

Shedding School Early: Insights from School & Community Shed Collaboration in Australia

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Abstract

Our paper focuses on evidence of positive interactions between schools and community sheds in Australia to examine what it is about shed-based community programs and pedagogies that are attractive to some early school leavers and school resisters. It is based primarily on interview data from the subset of men's sheds across Australia with school programs that formed part of our 2007 research into men's sheds. It is complemented by insights from interviews with men's sheds participants and rural fire volunteers about what it was that also led many of them to also 'shed' school early. Our paper identifies links between the success factors associated with informal learning pedagogies in voluntary and community groups identified in the UK and success factors associated with community-based shed programs in Australia. We identify the potential benefits of sheds in engaging both early school leavers and older men with negative recollections of school, in enjoyable, regular, hands-on activity. We also discuss ways in which some of the difficulties associated with shed-based school programs that seek to engage and reintegrate early school leavers might be avoided or minimised. Finally, we pose some unanswered questions about the implications of our research findings for education and training providers.

Introduction

Community sheds are recently established sites for regular, hands on activity for mainly older men. Our national men's sheds research (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey and Gleeson 2007) found that the activity is typically with wood or metal though some sheds also incorporate gardens. The range of organization types that men's sheds have sprung up from in the past decade are diverse, including health and aged care, Vietnam veterans and neighbourhood houses. What they share is a commitment to the health and wellbeing of men through companionship, friendship and mentoring. Our current paper is an extension of our 2007 AVETRA paper (Golding, Foley and Brown 2007) that briefly identified some applications of community shed practice in Australia for men, including working with school-age school resisters. As Hayes Golding and Harvey (2003) and Golding, Harvey and Echter (2005) had previously identified, negative experiences for boys at school, and particularly recollections of negative learning experiences for men can be persistent, debilitating, and potentially inter-generational for some men. On the positive side, our shed based research (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey and Gleeson 2007) identified a number of ways in which a lifetime of self-doubt about an ability to learn can be turned around for men of any age through the creation by men themselves of appropriate, supportive and inclusive informal learning environments in community settings.

As elaborated in the Limitations section later, our research is necessarily exploratory, given that only around ten of approximately 200 of the recently established community shed-based organizations have significant numbers of school age people involved in programs.

Leaving school early

The phenomenon of leaving school early is not new. Unlike most of today's school age children in Australia who are more likely than not to complete Year 12, most older people (55+) left school well before Year 12. For people now in their 70's and 80s, early leaving was seen as normal and was typically before Year 10. What has changed in the past decade (Marks and McMillan 2001) is that the long-term penalties, in terms of likely employment and income prospects of leaving school very early are statistically very high. A wide range of social indicators (Vinson 2007) now implicates early school leaving as one of several critical indicators of socio-economic disadvantage. For this reason much effort has been expended in schools by governments, particularly since the recession of the 1990s when high levels of youth unemployment became politically untenable to adapt and broaden school curriculum in the later years in order to embrace and involve young people more likely to leave (Dwyer and Wyn 2001). Much of this effort in Australia since 1995 (Keating 1997) has gone into vocationalising parts of school curriculum and invoking pathways other than from school to university that include some work-related educational experiences while still at school.

It is important to note that early school leaving is not an independent variable. Vinson's other indicators of socio-economic disadvantage (such as high rates of incarceration and psychiatric admission, low birth weight and low income) interact and contribute to a family's ability to keep students at school. Vinson's maps of the spatial distribution of overall disadvantage, evidence of its intergenerational persistence over time and in the same regions confirms that *where* Australians are born also makes a huge difference as to when a child is likely to leave school before the age of sixteen (BRS 2000, p.79). Vinson's maps graphically confirm the debilitating regional effect in the last decade of global warming on inland farming. As Golding and Pattison (2004) have demonstrated, regional inequities are also related to the inequity in service provision particularly in remote Indigenous communities.

Negative recollections of school

While we acknowledge that both boys and girls are adversely affected by early leaving, we focus in the rest of our paper on the evidence of the lasting impact on men of negative experiences of school while they were boys. Our reasons for concentrating on men are threefold. The first is that boys are around one half as likely as girls to enrol in a tertiary course post Year 12 (2006 Victorian VTAC and ABS data, *The Age* 2007). Since this fact is independent of the family and regional factors identified in the previous paragraph, there is something on average about a combination of boy's experiences of school, work opportunities and perceptions of formal study that is significantly different from a girl's experience. As a consequence, unless men with limited post-compulsory education and negative experiences of school come back later in life to formal education, we are likely to be confronting some of the same intergenerational and gendered inequities in 50 years time as we are today.

Our second and third reasons are pragmatic and opportunistic. Through our research with older men in community contexts (Golding, Harvey and Echter 2005; Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson 2007) we have access to a unique body of new data from a cohort of men with limited experiences of formal education, around two thirds of whom identify that they had not enjoyed learning at school. Through our community men's sheds research, we have also stumbled on a number of fascinating, innovative and very successful programs where these older men are mentoring young people who are actively resisting being at school. There is evidence that some of these school resisters, typically described as being disengaged, can be encouraged, through regular community shed-based experiences with older men and in collaboration with schools, to return to school.

Literature review

The lasting impact of boys leaving school early

There is evidence of the persistence of negative school experiences from research in some other countries. It is already widely known from research in the UK that ...

What happens at school has a significant and sometimes lasting impact on subsequent attitudes towards education and patterns of participation in post-compulsory learning. ... There is a broad consensus among many researchers exploring this field that the school environment has a particularly key role in shaping male identities, attitudes and behaviour patterns (McGivney 2004, p.55).

What is less well known, and what forms the focus of the current paper, is the persistent and debilitating nature of these attitudes on other aspects of men's lives over the life course.

Indifferent or negative experiences of school are identified by Ward (2003, cited in McGivney 2004, p.55) as being typically related to '... underachievement, boredom, bullying from other pupils, lack of interest or attention from their teachers and insufficient or no support when struggling to acquire literacy skills'. Haywood & Mac an Ghail (2003, p.79) identify schools in the UK as 'masculinity making devices ... in complex interrelationships with other social and cultural sites including the family, labour markets, media representations, cultural technologies and the legal system'. However they identify contemporary schooling as 'the most strategic site' for 'the creation and contestation of masculinities' because 'it offers a condensed range of experiences in a sustained and mandatory fashion' (p.79). The role of contemporary schools in shaping attitudes towards education generally, and towards masculinities in particular, have come into high relief in the western world with narratives that suggest that '... men are suffering from uncertainty and insecurity as a result of changing employment patterns and diminishing distinctions between male and female roles' (McGivney 2004, p.56). Lloyd (2002, p.6) suggests that ...

These (and other) attitudes towards the workplace, women and masculinity compound the difficulties that young men have. These attitudes can make them reluctant to learn, reluctant to accept the changing workplace, impatient and reluctant to work harder for what they want.

McGivney (2004) summarised the UK literature on the effect attitudes to schooling of 'laddish behaviour' (behaving 'like a bloke' in Australia) and more broadly to conform to prevailing constructions of hegemonic masculinity. McGivney (1999) identified boys in the UK, especially those from working-class backgrounds, as being more 'obliged to conform to certain forms of 'laddish' behaviour in order to maintain face among their peers, including working or be seen to be work – hard at school' (McGivney 2004, p.57). McGivney (2004, p.57) concludes that 'The perceived imperative to maintain face and credibility among their male peers emerges from all studies of men both at, and after school.'

Method

The new data are from three Australian research projects exploring the attitudes towards learning of men involved in informal learning as participants and volunteers in community-based learning organizations. The participant survey data from the studies (Golding, Harvey & Echter 2005: N = 339; Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson 2007: N=211) are supported by interview data with participants and program coordinators. Where the term 'significant' is used, a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) has been identified in the survey data using a Chi square test of significance.

The first study (Golding, Harvey and Echter 2005) surveyed men in twenty small rural towns in Victoria, involved as either learners in adult and community education, or as volunteers in Australian rules football, senior citizens, fire brigade or landcare organizations. The second was our study of informal learning through 24 community-based men's sheds in Australia (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey and Gleeson 2007). A question was included in both of these studies that asked 'Did you really enjoy learning at school?' that allowed for a 'yes' or 'no' response. Much of the analysis is based on interactions between the way this question was answered by respondents in the studies and the way a range of other questions were answered. Some data are also introduced from a third, national study of learning through fire and emergency service organizations in small and remote Australian towns (Hayes, Golding and Harvey's 2003). While this research was not restricted to men, 85 per cent all volunteer members surveyed were men, a high proportion of whom were older and had left school early.

Limitations

The findings of this paper are limited by its restricted sample of men who were surveyed and interviewed as participants and informal learners in five different community-based organizations (Golding, Harvey and Echter 2005) as well as in community men's sheds. It is likely, based on the evidence and trends identified in the paper, that men who are not participants in many of these organizations are even more likely than those surveyed not to have become involved as volunteers, in part as a consequence of similarly negative experiences of learning at school. The first study was restricted to surveys of men in Victoria. The second study was skewed towards older men (one half of whom were aged over 65 years) who participate in community-based men's sheds. The second study involved surveys and interview and was restricted to men in southern Australian states. We are unable, on the basis of the new data derived only from men, to conclude that women experience similar or different associations between negative experiences at school and life outcomes.

Another limitation is that men are reflecting on, judging, and in some instances, discussing with other male peers, experiences that often happened many decades ago. It might be that 'working class' men still feel obliged, through what they see as a desirable masculine image, even decades on, to deny the positive experiences of school and play up the desirable and hegemonic masculine role stereotype - that men should not enjoy learning. As Elliott-Major (2001) neatly summarises from the wider literature, '... [B]oys from a very early age are under pressure to conform to a masculine stereotype – the macho, the rebellious, unemotional male to whom study, school and authority are anathema'.

A final consideration is that while completing school is now perceived as desirable and around 75 per cent of Australians now complete secondary school to Year 12, for older men it was very unusual. In this sense, early school leaving is age-related and cannot be neatly isolated from its social and historical context.

Findings about negative school experiences

From the surveys

Our comprehensive survey of men participating in five community-based organizations in rural Victoria (Golding, Harvey & Echter, 2005, p.7) provided strong and disturbing evidence of the ongoing and debilitating effects of negative experiences at school on involvement in lifelong learning and community activity for men of all ages. On a large number of criteria, men who did not 'really enjoy learning at school' not only had significantly less positive attitudes to adult learning but were much less actively involved in community organizations. They participated significantly less frequently, were less interested in more learning, regarded public speaking skills less highly and rated their computer skills lower. Men who did not enjoy learning at school were significantly less likely to be active or hold leadership roles in community based voluntary organizations or to have recently been involved in formal learning program.

Positive attitudes towards school in Golding, Harvey & Echter's (2005) study (p.8) were significantly related to completion of higher levels of school. Men who left school earlier (particularly older men) had significantly lower self assessed internet skills which flowed through into significant differences in men's post-school education. Men with any form of education or training completed post-school had significantly more opportunities for learning through their community involvement, particularly through positions of responsibility, than men with no formal post-school experience. Men with limited post-school education completions also had significantly lower internet skills, were more likely to regard their age as a barrier to learning and to be attracted by learning opportunities in smaller organizations.

Survey data from Golding, Brown, Foley et al's (2007) study of learning through community-based men's sheds indicate relatively low levels of completed school education not atypical of older men. Four out of ten men who participate in men's sheds (39%) identified Year 9 or below as their highest completed level at school compared with 26 per cent of Australian rural volunteer fire fighters in Hayes, Golding & Harvey's (2004) study, with one third (32%) indicating below Year 9.

Importantly, relatively few men agreed that they ‘really enjoyed learning at school’ (28% agreed: compared with 26% in the fire fighter study) and only 15 per cent had ‘attended a formal learning program in the past year’.

A bank of learning-related questions in Golding Brown and Foley et al’s (2007) men’s shed study explored men’s opinions about their general learning enjoyment, aside from the men’s shed, as well as possible general barriers to their further learning. Men were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement to eight statements beginning with ‘I generally enjoy to learn ...’. The overwhelming, general learning preference for men who use men’s sheds is ‘in practical situations’ (99% agreement) and ‘by doing’ (94% agreement). There was strong agreement to the idea of learning generally ‘in a group with men’ (86% agreement) and also ‘in outdoor settings’ (76% agreement), though most (75%) men agreed that they also enjoy to learn ‘in a mixed group including women’. Around one half of men (48%) agreed that they enjoy learning ‘on [their] own from books and other printed material’. Four out of ten men agreed that they enjoy learning ‘via the computer or internet’ (41% agreement) or ‘in a classroom’ (40% agreement). These results were broadly similar to the results for the Hayes, Golding and Harvey (2004) rural volunteer fire fighter study. In summary, while men’s general enjoyment for men’s sheds participants (and also volunteer fire fighters) is for practical, hands on, group learning with other men or women mainly in outdoor settings, a significant minority of male participants were tolerant of some other forms of learning generally, including through texts, via the internet or in a classroom.

Interview data from community men’s sheds with programs for school resisters

Interview data from Golding, Brown, Foley et al’s (2007) study of learning through community-based men’s sheds included insights from coordinators and mentors involved in shed-based programs for school resisters in all five Australian states. Those students who take part in shed programs, as one Tasmanian shed coordinator explained, are ‘typically kids who aren’t necessarily interested in academic achievement but enjoy building things, making things, getting out of the class area and working with other members of the community’. Another explained that ‘We have got at-risk kids, some of those kids from schools and kids in the community, unemployed people who are bored and isolated and angry.’ For such young people it was important to ‘be strategic about trying to get creative learning opportunities for them.’

In the same study a Western Australian rural program the emphasis was on ‘certain kids that didn’t have a significant male influence in their life or had some sort of problem ... some at home and some within themselves.’ In a city shed program in Western Australia the emphasis was on

... mainly Indigenous boys who were at risk. They didn’t like going to school ... because school was boring. They got mentored, they made lovely projects, they had a feeling of achievement, they wanted to go on to TAFE, they didn’t want to go school, but they enjoyed what we were doing manually.

Shed coordinators working with young people were asked about what it was about the shed that was attractive. One shed coordinator in South Australia responded that:

They are out of school environment ... and because we are different, we are not like school teachers ... that helps as well, but they learn that they are here to have fun and

they are here to smile and be happy and you can see an improvement in their behaviour over the time. We like to have a little talk with them as well as the little projects that we do with them and hopefully that gives them a bit more confidence in themselves. But ... it is only day a week and you don't know the long term effect.

The preparation involved is significant in terms of both mentor and students selection. As one Western Australian city shed coordinator explained:

We have probably trained about 40 or more people to be mentors and that gives us a call of people ... who can work with kids. The mentor training is not necessary really, but it is a bit of an insurance and also gives us a chance to get to know the people who are trained. We put together some of the mentors with some of the kids at school and those kids were handpicked.

When asked about what they learn and what the program achieves, a Tasmanian shed mentor explained they learn

... how to cope with people, talk to people and they even mention themselves a little, we don't tell them they are doing that, it just happens you know, because they are the same person ... and some of them their home life is never recognised, parents are never home, ... they get a relationship [here] with a one-on-one person. ... Our big success is when we work to attach kids to community, a lot of the kids I work with have barely attachments to anything and school is not a great spot for them.

As a Western Australian shed mentor explained:

Through our contact and coming here they have made long term relationships that are quite strong because they are working as a team ... because it is not school related, it is not to do with writing, reading or whatever, because it is skill based the kids have a better team work happening, they're working together for that whole three hours. ... They have built up really good strong relationships and they are all different ages as well and that hasn't affected them

A shed coordinator in a second Tasmanian program made links between the type of young people involved in the program and their likely trajectory.

The smart ones leave the island, in any given year half of them are in Sydney or Melbourne in a few year's time, but these are the kids that stay in the community and they get work on farms or they get work in the bush. So I would like to think that there is a bit of long term investment here. ... I always think of it as that stitching of a community, you are connecting people up.

Importantly, the older shed-based mentors also learn in the process that:

The older men who are here, they really take on a different sort of stature almost. They are looking out for them, trying to be a better example, the swearing tones down ... There is a bond that develops. There's this mutual respect between those two different age groups that really develops, it is something to see.

As another shed program coordinator explained, 'We are actually here because we want to get as much out of it as what the kids do.' There is a broader agenda in men working with young people, as one New South Wales shed program coordinator explained.

The sort of environment that we have here is also attempting to restore good social images of blokes, so that blokes don't feel frightened about passing on the skills to younger guys ... The number of teachers in the primary schools that are males you can count on one hand. No-one will put their hand up to work in a primary school because of the stigma that surrounds that sort of environment. So we are really looking into affirming the guys for the contribution that they are making and attempting to put some

of those negative sort of stereotypes to one side and say ‘That may exist, but it is very much in the minority, the average bloke is not like that and let’s do some good stuff together’ and it gathers its own momentum.

Discussion

What potential do sheds have for young people?

Whilst many recent research projects have identified high levels of school disengagement, particularly for boys, relatively few studies have identified the use of intergenerational, hands-on learning alternatives outside and beyond the school with mentoring by older men as described in community men’s sheds. Further research is necessary to determine to what extent it is one or a combination of several different factors that works for young people: the attraction of learning informally through ‘hands on’ experiences, ‘getting out of school’, the careful selection and matching of young people with mentors, the ‘fresh start’ in a non-school site without ‘teachers’, the one-on-one mentoring and role modelling (typically with an older male tradesperson), or the social informality or the discipline of working responsibly and safely with equipment and tools.

The experiences for young people in men’s sheds appears to uniquely combine parts of what might be experienced in a trade pre-apprenticeship program, the discipline of the traditional ‘master and apprentice’ relationship in vocational education and training (VET) and a caring fathering/grandfathering relationship. As observed in the previous section, it is not just about young people, but the ‘stitching of community’. The mentoring has potential value to the mentor, the mentee, their families and wider community. It has the potential to simultaneously break the pattern of disengagement and value both young person and the (usually retired) tradesman. It serves to connect people (including experienced older people) with youth in ways that would otherwise not occur while at the same time negating some of the negative and debilitating stereotypes about contact between young people and older men, as alluded to by an interviewee above.

The apparent effectiveness of informal group learning in this particular community of practice, particularly for and with young people and men ‘from low socio-economic backgrounds [who] have traditionally bade up the numbers of early school leavers and ... [who] are least likely to benefit from education’ (Dwyer and Wyn 2001, p.133, citing Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn 2000) who share negative experiences and recollections of school respectively, has important potential implications for education and training providers. The findings may also be pertinent for supporters of the ability of formal delivery, accreditation and certification to re-skill and re-train men who are unemployed and with low assessed literacy and numeracy. Lattimore (2007, p.187), in a comprehensive review of *Men not at work*, has, on the contrary, concluded that ‘... the worldwide literature on the effectiveness of training for the economically inactive has been relatively pessimistic about its ability to [re-integrate] displaced older workers into the labour market’.

Some of this mismatch between the promise and reality of vocational reskilling of adults is blamed, by both governments and education and training advocates, on the men themselves. In particular, the blame is attached to the comparatively low average

formal literacy and numeracy levels of men not in work, not participating in or completing VET programs or achieving outcomes from such programs when they do participate. As Black (2007, p.12) suggests, the interests of ‘... a professional sector comprising trainers, teachers and organizational advocates ... are bound up with an inflated ‘autonomous’ notion of literacy and numeracy.’ Exposing such men to more of the same high levels of instructional literacy, abstracted teaching formality and standardised formal assessment that alienated them at school is, unsurprisingly, likely to be both unwise and counterproductive.

Our research also has present day implications for boys alienated from school, in the context of persistent calls to prevent early school leaving by raising mandatory school leaving ages. As Dockerty (2005, cited in Lattimore 2007, p.204) puts it,

It seems dangerous to paint all young people with the same brush and surely there are some young people who are simply not well suited to the schooling environment, either in terms of their individual preferences or of the benefits they can expect to gain.

The general statistical inference that more years of formal education necessarily leads to better labour performance has been questioned for non-academically oriented male students by Lattimore (2007). As Lattimore (2007, p.226) concluded,

[I]n the absence of changes in school practices, mandatory extensions of schooling might be seen as asking a sub-group of non-academically oriented students to do more of what has so far served them badly.

What are some of the difficulties?

Despite these advantages, we identify a number of difficulties associated with setting up similar, collaborative, shed-based school programs to engage and reintegrate early school leavers. Most sheds do not have school programs and those that do are not sustainable without the significant input of volunteers as mentors. All community sheds that involve young people need to ensure formal approval of adult suitability for working with children (some including girls as participants), close attention to occupational health and safety and safe operation and maintenance of equipment and tools. Most of those community sheds that run young people’s programs ensure that separate sessions are also available for older men and attempt to make re-entry to school for your people (or at least a pathway to post-compulsory vocational training) the end goal. The main difficulty is ensuring the level of commitment required of volunteers, including getting access to properly trained or prepared mentors. As one coordinator explained,

It takes a lot of coordination and you have to have some pretty dedicated people ... I would dearly love to have someone do that support because it is an awful lot of work and some people just have not been able to hang on for the ride and work, they have just found it too daunting ... it’s a big ask.

Several sheds have supplemented the limited funds for their programs with older men with money from schools for providing a valuable service to young people and their local school communities. Most shed-based programs select prospective young people that mentors feel capable of working with and have relatively small numbers of young people allocated to and working with each mentor. A small number of community sheds (including Pete’s Shed in Bridgewater, Tasmania and The Shed in Hackham, South Australia) have specialised in disengaged youth and have built adjacent learning areas with computer access to help reorientate students to other forms of

learning on site. These sheds deliberately have shed titles that do not include the term 'men'. In all programs with young people, liaison with schools (and in some cases police, youth, health and welfare workers) is essential to identify, select and support potential shed participants, to develop appropriately flexible shed-based programs and to identify possible overlap with school and VET curriculum.

What questions does this raise for education and training providers?

This research raises a number of unanswered and difficult questions about gendered pedagogies at work here that need further research, including data from the young people themselves. There is a need to identify what it is that young people learn in mentoring relationships in men's sheds, and how that learning might be recognised and recorded. That research would seek to identify what longer-term impacts shed experiences have on school completion by year level as well as its impact on both vocational skills and self-esteem. Dwyer and Wyn (2001, p.130) identify gender as a 'powerful in structuring conditions under which young people form and negotiate their identities'. The research poses questions about the desirability (or otherwise) of educating and training young people in gendered contexts, given that 'Some researchers claim that Australia has one of the most gender segregated labour markets in the OECD' (Dwyer and Wyn 2001, p.129).

Conclusion

We conclude that negative recollections of school experiences and leaving school can have significant and debilitating, long-term impacts on men's and boy's perceptions of themselves as learners that extend well into retirement for some men. Our research has shown that these effects include but go well beyond the significantly diminished likelihood of engaging at school, undertaking post-compulsory education or training or of becoming lifelong learners. The other effects include men's significantly diminished likelihood of obtaining and keeping satisfying work, maintaining family relationships and taking on voluntary community roles and responsibilities. For many older men with negative recollections of school, the formality of accredited re-education and re-training can be part of the problem rather than *the* solution. For these men, significant gains can be made to perceptions of themselves as learners as well as to their employability and life skills through learning in informal communities of practice such as those produced in community-based men's sheds. Our paper identifies some ways in which boys and men who experienced somewhat similar early disengagement at school, can be brought together in shed-based settings for their mutual benefit. It also identifies some unanswered questions for further research.

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