, barriers, and supports while obtaining their undergraduate degree.

Historically women have not held the positions of power within higher educational settings, including those of student, professor and administration. However women’s numerical presence has significantly increased both as student and graduate over the past few years. This still has not granted women the position of power from which to impact the higher educational system to favour women’s perspectives. Some universities are still structured around the white, middle-class, single male. Most women do not fit that learning style. Their ways of knowing and learning are different than the androcentric male model through which some universities are still structured. Some women value egalitarian, inclusive models and ones that value their learning from the home and their careers. While women’s career knowledge is somewhat valued within the university setting, their knowledge that they have gathered from their home environments is mostly not valued. Most women students and professors work within the fields of humanities, arts and social sciences. Research dollars are more allocated to fields that economically benefit the private companies. Women, still, have minimal inroads to
science, technology, engineering, and mathematic fields. These fields are still predominately male oriented. With funding not allocated to academic areas where women more predominately reside, the risk is that any gains that women have made in academia seems threatened.

In this research study some women identified that they are still finding similar issues, to women in previous generations, while attempting to obtain an education. Women, in this study, identified multiple role strain, silencing of their knowledge, sexism, poverty, ineffective teaching methods, marginalization, health issues, interrupted paths to education, non-support of their specific needs, ineffective or inappropriate delivery of programs for mature students, non-recognition of their prior learning and the uncertainty of how their programs might benefit them in the future as some of their barriers. Women, in this study, identified male mentors as effective and very supportive to their learning. This countered examined research that stated that women learn more effectively and thrive more with women mentors. Some women, in this study, also identified peer, family and friend support as important to their educational success. Some women in this study identified that smaller campus environments supported them as it made them feel more like they belonged and were a part of a family. This also was identified as a major factor in their educational success. Workplace support in the form of flex-time, financial assistance, and encouragement were also identified as major factors that assisted the women in their educational success. The women, in this study, found their way to university either through an internal desire to develop skills and /or for personal development. They wanted to be more. Other women found their way to the educational environment through the encouragement of a friend, family member or a
member of the university. These women appreciated this guidance. Some participants’ paths to university were not linear but rather were circuitous. However, these women found their way to university. One underlying desire for the women, in this study, was that they wanted to “Make a Difference” in their lives and/or the lives of others. This “Making a Difference” became an ongoing theme that kept the women motivated to move through the degree process. This defined objective of “Making a Difference” became apparent in the women’s lives, their children’s lives, the women’s careers and/or in their communities.
REFERENCES


Cragg, C., Andrusyszyn, M., & Fraser, J. (2005). Sources of support for women taking professional programs by distance education. *Journal of Distance Education,


Appendix A

Ethics Approval

DATE: January 14, 2010

TO: Judy Wright
4003 Gordon Road
Regina, SK S4S 6G6

FROM: Dr. Bruce Plouffe
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Re: Mature Women Returning to University (File # 46S0910)

Please be advised that the University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed your proposal and found it to be:

☐ 1. APPROVED AS SUBMITTED. Only applicants with this designation have ethical approval to proceed with their research as described in their applications. For research lasting more than one year (Section 1F), ETHICAL APPROVAL MUST BE RENEWED BY SUBMITTING A BRIEF STATUS REPORT EVERY TWELVE MONTHS. Approval will be revoked unless a satisfactory status report is received. Any substantive changes in methodology or instrumentation must also be approved prior to their implementation.

☐ 2. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB. **Do not submit a new application.** Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 3. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB. **Do not submit a new application.** Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 4. UNACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. The proposal requires substantial additions or redesign. Please contact the Chair of the REB for advice on how the project proposal might be revised.

Dr. Bruce Plouffe

cc: Dr. Marc Spooner – Faculty of Education

**supplementary memo should be forwarded to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at the Office of Research Services (Research and Innovation Centre, Room 109) or by email to research.ethics@uregina.ca**
Appendix B

Consent Form

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

2009-12-01

You are invited to participate in a Masters of Education thesis study examining the experiences of mature women who are in the process of completing, or who have completed, their first university degree. The purpose of this study will be to explore what you feel are/were your motivations and perceived barriers and supports to completing your degree program.

You would be interviewed at a mutually agreed upon time and asked to provide some background information regarding your own experiences in obtaining your degree.

This interview session (about 1.1 ½ hours) will be audio recorded in order to keep an accurate record of your comments/recommendations. A pseudonym (fake name) of your choosing will be used to help keep your answers confidential. That being said, your anonymity cannot be fully guaranteed.

This project was approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina. If you, the participants have any questions or concerns about your rights or treatment as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at Phone: 306.585.4775 or via Email: research.ethics@uregina.ca.

Your participation is voluntary and you can decide to stop at any time. By choosing to participate or not to participate the level of the services in your degree program (if you are still enrolled in University) will not be affected and your professors will not know whether you are part of this study or not. There are no known risks to participating and the only cost to you will be your time. If you are willing to be part of this session, please sign and date the following agreement.

I AGREE to participate in this Masters of Education thesis study entitled “Mature Women Returning to University”. I have read the above information and understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time. I have received a copy of the Consent Form.
Thesis Supervisor-  Dr. Marc Spooner  
Faculty of Education, University of Regina (585-4538)

Researcher-  Judy Wright  
Faculty of Education, University of Regina (789-3046)
**Appendix C**

**Interview Questions**

### Interview Questions for Qualitative Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question number</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>What discipline is your degree in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>What were the motivating factors that help to determine that you would take a degree?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>How did these factors influence you to take the degree?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>How would you describe your educational experience while taking the degree?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>Where there any support mechanisms in place to assist you through the degree program? If so elaborate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Where there any barriers that you experienced either/or gaining access to the program and/or within the program? If so elaborate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>Has the process of obtaining or completing the degree assisted you in any way? If so explain.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“I’m interested in learning about your experience that relates to your being/been a mature women student, graduating with her first degree.”
Eight  How did you find learning the material, preparing papers, writing exams and completing other requirements to complete the degree?

Nine  Did you have any mentors throughout your university experience? If you did could you describe how this/these persons impacted you? What was the gender/s of this/these person/s?

Ten  Overall how would you say taking the degree has impacted your life?
Appendix D

Demographic Questions

After the interview ended the following demographic questions were asked and participants’ responses were digitally recorded.

“I’m interested in learning about your experience that relates to your being/been a mature women student, graduating with her first degree.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question number</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>What is your gender?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>What is your biological age?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>What faculty are you enrolled through or have you graduated from?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>If you are still enrolled at university what year of the program are you currently in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>If you have graduated from the program what year did you graduate in?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>If you are still in the process of taking your degree how long do you anticipate that it will take you to complete your degree?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>If you have graduated, what year did you graduate in?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If you have graduated how long did it take to complete your degree?