Rural men's experience of returning to study in human services and social sciences

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the narratives of twelve participants who shared their experiences of returning to study as mature-age men. The majority of the participants came from small rural farming communities where the expectation from their family and friends was about finding employment, preferably working on the family farm, not about continuing with education. Significant life events such as family illness also impacted on decisions in relation to further study. The narratives reveal a complex composition of societally gendered expectations, family expectations and individual expectations that influence boys'/men's identities as learners no matter their age. Questions remain in relation to how mature-aged men can be engaged to consider education as an available option. Tertiary education for the participants in this research clearly had positive outcomes in relation to familial relationships and wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

There has been significant research about the relationship between older men's health, wellbeing and learning (Golding, Foley, Brown and Harvey 2009). However, there has been very little research about men aged 21-65 years and their relationship to formal and informal education and training. Much of the research regarding gender explores the experiences of women, their transitions and relationships to education and training. There is very little Australian literature that relates specifically to the experiences of men aged 21-65 and their participation in formal and informal education and training. There is some anecdotal evidence that this age-group of men are now returning to different forms of education and training and in increasing numbers. In this article recent literature and research in the domains of male gender identity, education and rurality are explored. Findings arising from research in Central Victoria (CV) that explored men's attitudes to and experiences of tertiary education in human services and social sciences in regional and rural locations are presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational systems can be classified as gendered, and notions surrounding the division of labour, power, authority and organisational cultures are all embedded in beliefs about gender. The under representation of males in pre-school and primary school teaching positions can be matched with the under representation of females in senior academic positions as indicators of education systems being gendered. Australian secondary and post-secondary education pathways are still influenced by the industrialised, gendered Western cultural state where specific knowledge bases which constitute 'subjects' to be taught have gendered histories and are tied to gendered symbols.

Karmel (2011, p.14) reveals that Australian education and training is front-end loaded in that the greatest participation rates for both males and females are in the age groupings, 15-19 years and 20-24 years, while from the age of 35 years for both males and females the participation rate is less than 10%, with full-time educational participation by males from aged 35 years being virtually non-existent. This data reveals the dominance of labour market programming in Australian education systems where the aim is to encourage labour market participation at very young ages no matter the level of education attainment achieved. Research also reveals that regardless of gender, participation in adult learning in regional and rural areas plays an essential role in the development of social capital, community engagement and community development (Townsend 2009, Golding and Rogers 2002).

Male gender identity, work and education

Masculinity can be described as a gender role created for men by society that varies with race, ethnicity and class, and which contrasts with biological, essentialist notions of masculinity (Connell 1995a in Woodward 2000). Gender identities alter in response to changes to social environment and conventions, and the specifics of this change are constrained or enabled by the social environment (Woodward 2000). Gender identity is multiple and relational; in a given society there is more than one way to enact masculinity, and some identities will dominate. Rose (in Woodward 2000) suggests that gender

identities are created with reference to place, and that the relationship between body and space is an important element.

All these factors result in the formation of gender identities that are culturally and temporally specific. Moreland notes that 'men reappraise their male-role standards at age-related stages' (Theodore and Lloyd 2000, p.1038) and what is valued or possible for a given gender role is not static throughout the life-course. The influence of gender role on attitudes to education begins with entry into pre-school and primary school. Studies of boys' experiences of education reveal that by adolescence, the way male gender roles are constructed interferes with engagement with education. Haywood, Mac and Ghaill (2003) acknowledge that schools can be masculinity-making devices (McGiveny 2004, p.55).

Given the impact of gender identity on attitudes and outcomes of compulsory schooling, it is not surprising that for many men, further formal education is not more appealing (Cleary, Brodie, MacFarlane, Brown, Gallacher and Boyd 2007; Quinn, Thomas, Slack, Casey, Thexton and Noble 2006). Education is not considered an appropriate activity for men (McGiveny in Chapman, Cartwright and McGlip 2006), education is not viewed as an end in itself, it is seen as boring (Marks 2000), and there is little ambition to educate beyond attaining employment (Cleary et al. 2007). These attitudes can be a protective, defensive stance (Marks 2000). A fear of appearing stupid to both other males and to females may exist, and 'laddishness' that 'fits with hegemonic masculinity… provides an excuse for failure' (Jackson in McGiveny 2004, p. 59).

Work is the main source of status and income for many men (Archer, Pratt and Phillips 2001), and the location for measuring success and failure (Erikson in Theodore and Lloyd 2000). Thompson (n.d.) suggests that paid work is a signifier of manliness and masculinity and the lack or loss of paid work diminishes male identity and power. Masculinity is constantly enacted but never achieved (Archer et al. 2001), and paid work is a major site in which to perform masculinity (Thompson, n.d.). Thus a key theme in consideration of male identity is 'the centrality of work in the lives of men' (Morgan in Archer, Pratt and Phillips 2001, p. 437).

Men and education

Mature age men are sometimes impelled to reflect on their aspirations, ambitions, and previous experiences of education as a result of an event, such as redundancy or illness (Cleary et al. 2007). This reflection facilitates men to return to education either to pursue new skills or extend existing skills and knowledge. Stewart, Cartner and Gibson (n.d., p. 7) concluded that a return to education was not catalysed by a single trigger, but rather a 'series of complex interactions, which over time prompted decisive action'. Previous experience of education affects the likelihood of men returning to education later in life (Guardian, cited in Archer et al. 2001). Negative previous education experiences operate as a barrier (Stewart et al. n.d.; Woodin and Burke, 2007) with confidence and self-esteem also being factors in returning to education. Family life provides a motivation to returning to study for some men. In a study of mature aged male students, Renmark (cited in Davey et al. 2003) discovered a desire to model a positive relationship to education. Returning to education appealed to some men because they could then contribute more to their

children's homework and learning (Stewart et al, n.d.; 2007; McGiveny, in Chapman et al. 2006). Cleary et al (2007) identified a desire for men in later life to keep up with the grandchildren.

The stigma attached to seeking further education proves a major barrier for some men. Archer (et al. 2001) found that working class models of masculinity did not easily include further education, finding that men viewed further education as middle class and effeminate. Similarly, McGiveny (cited in Chapman et al. 2006) noted a relationship between further education and femininity amongst the cohort she studied. Marks (2000) discovered that education was not considered to be 'real work' by men. Working class con-structions of masculinity are static rather than fluid (Quinn et al. 2006), with education viewed as a middle class pursuit that is not consistent with 'hard' working class masculinity (Archer et al. 2001). Merrill (n.d.) identifies that there is a struggle between working class and student identities.

Identity and masculinities in Australian rural and regional communities

Masculinity in rural Australia presents in multiple ways and there is no singular identity for young men, nor is there one notion of hegemonic rural masculinity. In studies of rural men, Foskey and Avery (2003) observed an emphasis on stoicism and individuality, and that for rural men, being useful is good. Alston and Kent (2008) perceived that power is central to rural masculinity, which often is associated with hard bodies and hard emotions (Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody 2006, p.66).

In rural regions of Australia, constructions of masculinity and attitudes to education affect the likelihood of mature age men accessing education where rural men value the body over the mind, and therefore do not place a high value on education. For boys, importance is placed on training specific to work rather than broader education aims. This is congruent with the research of Kenway et al. (2006); young men expect to leave school early and enter a trade, and men of lower socio-economic status were unlikely to become involved in education (Golding in Stone 2009). In contrast to these investigations, research by Chapman et al. (2006) revealed that in rural locales learning and education is considered empowering. Both Chapman et al. (2006) and Stone (2009) found that education is viewed as a second chance. Golding, Brown and Foley (2009) suggested that learning has a positive impact on wellbeing for older rural Australian men, and that informal learning is particularly appealing. The main research question arising from the experiences of the researchers as educators and from conducting the literature review was: how do mature age men over the age of 30 years experience post-compulsory education and training?

METHODOLOGY

The major aim of this project was to collect and analyse data on men's experiences of education and training in the Bendigo region to create baseline date and build case studies (Merriam 1988). Grounded Theory is a qualitative methodology that can be used to understand the theory that underpins people's experiences (Charmaz 2006). This research sought to understand mature age men's experiences of returning to study, and grounded theory methods were used in relation to data collection and analysis. Grounded theory

incorporates an intertwined data collection and analysis process, and because of the nature of theory growing out of the data as it is collected, the focus of the research can change throughout the research process. In this research the focus on the most part remained similar, however as themes were uncovered in relation to the influence of fathers, and resistance to access support, these were explored further in subsequent interviews. Ideally in grounded theory, data is collected until a saturation point occurs (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Due to project timeframes and the participant numbers, this point was not reached in this research. Nevertheless, some concepts have been developed and ideas for further exploration are suggested.

This research received ethics approval from the La Trobe University Faculty of Health Sciences Faculty Human Research Ethics Committee (FHREC) in mid 2010. The researchers over a period of 6-9 months were able to recruit twelve male participants between the ages of 21 and 65 years, who were participating in social sciences, human services or health sciences education and training programs in the City of Greater Bendigo during the years 2009 and 2010. Recruitment was via posters placed on-campus at La Trobe University Bendigo campus, Continuing Education Bendigo (CEB) and Bendigo TAFE. After initial discussions with potential participants, the aims of the research and the processes of the interview and data analysis were explained. Potential participants were then emailed a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and Consent and Withdrawal forms. Once consent had been given, an interview time and place was negotiated with each participant.

In-depth interviews were undertaken with 12 men participating in health and human service education or training programs in the Bendigo region in 2009 and 2010. All participants met age, gender and discipline criteria. Participants under the age of 30 were not excluded but as it occurred, all participants were over 30 years of age. Any potential participants known to all of the researchers were excluded.

The purpose of the interviews was two-fold. Firstly, the project sought to include and capture the voices of men's experience of life transitions, identity, wellbeing and participation in education and training, albeit in a preliminary manner. Semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The data was analysed manually exploring key themes and ideas, generating grounded theory concepts. Following the literature search and interview data analysis, key variables were identified, and hypothetical questions that we will be seeking to measure in a larger project were developed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following is a discussion of the research data with relevant quotes from the case studies developed about each participant following the interviews. Note that the case studies and the associated quotes use pseudonyms for each participant. The participant experiences and data will be discussed in terms of the themes beginnings, middles and new beginnings in the context of men experiencing identity formation and transitions throughout adulthood.
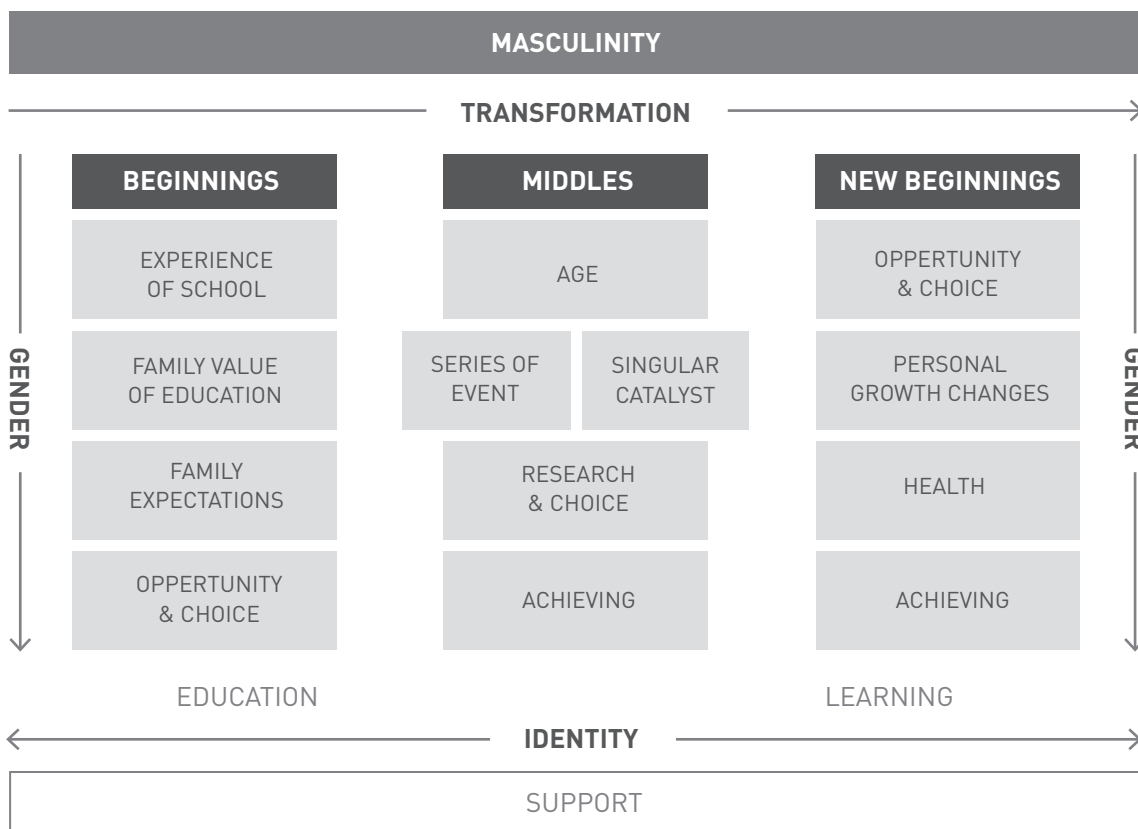
MASCULINITY

TRANSFORMATION

GENDER

BEGINNINGS	MIDDLES	NEW BEGINNINGS
EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOL	AGE	OPPERTUNITY & CHOICE
FAMILY VALUE OF EDUCATION	SERIES OF EVENT / SINGULAR CATALYST	PERSONAL GROWTH CHANGES
FAMILY EXPECTATIONS	RESEARCH & CHOICE	HEALTH
OPPERTUNITY & CHOICE	ACHIEVING	ACHIEVING

GENDER

EDUCATION
LEARNING

IDENTITY

SUPPORT

Figure 1: Beginnings, middles and new beginnings: how men transition through education

BEGINNINGS

Prior experiences of education

The experiences of primary and secondary education were varied for the participants but on the whole the men's experience of early schooling did affect their lack of interest in pursuing tertiary study at the time. For some it was the lack of choice provided at school in their rural community. They were unable to engage with the subject choices on offer and Rama talks about the lack of guidance and career counselling contributing to his negative impact at secondary school. Joel's experience is one of slipping through the gaps and not having the support from teachers at the time to develop and encourage his learning. Markus' experience is one of feeling unsupported at secondary school.

I'd put my hand up and say, "Can you show me again?" and they would say, the teacher would say "It's written on the board, I showed you, there it is. I suppose back then, when I was at school, you know, a lot of kids sort of slipped through the system I guess. (Joel)

I couldn't get out of there quick enough. No, school was a dump, it didn't engage me, we weren't really offered a great deal of choice, we weren't really given any career counselling that would give us a really good guide to what we should be doing, it seemed like an absolute waste of time to me. (Josh)

Significant life events such as family illness also impacted on decisions in relation to further study. Mark, whose early experiences of education were in Sri Lanka, abandoned ideas of tertiary study partly based on his cultural experience in terms of university being

for wealthy families and partly because his father fell ill and as the only son he felt an expectation to earn an income. For Barry, a traumatic event (nature undisclosed) impacted on his ability to pursue tertiary study at the time of completing Year 12. This idea of events outside of schooling experience and family values impacting on young men undertaking tertiary study is absent in the current literature.

Family expectations

Another theme was about the family values in relation to study and family expectations. The majority of the participants came from small rural farming communities where the expectation from their family and friends was about finding employment, preferably working on the family farm, not about continuing with education. Josh states that he was surrounded by people who did not value education. Markus experienced a lack of support from teachers and family in terms of schooling and left as expected by his family to take up a trade. It is likely that, for some of the participants in this study, as their sense of identity and their experience of gendered roles in relation to education developed, their ability to engage with education was affected. This is consistent with the finding by Golding (2003, 2006). Linked to this is the idea reinforced in society that work and income for many men are linked to status and identity (Archer et al. 2000). Moving from secondary school into employment was a way for the participants to gain a sense of their identity that at the time was consistent with their sense of masculinity and their family's expectations.

[Dad was] a farmer, you go and buy some land or you go and get a job and you work, you get a trade, you don't go to Uni and do girlie work. (James)

it [tertiary education] was just something that traditionally members of our family never contemplated. It was always something for people who were a) either rich or b) smart.... (Markus)

For David, making a choice to study at university was a 'way out' of his small rural community but was at odds with his family expectations of staying on the farm. David's initial study did not pan out as expected and when he returned to study as a mature age student some 20 years later, he still experienced the same sense of education being a luxury from his father. Other participants conformed to family expectations and moved into farming or into a trade qualification. Their experience at the time is consistent with Coldwell's (2009) idea that rural men value the body over the mind, and therefore, do not place a high value on education. It also is consistent with the dominant labour market programming in Australia in relation to encouraging labour market participation (Karmel 2011). Tim and Sean both identified as having positive secondary schooling experiences but the offer of employment meant that they did not pursue tertiary education at the time, even thought they had both considered this option.

For many of the participants their family and in particular their fathers, influenced their decision not to go onto further study after secondary school. Similarly, directly or indirectly, the participants' fathers played a role in their decision to return to study as mature age men. This highlights a link over time between father and son in terms of the influence of the father on men's identity particularly as a learner. Rama indicates a distant relationship

with his father and the expectations his father had about Rama working influenced Rama's decision not to explore tertiary study from secondary school. Lachlan indicates that his father has had an influence on both his decision not to pursue further education after Year 12 and his decision to return to study as a mature age student. Lachlan experiences support from his father on the one hand but on the other hand, he feels a sense that he should be financially supporting his family and fulfilling his role as a father and husband.

When Mark was considering returning to study in Australia his father was an important motivator. Mark said that his father believed in his abilities and encouraged him to explore his potential. Mark believes his father would be proud of what he was achieving. Josh described a lack of understanding about and value of tertiary education in his family when he was in secondary school and the influence this had on his decision not to go on to tertiary study at the time. However, his father's affirmation of his decision to return to study as a mature age student was the difference between Josh accepting his position at university and taking an offer of employment. In contrast, David believes his father sees his decision to return to study as a mature age student as an indulgence and in the four years of David's course has not engaged David in conversation about his study.

MIDDLES

The return to study

The literature identifies that either a single event can act as a catalyst (Cleary et al. 2007) for men to return to study or a series of complex events (although this is considered the less common). The pathway to return to education was mixed amongst this cohort of participants.

Lachlan is representative of the men in the group whose pathway back to education was part of a re-evaluation of their life and there was not necessarily one catalyst but a series of events that led him back to study. He was dissatisfied with the long term prospects in his employment; he had supported his wife during her university education and he had been supporting his wife through postnatal depression. The decision to study was about gaining new skills and knowledge to improve employment options as much as it was about a personal journey of reassessment, confidence and determination. Barry's story is similar as are the narratives of Josh, Tim and James.

The notion of class was not explored specifically in this study. However, the narratives of some of the participants are similar to the research of Townsend (2009) who found that low SES men can be trapped in middle age by low skill development. For Sean, John, Rama, David, Joel, the decision to return to study was prompted by an event in their lives in relation to employment such as illness, redundancy, selling of a business, or wanting to change careers due to job dissatisfaction. This is consistent with the concept of a singular event or catalyst prompting a return to study or initially at least, prompting a re-evaluation of life. What is interesting in this cohort of men is that on the whole the decision to study was not primarily about 'skilling up' or upgrading qualifications (Burnett 2003) but rather about changing careers and fulfilling an internal need.

Research and choice

As part of the decision to return, the men talked about finding out about their options and researching the possibilities as well as considering the financial implications. This was important to all of them and for the majority it was a different experience from how their earlier decisions were made in relation to going on or not going on to tertiary study. While previous experience and family expectations still had an impact, the participants were able to balance this with their current stage of life, their own internal needs as well as the prospect of achieving greater options for employment.

I can think of a few mature agers I've known here in the last few years that have had young families, that have studied fulltime and have taken that 3 or 4 years and a complete cut in pay, in order to be able to support them long term. They have copped it from their families, not from their spouses or children but from their in-laws who have sort of looked at it and gone oh but that's not a blokes role, you can't be doing that, you should be working blah, blah, blah, but I think it's big of them to do that, I think that's fantastic you know if they can work out how to keep things ticking and improve their lot in life at the same time, why not? (Josh)

The idea of 'researching' has not been identified in previous research to date and provides new insight into how mature age men make decisions about returning to study. Even with the event of a singular catalyst the process of actually enrolling at university can be lengthy. David, for example, spent time thinking about what sort of person he would be at age 70 (finding his inner 70 year old man); James attended university open days, spoke to others who had attended university and explored the job prospects associated with the course he was considering; and John researched his options for a period of 2 years.

So I thought if I was 70 what would I look like, what would I drink? What would I be reading? How would I dress? Where would I live? What would I say to myself? And I think if I was a distinguished, educated, well read, well travelled man of 70, I'd probably look at that 37 year old and just say, give up smoking for God's sake! So I really got in touch with that and I started thinking, well that person could work, but what would I do? I certainly won't be turning patients in bed, I won't be singing, but I could volunteer somewhere. (David)

Education and Identity negotiation

Archer, et al. (2001) suggests that a process of identity negotiation is required for men who enter education after some time in paid work. This 'identity negotiation' can be seen in the narratives of these men who juggle with their expectations of themselves as wage earners, carers and students and with the expectations of those around them, parents and friends, as well as their earlier experiences and connection to education. Josh's story captures these tensions, even while at university, he was still questioning whether or not he belonged; asking was it right for someone like him to be at university? This was based on his earlier schooling experiences, the influence of his family who did not value education and the identity he had developed in relation to himself as a learner. Josh also identified himself as working class and saw University as a middle class experience.

But I had no idea, I had no formal education, I didn't finish high school. I was 30 years old, had only basically worked as a farmer and then was working as a cleaner. I came from a rural

background where university doesn't really come into the discussion. It's seen as something elite and rather separate from everyone else, so I just assumed they wouldn't want me… I'm the first in my family to go to university. (Josh)

This is consistent with the findings of Archer et al. (2001) in relation to the idea of education not being consistent with a working class identity. This shifted for him during his experience at university as he reinvented himself. Tim shared a similar experience of feeling like he had to continuously justify his presence at university to those in his personal life as well as to other students in his course.

.. you're coming from a completely different generation where you approach things a little bit more reservedly, I guess in the sense that you tend not to want to upset the apple cart within the classroom environment, you know by asking a silly question or seeking advice on things, where a lot of the younger people would just have no hesitation about, being in your face and that's been a challenge to overcome. (Tim)

Tim considered himself to have a non-traditional view of gendered-roles and his own experience was one of supporting his partner in her career choices and being the predominant at-home carer of their children. Yet he too, experienced a period of negotiating his identity in relation to his return to study. Further to this the experience of juggling study, family life and finances are shared experiences of all of the participants.

Achieving

What is clear in the participants' narratives are the high expectations that they had of themselves, once they had made the decision to return to study. Perhaps in keeping with their earlier gendered-roles of being seen to do well, the men were able to justify, to them selves and the people around them, their decision to return to study by achieving well. Markus, Rama and Lachlan all refer to this as being significant in their study, with Lachlan identifying that it reached a point where he needed to readjust his expectations because of the impact on his family, and Markus indicated that his expectations have come at a price, impacting negatively on his relationships with family and friends.

David and Lachlan referred to an academic skills program as being significant in increasing their confidence about their abilities to study. The participants indicated a sense of fear of failure when they returned to study relating to both their abilities to study (Sean, David) but also the fear of not achieving the outcome of employment at the end of the course (James). An interesting point of difference here is that while some support such as academic skills programs was seen as significant, the majority of men were either unaware of or aware of and did not access, other support services (such as counselling, careers, access and equity) even though at times they struggled with their life at university and outside of university. A common approach was about working it out on their own.

I have a problem where I won't ask for help, I'm a typical male I suppose in that way. I'll go and go until I really, really desperately think I need help instead of asking straight up. I'll try and nut it out myself and understand it myself, that's one thing I know that I've got to overcome. I think that comes back to your upbringing maybe, probably where you come from, we were always made

to figure things out for ourselves and I suppose that's just the generation I come from. It may not be the same for the younger kids that are here. (Sean)

This was further evident by participants' non-response to explore the area of supports in more depth in a focus group. Men on campus at LTU Bendigo and across regional campuses were invited to attend a meeting either personally or via emails to discuss why it is that mature aged men do not participate in peer mentoring programs, peer learning programs or attend student support services in any significant numbers. However, only two (2) men responded to this invitation and this was deemed too low in number to collect any relevant, significant qualitative data.

NEW BEGINNINGS

Opportunity and Choice

Despite the juggling, the fears and the tension between what the participants wanted to do and the expectations of others, the participants all describe their experience of returning to study as positive. Further to this they all share a belief that returning to education is an option available to mature age men and is achievable. The new beginnings for the participants in this research relate to gaining employment in their new career and also continuing on to further postgraduate study. Combined with this, and unexpected for some, has been the personal transformations that have occurred. Josh's belief that he does belong in higher education, James' personal and life transformation through education, Rama's increase in self-confidence and David's personal growth and sense of who he is in the world.

Joel's experience has also included the development of new social networks and friendships. For Lachlan, who was diagnosed with a mental health illness whilst undertaking his undergraduate studies, his achievements at university have increased his confidence and opened up a range of possibilities. When we consider the long term health and wellbeing focus for mature age men, particularly in light of wellbeing for rural men (Golding et al. 2009), the experience of the participants in this research highlights the link between education and wellbeing.

Transformation- personal growth, health and wellbeing.

Associated with the theme of personal transformation is the idea of studying as a mature age student being about 'learning' not 'education' and as such different to secondary school. Josh refers to it as a process of learning and this shifted during the course from just passing in education. Markus's experience was about learning and becoming more enlightened as a person. Joel refers to his experience as one of adult learning. This centred on his relationship with his teachers and his experience of positive feedback and support. He has a desire to learn more and considers study in a different light – he wants to go on to further study.

I'm a very different person now to what I was, say when I first attempted university [or] when I left secondary education. So there's been plenty of different life markers along the way. My worldview, my understanding of the world, as a social construct continually changes, so it just gets bigger and bigger, more complicated. (Markus)

James's experience of a personal and life transformation also reflect the idea of returning to study offering more than education.

[Undertaking this course has] transformed me as an individual. It transformed me in terms of my…own values and I did a lot of self reflection. I think it opened my eyes up to disadvantage and vulnerability and how lucky I had been myself as a child and as a young person…and I started to believe that I could actually make a difference…… I wasn't prepared or expected the personal transformation. (James).

CONCLUSIONS

There is some evidence of the link between education, level of income and health outcomes (Cai 2009) but there is scant evidence on the link between men's education and their overall wellbeing especially in middle to older age. These narratives from mature age men returning to study reveal a complex composition of societal gendered expectations, family expectations and individual expectations that influence boys'/men's identities as learners no matter their age. When these tensions are balanced and an opportunity to engage in the process of learning through formal education occurs, the outcomes in terms of both economic and personal rewards are apparent.

The majority of men in this study were aged 35+ and struggled with the age 21 being seen as mature aged. A more useful approach to exploring the experiences of mature age men would be to focus on the age group of 35-65 years. More specific data collected for this age group could provide insight into the experiences for these men. In order to achieve this, current statistical data collection parameters may need to shift to reflect the community experience/understanding of mature age, particularly in relation to men.

The human services, health and community services sectors are expanding as aged and disability care becomes more community based, as child protection de-centralises and expands its focus and as mental health and wellbeing becomes more of a focus for all communities. These sectors and services need a diverse and highly educated workforce, Healy and & Lonne (2010) in their review of the social work and human services workforce stated there are a number of pressing workforce issues including rapid ageing, labour shortages (particularly in the community-based not-for-profit agencies, and rural and remote locations)… (2010, p. 65).

The review of Australian Higher Education (The Bradley Report) identified the urgent need to increase higher education participation rates amongst specific groups in Australian society, including those who reside in rural and regional communities (DEEWR 2008). The report also highlighted significant workforce shortages. Despite this report and its recommendations, the movement toward a 'demand' driven higher education system in 2012 has yet to prove to be of advantage to rural and regional communities or to mature age men accessing education in human services and social sciences. With minority Federal Government, significant changes to VET funding and administration across the eastern seaboard, and restructuring occurring within most universities, the education and training

sectors remained looking inward rather than seeking to locate new participants in all forms of education in Australia (Townsend 2011).

Questions therefore remain in relation to how to engage men in the process of researching their return to study, identified by this cohort as a significant step prior to returning to study. How can mature aged men be engaged in considering education as a choice that is still available? What is missing is a gender specific marketing approach to recruiting mature age men to further education. Consideration also needs to be given to how to support mature age men when they are engaged in tertiary studies. The participants in this research had either completed or were completing their study. Some further consideration as to why men might withdraw from tertiary study could assist in developing appropriate support services.

This research raised the notion that tertiary education may be linked to wellbeing for mature age men. A larger nationwide study to gather a comprehensive profile of mature age man (35+) that also explores the concepts and links between health, education and wellbeing as being potentially intertwined for men would provide insight into how to support mature age men in relation to providing choices in the access to and participation in post-compulsory education and training.

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