

## **It's Never Too Late to Start Again** **Examining Levels of Engagement of Female Students in a Rural Vocational Program**

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# IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO START AGAIN: EXAMINING LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT OF FEMALE STUDENTS IN A RURAL VOCATIONAL PROGRAM

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## Abstract

*This qualitative phenomenological study describes the experiences of female students in a rural Alberta vocational training centre through semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate five key ways that instructors and institutions can approach instruction to maximize the opportunity for early and sustained student engagement: a sense of belonging and feeling of community, relationships with instructors, consistent and clear organization and structure, the recognition of student success, and the opportunity to explore new skills and careers.*

## Résumé

*Cette étude phénoménologique qualitative décrit les expériences étudiantes dans un centre de formation professionnelle de région rurale en Alberta à l'aide d'entrevues semi-structurées. Les résultats indiquent cinq stratégies essentielles qui permettraient au personnel enseignant et aux établissements d'aborder l'enseignement de manière à maximiser les occasions d'engagement précoces et soutenues pour les étudiantes : un sentiment d'appartenance et de communauté, les relations avec le personnel enseignant, une organisation et une structure claires et cohérentes, la reconnaissance de la réussite étudiante et l'occasion d'explorer de nouvelles compétences et de nouvelles carrières.*

Over 9 million Canadians have limited entry into the labour market due to low literacy and other essential skills (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013, as cited in Taylor & Trumppower, 2014). Many of these people engage in training as adults to gain competencies they need to be successful in their search for employment. Canadian policy makers are becoming aware of how increasing these skills among adults returning to school in retraining programs is crucial for Canada's economic future (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2013). The difficulty educators face is understanding how to effectively engage adult learners, specifically those whose past experiences with formal education were negative or who face challenges that place them at an academic disadvantage. This is crucial, as research has consistently shown that sustained engagement is a critical factor

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in academic success (Harbour et al., 2015), with active student involvement resulting in "enhanced learning and better academic performance" (Bachhel & Thaman, 2014, p. 1).

Student engagement as a predictor of academic achievement is not a new concept. However, increasing research in this area continues to affirm the power of student engagement in academic, behavioural, and emotional success in educational contexts (Harbour et al., 2015). Given that the number of adult learners in higher education is increasing, it is important to develop a better understanding of their experiences to ensure they receive the support needed for their success (Rabourn et al., 2018; Wyatt, 2011). Adult learning theory can be viewed as distinctly different from pedagogical theories based on traditional learners. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the unique circumstances of adult learners that influence their entire educational experience (Rabourn et al., 2018). The importance of understanding these unique needs is magnified when examining a demographic of learners who have had non-affirming experiences with formal education, making research on student engagement and learning outcomes both relevant and necessary.

The purpose of this study was to explore the engagement of female students enrolled in a rural Alberta job centre; a qualitative phenomenological approach was used to address the lack of research concerning female vocational students in a rural non-formal education setting. This study attempted to answer the following research question: what factors promote increased levels of female trainee engagement in a rural Alberta job centre? This paper first provides an examination of existing literature concerning student engagement, followed by the methodology section, which describes the sample, context, and research design. Next, the results are summarized through the description of themes generated through data analysis. Finally, the findings are discussed, including practical applications for institutions and instructors.

### **Theoretical Framework**

At the beginning of her career, Eccles focused on the question of why men and women engaged in different types of performance-related behaviours in various aspects of life (including school, extracurricular activities, and education and career choices). As a result, her initial research focused on why women are less likely to pursue science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses and careers than men (Eccles & Wang, 2012), leading to the development of Eccles et al.'s (1983) expectancy-value theoretical model (EEVT). EEVT is designed to explain the differences in how individuals and groups engage in—and the extent of their actual engagement in—various achievement-related activities. EEVT is based on the premise that expectations and values are assumed to be influenced by beliefs about specific tasks, such as beliefs about abilities, perceived difficulty of different tasks and goals, self-schema, and personal emotional memory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). In turn, these social cognitive variables are affected by the individual's perception of previous experiences and various social influences (see Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles et al., 1998; and Wigfield & Eccles, 1992, for discussion of these influences).

Although Eccles and her colleagues generally used the terms "behavioral choices, persistence, and achievement when describing their major dependent measures or outcomes, Eccles has always included the idea of engagement in her set of major dependent measures" (Eccles & Wang, 2012, p. 142). Furthermore, Eccles did not focus on students' sense of belonging to an institution as a definition of engagement, but adhered to Fredricks

et al.'s (2004) definition of cognitive engagement and Skinner and Pitzer's (2012) definition of behavioural engagement. Three broad theoretical perspectives influenced the creation of EEVT:

(1) The life course view that both personal agency and social structure are prime forces in lifespan development; (2) the social processes underlying socialization and internalization; and (3) the person-environment fit perspective that people fare best and are likely to be most engaged when they are in contexts that meet their psychological needs. (Eccles & Wang, 2012, p. 142)

Eccles and Wang's (2012) study specifically focused on the person-environment fit perspective, which focuses on the various aspects of the learning environment that affect the degree to which individuals choose to participate in various tasks (Eccles & Wang, 2012). Therefore, the person-environment fit perspective focuses on the relationship between the nature of the context and the needs of the person and assumes that engagement will be highest when the task correlates to the individuals' "sense of agency...and the values, needs, and goals of the individual" (Eccles & Wang, 2012, p. 142).

## Literature Review

### *Engagement*

Engagement is a widely researched topic in education because of its significant impact on academic success (Fredricks et al., 2004). Previous research has shown a connection between engagement and increased academic achievement as well as disengagement and academic withdrawal (Marks, 2000). Student engagement has been defined as a psychological process (Jonasson, 2012) involving student attention, interest, investment, and effort in the learning process (Marks, 2000). This is similar to the conceptualization of engagement suggested by Fredricks et al. (2004), where engagement is represented as a tri-part model with behavioural, cognitive, and affective components. Behavioural engagement is understood as participation in academic and social activities within the learning environment (Fredricks et al., 2004), whereas cognitive engagement refers to the effort invested by the student and the willingness to exceed the minimum requirements by grappling with complex concepts (Fredricks et al., 2004; Harbour et al., 2015). Finally, affective engagement encompasses the feelings of belonging experienced by students within their learning community, which is influenced by the emotional reactions of students to their peers, instructors, and school context (Appleton et al., 2006; Harbour et al., 2015).

### *Engagement and Adult Learners*

As engagement is a complex concept, personal experiences of engagement are influenced by a multitude of factors, including cultural and historical differences, personal motivation, composition of the learning environment, and the amount of support received by students (Zepke, 2018). This multifaceted nature of student engagement is particularly visible in relation to adult learners, as they are a distinct group with unique learning needs (Rabourn et al., 2018) whose representation in post-secondary institutions is steadily rising (Wyatt, 2011) despite the fact that they are met with a multitude of obstacles in their

pursuit of learning (Taylor et al., 2011). In other words, they represent an increasingly diverse student body that does not adhere to the model of a traditional student. Taylor & Trumpower (2014) discussed the experience of adult students returning to high school to obtain a Grade 12 equivalency or participate in short-term retraining programs. They argued that these students experienced a significant number of barriers along their learning path, some of which were related to the ever-changing life circumstances of adult students (Taylor & Trumpower, 2014). Students in these programs often face difficult personal issues, challenging family circumstances, and financial difficulties.

Education is often viewed as a solution to, or a protective measure against, poverty and marginalization (Stuit & Springer, 2010). It is thought that education provides students with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful (Dika & Singh, 2002). However, Lawton-Sticklor (2018) argued that there are two faults in these views, which place the sole responsibility for engagement and academic success on already disenfranchised students. First, the available resources and implemented policies in learning institutions cater to the dominant class of student; that is, a traditional male, White, middle-class student (Lawton-Sticklor, 2018; Rabourn et al., 2018). Second, the quality of education received by these students is not consistent (Blanchett et al., 2005; Sanders & Jordan, 2000). This is because "inequality is endemic in schools, realized through access to high quality teachers, extra-curricular opportunities, supplies and technology, and post-secondary preparation" (Lawton-Sticklor, 2018, p. 137). This indicates that an already disenfranchised student population, which includes female and minority students, is being further marginalized through policies and practices of learning institutions, as well as the preconceptions and assumptions of the policy makers, instructors, and general population. For example, adult learners as a whole experience decreased confidence (Rabourn et al., 2018) and students from lower socio-economic and minority groups generally demonstrate decreased school engagement (Willms, 2003). Taken together, this suggests that adult learners of lower socio-economic status may be particularly vulnerable—demonstrating the importance of examining and understanding the experiences of marginalized students. Moreover, engagement is not the sole responsibility of the student; instructors and institutions have a duty to identify andragogical tools that can be employed to increase the opportunities for deepened engagement (Thomas, 2013). This indicates that students need to be partners in "discussions about which pedagogical and technological tools encourage participation, enhance their sense of learning community and contribute to better learning outcomes" (Hellmundt & Baker, 2017, p. 27).

It is also important to note that female and male students experience engagement in education differently. Cerda-Navarro et al. (2019) noted that females generally have higher engagement in educational settings. However, Elffers (2013) reported that female students face unique challenges that can hinder their engagement, such as pregnancy and the responsibility of primary parenthood. Athens (2018) found that males have higher rates of participation in face-to-face classroom settings, but that females adapted more easily to changing learning environments. Furthermore, female adult students have a higher rate of withdrawals in face-to-face learning programs than their male counterparts (Athens, 2018). Additionally, Kozolanka (1995) identified that female students in a technological study program (in a construction jobsite classroom) reflected a "primary concern and attention to interpersonal relationships" (p. 73). The levels of engagement for the female students in this program were measured, in part, by their freedom to express relational needs as well as

the extent to which they felt their contributions were recognized (Kozolanka, 1995). It was also important for female students to feel that their instructors recognized their abilities and gave them opportunities to learn equal to those of their male counterparts. Females in construction learning settings can often feel less competent than male students, which often leads to feelings of self-doubt; this, in turn, decreases their engagement (Kozolanka, 1995).

### ***Current Approaches to Engagement***

Current literature has identified several approaches to student engagement. Taylor and Trumpower (2014) indicated that many students have experience with teaching methods that were “neither relevant nor meaningful” (p. 3). Programs that deliver these types of learning experiences often use instruction that is teacher-driven, rather than learner-centred. Students assume a passive role in these situations, thereby reducing their engagement (Taylor & Trumpower, 2014). While teachers have crucial roles in learner engagement and success (Harbour et al., 2015; Zepke, 2018), they should not be the dominant voice in the learning experience. Lawton-Sticklor (2018) stated that the solution to this problem is moving away from a “banking model” of education and toward a model of education that promotes social equality and learner-centred teaching and emphasizes dialogue over an instructor-controlled conversation (Athens, 2018). Students are not repositories for the words or the worlds of teachers; they are co-creators of knowledge who contribute valuable insight and experiences in the learning process. Indeed, adult students want to be treated differently than they were in previous unsuccessful education settings (Hellmundt & Baker, 2017); they expect to be respected as adults and to encounter supportive environments where their learning is facilitated in a partnership (Hellmundt & Baker, 2017).

The unique learning needs of adult students and the ways in which their learning can be supported in novel ways has been extensively studied. For example, adult students find it easier to engage with their learning when they are motivated by an employment goal (Taylor & Trumpower, 2014), as learning skills and concepts related to their goal of obtaining employment becomes inherently more interesting. Indeed, Taylor and Trumpower (2014) found that having an identified employment goal aids in maintaining enthusiasm and commitment to learning through inevitable academic challenges. This concept also applies to teachers who are instructing adult students at a high-school level, as it is critical that they help students realize that the skills they are learning will be useful in reaching their short- and long-term goals (Taylor & Trumpower, 2014). Instructors also need to encourage students to explore ideas beyond their comfort zone (Hellmundt & Baker, 2017), which opens new learning opportunities for students and can encourage affinity for lifelong learning.

In addition to encouraging students to explore beyond their comfort zone, instructors should focus on developing relationships and connections with their students. Athens (2018) stated that student engagement is all about connections. These connections create a sense of belonging for students, which plays a key role in their engagement with their learning while simultaneously providing emotional and psychological support as students work toward their employment and education goals (Taylor & Trumpower, 2014). Students who experience warmth, respect, acceptance, and recognition from their teachers feel that their teachers genuinely care about their well-being and success and are, in general, more engaged than students who do not have these connections (Hellmundt & Baker, 2017; van Uden et al., 2016). Van Uden et al. (2016) continued this argument, stating that teachers

need to be engaged to effectively engage students. This requires that instructors actively participate, share expertise with learners, ensure there is time to speak with students one-on-one, develop individual learning plans with students, and use positive feedback (Harbour et al., 2015; Taylor & Trumppower, 2014; van Uden et al., 2016).

Another theme in current literature on promoting engagement is classroom design. Programs and courses that are well organized with consistent expectations and structure make the learning process predictable (Athens, 2018; Hellmundt & Baker, 2017). This predictability gives students the confidence to fully engage with their learning. Likewise, ample time to complete tasks and small class sizes that allow for increased guidance from the instructor are other critical factors in classroom design that promote student engagement (van Uden et al., 2016). Furthermore, several studies have noted the importance of modelling for maximizing student engagement. Modelling promotes student engagement and academic achievement, thereby increasing the use of self-regulated learning strategies and improving responses to higher-order thinking tasks and problems (Harbour et al., 2015; Housand & Reis, 2008). Hellmundt & Baker (2017) replicated these findings, noting that explicit modelling of expectations allows students to fully engage with a learning task.

Thus, when existing literature on student engagement is examined, it is apparent that there are unique challenges and needs for adult learners, but that adult learners are not monolithic in these needs. For example, the learning needs for engagement in rural female adult learners has not been examined previously; this unaddressed population is the focus of this research study. No qualitative study was found within existing English Canadian literature revealing the experiences of female students in a rural vocational training context. For this reason, it was critical to examine the experiences of this demographic in this unique setting.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

Given the exploratory nature of the investigation, a qualitative phenomenological research approach was employed. Phenomenology is a research method that explores the meaning of a lived experience from the perspective of the individual. Therefore, phenomenology aims to provide a deeper understanding of the meaning of people's daily experiences and direct the understanding of phenomena consciously experienced by people themselves (Edward & Welch, 2011; Shosha, 2012). Phenomenology is both a research method and a philosophical approach (Smith et al., 2009). It is concerned with revealing meaning rather than determining a truth or developing a theory (Flood, 2010) and primarily focuses on subjective, first-person experiences. This qualitative approach has not been previously used to understand the experiences of female students in rural vocational training, making a phenomenological approach relevant for this study.

The vocational centre used for this study worked with individuals who were on income support from the provincial government. The goal was to work with these individuals to identify areas of interest for future careers, introduce and train them for a career in their identified area of interest, and then provide support in obtaining a job and removing themselves from income support. At the time this research was conducted, the most recent yearly report from this centre was from April 2017 to March 2018 (Crossland, 2018).



Crossland (2018) reported that this centre worked with approximately 183 trainees in that time frame, which was an increase of 20% over the previous year. Projected participation numbers for the 2018/2019 year indicated another expected increase of 20%. During the 2017/2018 year, 144 of the 183 participants completed and/or left the program; 73% of those individuals were deemed successful graduates of the program and 92% of those individuals did not go back on income support after leaving the program (Crossland, 2018).

### ***Participants***

Purposive sampling was used in this study, as is typical in qualitative research, in order to find people who have experienced similar circumstances and ensure the information gathered is cohesive. Participants who were recruited had been attending vocational training for a minimum of 3 months. This ensured that participants in the research had experienced the phenomenon under study.

This study included a sample of six students in accordance with recommendations that phenomenological research have 3 to 10 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All participants were female, had been enrolled at this job centre for a minimum of 3 months, and had begun vocational training out of desire for independence after being on social assistance. Participants selected the following pseudonyms: Jane (3 months in vocational training), Layla (7 months in vocational training), Jaymes (8 months in vocational training), Jackie (8 months in vocational training), Linda (10 months in vocational training), and Cindy (3 years in vocational training). All participants were given an overview of the study and signed informed consent before participating. Three participants self-identified as Indigenous and three participants identified as being of European descent. All participants identified that they had lost their jobs and needed assistance removing themselves from income support. Two participants lost their previous jobs due to addictions, one participant needed retraining after being unable to find employment after having children, and three participants stated that they were unable to find suitable employment due to the economic downturn.

### ***Data Collection***

Each participant completed a semi-structured interview in December 2019. Interview questions aimed to elicit participants' experiences and feelings relative to their engagement in their vocational training. Semi-structured interviews were selected with interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), as this approach allows interviews to be flexible while capturing implicit and explicit details and context (Hodges, 2009). Furthermore, IPA allows researchers to do a detailed exploration of the experience of the participants (Smith et al., 1999). Each interview was conducted at the participants' training institution to allow for consistency within their context. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder with the written consent of all participants.

### ***Data Analysis***

Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, analyzed using IPA for themes or categories of meaning, and used to write descriptions of participants' experiences. Following the IPA process, data analysis commenced during the interview process, where I sought to initiate and attach meaning to what was being said by each participant. Interpretation of the data is

based solely on what participants expressed in their interviews (Smith et al., 2009). Member checks were sought from participants after the initial coding was completed. Participants were asked about how accurately coding matched their intended descriptions to increase the credibility of the study and to ensure that the stories being constructed accurately reflected the participants' experiences.

## **Results**

Five themes relating to female student engagement in vocational training were identified. These themes are discussed below.

### ***Theme 1: A Sense of Belonging and Feeling of Community***

All participants reported that their engagement increased when they experienced a sense of belonging and a feeling of community within their institution. At the centre of this theme is the idea of creating a learning atmosphere where students feel connected to each other and to the instructors and staff. This sense of belonging was built from relationships between students and their instructors, as well as relationships between students and their peers. Three participants indicated that they cared about the success of their peers, which was evident through their support of peers who were nervous about starting the training program, were struggling with personal issues, or needed additional assistance adjusting to routines and expectations. Students who had experienced significant success and progress within the program acted as mentors and role models for newcomers to the program. For example, two participants who engaged in a mentor role committed time to teaching crafts and activities students could complete with their families at home. They both stated that they cared about the well-being and success of the peers they were working with. Specifically, Linda had been given a leadership role that required her to spend part of her day instructing new trainees in the program. She had developed a considerable amount of skill in the career path she selected, which was recognized by program administration. Linda stated that she had learned to scaffold and adjust her teaching methods to include all students, which ensured that no one was "left behind or too overwhelmed when they start the program."

Additionally, all participants reported that the relationships they developed with other students were a critical aspect in their levels of engagement. Cindy stated that "here to me now is like another family." Jane reported that the main thing keeping her in employment training was the variety of people she interacted with daily. She said learning about people shows how you can relate to them and learn to support one another. Jackie stated that she appreciated the differing backgrounds of everyone at the institution. She said that students find ways to relate to one another and navigate through differences to build relationships that resemble familial support. These relationships with staff and peers proved to be instrumental in encouraging students to continue attending the job centre daily, even when circumstances in their personal lives proved to be difficult.

### ***Theme 2: Relationships With Staff***

While aspects of this theme overlap with Theme 1, it was worthy of a separate category, as each participant indicated that this was a critical factor in their engagement at the job centre. All participants reported that they appreciated the opportunity to learn about the staff in a

personal manner. Staff shared aspects of their lives with the students, who then felt free to do the same. This created a sense of trust and understanding between staff and students. All participants consistently reported that they felt valued by staff and appreciated one-on-one connections with them. Jackie indicated that her self-worth increased because the staff recognized her potential and intelligence. This encouraged her to deepen her engagement with her learning and discover her potential and capabilities. Cindy shared that the staff had proven “time and again” that her well-being was important to them. She stated that the staff at the institution felt more like family than instructors. She shared information she knew about the hobbies, interests, and families of staff members, which displayed the familiarity she had with them and the degree of comfort that staff and students had in sharing aspects of their lives with one another.

Furthermore, all participants felt that staff at their institution cared about their success both in the program and in their personal lives and circumstances outside of school. Jaymes reported that staff were available and supportive when she needed somebody to talk to or ask a question about anything she was doing. She stated that they were “hands on” and would work with students to solve problems and hurdles in their learning. She also stated that she was confident that a staff member would do everything within their capabilities to answer any questions she may have. Furthermore, this commitment to student success extended beyond the walls of the institution. Staff worked with students to help them develop plans to obtain necessary safety tickets for employment. If students had outstanding traffic violations that were impeding their ability to have a valid licence, staff worked with students to develop a payment plan. The inability to drive is a distinct barrier to employment in a rural area. This felt like an insurmountable obstacle to some students, so the practical support from staff showed the participants that they could rely on institutional staff for support in areas outside of formal education. Finally, Jackie stated that staff recognized the potential of students, which encouraged them to engage with their learning. She noted that this was the first experience she had where someone had verbally acknowledged her skills and potential.

### ***Theme 3: Structure and Organization***

Five participants reported that clear structure and organization were important in their ability to engage with their learning. The expectations, schedules, and routines were consistent and organized, which made information easy to access and reduced barriers and risks relative to their learning. The predictable nature of the program gave participants the confidence to fully engage with their learning. Jaymes noted that the routine and predictability removed any uncertainty or anxiety she was feeling about her responsibilities for each day. She also reported that the structure and organization present in the institution was something that was noticeably absent in her life outside of the establishment. However, she reported taking steps to increase structure and organization in her life outside of school after recognizing their importance to her personal success and engagement.

Jane stated that she appreciated that the routines, structures, and expectations were clear and predictable while still providing space for students to make autonomous decisions about what skills they practised and career goals they pursued. It was important to her that staff still treated students as adults and provided them the respect that their maturity deserved. Additionally, she stated that learning becomes easier when “you know what the

expectations are and where you're supposed to be and what you're supposed to be aiming for." She appreciated that the structure of the program allowed for continuous learning as students move from one skill area to the next without any limitations. Furthermore, Jackie stated that she had attended a number of vocational training institutions throughout Alberta but none of them incorporated the structure and organization of this specific institution. She reported that this was a significant part of the reason she continued to attend this institution and had become so engaged in her learning.

#### ***Theme 4: Recognition of Success***

The recognition of student success by staff influenced student engagement in a significant way. This acknowledgment of accomplishments increased students' confidence and encouraged them to strive for further progress. Linda described a progression of hard-hat promotions that were meaningful for students. Hard hats are required personal protective equipment on the grounds of this institution. When each student began training at the job centre, they were given a dark blue hard hat. As students reached milestones in their training or made significant improvements, they were given a hard-hat promotion, which resulted in being awarded a new hard hat of a different colour. Students strived to obtain a white hat, which was the highest level and indicated you had been promoted to a lead hand. All participants reported that this was a coveted position and the desire to earn a white hat encouraged them to engage with their learning and strive for continual improvement and progress.

Furthermore, student work was also recognized and showcased publicly. Participants reported that student projects (i.e., woodwork, painting, example of how to feed a family of six on \$2 per day, etc.) are used with permission as prizes and gifts at holiday parties. Students appreciated that the staff saw value in their work. Projects completed by students were also showcased to local and provincial government personnel who toured the facility. This developed a sense of pride for work accomplished.

Finally, when students had demonstrated capability within a certain training area, they were often given leadership roles. This included leading orientations and teaching selected classes. This gave students the dual opportunity to experience leadership while also expanding their understanding of their selected craft or occupation for study.

#### ***Theme 5: The Opportunity to Explore New Skills and Careers***

All participants appreciated the opportunity to sample and experiment with new employment options, including non-traditional avenues of employment for females. This institution provided a diverse assortment of skills and occupations for students to explore. Layla reported that she gained skills in areas she otherwise would not have attempted. Cindy noted that she learned how to weld and change oil, which allowed her to discover previously unknown talents. Jackie experimented with carpentry, welding, and painting before learning that she enjoyed small-engine mechanics. Linda stated that she explored carpentry, welding, and mechanics before discovering she was a proficient painter. She was surprised at the discovery of abilities she did not know she possessed and stated that "if you keep an open mind the possibilities are endless." She noted that staff encouraged students to work and learn outside of their comfort zone by assuring them that trepidation was a typical response and supported them through the learning process. Jane noted that it

was critical for students to be given practical work experience in non-traditional career skills. She stated that it was important for them to leave the training centre being practically prepared for a job, rather than just having a theoretical understanding of what a person in such a job may do. Furthermore, three participants noted that they were encouraged to expand the classifications on their licence, which would enable them to qualify for employment opportunities that required advanced driving skills. Finally, four participants explained the uncertainty that surrounded exploring new skills—specifically those that are considered non-traditional skills for females. They also described the excitement they experienced at discovering new aptitudes and potential career opportunities. This increased their engagement in learning as they became more confident in the scope of their abilities.

### **Discussion and Practical Implications**

This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of female students in a rural Alberta job centre. It provided an opportunity for participants to reveal their feelings regarding their engagement with their learning. This approach is useful when examining subjective phenomena because it allows the emergence of truths grounded in lived experience. Each theme identified is part of the overall phenomenon of female student engagement in a rural vocational training context. The interrelationship of each part to the whole is a fundamental component of the phenomenon experienced by the participants of this study.

Themes 1 (a sense of belonging and feeling of community) and 2 (relationships with staff) contain similar underlying tones and are consistent with previous research (Athens, 2018; Elffers et al, 2012; Hellmundt & Baker, 2017; Kozolanka, 1995; Rouborn et al., 2018; Taylor & Trumpower, 2014; van Uden et al., 2016). These themes indicate the importance of the learning experience being constructed upon a respectful and collaborative partnership between staff and students and between students and their peers. Taylor and Trumpower (2014) noted that the social networks developed between students is a source of critical support as students both face and overcome barriers while striving toward educational goals. This is supported by Reder's (1994) practice engagement theory as well as previous research that concluded that collaborative learning is a substantial contributor to the formation and continuation of communities of practice within a learning environment (Taylor et al., 2007). Kozolanka (1995) specifically noted that interpersonal relationships were a critical factor for engagement for female students who need the opportunity to feel a sense of community within their learning context.

The necessity to treat adult learners as independent adults was also highlighted. The relationships built between students and instructors create a foundation for a partnership approach to engagement. Students are invited to participate in discussions about pedagogical approaches that best support their engagement, as the responsibility for this is shared between students, instructors, and institutions (Elffers, 2013). However, it is critical that students are not simply treated as data sources within this partnership, as this allows the balance of power to remain with the institutions (Buckley, 2018). Comings (2009) noted that when students are assigned a passive role in a teacher-driven learning environment, student engagement decreases and, subsequently, the rate of dropouts increases. Students need to be recognized as co-creators of knowledge and supported in engaging in a fully collaborative partnership with instructors and institutions to identify tools that encourage

engagement and contribute to better learning outcomes. This is specifically critical for female students in vocational training programs, as they often experience a decrease in confidence and increase in self-doubt. The ability to discuss roles, learning tasks, and outcomes would provide female students with a sense of ownership over their learning that has the potential to increase their engagement and confidence in their training. This requires that instructors relinquish control of the conversation and develop social equality within their classrooms through dialogue and a learner-centred approach to instruction.

Another core theme extracted from this work was the importance of structure and organization within learning programs. This finding supported the work completed by Athens (2018), Hellmundt and Baker (2017), and van Uden et al. (2016). It is not surprising that students who have had negative past experiences with education appreciate and rely on a structured academic experience to fully engage with their learning (Hellmundt & Baker, 2017). Furthermore, previous research indicated that clear instructions are strongly related to increased student engagement (Ko et al., 2017; Maulana & Helms-Lorenz, 2017; Zhao & Ko, 2020). This was consistent with the findings of this study, as all participants reported that the well-organized structure of their program was a necessary aspect in their reintroduction to an education setting. They appreciated that expectations, outcomes, and structure were predictable, accessible, and clearly communicated. This reduced the uncertainty associated with learning, which in turn reduced the risks and barriers students experienced. Furthermore, this highlighted the importance of creating consistency within courses and programs. For example, English instructors having consensus on requirements for and approaches to writing essays within upgrading programs would increase learner confidence and would reduce additional barriers to learning and academic success.

The theme of recognition of success indicated the importance of experiencing recognition and acceptance from instructors to students. This finding was also supported by previous research (Jennings & Greenberg, 2008; Osterman, 2000). Participants valued constructive, timely feedback, consistent with the findings of Harbour et al. (2015) and Athens (2018). This indicated the importance of recognizing the successes of students, an approach that is specifically important for learners who have had negative and unsuccessful past experiences with formal education. When emergent success is recognized by instructors, it builds students' confidence to fully engage in their learning and strive for continued success. As noted above, female students in vocational training settings often feel less confident in their ability to complete tasks and be successful in their training. However, these feelings of self-doubt could be diminished by instructors recognizing that the contributions made by the female students are valuable and equal to those of their male counterparts.

Finally, the opportunity to explore new skills and careers was noted as a key factor in the engagement experienced by female trainees in a rural vocation training context. This finding is consistent with previous research, as Hellmundt and Baker (2017) noted that it is critical for instructors to challenge students to go beyond their comfort zone. However, participants of this study specifically stated that they valued the opportunity to explore non-traditional avenues of employment for females, which is an idea not found in existing literature. This indicates the importance of promoting non-traditional careers for females. There are practical ways this can be accomplished, including the incorporation of discussions on this topic into existing courses; collaborating with student advisors and student success teams to encourage females to set non-traditional career goals; and providing examples of and exposure to success of females in these areas. Students are more

engaged when they have identified a career goal (Hellmundt & Baker, 2017; Rabourn et al., 2018; Taylor & Trumpower, 2014). This provides student advisors and student success teams an opportunity to explore career opportunities with students. Additionally, it would be beneficial to students for institutions and instructors to incorporate examples of technical and procedural terminology and language use into English-language instruction. This would provide students with critical exposure to a style of language use they will be required to interact with throughout their education.

### **Limitations**

Despite offering insights into a unique population of adult learners, this study nevertheless has several limitations. This sample population was limited to students from one training centre in rural Alberta and may not be representative of other institutions or other rural communities. Thus, further research is needed using other job centres throughout rural areas in Alberta and the rest of Canada. Additionally, the participant pool was limited for this study, as the majority of students at this institution are male. Potential participants had to be female and attending this institution for a minimum of 3 months. Only six people met these requirements. While all six people agreed to participate, a larger pool of applicants would expand and support the findings of this study. Furthermore, the findings of this study would be strengthened by replication with other methodologies. For example, future research could expand to include the development and distribution of quantitative surveys to gather additional data about female student engagement in rural vocational training programs. Moreover, a comparative between male and female rural vocational students would be beneficial, as the data collected would yield important information that could be used to support the engagement of female students specifically. This is especially important given that females were an underrepresented population at the study site, which highlights that it is critical to examine and compare what factors promote engagement for unique groups of students. Finally, this study was not able to include an examination of individuals who did not remain in, or complete, vocational training, potentially omitting gaps in student engagement where instructors and institutions could improve the learning experiences of students.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the findings reflect the key role that instructors, organization, and the learning environment have in supporting and deepening student engagement. Education cannot be approached from a one-size-fits-all philosophy. The population of adult learners is constructed of a diverse student body, which requires that programs be tailored to suit the needs of a variety of students. A functional approach to student engagement must be holistic, requiring that it consider the circumstances, individual context, and history of learners. A key finding of this study is the importance of allowing female students to explore non-traditional careers—a factor not previously identified in research on engagement and student success. This study also affirmed the role of organization and structure, recognition of success, and the importance of relationships within the learning environment in a new population of rural adult female learners.

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