"We are not in this together": COVID-19 exacerbates learning barriers for African immigrant student mothers in institutions of higher learning

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AISM IN CANADA

African immigrant student mothers (AISM) are often unable to find well-paying jobs commensurate with their skills and education (Bauder, 2012; Knowles, 2007). Some choose to upgrade their education by enrolling in institutions of higher learning (IHL), hoping they will be accepted into the job market and acquire lucrative employment (Jayawardene & McDougall, 2019). However, returning to school is problematic since one must juggle parental duties, housework, and academic obligations (Jones et al., 2013). In addition, one must consider the significant financial burden of tuition fees and the lack of a steady income (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020).

Canada boasts an equitable education system offering support through loans and grants. Many immigrants see this as an excellent chance and a path toward their dreams of economic independence. With this in place, many African mothers take advantage of this opportunity to upgrade their education and skills. The prestige of graduating from a progressive country motivates African women to go back to school to advance their careers through education.

SCHOOL LIFE BEFORE COVID-19 FOR AISM

The limited literature on AISM suggests that this group of women is invisible within academia (Lynch, 2008). Students of colour in IHL are not a homogenous community but rather diverse in their unique ways (Anaya, 2011). The absence of literature and studies reflects the dearth of formal research and documentation on the experiences of African immigrants (Danso & Grant, 2000).

Research shows that female students feel more academic pressure compared to their male counterparts (Allen, & Haniff, 1991). Evidence shows Black students on white campuses experience considerable difficulty adjusting to a culturally different environment (Beard & Brown, 2008).

Before COVID-19, the insecurity of not belonging felt by most young AISM students and their position as a minority group have been a burden and a struggle. Adjusting to a new culture and a new learning system can be daunting. Language presents a considerable barrier in this case (Elabor-Idemudia, 2001), but it is not knowledge of the English language so much as the academic language that they must cultivate and apply in order to understand and integrate successfully into academia (Allen & Haniff, 1991). In addition, the lack of a Canadian accent poses a barrier to communication and makes them stand out as foreign, which leaves them feeling marginalized (Creese & Kambere, 2003). Language, therefore, functions as a medium that segregates and discriminates.

Hemans et al. (2020) note that school life can be intimidating for African student mothers. Self-doubt in the ability to perform like other students erodes confidence. Not having the language, accent, and skills is a continuous reminder that they are "not good enough." "On campus, I experienced 'imposter syndrome,' believing I was accepted into my program as a mistake and feeling I was (in)visible as an older female student of colour" (Hemans et al., 2020, p. 24).

Lack of confidence and feelings of being out of place result from an absence of support groups (Lyonette et al., 2015). Because they come from a conservative culture, most AISM are seen as not engaging or as shy in classroom interactions. It is for this reason that support in establishing social capital for AISM is vital. Undoubtedly, higher-learning institutions advocate and believe that networking is essential for academic success (Lobnibe, 2013). Social support groups and good relationships with professors increase interactions, boost confidence levels, and improve academic performance.

THE SWITCH TO VIRTUAL LEARNING

The end of in-person classes and the subsequent switch to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic have presented a big hurdle for students of colour (James, 2021). Online remote learning in the education system has assumed that learning resources are accessible to all students (Mupenzi et al., 2020). Little is known of how AISM are learning online with children at home and of the implications for these women.

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The emotional, physical, and psychological burdens of performing work at home (Hochschild & Machung, 1989) when combined with the impact of the pandemic remain unknown. In an interview with the *Toronto Star*, Dr. Susan Prentice points out that, "[f]or any household that has children, a school closing is a make-or-break factor for family decision making, women trying to do homeschooling by day and trying to do their work at night—in the end, they manage it at the expense of their health, by sleeping very little. You can get through a short-term period like this, but it's not sustainable over months or semesters" (Balakrishnan, 2020).

Therefore, it is fair to state that the unequal positioning (Mitchell Jr. et al., 2019) of AISM is a challenge. For example, the role of student mothers at home conflicts with schoolwork in terms of responsibilities, time, and place. With children at home, mothers have prioritized their children while their own schoolwork takes the back seat. The psychological effects of worrying about papers due, presentations beckoning, and Zoom classes are exhausting.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutions of higher learning do not necessarily know who their most vulnerable students are owing to a lack of disaggregated data (Anaya, 2011; McKenzie, 2021). The population of AISM is relatively small compared to the student body in general. As a starting point, it is crucial to tap into the experiences of AISM to understand their struggles and develop solutions based on their multiple identities (Ngoubene-Atioky et al., 2020). With the added burdens and responsibilities of the pandemic, there is increased pressure on student mothers to fit their children's studies and care and their own domestic duties into their schedules. The impact is evident in their productivity or lack thereof. The student body is not homogenous (Kaushik & Drolet, 2018). It is diverse, and to achieve equity, attention must be called to the needs of the most vulnerable students (Reid-Maroney et al., 2018).

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Understanding students' diversity will address some of the disparities that exacerbate gender and race-based inequities. Access to resources and supports should be a priority. I hope that this paper will open conversations that aim to

1. heed calls to disaggregate data collection, because a "one-size-fits-all" strategy will not work in a diverse student population;
2. tap into the life stories of AISM in IHL to establish culturally relevant support systems; and
3. explore the needs of student mothers adversely affected by COVID-19 for special accommodations such as course extensions, bursaries, and access to computer equipment and the Internet during this period.

Only by having these conversations and dealing with these pressing needs do we stand a chance of levelling the playing field and making equity a reality for AISM.

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CHANGING THE PERSPECTIVE

Although I am just one person living with high self-determination in one aspect and nearly none in another, throughout Canada I imagine I am not alone. It is a constant battle I walk, but every day I am closer to fulfilling the three core needs to feel that I belong. This conversation of identity and belonging is one that continues to be needed. Why is it that we still look at cultures with only one specific vision? How do we expect growth within our country if it does not start within ourselves? It is important to educate one another with information that allows Canada to come together as one and not feel divided. As I continue to soar with my passion for figure skating, feeling no sense of fear, I hope to reach this feeling of belonging as a First Nation Indigenous person someday soon.

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