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## Education Creates Confidence and Empowerment; Confidence and Empowerment Create Opportunities; Opportunities Breed Success

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## **EDUCATION CREATES CONFIDENCE AND EMPOWERMENT; CONFIDENCE AND EMPOWERMENT CREATE OPPORTUNITIES; OPPORTUNITIES BREED SUCCESS**

*Siobhan Walker, Health Psychology, Northumbria University, Class of 2021*

Coming from a low socio-economic background, leaving school with no GCSEs or any desire whatsoever to be academic, both my family and I believed that I would amount to absolutely nothing. However, after the birth of my daughter 11 years ago, I was inspired to fall in love with education. This gave me new confidence, a sense of empowerment, and a whole lot of opportunities, including the revelation of my dyslexia. It has been a rocky path, and one that has shown me the importance of inclusivity. This piece is my insight into being a mature, single-parent, and dyslexic student. With no academic background, this is how I became empowered.

### **Education is Empowering**

Education will always be seen as empowering. Not only does it 'open doors' for employment and opportunity, it is also a key enabler of self-development. Ask any mature student about their view of going back into education, and it is guaranteed that the word 'empowering' will be utilized as their main adjective. Look up any research on mature students' views on education, and, again, it is clear that the word 'empowerment' is strongly associated with this topic.

In various studies, finding empowerment through education is proposed as a chance to gain independence from traditional family structures, and a way to provide opportunity for new roles and identities (Baxter & Britton, 2005). However, various authors have recognized that this form of empowerment may not be without its problems, and that personal changes in relation to higher education study can lead to both positive and negative impacts on a mature student's life.

### **Mature Students are More Difficult**

A mature student in the UK is said to be an individual aged 21 years or older on admission to university. Mature students are renowned for battling with immense pressures on their time. Nonetheless, they still accomplish and achieve academically. This is despite expressing uncertainty with their abilities, even when offered successful feedback on their progress (Shanahan, 2006). For me, becoming a mature student was very much about utilizing the vehicle of education to get on the road to self-development and to find my purpose in life. I knew it would not be an easy ride, yet I also knew this route was the best one for empowering myself.

One battle I faced was being in a new environment as a single parent. Another was studying my Master's degree while also working part time on the major trauma ward at the Royal Victoria Infirmary hospital in Newcastle. This led to my struggling to deal with the combination of work pressure and pressure from my degree. Li, Heath, Jackson, Allen, Fischer, & Chan (2017) discuss the particular challenges students face within new environments, suggesting that students should proactively seek support to help them achieve success. Reading this research resonated

with me, as I felt I was not the only one to experience these feelings. However, I did not realize that support was available at Master's level. The fact that I had accomplished my Bachelor's degree at Sunderland University in the field of sport and exercise meant that I felt a huge sense of detachment and marginalization while studying for a psychology Master's degree at Northumbria. On reflection, perhaps these feelings of detachment led me to not seeking support sooner.

### **With Big Dreams Came Big Barriers**

Campbell and Wu (1994) argue that 'household atmosphere' and family processes provide the social and intellectual forces that affect how a student will learn. Their research shows that the level of encouragement, expectation, and educational activity within a student's home environment are all related to socio-economic status. Families from different socio-economic groups create different learning environments that impact on children's academic achievements. I can concur with these discoveries. Due to my socio-economic background, I left school with no GCSEs, no career aspirations, and certainly no desire for education whatsoever. The young version of myself would probably laugh in disbelief at how much education means to me now. The fact that I now have a huge desire to one day accomplish a PhD, to add to the long list of qualifications I have already achieved, is still nothing short of astounding to me. My background is still my main barrier to success, and is the only reason it's taken me so long to find out what I want to do for a career. I am 31 years of age and I finally know that I want to be a psychologist! Because I started my academic career late, at the age of 20, I now feel 'rushed' in that I feel I need to achieve my psychology accreditation as quickly as possible. But while I now have a Master's degree, I still have a long journey to get my PhD and to find a way to gain accreditation. That said, achieving a Master's degree despite my background, and seeing how far I have developed from no education whatsoever to where I am now, keeps me going and drives me to complete the long journey and achieve my end goal.

### **Finding Out I had Dyslexia mid-Master's**

After falling in love with education at the age of 20, and after 10 long years of studying, I have accomplished both a first-class honors degree and a Master's degree in health psychology. However, I have also discovered that I suffer from dyslexia, which now explains my phobia of learning that formulated during my teenage years.

Going to university as a mature student is beset with risks, the main one being that of failure: that you will have wasted your time and let yourself down (and, if you're a parent, let your child down too). This fear of failure gave me a lot of anxiety. On top of this, there were so many other risks that occurred during both of my degrees. For instance, the risk of feeling marginalized caused me great anxiety. Indeed, research shows that mature women have reported feelings of being marginalized, resulting in a reluctance to enroll in wider social and leisure events that a university may offer (Kevern & Webb, 2003).

During my Bachelor's and Master's degrees, this was something I was incredibly fearful of. It was something that unfortunately occurred throughout my six years of studying, which led to a struggle to engage as thoroughly as I wanted to, resulting in my wanting to remain anonymous and just attend lectures.

Novita (2016) and Olofsson, Taube, & Ahl (2015) show that dyslexic students require extra assistance, especially in regard to lowering the levels of anxiety and stress they may face in academic situations. In retrospect, I feel positive about the discovery of my dyslexia. Yet I feel dismayed when I think about the level of support that I have always needed to help with my disability, but which I have lost out on by not knowing about my dyslexia sooner. When I look at how I managed my studies and how I suffered on my own for an unnecessary amount of time, I wish I had reached out to someone sooner (Atkins & Murphy, 2013).

### **On Reflection**

In conclusion, if it were not for my Master's degree, I would not have found out that I have an underlying specific learning difficulty for which I could access specialist support. Without my tutorials, I could not have improved my abilities. Due to my experiences, I would strongly advise students, no matter their age, to seek assistance from their universities if they need support. I would not be graduating with such amazing results without the support I have had since finding out about my disability. Also, if it wasn't for my dyslexia tutor, I would not have heard about the student inclusion consultancy role. Taking on this role has not only made me finally feel a part of the Northumbria University family, but has also led to huge opportunities for me. All of these things are continuing to empower me and are encouraging me to want to further my academic journey—next stop pursuing my PhD.

### **A Poem: An Investment Within Education**

IF you feel you have no purpose in life,  
Issues with home, finance, and strife,  
If you're not able to read or write,  
Nothing will work, try as you might...

**BUT!!!**

If you fall in love with education, like me,  
Value, nurture YOUR education, you'll see,  
Education can truly change your life!  
Education can truly remove your strife!

I found my purpose, my sense, my vocation,  
No need to change accent, look, or location.  
I read and write fantastically,  
Because I read and write academically.

You can do anything you want, but that's really not news.  
I still have financial issues, but that's just because I love shoes!  
Fall in love with education, the same as me.  
Fall in love with education, it's a guarantee...

That you will have nothing, if you cannot see,  
But try education, and believe me you'll be  
So happy you did... DON'T ONLY SURVIVE...  
Get education: work, learn and thrive!

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