

ABSTRACT

“Better for everybody”: Student-parent experiences of higher education

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The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a successful campaign to increase accessibility of higher education in many industrialised countries. Therefore, the system that was once reserved primarily for the traditional white, middle to upper-class, young adult male, with a well-educated and politically connected father, is now more accessible to a diverse non-traditional student population that includes women, racial and ethnic minorities, and older adult students (Pearce 2017). Research indicates that, for many non-traditional students, financial, social, and emotional complexities that accompany maintaining the roles of parent and student simultaneously can impair their abilities to obtain a degree and, therefore, impair their socio-economic standing (Hoffer & Welch, 2006). These complexities may also affect family. This study explores the experiences of six mature Higher Education (HE) students with dependent children. Using semi-structured interviews the study asks students three research questions: (a) what led the participant to decide on HE while in a caring role, (b) what internal or external criticism or praise has the participant experienced by taking on a dual role of both parent and HE student, and (c) how does the participant deal with the internal, external criticism, praises – the unique challenges of being a mature student and parent? A descriptive interpretive approach connects ideas from different participants to understand their stories (Smythe, 2012). Findings indicated participants’ motivation to undertake HE were: seeing study as a prized possession; their mature age being an advantage; and sufficient support for childcare. Praise from family and staff encouraged them, whereas societal expectations for mothers staying home with very young children was a criticism. Once they decided to study, they gained support from personal and institutional sources to succeed. They also offered advice on how to better support mature student parents. The findings will help develop support for mature-aged students in higher education.

References

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