AN ANALYSIS OF A GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED RETRAINING PROGRAM: IMPLICATIONS TO EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

HOLLY CATALFAMO
Niagara College, Canada

ABSTRACT

The collapse of the global economy in 2008 had a devastating impact on manufacturing and other sectors across Canada. Displaced workers were unprepared for the demands of the new knowledge-based economy and found that they required retraining to secure employment in modern, highly technical workplaces. In Ontario, the introduction of the Second Career (SC) program provided opportunities for laid-off workers to attend college for retraining. Using qualitative methods, this study explores the experience of adult students participating in a government-sponsored retraining program. The findings suggest that adult learners who return to school encounter many challenges, including the need to balance school-life responsibilities, the dynamics of generationally diverse classrooms, significant financial pressures, adaptation to a new postsecondary environment, the need to relearn how to learn, the need for academic upgrading, and bureaucratic processes. In addition, the data reveal significant impacts on SC students, including renewed confidence and hope, a determination not to fail, new skill development, preparation for and connection to employment, establishment of powerful relationships with instructors, and development of a supportive community of peer learners. The data revealed in this study provide important recommendations to key stakeholders with respect to the importance of educational planners creating conditions for success when planning and implementing a school-to-work transition program for displaced workers.

INTRODUCTION

The near collapse of the global economy in 2008 left hundreds of thousands of workers in Canada unemployed. Countless displaced workers were unprepared for the demands of the new knowledge-based economy and discovered that they would need new skills to secure employment in modern, highly technical workplaces. Many displaced workers required an opportunity to retrain for a second career and a second chance. The Ontario government moved rapidly to respond to pressing economic challenges and launched a retraining program that provides financial support to unemployed workers who return to school to train for a new career.

This article presents the results of a study that took place in 2010 at a medium-sized Ontario college. The study examined the experiences of postsecondary students who participated in a government-sponsored retraining initiative known as Second Career (SC). The intent of the research was to add a scholarly contribution to the field of adult learning by documenting the challenges faced by this specific subset of non-traditional adult learners and the impact of the experience on the students themselves. In addition, the article provides implications for educational planners to consider regarding how to enhance the success of retraining programs at colleges. This study contributes to this scholarly field of work by examining a phenomenon that is all too common in contemporary society: the experience of adult learners driven by the need to retrain for a new career who return to a postsecondary educational institution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have been examining the experience of postsecondary students for many decades. This field of study includes understanding the experiences of students who are considered traditional as well as those who are viewed as non-traditional, including adult learners. According to Stokes (2006), traditional students are those who are 18–22 years old, full-time, undergraduate students living on campus. This may in fact represent a dwindling number of students on college campuses across Canada as the demographic landscape is changing rapidly. To situate the examination of the SC students in this study, it is first helpful to explore the rich field of literature examining the challenges faced by adult learners followed by the far less robust field that documents the postsecondary experiences of displaced workers. Displaced workers are those who are over the age of 20 who lost jobs because their organizations closed, there was insufficient work to do, or their positions were abolished (Kalil, 2005). For the purpose of this study, these displaced workers who are retraining for a new career at college may be considered a specific type of adult learner or a subset of the group of learners who return to school as adults.

Although the definition of *adult learners* varies across the literature, for the purpose of this study, Kasworm's (2003) definition was adopted. She defined *adult students* using the following criteria: (a) age (25 years or older); (b) maturity and developmental complexity acquired from life responsibilities, perspectives, and financial independence; and (c) responsible and often competing sets of adult roles that reflect work, family, community, and student commitments. A growing number of postsecondary students in the United States and Canada are over the age of 25 (Brookfield, 1999; Kasworm, 2003; Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001; Whisnant, Sullivan, & Slayton, 1992). These older students face different challenges from those students who are much younger and are also recent graduates from high school (Rautopuro & Vaisanen, 2001). Deggs (2011) believed that the needs of adult learners in higher education are complex, as are the challenges of institutions in meeting the needs of those students. Furthermore, to address these needs, it may be more challenging for staff in postsecondary institutions because adult learners "are in a different place in life and view the world and their future differently" (Kasworm, 2003, p. 9).

The seminal work of Patricia Cross (1981) and additional theoretical frameworks provide an important foundation for this study. They help to provide a better understanding of the challenges faced by adult learners. Followed by this literature, the specific challenges encountered by displaced workers when returning to school will be presented. Cross (1981) described three primary barriers to adult learning: dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers. *Dispositional barriers* are the attitudes and perceptions adults hold about themselves as learners. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) suggested that an individuals' perceptions about learning and learning experiences may prevent them from engaging in a learning experience.

Situational barriers are those that arise from a learner's situation in life at any given time (Cross, 1981). This may include a lack of time for the adult learner to participate in learning activities because of multiple responsibilities (Cross, 1981; Cupp, 1991). Other situational barriers may include (a) the lack of child care for young parents, (b) the lack of financial support for low income individuals or families, and (c) the lack of transportation for geographically isolated learners.

Institutional barriers include institutional practices that discourage or exclude participation in learning and development (Cross, 1981; Cupp, 1991). A study published by Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada (2001) found that adult participation in higher education was limited because organizations are not accessible to students because of inconvenient scheduling times and a lack of financial support.

Additional research has suggested that adult learners do, in fact, encounter many challenges when returning to school. Brookfield (1999) described the feeling of *impostership* reported by some adult students who, at some deeply embedded level, sense that they neither have the talent nor the right to become college students. Sissel et al. (2001) suggested that adult students are often viewed as invisible and lesser important than traditional core students. The authors further stated that marginalization occurs as services, programs, and policies for adults are typically delivered as peripheral add-ons with limited funding by student services personnel who are not in key power and advocacy roles (Sissel et al., 2001).

It is also important to consider the specific circumstances of the adult learner who has faced job loss and is returning to college for retraining. Cavaco, Fougere, and Pouget (2010) described *worker displacement* as an "involuntary job separation caused by adverse economic conditions. In this case, the job separation is initiated by the employer and not caused by the individual worker's performance" (p. 264). Many displaced workers have returned to college to meet the demands of the employment market as jobs have become increasingly complex and new occupations require new skills (Simmons, 1995). Wisman and Pacitti (2014) argued that the traditional model of education and training in which future workers receive their education when young and that any future reskilling occurs within the workplace is no longer adequate in a work world where skills are continually becoming antiquated.

Statistics Canada completed a study that demonstrated potentially substantial benefits of education for displaced workers (Frenette, Upward, & Wright, 2011). Retraining of displaced workers can provide individuals with new skills that are in greater demand and also provide impressive social returns (Lalonde & Sullivan, 2010). Community colleges have played an increasingly important role in worker retraining in the last 30 years (Jacobson, Lalonde, & Sullivan, 2004). Canadian colleges have an important role to play in economic development and sustainability. The Association of Canadian Community Colleges (2011), now Colleges and Institutes Canada (CiCan), argued that they "support business growth and sustainability by supplying graduates with advanced skills, re-skilling displaced employees, offering customized education, and providing applied research and development support" (p. 1). Although more and more workers are returning to colleges, Simmons (1995) argued that "little is known about how workers in retraining fare in the community college environment" (p. 48). However, some studies have examined the benefits of retraining by analyzing the impacts of college schooling on displaced workers' earnings (Jacobson et al., 2004; Jacobson, Lalonde, & Sullivan, 2005).

It also could be argued that adults who return to school after job displacement or layoff face a unique set of circumstances and are driven by the need to retrain for financial survival. Job loss often affects families and children by threatening economic security and resulting in families reducing their food expenditures, moving, and sometimes relying on public assistance (Kalil, 2005). Brand (2014) argued that the impact of job loss is not limited to economic decline but is also associated with considerable, long-term noneconomic consequences for

displaced workers as well as their families and communities. Job loss also may affect adults' physical and mental health and marital relationships (Bernes, 2004; Brand, 2014; Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2009b; Kalil, 2005). Wisman (2010) argued that economic, social, and emotional well-being are tied to one's having a job. Therefore, although adult learners differ from traditional-aged students in colleges, it could be argued that adult learners who have faced the disruption of job displacement face additional challenges including acute stress that may lead to psychological challenges that often compound financial struggles. More needs to be done to improve the understanding of adult students and their needs with respect to instructional strategies and institutional practices (Donaldson & Rentfro, 2006; Rautopuro & Vaisanen, 2001).

RATIONALE

This study sought to examine the experience of displaced workers who return to school at college by examining a government-sponsored retraining program known as *Second Career*. The research is intended to examine the challenges and impacts experienced by those who participated in this program. The rationale for this study is rooted in the convergence of two situations: the economic challenges that drive the need for new knowledge and skills, and the increasing number of adult learners who inhabit postsecondary campuses. The economic downturn that began in 2008 and the resultant job losses have created interest in the outcomes of displaced workers (Cavaco et al., 2010; Frenette et al., 2011). The CCL (2009b) recognized that to reduce vulnerability as a nation, Canada needs "a skilled and flexible workforce capable of adapting to continuous economic change" (p. 1). Furthermore, the key to such a workforce is a genuine commitment to continuous lifelong learning and workplace training. As part of an economic recovery plan in Canada, federal and provincial governments have modified or introduced government-sponsored educational opportunities to help displaced workers retrained for new careers. Research is needed to understand the experience of these transitioning workers and the impact of these programs from various perspectives. This qualitative study presents findings on the SC phenomenon, the personal voice and subjective experience of the adult learner and, uniquely, the displaced worker-turned-student.

CONTEXT

In 2008, following six years of strong employment growth, Canada's labour force appeared to be in a strong position (CCL, 2009b). As the world economy faltered during the last quarter of 2008 and the first five months of 2009, Canada lost approximately 363,000 jobs. Ontario's once dominant manufacturing sector witnessed significant decline as facilities closed throughout the province, resulting in widespread job loss. In response to growing concerns about economic stability, governments in Canada introduced programs to support individuals who had lost their jobs. The Government of Ontario designed and initiated the Second Career strategy, originally a $355 million investment over three years to help approximately 20,000 unemployed workers obtain long-term training for new and better careers (CLC 2009b). By June of 2010, more than 28,000 participants had participated in the SC program and funding was committed for an additional 30,000 unemployed workers (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2010b). "The objective of the SC program is to provide laid-off, unemployed individuals with skills training to help them find employment in occupations with demonstrated labour market prospects in Ontario" (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2012, p. 5). The program provided up to $28,000 to laid-off workers

for tuition, books, resources, transportation, and, in some cases, a living allowance. However, qualification was based on an eligibility-and-suitability assessment that takes into account a complex array of factors (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2010a). Workers in retraining were permitted to attend both public and private career colleges. At the time of the study, the majority of students selected one of the 24 publicly funded colleges in Ontario (F. Allan, personal communication, May 14, 2010).

This study took place at a medium-sized Ontario college, with approximately 8,000 students during the academic year 2009/2010. The study began in the winter of 2010 at which time there were a total of 578 students participating in the SC program at the study college. Tracking of SC graduates had not been established by the college; therefore, the data are limited to those who were in the process of their 1-year certificate, 2-year diploma, or 1-year graduate certificate programs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article presents the data from qualitative interviews that took place with key stakeholder groups: SC students and college staff (i.e., support staff, faculty, and administrators). Qualitative research provides insight into people's lives, their stories, and behaviour and provides an opportunity to examine organizations and relationships (Bouma & Atkinson, 1997). The qualitative approach was chosen as it was viewed as important to gain an understanding of the experience using the participants' perspectives and how they made sense of their world (Merriam, 1998).

The ethics review process required by the study college was observed with absolute diligence. Upon clearance from the Research Ethics Board, research participants were invited to participate in a qualitative interview via an email distributed to all SC students enrolled at the study college, as well as all college staff. It was made clear to all prospective participants that their involvement would be voluntary and that all interviews would be confidential. Ultimately, 20 students and 15 college employees (including support staff, administrators, and faculty) agreed to participate.

The interview participants were asked to describe the challenges faced and impacts experienced by SC students. They also were asked to provide recommendations for governments, the college, and future SC students. The interview guides for all stakeholder groups were semi structured. Open-ended questions asked of participants to provide rich descriptive details.

Interviews took place in mutually agreed-upon confidential locations. These locations included quiet rooms in the library for students and privately located staff offices. The interviews flowed well according to agreed-upon time lines and participants were extremely generous in sharing their stories. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded, with the consent of the participant, and transcribed. Detailed notes of each interview were kept by the principal researcher conducting the interviews. Detailed transcripts were compared with notes taken by the principal researcher. In terms of analysis, the researcher became immersed in the participants' experiences by reviewing the tapes several times and then engaging in a time of quiet reflection. This is referred to by Moustakas (1994) as a *period of contemplation*. Patterns and connections between interview data were identified and several key themes emerged.

Interview participants thoroughly reviewed an informed consent that included an explanation of the study. There was no perceived risk on the part of the participants. No mental, physical, or social harm would result from the study. The participants voluntarily participated in the study and were provided the opportunity to decline to answer any questions that they did not feel comfortable answering. Participants were informed that they may withdraw from the study at any time during the study and that they would be provided access to results. They were also informed that the transcripts of the interviews would be maintained in a secure location for two years after the completion of the study, after which the data were destroyed.

RESULTS

The results of the study are organized according to themes considered to be important to the evaluation. McCracken (1988), in his discussion of interview data analysis, suggested that observation, multiple reviews of transcript data, and reflection reveal patterns or themes. The themes include the challenges faced and the impacts felt by SC students during their return-to-school experience as well as recommendations for stakeholder groups.

Challenges Faced by SC Students

Theme 1: Balancing school-life responsibilities. One of the biggest challenges faced by SC students during their postsecondary experience was the difficulty of balancing school responsibilities with life demands outside the college. Cross (1981) suggested that adult learners often have a lack of time to participate in learning activities because of the challenge of balancing home responsibilities. One participant stated, "I enjoy interacting with fellow students and learning new things . . . but it's been a challenge, partially because of my age, and also because I have family responsibilities at home, so it's kind of tough balancing the two." Another described the stress that he experienced as a result of the substantial academic workload and responsibilities at home:

> The homework has been just phenomenal and this has caused a lot of stress. . . I always strive to do well and it's caused a lot of stress. Not to the point there's a break-up or divorce, but, just a lot of stress.

An additional aspect of balancing school-life responsibilities is the proliferation of group work in most college programs. SC students found it very difficult to integrate meetings for group work into their delicately balanced and demanding schedules.

> Every class has these group projects. As a Second Career student, as an older person with a family, kids, and responsibilities, I can't meet people willy-nilly or stay late after class. . . I have other responsibilities. My wife works full-time and I cannot dump everything off on her. It's the logistics of it. It's so much. We have breaks between classes, and I use those breaks. But, I can't meet with three different groups in a 1-to-2-hour break.

Despite the significant challenge of balancing multiple roles, adult learners have been found to be extremely resilient in conquering these obstacles, often demonstrating the life skills of time management, clarity of purpose, and remarkable persistence (Chartrand, 1992).

Theme 2: Classroom-related generational diversity. Participants described the challenge of being an older, more mature student in a classroom of younger learners. This theme of classroom-related generational diversity is significant. Swail (2006) found that adult

learners sometimes experience bias, prejudice, and even isolation. "I find a little bit of distance there; it would have been nice if there were more people my age in the class. I get along with them fine; you just don't get really close to them." Some students found the generational mix to be amusing as is illustrated by this quote: "I know some of the teachers seem to be happy to have somebody their own age; they make jokes about *Starsky and Hutch*, and we laugh, and the other kids go, what are they talking about?" Others, however, found the mix of generations and the use of technology among younger learners to be somewhat frustrating:

> They talk all through class and it drives me crazy. . . [The professor] tries to get them to shut up . . . but you know, they still do it and they still sit and text on their phones; you know it is just really distracting. I'm here to learn. I need to. I can't afford to pay back the tuition. I've got to pass and I want to get the benefit from the class.

Marston (2007) stated that technology is like a freedom tool for Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) and Millenials (born after 1980). It enables them to work faster so they can get back to what is important to them: their outside lives. Those who have observed undergraduate classroom behaviour may argue that technology has integrated the "outside lives" of students into the postsecondary classroom from their use of cell phones, constant connection to the Internet, and social networking.

Theme 3: Financial demands. The financial challenge of returning to school was found to be significant for participants. SC funding is means-tested, and a thorough projection of expenses is critical for inclusion in the funding allocation. If an expense was not identified in the application process, participants found it difficult to receive reimbursement after the fact:

> The college needs to realize the financial constraints on a lot of Second Career students. There are expenses of going back to school beyond parking. . . There's an expense to use the colour printers. They're cheap, but, I didn't know of any of these extra costs.

Another student described the difficulty that she experienced in transitioning from what she viewed to be a very decent income to contributing to the support of her family while being at college:

> The hardest thing in our family has been the financial aspect. I went from making over $50,000 a year to making very little every week and my four kids are in a variety of universities and colleges. The financial impact has been staggering.

Kasworm (2003) reported that the most significant challenges and stresses for adult learners relate to their financial fragility.

Theme 4: Transition to school (adapting to a NEW postsecondary environment). In the past 40 years, colleges have changed dramatically as a result of the use of computers and other new technologies that have altered the ways in which people work and learn (Levin, 2001). Students who are not knowledgeable and savvy with computer technologies find themselves at a significant disadvantage. Participants commented that they often felt marginalized and others noted a serious academic disadvantage from a lack of computer skills:

> There was this one incident with one of the Second Career students. I guess this guy. . . was falling behind and [the professor] said, "Well, you are handing in all your assign-

> ments but your e-classes, your Blackboard work, you're missing those assignments. He goes, "I'm in here, in your class every day. There's nothing on the Blackboard." He hadn't a clue that Blackboard was a computer program.

Levin (2001) observed that work that was enhanced by computers in the 1980s, such as written communications, became unimaginable without computers in the 1990s. He further noted that Web-based instruction and interactive video have begun to replace traditional classroom instruction. Deggs (2011) also argued that technology, in particular, presents a challenge that permeates the adult learning experience in postsecondary education: "Most academic and student support systems have a technological interface" (p. 1540).

Theme 5: Anxiety regarding the return-to-school experience. Participants detailed the anxiety they experienced regarding their return-to-school experience, particularly during the first few weeks of arriving on campus. Donaldson and Graham (1999) noted that adult learners experience anxiety about returning to school. One participant stated,

> You know, maybe the first week . . . you drive in the driveway and you go, "Okay, I've gotta go find my classes." And, I'm looking around, wide-eyed; your stomach is doing flip-flops because you don't know what you are getting yourself into.

This student further described her doubt about the life choices that she had made:

> You know, I'd be walking out to the car and it's snowing and it would be 4:30, 5:00 in the afternoon and I'd be just leaving, and . . . I have the attitude like, what the hell am I doing here?

Some students spoke of their feeling of being overwhelmed and intimidated, and others expressed anxiety about their own abilities and not wanting to slow down the pace of instruction for others:

> I haven't been in school for so long, plus, I feel like I don't think that I am smart enough. . . . I don't want to keep asking a lot of questions, and I don't want to ask every two minutes and interrupt the other kids that are learning. That's just slowing them down.

Anxiety can play a large role in resistance to learning. Van Veslor, Moxley, and Bunker (2004) suggested that some individuals resist learning experiences because of inertia and anxiety. It is important to recognize that displaced workers may experience anxiety within the classroom, which may add to additional psychological stressors they face as a result of being a displaced worker.

Theme 6: Relearning how to learn. Cross (1992) identified dispositional barriers, including the belief that some adults feel that they are too old to learn. Donaldson and Graham (1999) reported that adult learners state that they do, in fact, have rusty study skills. Noe and Peacock (2008) stated that there is biological evidence that certain mental capacities decrease as individuals age, particularly short-term memory and the speed at which people process information. One participant noted: "The energy level and memory retention; it isn't what it used to be 30 years ago."

Kasworm (1999) reported that adult students experienced dichotomies between "academic learning - learning in the classroom which included theory and memorization" and "real-world learning – learning which was directly part of the adult's daily actions in the world"

(p. 9). One participant described the difficulty she experienced in recalling information and sitting for what she viewed to be long lectures:

> It's a challenge, retaining the information. I can study, study, study, and then the next day I feel like you ask me a question on what I spent the day studying yesterday and I don't always remember. . . The 2- and 3-hour lectures are murder.

Although adult learners are concerned about being too old to learn and sometimes demonstrate a lack of confidence in their academic abilities, research has demonstrated that it is important for educators to create opportunities for early successes and to generate confidence (Ross-Gordon, 2003).

Theme 7: The need for academic upgrading. Simmons (1995) identified the need for strong basic skills to facilitate rapid progress or integration into occupational programs. Computer literacy, in particular, was found to be necessary for transition into new, high wage occupations. "My computer skills are a little bit old, and, my typing is like negative five words per minute. I didn't take computer upgrading first. . . I'm not bad at it now, but, it was like shell shock when I first started." An instructor echoed these concerns: "Well, the technical skills, the math skills, these are challenges that [SC students] are facing." Simmons (1995) suggested that such skills are needed not only for classroom success but also to succeed in the workplace.

Theme 8: Dealing with bureaucracy. Cross (1981) suggested that institutional practices become barriers and procedures that discourage adults from fully participating in educational activates. More recently, Swail (2006) reported that adult learners are challenged by the bureaucratic processes encountered during their academic journey.

The present study identified the bureaucratic impediments encountered by SC students as generally outside the scope of the college campus. Funding requests for SC are submitted to the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU) for approval, after initially being vetted through an employment agency located in the participant's community. SC students identified frustration with bureaucratic processes established by the provincial government and noted that certain rules made them feel child-like and devalued.

> We have to trot up to our teachers, like children, to have an attendance form signed. I've been in charge of multimillion dollar projects, and now I've got to go to you and say, can you sign my attendance form please?

Research has suggested that adult students are more aware of institutional impediments and are more likely to perceive barriers to access than traditional-age students (Kortesoja, 2009).

Impacts on SC Students

Theme 1: Renewed confidence and hope. SC students spoke of the great hardship they had experienced as a result of the 2008 recession and noted that the SC program provided them with a renewed sense of confidence and hope. "[The program] has given a lot of people that were at the end of their rope, a direction that they can follow . . . something that [will help them] pull themselves out of the hole." Other participants described the hope they felt as a result of their participation in the SC program:

> [The program] helped me a lot; it gave me hope. This school gave me a future. I am a much happier person now than I used to be; so, it really moved me. I would say it did change my life.

Another participant said, "[The program] has given me more confidence. I think that I had lost that little edge that I used to have." Others contrasted their experience in the working world with their new role as a SC student, describing a newly found energy: "Coming back here, I felt reinvigorated. There's a lot of life in being a student and this is something that you don't get so much in industry." Others described the anxiety they felt until they received an indication that they were on track academically and highlighted the importance of providing learners with feedback in a timely manner. "I finally was getting feedback from marks and I did well. That gave me the confidence to continue, 'cause at that point, I was just ready to chuck the whole thing in, cut my losses, and run like hell!" These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Cupp (1991), who asserted that adult learners perceived a positive impact on their self-image as a result of their educational experience.

Theme 2: Determination not to fail. Participants spoke of their determination *not* to fail and their need to succeed. From a financial perspective, there was the concern that should they not be successful, they would be required to pay back the monies provided to them by the provincial government. Anecdotally, it was not clear from the research (or the funding documents) whether this was, in fact, the case. More importantly, from an emotional perspective, participants spoke of their personal need to be successful and accomplish the goal they had set for themselves: "[The program] has given me another challenge that I don't want to fail. . . . I've been given this opportunity." This finding is consistent with other research whereby dislocated workers have been found to apply their work ethic to go to college and are willing to work long hours in exchange for rapid progress toward reemployment (Simmons, 1995). Such determination creates significant pressure on adult students who are likely to view a poor grade as an indication of personal failure accompanied by a significant reduction in self-esteem (Saunders, 2009).

Theme 3: Skill development. SC students reported that they had developed important skills that greatly improved their prospects for future employment. The CCL (2009c) stated that substantially more occupations require higher levels of education and training to meet the demands of a continuously expanding knowledge-based economy. One participant stated, "I learned skills from the program like communication skills and how to write letters." CCL (2009b) suggested that higher levels of skill development acquired from education and training "act as protective factors in times of economic instability and may contribute to improved employment prospects, income levels, health, and integration within communities and society" (p. 7).

Theme 4: Preparation for and connection to employment (with cautious optimism). An additional theme that emerged was related to the notion that participation in the SC program prepared adult students for and connected them to employment. Skolnik (2004) stated that the purpose of colleges is to pursue, among other objectives, an economic societal goal by preparing people to be productive workers in professional and other occupations. One participant stated, "I feel very, very confident that I have learned what I need to know to go out into the work force again." Others were cautiously optimistic about obtaining a job in their newly chosen careers, expressing some concern about the existence of ageism.

> I'm hoping my time in school has given the economy time to bring the job situation back so when I graduate, there will be something there. I think my chances have

> improved dramatically because I have more to put on my resume. My only fear is my age. They may take younger people because of ageism.

Despite these fears, participants were determined to stick with their programs, graduate, and seek out new employment opportunities. Work-related goals are clearly important to adult students in formal postsecondary education (Kortesoja, 2009).

Theme 5: Academic success: Obtaining a postsecondary credential. One theme that emerged from the data was the recognition by most SC students of the significance and importance of earning a postsecondary diploma. One stated, "I think that one of the advantages is definitely to have that certificate in today's world. I think it means a lot to people today; that will be the reason my resume goes in one pile or the other." Adult students perceive value in postsecondary and vocational credential programs beyond that of the specific instructional material (Kortesoja, 2009).

Theme 6: Relationships with instructors. Educators have a crucial role to play in student success, often related to the relationship they establish with their students. Educators' view of students affects how and what educators teach, to whom, and whether they value and respect students' life experiences, perspectives, and participation (Sissel et al., 2001). SC students in this study commented on the valuable role played by their instructors as facilitators of student learning: "They have been very helpful. I think a lot of the teachers have really appreciated people with experience to give real examples in the class." "[This college] is all about success: student success. [My professors] have truly gone above and beyond." Additional comments recognized the importance of providing additional support to students and of making appropriate referrals if needed: "Most of the teachers I have had are very nice and helpful, like, they'll put in the time after class if you need help, they'll be there. . . If you need a peer tutor, they will suggest that for you." Participants commented on how important it was to their learning to be treated in a dignified, respectful manner and how this has contributed to their success as adult students: "The teachers, they treat us like individuals. They teach you respect. You give them respect and they give you respect back." Ely (1997) suggested that, for adult learners, the key to persistence is social integration facilitated by faculty and faculty's role in creating a sense of kinship. O'Neill and Thomson (2013) indicated that the quality of the faculty-student relationship has significant impact on the adult learner and that when students believe that their instructor has a genuine concern for them and their academic success, it has a positive effect on them.

Theme 7: A community of peer learners. A final theme relates to the emergence of peer-learning communities. Adult learning theory documents the high value placed on the development of a sense of group membership (Ausburn, 2004).

> [It's] been really helpful that there are other Second Career people so I have someone to relate to and don't feel totally out of place. . . It's been really nice being with some of my own age group and we have similar struggles and we can relate to each other.

Another student commented on how important his peer group became to him when faced with a difficult life event during his program of study:

> I know that it has helped me to get through things since my wife passed away, because there is more or less a feeling of community here. It's hard to put a label on it, but I guess that would be the best way to describe it.

Participants in this study spoke openly about the importance of the relationships they built with peers during their SC experience.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

The study participants were given an opportunity to provide advice or recommendations regarding the program. This data, along with the findings related to challenges and impacts, reveal significant implications for educational planners, including governments, broker agencies, and college administrators.

Implication 1: The Importance of Continuing the Program

When government is planning educational initiatives, school-to-work transition programs should be included in their strategic planning efforts. Study participants strongly encouraged the province of Ontario to maintain the SC program. A senior administrator commented how important it was to "keep the program going; tweak it with lessons learned because it is important, not just for these individuals. It's important for future economic growth as well." CCL (2009a) indicated that the need to increase access to postsecondary education for underrepresented groups, including students from low-income backgrounds, is driven by both social justice and economic imperatives.

Implication 2: Labour Market Planning as a Key Requirement of School-to-Work Transition Programs

Government planning should include extensive labour market research regarding in-demand jobs in the economy and those programs which are most likely to produce skilled graduates. It is critical that funded students carefully research the labour market for highly needed jobs in the workforce and that broker agencies plan with students regarding their career suitability and available college programs. Simmons (1995) stressed the importance of strong career counselling and entry assessment programs in her study of a worker retraining program design for dislocated workers in community college programs. One participant noted the importance of research: "Do a little more digging into it; find more details to maybe see what they expect to get into." For many SC students, the job market had changed dramatically since the last time they looked for a job.

Implication 3: Create and Implement Communication Plans

Communication must be woven into the planning process at both the provincial and college level. There is a need to communicate information about SC, and other school-to-work transition programs, to all stakeholders, particularly current and prospective SC students. Research has demonstrated that the information received by displaced workers facilitates their job search and constitutes a valuable benefit of attending a community college (Jacobson et al., 2005). Jacobson et al. (2005) stated that they doubted that most dislocated workers receive reliable information about the benefits and costs of attending school and that imparting accurate information helps displaced workers make better training and retraining decisions.

Implication 4: Plan Professional Development Interventions for Staff

As part of the implementation planning efforts, plans must be made for effective professional development within colleges; educating all staff by providing learning experiences development related to how to best support adult learners in the college environment. One faculty member observed:

> When the program started, it would have been helpful to have a workshop educating me on the SC program and providing [faculty] with strategies to support these individuals most effectively. I think I'm doing okay, but, training would be good.

When considering various methods by which to improve instruction quality, professional development stands out as the most important. This requires leadership, strategic planning, and resources (Beder & Medina, 2001). Also included in the suite of professional development opportunities should be the importance of teachers' demonstrating compassion to SC students, many of whom had been through tumultuous life experiences. One support staff indicated how important it was to:

> Put yourself in their position and think about what you would need. Show compassion, be understanding. Don't slap them in the face and say . . . it's not up to me or it's not in my contract. Remember, there but for the grace of God go I!

Brookfield (1999) documented the anxieties, fears, and concerns often felt by adult learners upon their return to postsecondary education. Planning ways to create an atmosphere of genuine caring and compassion will have the impact of fostering a positive climate within the classroom and beyond.

Implication 5: Plan for Academic and Skill Upgrading

During the planning process, it is essential to include processes that will offer adult learners in school-to-work transition programs academic upgrades as required, particularly in the areas of basic literacy, math, and computer skills. Participants recommended that the college provide training opportunities prior to entry into the program. "Get [SC students] into a classroom and just invite them in as a group. . . Give them a seminar on computers." Simmons (1995) argued that for dislocated workers in particular, strong basic skills are needed not only to be persistent in their studies but also to succeed in the workplace" (p. 55).

Implication 6: Plan and Develop Learning Communities

Colleges should consider the research on the benefits of learning communities and plan to create such communities to enhance the postsecondary experience for adult learners. Lundberg (2003) found that peer relationships contribute strongly to learning for both older and traditional-aged students. One senior administrator observed,

> They've organized as a support network [a student club] . . . many have kids. . . I thought it was really interesting to see the club out there in the hallway. It was very impressive.

Such kinship is believed to have a positive impact on retention rates. Bailey and Alfonso (2005) found that learning communities have a positive effect on persistence and graduation rates.

DISCUSSION

The data in this study revealed significant challenges and impacts faced by adult students returning to school for retraining after job displacement. Two themes in particular are worthy of further exploration. First, SC students have returned to school as a result of experiencing a traumatic life event (i.e., job displacement). Studies have shown that one's being laid off from a job creates significant stress on the worker and his/her family (Bernes, 2004; CCL, 2009b; Kalil, 2005). Many participants in this study faced financial and emotional challenges

associated with being laid off more than once during their careers. Several had also faced further emotional hardship such as the loss of a loved one or separation/divorce. The emotional turmoil of life circumstances coupled with a return to school exacerbates the student's stress level. Despite these challenges, the researcher found their determination to be inspirational.

Second, transitioning to a modern, highly technologically focused, postsecondary environment is a far different experience than would have been encountered even 10 years ago (Levin, 2001). Multigenerational classrooms now integrate Web-based learning platforms, such as Wikis, blogs, online discussion threads, online project teams, and many others. In addition, educators must deal with laptops, cell phones, and other technological devices that have the potential to support learning, but, more often than not, distract students with seductive applications such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, video games, and text messaging. Adult learners must ramp up and adapt to their new learning environments or they will quickly be left behind.

The impact of the SC program on participants is also significant. Displaced workers often experience diminished self-confidence and develop feelings of inadequacy (Bernes, 2004) and a decline in participation in social participation, particularly in those workers between the ages of 35 and 53 (Brand & Burgard, 2007). This condition magnifies as the individual remains unemployed. SC students are typically unemployed for a minimum of six months. They have suffered both emotional and financial diminishment from this experience. Their gaining a community of peers at college provides them with a new support system with encouragement ("you can do it"), collegiality ("I'm not in this alone"), and academic peer coaching or peer tutoring ("let's help each other") when required. Brookfield (1999) encouraged institutions to develop peer-learning communities that may be significantly more important for adults who have returned to school after the trauma of job displacement than for traditional-aged students. More exploration into how job displacement trauma influences the academic experience and how peer learning communities support adult learners would be helpful.

When examining the implications for educational planning for governments, broker agencies, and colleges, it is important to consider the impact such programs have on individuals, families, and the broader communities. SC presented to displaced workers a second chance for career success. Canadian colleges are also considered by some to be the "labour market trainers of choice, key to adult re-training and re-skilling" (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2008, p.1). Labour market planning is key to the success of school-to-work transition programs and should be woven into the planning processes by government, broker agencies, and colleges. The creation and execution of communication plans provides consistent and relevant information to all stakeholders including future and existing students, employment agencies, and college staff. Planning for meaningful professional development interventions provides college staff with tools and strategies to support this unique group of adult learners. Planning academic and skill upgrading prior to beginning a program has significant impact on student academic success, particularly for those who have been out of school for an extended period of time. Finally, colleges that plan and support learning communities for adult learners provide a positive and safe space for their adult learners. These adult learners have been shown to benefit greatly from establishing peer relationships with those who share similar experiences and face common challenges related to their life circumstances.

LIMITATIONS

Potential limitations of this research relate to sample size and the legitimacy of generalizing conclusions. Because of the relatively small sample size, the data may be related to the specific participants and to their experiences and, as such, no generalizations can be made. A qualitative study provides insight into people's lives, stories, and behaviour and an opportunity to examine organizations and relationships (Bouma & Atkinson, 1997). One concern was whether the SC students interviewed would be reluctant to participate in the study because of their academic and personal workload. To address this concern, participants were invited to participate in a completely voluntary process, interview times were scheduled around their timetables, and every effort was made respect their time. The researcher found that participants were eager to share their stories and provided rich descriptive detail of their experiences.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study examined the experience of one Ontario college. This study could be extended to the remaining 23 publicly funded colleges across Ontario to create a rich data set with which to compare SC experiences across Ontario colleges. Follow-up research with those who have graduated from SC programs would be helpful to examine the success of this school-to-work transition program in supporting job and life success. It would also be interesting to drill deeper into the experiences of displaced workers to determine the extent to which a job layoff influences their return-to-school experiences. As indicated, few studies have explored the influence of job displacement on people retraining for new employment. Are these students significantly different from adult learners who return to school for other reasons? Such research would enlighten educators and perhaps provide strategies to help enhance the experience of students who have suffered from job loss and the accompanying emotional and financial struggle.

REFERENCES

Association of Community Colleges. (2008). Canada's crisis in advanced skills: A submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance Pre-Budget Consultations. Association of Community Colleges: Ottawa. Retrieved from http://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/wp-content/uploads/archive/briefs-memoires/200808_finance.pdf

Association of Community Colleges. (2011). Driving Canada's long-term prosperity: A submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance Pre-Budget Consultations. Association of Community Colleges: Ottawa. Retrieved from http://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/wp-content/uploads/archive/briefs-memoires/201108_FinanceBrief.pdf

Ausburn, L. (2004). Gender and learning strategy differences in nontraditional adult students' design preferences in hybrid distance courses. *The Journal of Interactive Online Learning, 3*(2), 1–17.

Bailey, T. R., & Alfonso, M. (2005, January). *Paths to persistence: An analysis of research on program effectiveness at community colleges.* New York, NY: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Beder, H., & Medina, P. (2001). *Classroom dynamics in adult literacy education*. Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), Harvard University Graduate School of Education.

Bernes, K. (2004). *Helping people to deal with the traumatic effects of organizational downsizing and change.* NATCON papers 2004.

Bouma, G. D., & Atkinson, G. B. J. (1997). *A handbook of social science research.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Brand, J. E. (2014). The Far-Reaching Impact of Job Loss and Unemployment. California Centre for Population Research On-Line Working Paper Series. Retrieved from: http://papers.ccpr.ucla.edu/papers/PWP-CCPR-2014-011/PWP-CCPR-2014-011.pdf.

Brand, J. E., & Burgard, S. A. (2007). *Effects of job displacement on social participation: Findings over the life course of a cohort of joiners.* Population Studies Center (Research Report No. 07-623). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.

Brookfield, S. (1999, January-February). What is college really like for adult students? *About Campus,* 10–15.

Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). (2009a). *Lessons in learning: Post-secondary education in Canada: Who is missing out?* Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council on Learning.

Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). (2009b*). Securing prosperity through Canada's human infrastructure: The state of adult learning and workplace training in Canada.* Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council on Learning.

Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). (2009c). *Up to par: The challenge of demonstrating quality in post-secondary education.* Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council on Learning.

Cavaco, S., Fougere, D., & Pouget, J. (2010). Estimating the effect of a retraining program on the re-employment rate of displaced workers. *Empirical Economics, 44*(1), 261–287.

Chartrand, J. M. (1992). A causal analysis to predict the personal and academic adjustment of non-traditional students. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, *37*(1), 65–73.

Cross, P. (1981). *Adults as learners: Increasing participation and facilitating learning.* London, UK: Jossey-Bass.

Cupp, L. (1991, October). *Acquiring new perspectives: The impact of education on adult students in a traditional university.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Montreal, Quebec.

Darkenwald, G. C., & Merriam, S. B. (1982). *Adult education: Foundation of practices*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.

Deggs, D. (2011). Contextualizing the perceived barriers of adult learners in an accelerated undergraduate degree program. *The Qualitative Report*, *16*(6), 1540–1553.

Donaldson, J. F., & Graham, S. (1999). A model of college outcomes for adults. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *50*(1), 24–40.

Donaldson, J. F., & Rentfro, A. L. (2006, October). *Adult undergraduates in the adult education literature: Mainstream or marginal.* Paper presented at the Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, University of Missouri, St. Louis, MO.

Ely, E. E. (1997, April). *The non-traditional student*. Paper presented at the American Association of Community Colleges Annual Conference, Anaheim, CA.

Frenette, M., Upward, R., & Wright, P. W. (2011). *The Long-term earnings impact of Post-secondary education following job loss*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada.

Jacobson, L., LaLonde, R., & Sullivan, D. (2004, February). *Estimating the returns to community college schooling for displaced workers.* IZA Discussion Paper No. 1017.

Jacobson, L., LaLonde, R., & Sullivan, D. (2005, October). *Do displaced workers benefit from community college courses: Findings from administrative data and directions for future research.* Paper presented at the conference on the Effects of Community Colleges on the Earnings of Displaced Workers.

Kalil, A. (2005, July/August). Unemployment and job displacement: The impact on families and children. *Ivey Business Journal,* 1–5.

Kasworm, C. (2003). Adult meaning making in the undergraduate classroom. *Adult Education Quarterly, 53*(2), 81–98.

Kasworm, C. (2003b). Setting the stage: Adults in higher education. In D. Kilgore, & P. J. Rice (Eds.), *Meeting the special needs of adult students: New directions for student services.* (pp. 17–28). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Kortesoja, S. L. (2009). Postsecondary choices of non-traditional-age students: Non-credit courses or a credential program? *The Review of Higher Education, 33*(1), 37–65.

Lalonde, R., & Sullivan, D. (2010). Retraining displaced workers. *Policy Brief.* The Hamilton Project, Washington. Retrieved from http://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/legacy/files/downloads_and_links/10_displaced_workers_lalonde.pdf

Levin, J. (2001). *Globalizing the community college: Strategies for change in the 21st century.* New York, NY: Palgrave.

Lundberg, C. A. (2003). The influence of time-limitations, faculty, and peer relationships on adult student learning: A causal model. *The Journal of Higher Education, 74*(6), 665–688.

Marston, C. (2007). *Motivating the "what's in it for me?" workforce: Manage across the generational divide and increase profits.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

McCracken, G. (1988). *The long interview.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. (2010a). *Programs and services.* Retrieved from http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/programs/secondcareer.html

Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. (2010b). *What is second career?* Retrieved from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/tcu/secondcareer/whatitis.html

Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. (2012). *Second career (SC) Guidelines.* Retrieved from https://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/publications/2012_sc_guidelines.pdf

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Noe, R. A., & Peacock, M. (2008*). Employee training and development*. Toronto, ON: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.

O'Neill, S., & Thomson, M. M. (2013). Supporting academic persistence in low-skilled adult learners. *British Journal of Learning Support*, *28*(4), 162–168.

Rautopuro, J., & Vaisanen, P. (2001, September). *Non-traditional students at university: A follow-up study of young and adult students' orientations, satisfaction and learning outcomes.* Paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, Lille, France.

Ross-Gordon, J. M. (2003, summer). Adult learners in the classroom. *New Directions for Student Services*, *102*, 43–5.

Saunders, C. (2009). A twist on diversity: The influence of age, gender, and culture on peer instruction. *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal, 4*(1), 1-4.

Simmons, D. L. (1995). Retraining dislocated workers in the community college: Identifying factors for persistence. *Community College Review, 23*(4), 47–58.

Sissel, P. A., Hansman, C., & Kasworm, C. E. (2001). The politics of neglect: Adult learners in higher education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *91*, 17–28.

Skolnik, M. (2004, February). *Does structure matter: (Where) do questions about structure fit on the higher education policy agenda.* Paper presented at the John Deutsch Institute`s Higher Education in Canada Conference, Kingston, Ontario.

Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada. (2001). *A report on adult education and training in Canada: Learning a living.* Ottawa, ON: Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada.

Stokes, P. K. (2006). *Hidden in plain sight: Adult learners forge a new tradition in higher education*. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/stokes.pdf.

Swail, W. S. (2006, March). *Barriers to student retention and success on college campuses. student success.* Retrieved from www.educationalpolicy.org

Van Veslor, E., Moxley, R., & Bunker, K. A. (2004). The leader development process. In C. McCauley & E. Van Veslor (Eds.), *Handbook for creative leadership* (pp. 204–233). San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Whisnant, W. T., Sullivan, J., C., & Slayton, S. L. (1992). The "old" new resource for education: Student age. *Community Service Catalyst, 22*(3), 7–11.

Wisman, J. D. (2010). The moral imperative and social rationality of government-guaranteed employment and reskilling. *Review of Social Economy*, *68*(1), 35–67.

Wisman, J. D., & Pacitti, A. (2014). Ending the unemployment crisis with guaranteed employment and retraining. *Journal of Economic Issues*, *48*(3), 679–705.