The 'double-edged sword' of the adult learning environment

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The vocational education and training sector plays a critical role in the provision of educational opportunities for young adults who have left school prior to completing a qualification. Some research has found that a major factor that supports student re-engagement in formal education is the 'adult learning environment' that characterises institutions such as TAFE. Other studies have questioned the suitability of the adult learning environment for some students. This study explores how students and teachers in five foundation TAFE courses view the adult learning environment, and how they respond to this environment. The paper argues that the adult learning environment can in some instances be a 'double-edged sword', in that it can both enhance and limit student engagement.

Background

Within Australia there is a small yet significant number of young adults who leave school prior to completing a qualification and/or

who are unemployed or not participating in formal study. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) participation data indicate that in 2011 8% of people aged between 15 and19 years, and 12% of those aged between 20 and 24, were not engaged in any form of work or study. Developing practices that re-engage young adults in formal education is important in terms of social equity. Many young adults who have left school early, and who are not engaged in work or study, are from backgrounds associated with social and economic disadvantage (Marks & McMillan, 2001). School completion or an equivalent qualification is highly correlated with gaining employment and longer term health and well-being (Black, Polidano & Tseng, 2009).

The vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia plays a crucial role in the provision of educational services that address disadvantage and provide skills and qualifications that will prepare early school leavers for employment or further study (Skills Australia, 2010; Brown & North, 2010). The term 'second chance' education has been used to describe courses provided by institutions such as TAFE (Technical and Further Education) for young people who have left school without a qualification and/or who are disengaged from schooling (Karmel & Woods, 2008; Ross & Gray, 2005; Wyn, Stokes & Tyler, 2004). Successful completion of second chance courses, generally at the Certificate I, II or III level, significantly improves the chances of young people gaining employment (Skills Australia, 2010).

There is only a relatively small body of literature that has examined the experiences of young adults in second chance settings. However, in the research that has been conducted, there are clear patterns. Young adults who leave school early and then participate in second chance educational opportunities have often had very negative experiences at school. Indeed when young adults have been asked why they disengaged from school two reasons stand out. First, these young people report a dislike of school environments that are rule-bound, inflexible and restrictive. They describe such environments as ones in which students struggle to conform and in which there is conflict and power struggles (Crane & Livock, 2012; McGregor & Mills, 2011). Second and relatedly, young adults often mention negative relationships with teachers as a reason for disengaging from and leaving school. Students report, for example, that teachers 'talked down' to them (Black, Balatti & Falk, 2010); they were 'picked

on' by teachers (Attwood, Croll & Hamilton, 2010); they fought with teachers (Wyn, et al., 2004); and they were punished unfairly by teachers (Lee & Ip, 2010).

A dislike of school and teachers are common reasons that young people put forward for leaving school prior to completing a qualification, but as Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers and Rumberger (2004) argue, such reasons can often be combined with a complex set of additional factors related to social and economic disadvantage. These additional factors include personal and family related circumstances such as ill-health, disability, homelessness, domestic violence, poverty and transience. When these factors combine with low rates of school attendance and/or movement from school to school, a consequence can be a 'downward spiral' of academic achievement, self-esteem and school engagement (Lamb, et al. 2004: 14). Students' dislike of school and their poor relationships with teachers can also be underpinned by a range school practices and policies that can contribute to student disengagement. These include limited subject choice and lack of curriculum relevance, negative school cultures, variable teacher quality, students' experience of academic failure, and teachers having low expectations of students (Willms, 2003; Lamb, et al., 2004; Zyngier, 2008).

A range of policies and practices have been developed within both the adult education sector to provide second change educational opportunities for early school leavers. Given the complex array of factors that can contribute to early school leaving, it is not surprising that there is no one program or practice that contributes to successful re-engagement with learning. Typically programs use a range of curricular, pedagogical and welfare strategies to support re-engagement. Interestingly, when young adults participating in 'second chance' education are asked about the factors that support their re-engagement, two areas are commonly mentioned. These are a flexible or adult learning environment and respectful relationships between students and teachers. The notion of an adult learning environment is strong in the literature and sometimes the term is even used to signify the opposite of a school environment. An adult learning environment is one in which students do have some freedom and autonomy, and in which there is flexibility in terms of course pathways and timetables (McGregor & Ryan, 2011; Wilson, Stemp

& McGinty, 2011; Black, Balatti & Falk, 2010; Wyn, et al., 2004). Wyn, et al. (2004) make the point that a distinctive feature of such environments is that young people do not feel 'humiliated' in ways that they may have experienced at school. Such environments can also have fewer rules than school in relation to, for example, uniform and attendance (McGregor & Mills, 2011).

A second factor that is supportive of re-entry into education is positive student-teacher relationships, in which young people feel that they are "treated like an adult" (Attwood, Croll & Hamilton, 2010; Harkin, 2006). Respectful relationships between students and teachers are commonly mentioned in the literature. Other features of student-teacher relationships seen as important to the process of re-engagement include 'caring', 'supportive' and 'easy-going' (Wyn, et al. 2004; McGregor & Mills, 2011; Livock, 2009).

Interestingly many VET providers operate on the principles of an adult learning environment. The TAFE New South Wales website provides a useful example of how this environment is understood by VET institutions. On this website an adult learning environment is characterised as one that allows freedom of choice, and it is contrasted with the more 'structured environment' that 'children require'. There is a statement that students will be judged on 'output rather than attendance'. The website includes a discussion of the obligations and expectations of students that accompany these freedoms, including treating staff with respect, allowing other students to study without disturbance and applying 'adult considerations to the level of effort' put into study (TAFE New South Wales, 2012).

Concern has been raised in the literature about some aspects of the adult learning environment for early school leavers. Researchers have argued that the adult learning environment of TAFE can be unsuitable for young people, particularly those who might have left school prior to completing Year 10 and who could be under the age of 15 (Polesel, 2010). Further, adult education providers are not necessarily equipped to deal with the sometimes complex academic and pastoral needs of young people in terms of the training and experience of staff, the range of courses available that are geared to the needs and capacities of students, or the resources and funding to

provide a range of student services (Polesel, Nizinska, & Kurantowicz, 2011; Polesel, Helme, Davies, Teese, Nicholas & Vickers, 2004). An additional concern relates to low course completion rates among early school leavers in TAFE courses (Karmel & Woods, 2008). The risk factors associated with low completion at TAFE are closely aligned with the risk factors associated with early school leaving (Polesel, 2010; Polesel, Davies & Teese, 2003).

As noted earlier, there is a scarcity of research, which has investigated the experiences of teachers and students in 'second chance' courses. The picture developed to date regarding an adult learning environment for young school leavers is a complex one. While the literature reveals that an adult learning environment may be crucial to re-engagement for early school leavers, there are some cautionary notes sounded regarding some aspects of the adult learning environment for these young people. The purpose of this paper is to explore how both teachers and students in a foundation skills program for early school leavers perceive and respond to the adult learning environment of TAFE.

Research methods

Courses included in the study

This study was conducted in five different foundation skills courses delivered on two TAFE campuses in regional towns in New South Wales. The curriculum content was concerned with literacy and numeracy skills, as well employability skills such as communication, team work and computer skills. The courses provided foundation skills at the following levels: prevocational, Certificate I, Certificate II and Certificate III. The courses had been designed for those without a Year 10 Certificate and/or with low levels of literacy and numeracy. Students enrolled in the courses attended classes on three days each week over an eighteen week term. There were between ten and fifteen students enrolled in each of the courses.

Participants

Teachers and students consented to be part of the study. 30 students (19 male, 11 female) participated in the interview, representing a

participation rate of 70%. The students' ranged in age from sixteen to twenty-five years, and all lived in regional towns. The average age of student participants was 17 years. None of the students who participated in the research had completed Year 10 at school.

All 10 members of staff (four male and six female) working in the foundation skills courses participated in the interview. Seven of the staff had teaching-only roles. Three of the staff had roles that encompassed teaching as well as leadership, counselling and assessment.

All participants in the study are referred to using pseudonyms.

Interview

The data reported in this paper were collected as part of a larger study examining teaching practices and classroom environments that encourage student effort and participation across a range of courses in TAFE settings. Student and staff views were elicited using a semi-structured interview. Questions were open-ended. The term 'adult learning environment' was not used in the questions so as not to lead participants in any way. Students were first asked some general introductory questions related to why they enrolled in the course and the nature of work undertaken in the course. They were then asked what they liked and disliked about the course and what they would do to improve the course. The average time taken for each student interview was approximately fifteen minutes. The interviews with staff sought to ascertain their beliefs and practices related to student engagement, including the factors that encouraged and discouraged student effort. Staff were also asked for their suggestions regarding course improvements. The average time taken for each staff interview was one hour. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

Analysis of data

The responses to the interview questions were coded iteratively, using an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). The full range of responses was ascertained from a detailed reading of the transcriptions. The responses were then grouped into major themes. Reponses to the questions were usually multidimensional and encompassed several themes.

Findings

The findings are grouped into three sections: aspects of the adult learning environment that were seen as positive by teachers and students; aspects that were seen by teachers and students as hindering student learning or problematic in some way; and a final section exploring the ways in which teachers deal with issues arising from an adult learning environment .

Positive aspects of the adult learning environment

Both students and teachers used the term 'adult learning environment' in the interviews to describe aspects of the TAFE environment. Students reported that they liked the flexible and relaxed nature of TAFE, being able to work at their own pace, and being treated like an adult by teachers. Teachers spoke of respectful relationships and of treating students as adults. Teachers aimed specifically to create a different environment from that of secondary school and counter the impact of negative school experiences on students.

Students liked what they described as the flexible and relaxed nature of the TAFE environment:

> *TAFE is somewhat more flexible than school. There's not so much pressure and it's just more easy-going, which makes me feel comfortable and able to do my work without much pressure. (Owen/student)*

> *At school you've got all these stupid little rules and you don't really know what's going on. While here you know what's going on and you know what you've got to do, you get it done and then do whatever you do in your own time. (David/student)*

Students also enjoyed being able to work at their own pace:

> *It's easy going and you can take your time of doing it. (Ricky/student)*

> *You work at your own pace so you know, they give you a book and you work through that at your own pace. You know you sit down, you do the task that's given to you and I think that works well. (Jason/student)*

Students appreciated teachers treating them like adults:

> *I like the way I'm treated, we all get treated like adults and even though there is some conflict it's resolved like adults. (Lucy/ student)*

> *I pretty much like the adult learning environment, where I get treated as an equal, not like a sort of a subject. (Alex/student)*

The adult learning environment for some of the students was highly motivating and encouraged them to keep attending:

> *They treat you more like an adult than like being a kid and that. And at TAFE you're here because you want to, you're not being told you have to, so you're going to be more willing to come. (Holly/student)*

All of the teachers noted that the adult learning environment within TAFE was a major factor that encouraged students to attend class, make an effort in class, and complete their course. They took care to make TAFE different to school:

> *So it's kind of a different experience for them here to what they've had at school with the teachers. They call me by my first name, they can go outside and smoke, there's nobody policing them. (Jenny/teacher)*

> *I think we have a little more time ... we are not as big as secondary schools and we are more caring ... a more caring staff unit. (Andrew/teacher)*

> *They're young adults, the students, so you can't treat them like school children. I tell them it is more like being in a university or being in a job. (Charlie/teacher)*

The notion of respectful relationships was a recurring theme in the interviews. Teachers emphasised the importance of establishing relationships with students that were based on trust, care and respect:

> *I don't back off...I want to be there, I want them to talk to me and I want them to tell me what they thinking...and I speak to them respectfully and hopefully they will do the same to me. (Megan/ teacher)*

> *We're small enough here and personal enough that we can customize to meet their [student] needs. And I think when they finally get someone that respects them rather than barrages them to do things, they kind of want to work hard. (Jenny/teacher)*

Teachers expressed the view that respect involved treating the students as 'adults':

> *Treating them like adults, talking to them one-on-one and not talking down to them. (Charlie/teacher)*

The perspectives provided by students and teachers are consistent with the ideas raised in the literature about productive learning environments for young adults disaffected from schooling. It was clear from the interviews that the freedom and flexibility of the TAFE environment, coupled with positive and respectful relationships between teachers and students was fundamental to students' re-engagement with formal education.

However, as one teacher stated, the students were in many respects "apprentice adults", that is they did not always accept some of the responsibilities and obligations of adult behaviour and relationships. This created tensions in the learning environment for both students and teachers. These tensions are discussed below.

Problematic aspects of the adult learning environment – the 'doubled-edged sword'

The freedom and flexibility of the TAFE environment were important features for student re-engagement, yet these same features also gave rise to some problems. The teachers acknowledged that in some instances, students embraced the relative freedom of the environment but did not necessarily behave like adult learners. Irregular attendance, variable effort, frequent disruptions in class, and lateness to class were problems regularly faced by teachers. Interestingly, some students also expressed frustration with other students failing to behave appropriately in the adult learning environment. In this way, the adult learning environment can be characterised as a 'double-edged sword'.

Teachers expressed a tension between the autonomy that is appropriate to an adult learning environment and making sure that students were punctual, stayed in class, and took responsibility for their work:

> *It is very difficult. At what point do you say enough's enough, really? Some of our students constantly push the boundaries. I know with the one group in particular, we have a lot of trouble with students coming late. You know, 9.30 is just this abstract time and students wander in as they please. (Amanda/teacher)*

> *One of the classes … they will go, 'Can I go out for a smoke now?' And I say 'you are in an adult institution, if you want to go out, go, but don't be too long. You know you have your 15 minute break in the middle of the class'. (Megan/teacher)*

Students also expressed concern about peers who did not attend regularly or who did not appear committed to learning:

> *Maybe attendance should be mandatory, I don't know if it is or not or you have to arrive on time or otherwise get penalized or something. I don't know, 'cause I see a lot of people not attending on time or not at all. (Adam/student)*

> *Get people here that want to learn, not people that want to come here because they're getting paid for it and come when they feel like it … if you had people here that really wanted to learn and gave it 100%, TAFE would come out better, the people would come out better and we'd have a better society. (Jacob/student)*

Students also expressed the tension between the autonomy of the adult learning environment and their own need to be regulated to some extent. Some students said that they would prefer the teachers to be more demanding of them, but these students were also, implicitly at least, expecting the teacher to be responsible for their learning:

> *I think maybe that the teachers… they're not persistent with making sure you're doing the work constantly all the time. (Chloe/student)*

… If they [teachers] push you enough you can learn more and more. But if they don't push you, you're not going to learn. (Jacob/student)

Teachers' responses to the challenges of the adult learning environment

The perceptions of the teachers and students highlight the many benefits conferred by the adult learning environment as well as the challenges. How did the teachers in our study respond to these challenges? Despite the tensions involved, teachers were not critical of students, but accepting of and realistic about the students' capabilities. Teachers adopted a developmental approach, such that they attempted to incrementally increase students' autonomy and appropriate learning behaviours.

Teachers dealt with lateness and in-class behavioural issues with patience, and treated all students with respect:

I am mindful of the fact that it is an adult learning environment and I think in the end you have to have patience… it is a different environment and they've had bad experiences with school and they generally respond well to the idea that you respect their point of view. (Sarah/teacher)

The teachers acknowledged the difficulties associated with starting a lesson when students arrive late. The teachers typically welcomed late students to class, spoke to them about lateness, and designed lessons activities that enabled multiple starting points:

We just try to carry on as best we can, I mean if it's a project and that's easy to do, 'pull out your project and continue where you left off last lesson'. If it's a worksheet we just hope that they can sort of catch-up to where we're up to. And then once everybody's there I can have a chat with them and say 'well, did you catch the first part of the lesson, have you caught up on it?' and make sure that they have. (Amanda/teacher)

Teachers recognised that they needed different strategies regarding lateness, depending on students' individual circumstances and the nature of the work the class is undertaking:

If it's a student that I know has issues with lateness because they for instance work at the pedestrian crossing down the street and they're late, they're 10 minutes late, or they've got children ... If they've got massive social issues I let them come in and as long as they're not interrupting the lesson I let them come in at their point in time. (Lauren/teacher)

Teachers also had practical and sympathetic strategies for students wanting to take non-scheduled breaks during lessons:

A lot of them have got drug dependencies, nicotine. You can't just, you can't say, 'Oh no you can't go on a break,' because they will just go and they won't come back because they don't want to face the music when they come back. So no, I say 'you can walk out whenever you want'. You know, it's not a jail and they are adults, it's an adult environment. (Megan/teacher)

Punctuality and appropriate in-class behaviour were seen as developmental issues, and teachers allowed students to develop these skills gradually:

When I'm having students with massive behavioural issues that don't want to learn, and make it obvious that they don't want to learn, then I may start to impose more penalties for lateness. I will use those things to then impose a penalty, it might be for a week that I shut the door, but yeah, those penalties are certainly way down the track and particularly after I've got trust and after I've got a whole heap of other strategies in place. (Lauren/ teacher)

When they first start, they can't put their phones down for a while and they are texting virtually the whole time if someone is returning their text. But after a while, they tend to leave that and they can go back to it in their break or at the end of the class. (Megan/teacher)

For some students, teachers set regular attendance as a first goal:

I think there's some students that you know you're not going to get much work out of. And with those you don't focus so much on the outcomes of the unit but more on just trying to help them attend regularly. (Amanda/teacher)

Teachers also took responsibility for students' work folders and provided pens. They reflected on whether that was the best thing to be doing, but were realistic about students' current capacity to take responsibility themselves:

> *And often I think, should we be encouraging them to do that, to get a bag, to get their own folder, to get their own pens? But then you know, one of those classes I keep their folders because I know it's never going to make it back the next day. They have a folder that they can save their files electronically to, but I will obviously keep a hard copy folder with their things in it. And we will provide a pen. (Megan/teacher)*

Once again teachers took a developmental approach to increasing students' sense of responsibility for their own work:

> *Some students like to take their work home, which is great because it's obviously taking ownership and responsibility. But again that's been a learning curve. When I first started teaching these courses, I found that I'd give work out and it would get lost or it would be at home. And it would never come back and you know we're forever spending time giving out the same work that was lost. So many years ago I decided the folder strategy would work. They're quite happy to give you the folder and have you look after it. That's not a very mature approach to it, as in not taking responsibility, but over time I'll find that they actually ask to take their folders and keep their folders and take them home, if they're improving and committing to the course. (Lauren/ teacher)*

For the issue of student effort and application to work, teachers also adopted a careful and patient developmental approach. Teachers understood the difficulties that some students had experienced at school and set goals of gradually decreasing students' antipathy towards the learning environment and developing a positive mind-set toward their study:

> *But in the lower level courses, they don't lose that antagonism towards school and they can be very immature and so that's an issue. And you have to treat them like adults, even though they don't always behave - to get them to say 'well, it is up to me, you*

*know. If I work, I'll get somewhere, and if I don't, I won't'. And
'the teachers aren't out to get me and I shouldn't give them a hard
time, cos then I'm giving me a hard time'. (Charlie/teacher)*

The teachers discussed the careful way in which they needed to
develop students' learning behaviours. They acknowledged if they
'pushed' too hard or were too strict some students may not return:

*When it comes to discipline, I think if I get too heavy, they walk
out the door and they won't ever come back and I have never had
that happen yet. (Megan/teacher)*

*Yeah, I say to them, 'Look, try and be here at the right time
because we have only got so much time, you know, each week
together' But there are two students who will always walk in at
10:00 or 10:30, and I just say, 'Hello guys, come in, take a seat.'
Later on I might say, 'if you want to get your work done, you
have got to be here earlier'. I might say, 'Look at the time,' but
you know, I don't insist that they apologise or explain anything, I
just say 'sit down, take a seat', because I would rather them come
at that time than not come at all. (Sarah/teacher)*

Teachers avoided applying rules in the same way as a school might:

*… I always stress the exact start time … but if I try and impose
too many rules it becomes too much like school and it creates
more of a problem in the long term. (Lauren/teacher)*

There was also an acknowledgement from all of the teachers that
setting homework was not appropriate for similar reasons:

*I don't really think that anyone in this section would be setting
a lot of homework because the feeling is that it wouldn't happen.
So then that would be not a success for the student, so therefore I
think we'd be back to school mentality. (Lauren/teacher)*

Discussion and conclusion

The interviews revealed that the adult learning environment of TAFE
is seen by teachers and students as vital for student re-engagement
in formal study. The adult learning environment in this study
encompassed freedom and flexibility and was underpinned by

positive and respectful student-teacher relationships. TAFE was seen by participants as very different to secondary school. Much of the literature has also identified that these features of educational environments are crucial to the process of re-engaging young adults in formal education (Mills & McGregor, 2011; Wyn, et al., 2004).

As noted earlier, some researchers have raised questions about whether environments such as TAFE can cater for the complex learning needs of young adults disengaged from schooling (Polesel, et al. 2011; Polesel, 2010; Wyn, et al. 2004). Our research provides a nuanced response to such questions. Certainly, the study revealed specific difficulties for students and teachers as they worked together in an adult learning environment. We argue that, in the context of this study, the adult learning environment was a 'double-edged sword', reflecting the fruitful, but at times highly challenging nature of this environment. The freedom and autonomy were seen by teachers and students as an essential part of the process of student re-engagement with study and they provided a contrast to students' experience of school. Yet as both teachers and students noted, the freedom and autonomy also enabled poor attendance, lateness to class and other behaviours that jeopardised course completion. Similarly, teachers and students wished to have mutually respectful, equal relationships, based on the fact that all parties are adults. However, some students did not, at least initially, demonstrate appropriately responsible or 'adult' behaviours towards their learning.

The teachers in our study thus faced a dilemma. If they imposed too much discipline or structure, some students could leave the course because TAFE was 'too much like school'. If teachers did not impose some structure then students may well not attend, apply themselves in class, or complete a qualification. The strategies employed by teachers to negotiate this dilemma involved respectful relationships at all times; an individualised approach for each student; flexible lesson design that enabled multiple starting points for a lesson; and explicit behavioural and learning standards accompanied by a developmental approach to these standards. The teachers in this study thus managed the adult learning environment by adopting a careful approach, with realistic and incremental goals for students. They negotiated the 'double-edged sword' of the adult learning environment by allowing

students some freedom and autonomy while ensuring that they did indeed attend class, gain skills and meet course outcomes.

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