Under Construction:
Journey of Re-entry to Adult Education Programs

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Abstract

My research is a work in progress. This paper discusses the potential project that will utilize narrative inquiry to learn about the lived experiences of adults over the age of 45 who have made the decision to re-enter a high school program to complete grade 12. I review the literature surrounding adult learning and early exits from high school. Transformative learning theory and reflective inquiry are also mentioned as possible theories in the understanding of the data that will be collected and as a means to extend thinking about ethics that ultimately will impact the research process.

RETURN TO HIGH SCHOOL: *A REAL-LIFE JOURNEY*

A Conceptual Framework for Anticipated Doctoral Research By Shelley Kokorudz, University of Regina Doctoral Student

This paper discusses the literature surrounding adult learning. It examines the challenges associated with re-entry to adult education spaces and briefly discusses some of the theories associated with adult learning. The paper also describes the potential research project that will involve a narrative inquiry to better understand the lived experiences of adults who re-enter high school spaces later in life. The intention of the paper is to describe the methodological process for the narrative inquiry and review the literature associated with adult learners

Contextualizing the Project

For nearly a decade, I have worked with adult learners who have returned to an adult learning center to complete their high school diplomas. My intrigue rests with mature adult learners over the age of 45. I am fascinated by their decision to re-enter high school and complete a piece of their education from which they chose to exit prematurely many years earlier in their lives. At a time when North American culture might suggest that this group of individuals should be planning or

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considering retirement, their journey assumes a different direction, one with educational overtones. I am on a quest to learn more about the experiences of adult learners during this time of re-entry. I expect to gain new insight from their stories that might extend the literature surrounding adult learners and create some tension in the "mosaic of theories, models, sets of principles, and explanations that, combined, compose the knowledge base of adult learning" (Merriam, 2001, p. 3).

As well, I am interested in learning about their pedagogical experiences. Taylor & Trumpower (2014) linked their learners' negative past experiences to teaching methods that were "neither relevant nor meaningful" (p. 3). I wonder whether my research participants' return to an adult high school space is an enjoyable and fulfilling adventure. In particular, I am curious about their learning experiences as they apply to literacy, because "Canada's economic future requires finding new ways to increase literacy and essential skills" (Taylor & Trumpower, 2014, p. 3). Using Wlodokowski's Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching as a model in their research with two adult high school programs in Eastern Ontario, Taylor & Trumpower (2014) discussed engaging pedagogical practices that promote meaningful and motivational engagement of adult learners in their re-entry to high school programs. One of my research aims is to learn more about my Manitoba participants' responses to their literacy experience, since teacher instruction influences the students' response and skill development surrounding literacy.

Brief Overview of the Literature

The American Council on Education (ACE, 2007) studied "the changing demographics of adults aged 55 to 79, their motivations for participating in higher education, and the obstacles that prevent broader participation" (p. 3). Because of advancements in health care, many more people are living into their 80s and 90s. Therefore, instead of retiring, adults 55 to 79 years old "are entering the third age of life . . . defined by personal achievement and learning for self-development – with new plans for their later years in mind" (ACE, p. 4). The change in demographics has significant implications for adult education, especially because "those with at least some college are nearly twice as likely to work past traditional retirement age as those without a high school diploma" (ACE, p. 7). Not only are higher education spaces such as colleges and universities experiencing increased enrolment among this demographic, adult high school spaces are also seeing a re-entry of older adults who have prematurely exited their former high school education spaces.

While studying adult high school programs in Ontario, Pinsent-Johnson, Howell, and King (2013) found that "just under 14% of Ontario adults aged 26 to 64" and 34% of Ontario's Aboriginal adults had not completed high school (p. 5). They also discovered that more than half of Canada's high school dropouts later return to earn a high school diploma for the following reasons: "PSE [postsecondary education], . . . a job, personal accomplishment, improve English language skills" (p. 23). Remaining in the work force is therefore not the only motivating factor for older adults to pursue education. Serrat, Petriwskyj, Villar, & Warburton (2016) suggested that older adults' civic participation in politics is beneficial to their person growth and community development. Therefore, some aging adults will return to learning spaces to increase their knowledge base to engage in civic participation.

Mackinnon (2013) reported significant numbers of Aboriginal people returning to secondary and post-secondary educational programs for adults in Winnipeg, Manitoba: Urban Circle Training Centre (UCTC), BUILD (Building Urban Industries for Local Development), and the University of Manitoba's Inner City Social Work Program (ICSWP). MacKinnon described these learners as adults "who have not completed their education and training through the traditional trajectory (post-secondary education directly following completion of secondary education), and who typically have low socio-economic status, minimal access to resources and supports and responsibilities beyond those of the mainstream student" (p. 49). In her discussions with these "second chance learners" (p. 49), Mackinnon reported,

Most of the adult learners described their training experience as part of a bigger journey toward personal development, rather than simply a means of entering the labour market. The majority of individuals placed greater emphasis on the relationships they built, the healing they experienced and the life lessons they learned. While all acknowledged that finding secure, decent paying employment was a goal, it wasn't their only goal. . . . They spoke more of aspirations tied to their values regarding family, becoming more engaged in community life and finding personal fulfilment. (p. 55)

The choice to return to education can be a complex process for adults, and their formal education process can be challenging. In order to remain focused on the targeted participants for this author's potential research, literature reflecting explanation for premature exiting from high school and the challenges that are encountered during re-entry to adult high school programs (secondary programs) will remain the focus.

But . . . Why do they leave?

With the number of adults returning to adult high school programs, insight into the premature exits from original high school spaces is important. Although the rate of dropouts appears to be dropping, Raymond (2008) found a gender difference in the rate of dropouts (as cited in MacGregor & Ryan, 2011, p. 148). More males tend to drop out than females, but more females return to complete their high school diploma. Interestingly, Bradley and Goldman (1996) found that if adults return too early after leaving, they tend to have less success (as cited in MacGregor & Ryan, 2011, p. 148). In Chuang's (1994) study, "male dropouts most often cited work-related reasons; whereas female dropouts most often cited family-related reasons [such as] marriage and/or pregnancy" (as cited in MacGregor & Ryan, 2011, p. 149). In their report, Pinsent-Johnson et al. (2013) listed the following reasons for dropping out: difficulties in personal life, not interested in school, wanting or needing to work, problems at home, immigration, being bullied, drugs, death of a family member, lack of caring and motivation, poor self-esteem, and mental health issues (p. 26).

Despite their reasons for leaving, understanding the lived experiences surrounding their re-entry becomes essential to ensuring optimum learning spaces for these learners. Many adult learners retain negative memories of their high school years (MacGregor & Ryan, 2011). Lange, Chovenac, Cardinal, Kajner, and Acuna (2015) referred to low-income adult learners as "wounded – physically, psychologically, intellectually, and spiritually" by their unsuccessful prior schooling, to the point that that "this reality becomes an identity embodied as being an incompetent and incapable learner" (p. 84)

Even when the reason for a premature exit from high school is as simple as boredom (MacGregor & Ryan, 2011), the adult who is returning to high school may encounter many challenges in the process of re-entry. Understanding these challenges is important in the process of providing adequate supports and programming for these adult learners.

Challenges in Re-entry

Discourses

An examination of the discourses that surround adult education reveals a gradual change "from speaking about lifelong education to starting to speak about lifelong learning" and "from a more humanistic notion of adult education to a more economically driven one, as well as framed within a neoliberal discourse on how governing should operate" (Sandberg, Andreas, Dahlstedt, & Olso, 2016, p. 104). Lifelong learning implies that adults need consistent learning and have a

responsibility to acknowledge this need and to be independent in their perpetual ongoing journey to be learners in both formal and informal spaces.

Because adult education has focused on creating an employable work force (Field, 2010), it has targeted "the unemployed, migrants, single mothers, and individuals on social benefits, as well as those at risk of losing their jobs" (Sandberg et al., 2016, p.104). Thus, adult education serves to convert "displaced and abnormal citizens . . . into desirable subjects" (Sandberg et al., 2016, pp. 104-105). This attitude shapes the thinking of both educators and adult learners. Students become positioned as "subjects of deviation" (Sandberg et al., 2016, p. 115), either because they failed to complete high school or because they failed to sustain employment.

Another adult education discourse focuses on the "second chance" label attached to adult high school programs, which assumes "that students 'squandered' their opportunity to obtain a high school credential the first time around" (Pinsent-Johnson et al., 2013, p. 13). The label is not only inaccurate, but also potentially damaging to the students' identity as learners and to the adult high schools' educational credibility. The second chance label is another deficit discourse.

Nevertheless, the prevailing public discourse views adult education "as a route toward active citizenship, social justice, and well-being" (Sandberg et al., 2016, p. 117). Many adults see adult high school as their route to a better future for themselves and their families. Unfortunately, other real barriers exist that contribute to an adult learner's difficulty in returning to school.

Risk of Exclusion

Older adults often feel excluded before they even enter the doors of the classroom. These individuals are often thought of as illiterate and have been "designated as being in need of support and encouragement in terms of performing further study" (Sandberg et al., 2016, p. 109). They may feel uneasy about entering a learning space with students who may be considerably younger (ACE, 2007), and they harbour fears of academic inadequacy, often carrying over difficult memories from previous educational experiences.

Overcoming feelings of exclusion requires "a respectful learning environment" (Taylor & Trumpower, 2014, p. 7). Adult learners benefit from feeling connected to each other (Cranton, 2010) and to their instructor (MacGregor & Ryan, 2011). Inclusion for these students is also dependent on building confidence in the program of delivery, because previous educational experiences may have taught them that "they cannot trust the system" (MacGregor & Ryan, 2011, p. 152). Thus, although exclusion may be a barrier that adult learners bring to the classroom, the classroom itself can be a means to foster inclusion.

Financial Means

Because most adult learners are low-income individuals, they have financial concerns that affect their decisions to enter secondary and post-secondary programs (Pinsent-Johnson et al., 2013). They may also struggle with time constraints, daily jobs, and family commitments (Normand & Hyland, 2003). These adults understand that a return to education could benefit them into a more sustainable economic state, but realize that it is also a sacrifice to try to balance current responsibilities that often have very little room for flexibility.

Other Considerations

Besides the barriers already discussed, other challenges exist for adults who wish to re-enter educational spaces. Some of these problems include access to technology, lack of technology literacy, remote community placement, and numerous personal matters that are specific to individual learners (ACE, 2007). Policy makers and institutions indeed have a challenge in meeting the demands of this learner population.

Theoretical Framework

Malcolm Knowles' work in andragogy is being considered for a theoretical perspective of this research (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). A review of the literature surrounding premature exiting from high school and characteristics of adult learners will be essential, because these concepts contribute to the notions of self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn. Jack Mezirow's (1991) work in transformation will also be important, as will the work of Paulo Freire (1970) in the process of "conscientization." Jardine (1998) reminded researchers that the "goal of interpretive work is . . . to evoke in readers a new way of understanding themselves and the lives they are living. Good interpretation is not good or final . . . but it keeps the story going, in this sense it is fecund" (p. 42).

As early as 1968, Knowles proposed the concept of andragogy to distinguish adult learning from the pedagogy of pre-adult schooling (Merriam, 2001). Over time, however, researchers saw that, in fact, some characteristics of adult and pre-adult learners crossed into both categories of learners. By the end of 1980, Knowles "moved from an andragogy versus pedagogy position to representing them on a continuum ranging from teacher-directed to student-directed learning" (Merriam, 2001, p. 6). Still, concepts of andragogy cause educators to think about adult learners as independent, social beings with a range of life experiences that can impact their learning (Merriam, 2001).

Merriam (2001) and Hoggan (2016) discussed transformative learning and its theoretical connection to adult learning. Thought of as much more than a simple linear process, transformational learning enables researchers to broaden their understanding of adult learning. Merriam described its use as "explicating the meaning-making process. It is not *what* we know but *how* we know what is important" (p. 22). Relationships, feelings, and contexts are all important in the process of understanding transformative adult learning.

Hoggan (2016) defined transformative learning as "processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world" (p. 71). True transformation is further described as having depth, breadth, and relative stability. One of my research goals is to uncover the transformative processes that define learning for my adult high school participants.

The Research Plan

Methodology

Christians (2011) defined humans as "communicative beings within the fabric of everyday life. Through dialogic encounter, subjects create life together and nurture one another's moral obligation to it" (p. 70). Narrative inquiry privileges a researcher in the journey to gain knowledge and understanding of the lived experiences of others in "a sacred space" (Kim, 2016, p. 103).

Narrative inquiry is being considered as it relates to educational research. I intend to understand the lived experiences of mature adult learners as they reflect on their re-entry to high school. "Narrative inquiry begins and ends in the storied lives of the people involved . . . through the inquiry, we seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 18). The researcher puts his/her life alongside the lives of others, intentionally coming into relation with participants. Stories become co-composed. Narrative inquiry becomes a deeply ethical undertaking (Clandinin, 2013), whereby both participant and researcher engage in a relational undertaking that affects both researcher and participant in their understanding of who they "are" and who they are "becoming" on each of their landscapes.

Questions

"The subtle shift from research question to research puzzle creates reverberations as it bumps against dominant research narratives and . . . allows narrative inquirers to make explicit that narrative inquiry is markedly different from other methodologies" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 42). I begin my quest with two pieces in the building of the puzzle:

1. How is the re-entry of mature adults to high school experienced?
2. How do these mature learners see themselves "becoming" in consideration of this re-entry?

Participants

Mature adult learners attending an adult community high school will be invited to participate in this research. I am particularly interested in hearing the stories of adults who have been away from high school for a long period of time. "By way of story telling, we allow stories to travel from person to person, letting the meaning of story become larger than an individual experience or an individual life" (Kim, 2016, p. 9). Participants over the age of 45 will be purposively selected. Other factors such as cultural backgrounds or gender will not be considered in the selection of research participants.

Closing Remarks

Adult learners embody a wide range of life experience and are vessels filled with stories waiting to be told. Co-constructing these stories with participants holds exciting potential in furthering the understanding of adult learning, particularly the inquiry of adults who are approaching or are within retirement age. Their decision to re-enter a high school program during their *third age* in life contains awe-inspiring tales of desires to increase learning and may even transform their own way of being and becoming. Perhaps even more important than basic skills in math, computers, and literacy, their return to high school may reveal deeper transformative realizations that will expand our current understanding of lifelong learning. I look forward to the research journey that will most certainly yield wonderful secrets in contribution to the current body of literature that informs understanding of adult learning.

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About the Presenter

Shelley Kokorudz is an assistant professor at BU. She is currently completing a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction through the U. of R. Her dissertation focus is the lived experiences of mature adults as they return to adult education centres to complete high school. Her other research interests include learning disabilities (particularly those related to literacy development) and pedagogical practices that promote inclusion and foster social justice.