

Second Chance Learning in Neighbourhood Houses

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Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria are significant sites of formal and informal education for adult learners. Intrinsically connected to local communities they play an important role in decreasing social isolation and building social inclusion. The focus of this research is on adult learners and adult learning that engages with 'second chance' learners who participate in adult learning programs in the Barwon and South West regions of Victoria. The greater Geelong region is characterised by declining car automotive and textile manufacturing industries and emerging new industries such as hospitality and tourism. The data from the research participants in the study include career changers, long term and recently unemployed, newly arrived and migrant communities, young people and older adults. This paper focuses on the learning practices of second chance learners who frequently have negative perceptions of themselves as unsuccessful learners, but are transformed through their learning experiences in Neighbourhood Houses. We argue the unique social space of the Neighbourhood House, the support and guidance offered by staff and teachers, the unique pedagogy and small group learning experiences, allows adult learners to reconstruct a new identity of themselves as successful learners.

Keywords: *informal learning, formal learning, adult education, ACE, VET, training reform, Neighbourhood Houses.*

Introduction

This research focuses on adult learners and adult learning that engages with ‘second chance’ learners in the regional city centre of Geelong and the rural outer south-west area of Victoria. Neighbourhood Houses run adult education programs and are widely known for their impact on social inclusion and community building in local communities. Courses offered include, but are not limited to, foundation studies in literacy and numeracy, language and learning to study skills, information technology courses, health and well-being programs, community events and arts-based programs. Some Neighbourhood Houses are Registered Training Organisations (RTO’s) and provide accredited vocational training in youth work, childcare, community services and hospitality. The greater Geelong region, has undergone dramatic economic change in recent years, with manufacturing industries such as clothing, footwear and car production closing and newer industries emerging such as tourism, hospitality, disability services and education. In addition, major employers such as Ford, Shell and Alcoa have recently announced their closure or departure from the region. The research is set against the backdrop of the current project of lifelong learning, which has dominated adult education discourses for more than 30 years (Delores 1998; Edwards & Usher 2001; Chappell et al. 2003). We argue Neighbourhood Houses are well positioned to play an increasingly important role in the education of adult learners. Adult education in Australia is delivered by a number of program providers including Teaching and Further Education (TAFE), Adult Community Education (ACE) providers, private training organisations and welfare organisations. Within Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses are recognised and funded as legitimate providers of adult community education (Rooney 2006 & 2011). The 2008 Ministerial Declaration on Adult Community Education (MCVTE 2008) acknowledges the ACE sector has the potential to support the national agenda on skills and workforce development because of its ability to respond to changes in “industrial, demographic and technological circumstances” (MCVTE 2008). The

declaration emphasises the important role played by ACE in building the “knowledge, understanding, skills and values” essential for an educated and just society and its contribution and provision of educational opportunities for ‘second-chance’ learners (Borthwick et al 2001, p9). Furthermore, programs and activities offered within Neighbourhood Houses contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities, increasing personal satisfaction and community and social capital as well as providing economic and employment benefits (Townsend 2006). Furthermore, the recent McKenzie Review identified the ACE sector as well positioned to deliver flexible training and adult education programs to local communities (MacKenzie & Coulson, 2015).

Throughout this paper we explore the formal and informal learning that occurs in Neighbourhood Houses and the rich context for understanding adult learning that occurs in the space of Neighbourhood Houses.

Presently, there is a dearth of research on the educational trajectory of ‘second chance learners’ in Neighbourhood Houses and the possibility for transition to programs into higher education. In the vignettes of Allan, Marta, Joy and Lesley, and their case studies outlined in this paper, we uncover the benefits of adult education in these places of ACE. This is in line with Nechvoglod and Beddie (2010) who cite Pittham’s (2009) research, which claims hard to reach learners are those learners who do not readily self-refer or seek engagement in adult education learning programs.

Methodology

This research into learning in Neighbourhood Houses draws on qualitative research to explore issues of lifelong learning in the context of Neighbourhood Houses (Henn, Weinstein & Foard, 2009). Using a critical pedagogy lens, case study methodology and methods are engaged to uncover the rich stories of the research participants (Stake, 2013). This research is subjective and constructivist. Central to this research is the exploration of adult learners’ education experiences. To date 44 interviews have been conducted with learners across 12 Neighbourhood Houses. Access to the research site was gained through a partnership with the Barwon Network of Neighbourhood Centres and in collaboration with the South West Network of Neighbourhood Houses. Those interviewed come from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, they

are young, unemployed, sole parents, and older retrenched workers. A few participants came from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and one participant had a disability. Some interviews raised strong emotions for a small group of the participants as they recounted their stories of early schooling, education and work participation. Only eight of the 44 people interviewed were men, and this is broadly representative of the Neighbourhood House sector overall, where the participants and staff are predominantly women (Clemans & Hartley 2003; Golding et al. 2008). This research project gained ethics clearance from Deakin University's Faculty of Arts and Education ethics committee. All of the participants who were interviewed were given the opportunity to review their transcription for validity and correctness as the in-depth case studies were being drafted. Participants were allocated a pseudonym in order to protect their identity.

Neighbourhood Houses in Australia

The first Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria were established in the early 1970s. Many of these early houses focussed on providing community based education opportunities for women returning to study (West 1995; DUCIE 1994). They also played an important role in reducing social isolation and increasing social inclusion, particularly for mothers at home with young children (Golding et al. 2008, p240; DUCIE 1994; West 1995). The most important distinguishing feature of Neighbourhood Houses is their neighbourhood-based models of community development practice that encourages communities to initiate recreation and education activities, which address local needs (Golding et al. 2008; Rooney 2011; Foley 1993; Kimberley 1998; Permezel 2004). Neighbourhood Houses offer local community based programs close to where people live. Houses operate as generalist services which are inclusive, flexible and responsive to their local communities (Thompson 2015; Humpage 2005).

A further distinguishing characteristic of Neighbourhood Houses is their relatively small size in comparison to other educational settings. Small class sizes and creative pedagogy offer substantial opportunities for the establishment of supportive learning relationships between class colleagues and between learners and their teachers. This creates

a mutual process of engagement between learners and teachers, with learners being able to initiate short course programs and curriculum (Freire, 1972). There is a particular focus on the inclusion of people who are typically under-represented within more formal educational settings - those who are marginalised or disadvantaged through social, economic, educational, or cultural circumstances or who are living with a disability (Rooney 2004; DUCIE 1994; Townsend 2009; Permezel 2004; Thompson 2015).

Many houses use community development practices in their delivery of adult education programs (Kimberley 1998). They use multi-layered approaches to learning, social engagement, personal and social change. Neighbourhood Houses seek to empower and support individual participants and their local communities (Rooney 2004; Townsend 2009). The pedagogy is based on adult learning principles, acknowledging that adults are frequently self-directed learners and have insight into their own learning needs and their preferred styles of teaching (Ollis & Hodge, 2014). In an era of lifelong learning policy, houses typically tailor their programs to respond to the needs of learners across a whole lifespan (Kimberley 1998; Rooney 2011; Thompson 2015; Townsend 2006; Humpage 2005; Golding et al 2008; Branch 2012; Kenny 2006).

In Victoria, there are more than 390 funded Neighbourhood Houses, servicing 372 communities. They are funded through a complex array of funding sources. Core funding for the community development work comes from the Department of Health and Human Services Victoria, through the Neighbourhood House Coordination Program (ANHLC 2003). In Victoria 367 houses (almost 97% of houses) are funded under the NHCP, although their funding has declined in recent years.

Second chance learners

There is limited literature on second chance learners and what is available tends to focus on immigrants and literacy (Twao et al 2007). Some adult learners who frequent Neighbourhood Houses have had negative educational and learning experiences and outcomes in their lives. Sometimes described as vulnerable learners, or disengaged learners, they have also been described as hard-to-reach learners.

Hard-to-reach learners are those learners who do not self-refer or readily seek to engage in adult learning programs or courses. They are difficult to recruit, to the extent, that if there are softer targets available locally, little effort is made to make contact and connect with the hard to reach and thus their voices can remain unheard and their needs and wants largely ignored. (Nechvoglod 2010, cited in Pittham 2009, 12).

Some caution must be exercised when using this term. Some of the literature appears to place the responsibility upon the learners for not taking the opportunities education offered them (Twao et al 2007). However, learners may be hard to reach due to inadequacies of the education system and its ability to meet students' learning needs, rather than the learners possessing negative attributes. Second chance learners encompass those who have been unable to continue with and complete studies in formal school or tertiary settings and who have returned to learning later in life in order to gain employment. Second chance learners often find themselves in an occupation or employment that is different from what they initially planned (Twao et al 2007).

Descriptions and segmentations of learner cohorts are frequently organised around identifying levels of disadvantage, which can result in negative assumptions and stereotyping of particular groups (Nechvoglod 2010). These terms have been applied to various groups such as those listed in the report by Nechvoglod & Beddie (2010, 12):

- Indigenous Australians;
- people with a disability;
- early school leavers;
- vulnerable or low-skilled workers;
- under-employed and unemployed people;
- culturally and linguistically diverse people (CALD);
- under-represented learner groups;
- disengaged young people;
- socially and economically disadvantaged people;
- people isolated and marginalised from the community and
- some older people.

Neighbourhood Houses and the VET sector are well known for their provision of second chance education (Robertson et al 2011). Second chance learners are described as those learners who are returning to study because their current qualifications do not equip them for promotion within their workplace, or facilitate a move outside their current workplace to find equivalent or higher level positions (Robertson et al 2011). The term can also be used to refer to those learners who are re-engaging with education and training after leaving school early or disengaged from traditional education settings such as schools, TAFEs and university. Nechvoglod and Beddie (2010) claim hard to reach learners may experience barriers to participation arising from previous negative educational experiences. They also recognise that other exclusionary factors such as the financial cost of courses, as well as social barriers such as lack of confidence and low self-esteem, may also operate to exclude particular learners. In addition, Robertson et al (2011) argue that second chance learners have a negative perception of themselves as learners having not acquired the same successful learning milestones as other learners. For many of these learners this results in having poor literacy and numeracy skills due to non-completion of their secondary education (Robertson et al 2011). Second chance learners are usually motivated to learn because they wish to enter or re-enter the workforce or improve their position within the workforce (Robertson et al 2011). Hoare (2012) and Pyvis and Chapman (2007) describe the experiences of second chance learners as both transformative and positional. In addition to improved job satisfaction and other employment related rewards, learners were at times surprised to realise their increased levels of confidence and personal agency, which is often manifested as overcoming a hesitancy to speak up and voice their opinions. Pyvis & Chapman (2007) describe transformative outcomes as a means of changing learners' professional and personal identities. Hoare (2012) also found that learners reported a new-found independence and ability to seek out "authoritative resources" and that they were "learning how to learn" through critical questioning rather than accepting theoretical positions and points of view (p276). This is supported by Pyvis and Chapman's (2007) study that found learners who experienced transformation were more confident engaging in new educational experiences.

Second Chance Learners: their challenges and transformation

The Geelong and South West region of Victoria has been traditionally noted for providing employment in car manufacturing, oil refining, and chemical engineering. Rising unemployment and the continued disappearance of full time jobs is of particular concern in this region of Victoria (Tyler et al 2013). As previously stated, large numbers of workers have been made redundant due to manufacturing flight at the same time as eligibility for welfare provisions are tightening up. Working-age individuals bear the risk and responsibility for assuring their employment and employability. Adding to this context, the Commonwealth government's changed social policy rhetoric from 'entitlement' to last resort 'safety net' has heralded stricter eligibility requirements for welfare aid and support. Delayed entitlement and work for the dole schemes, reductions in child support eligibility and payments, along with tougher assessments for government supported 'carers' have forced many adults back into the workforce. Rising fees in an increasingly deregulated higher education and training sector compound these issues (Tyler et al 2013).

Long-term unemployment hits many different sectors of the economy. Frequently, the first retrenchments fall on individuals who have been early school leavers, have no post-school qualifications and have worked in relatively insecure settings all their working life. However, a second layer of retrenchments has recently hit the City of Greater Geelong, with major cut backs and the closure of some of the last major manufacturing industries, such as Alcoa and Ford. Now, more highly skilled and qualified workers are finding themselves out of employment for the first time in their working life. Many are at a loss as to where to begin to seek career change, or the direction they might choose to go. Data from this research revealed that many of the learners in Neighbourhood Houses:

- are early school leavers;
- face equity issues in terms of access to skill development, courses and learning opportunities including access to computers, technology and the Internet;
- often have negative perceptions of themselves as learners due to negative prior learning experiences;
- are assisted to build their confidence, develop new knowledge, skills

- and networks in order to become successful learners and workers;
- learn, but also volunteer in Neighbourhood Houses, gaining further skills and knowledge through social learning opportunities;
 - successfully transition from education programs in Neighbourhood Houses into work and further education;
 - envisage a future in further formal learning, including acquiring higher education degrees.

Case study vignettes - Allan, Marta, Joy and Lesley.

The case studies of the four research participants listed below chronicle how learners describe the benefits they derived from engagement in Neighbourhood House programs.

***'It's that community thing.'* - Allan.**

Allan is 54 years old and has lived in the area for 23 years. He is a fully qualified experienced aircraft mechanic, who was retrenched after 37 years. *'I got retrenched ... and decided to change careers...and this is pretty much where I end up, doing training.'*

Allan was looking at the TAFE career book, when he saw a full-page advertisement for the Neighbourhood House in the local newspaper and noticed that they were offering the same course, a Cert IV in Youth Work. At that stage his understanding of a Neighbourhood House, like many people, was limited. *'I thought they did arts and crafts, drop-in centre, bingo. That's what I thought the Neighbourhood House was because I didn't know anything about them at the time.'*

Allan is an early school leaver, who left without completing year 12 in order to take up an apprenticeship. He was concerned that he might not be able to succeed with more academic learning, as he had always seen himself as a '*hands on learner*'. He was concerned that he would be lost in a big, impersonal setting, with large class sizes. *'I've said to (the tutor)...at my age and at my learning skill level if I had been in a class of twenty people I wouldn't have been able to handle it!'*

Allan found the learning environment suited him because the class had few participants, and was able to offer a far higher level of support to each individual re-entering accredited programs.

...it's a much more relaxed learning experience for me ... So because it's that community thing it makes it easier for me to talk to the other ladies that work here. It doesn't have ... what I would perceive to be a sterile learning environment that maybe a university or a TAFE would have. ... That's the single most enjoyable part of being here was to have a teacher and a group of people that you can interact with and get along with.

Since requalifying, Allan has been able to secure fulltime work in youth residential care and gone on to complete a Diploma in Community Services at Ocean Grove Neighbourhood House. He now views himself as a successful learner, in a setting where he feels confident and supported, and has since completed a recreation short course on photography.

'We all began to care for each other' - Marta

Marta is 37 years old, a single mother with two children at home. Marta left school half way through year 10 and has never managed to access ongoing employment. She had experienced long-term unemployment, and was encouraged to undertake a certificate in warehousing, with another education provider, a course well beyond her at that stage. She came to the Neighbourhood House where they managed to assist her to withdraw without penalty, she then enrolled in a preparatory program at the house prior to commencing a Certificate II in Warehousing. She gained some credentials in her first course, including a First Aid certificate and a Forklift Licence. Getting her forklift licence was one of the most enjoyable and meaningful aspects of the course for her.

I reckon that was my happiest day of the whole course I must admit, that was even better than anything because that was the first time I've actually gone for a test, like a test, a test and passed! My kids were all giving me well wishes that morning so I was really nervous thinking if I fail I have to go home and tell the kids I've failed. I was so happy I ran out and high-fived one of my classmates.

From feeling as if there was no hope for her, no life and no job, since coming to the house and completing two courses Marta feels that she has a grip back on her life. Her confidence has grown and she has learned that she is also a leader.

I'm a leader and that's the way I am and I didn't really realise that I just thought I was mum... I didn't realise that in my everyday life that I could use that in the workforce and it could be an advantage and I think that was very surprising to me because I just didn't think motherhood would come into it. I thought to have a job you've got to have credentials and I don't I only have cooking and cleaning.

The course has brought about changes in her life. As she has grown in confidence this has had a positive impact on her children. Her children can see that no one is telling her how to live her life now, and her son tells her how he is happy about the woman she has become.

I've got a fourteen year old son...he says 'mum I'm happy with the woman you are now' he goes 'nah' referring to my partner, 'he'll never stand over you again mum,' and I go 'yeah you are right, I won't let him!'

It's actually taught me that I'm a leader too, when I'm with people they tend to follow with me.

Marta believes the social environment of the neighbourhood house provided her with encouragement and support.

So we all began to care for each other, which was awesome because a lot of the people didn't have people that cared, there were a lot of the young blokes that didn't have family or anything and they actually felt loved.

Marta's identity changed from thinking that at 37 she couldn't learn anymore to discovering that she could learn from and be inspired by the younger students in the class.

If doing this (giving support to young people in the Neighbourhood House) if I can help one person, I'll achieve what I want to achieve. I'll do it ten times over...because if I had that person sitting on my shoulder at 16 I would have been grabbing it.

Marta believes her learning has changed her life in a significant way, this is evidenced in the quote below:

My life has just got better and better and I've grown as a person, my confidence and everything has grown and my kids can see me flourishing which in turn makes my children happier. I'm happier and my partner's happier. So I'm really looking forward to what I'm going to learn in the future, and whether I'm going to learn anymore.

'Without a facility like this I'd be lost' - Joy

Joy is 24 and a single mother of two pre-school aged daughters with clear aims about where she wants to get to with her education. She experienced considerable disruption in her early years of secondary schooling when her mother passed away. For the next few years she lived either on her own or in foster care in different towns in Victoria. The instability of her living arrangements led to her dropping out of school after completing year 10 because she had nowhere else to go. Although she had earlier enrolled in a certificate course, she says of herself, she was too young and disengaged to gain anything from them.

I was young then and I had to do schooling of some form so I enrolled in the course that I thought was going to be the easiest.

She came to the Neighbourhood House when she decided it was time to do something about her dreams and for the sake of her children. Whilst her current course might not lead to employment she realises that she is gaining valuable skills toward her long-term goal to work in animal welfare.

So for me to be able to do that (design a web page) and then look at the finished product and go 'I'm really proud of that' is giving me back a bit of confidence and I think that to me is worth a lot.

Joy has found the social environment and the facilities at the Neighbourhood House helped her to learn. She is able to come in and use the internet, access space and computers on other days of the week to do her homework and also to meet up with other students. The learning environment is easy-going and very supportive and the timetabling fits in well with her parenting responsibilities.

I don't have internet at home so to be able to come here even on

days I don't have school and do it, it makes it a hundred times better than any general schooling.

Joy lives in a small town and the courses that are offered at the Neighbourhood House are somewhat limited. This is compounded by limited access to childcare, and limited free time, so she is not certain what she will be able to study in the future, given her current family arrangements.

I've always had a dream of actually opening up an animal rescue. My basic knowledge of what I needed to know was limited...and doing this course I hoped to broaden my knowledge on the subject base and give myself that push forward that I needed to actually go through with opening up a small Animal Rescue and providing something that the town really doesn't have. ... So for me to be wanting to do this course as I know it's my passion and it makes me a better learner because I want to give it my all.

'I've grown so much here' - Lesley

Lesley is 43 years old and has two daughters. She left school at the completion of year 8 and worked in fast food settings until she had kids.

I only completed year 8. When I was younger before I had kids I was in retail, milk bars and take-away food. The only thing is I didn't really last too long in those areas, because I didn't know what I was doing so I didn't exactly get the experience that I needed back then, not the experience that I have now.

Lesley came to the Neighbourhood House to do voluntary work to make up her hours while she was on income support. Many things have changed since she began volunteering in the community café.

I've been here for about four and a half years now and I'm a totally different person. I had no confidence at all when I started but now I've learnt and grown. Working with customers, I wasn't much of a cook when I started here but now I do desserts, I do lots of different meals, things that I never thought I would be doing. I've learnt how to make the coffees, so

yeah I've grown so much since I've been here I was so shy and withdrawn when I first started.

Her daughters love her for working at the café and bringing home some of the leftover desserts that she makes. She sees herself as a much better cook and the family is much happier all round with her new self-confidence and sense of achievement.

Yeah it's just been a big confidence booster here and it shows at home as well, I'm a lot happier.

The positivity and encouragement of the people at the Neighbourhood House have helped her to do different things. Describing herself in the past as a learner who lacked concentration and was easily distracted she says that now she can concentrate on what she is doing. She has the confidence to sit there and block things out when she needs to. She has completed several hospitality units at the Neighbourhood House and has transitioned to study at the local TAFE.

I've got a Certificate for Food Handling and Coffee Making, it sort of entails the money handling of the cafe, food prep, cleaning the coffee machine, packing that up, I've learnt a lot since I've been here. The confidence boost, which was the biggest problem, so yeah I've learnt quite a bit since I've been here. Between the centre I'm doing a course at TAFE it's just the Adult Education which is Computers and Maths. I'm nearly finished doing the Maths, I'm doing well in the Computers as well. Last year I started at Level 1 and I've moved to Level 2 Maths and Level 1 Computers.

She has become more confident and is less shy and withdrawn since starting work. The day of her interview was the last day of volunteering at the café. Lesley plans to complete her course at TAFE and wants to find a job.

Well before I started here I was like a scared little kid, I wouldn't speak to anybody, wouldn't involve myself in activities or things like that. But since I've been here I'm more outgoing, once you get me talking I won't shush.

I'm hoping after I finish this course I'm ready for the workforce. I'm actually ready now so the sooner I get a job the better off I'll be.

The vignettes from the data outlined above offer insight into the learning experiences of Allan, Marta, Joy and Lesley. All were early school leavers and found a sense of support and connectedness in the social environment and smaller class sizes of the Neighbourhood House courses, all were changed in some way because of their learning, with renewed confidence about their knowledge, skills and abilities. Allan, Marta and Lesley are older learners who have returned to study or to reskill in mid or later life after being retrenched. Significantly, Marta had experienced long term unemployment. Lesley has successfully transitioned from Neighbourhood Houses to further study at TAFE. Joy's early family upheaval ensured her secondary schooling was disruptive, she is now slowly starting to build her learning skills. All of the participants outlined here have had a significant change in their identity formation that has enabled them to reconstruct previously held negative views of themselves as learners.

All learning is a process of identity formation, we learn to become a doctor, a teacher, or an electrician and an identity is formed along the way (Chappell et al 2003). For many of the research participants in this study, learning in a Neighbourhood House has been transformative, it has assisted them to change their long held views and self-doubt of being unsuccessful at school or education – these learners are starting to believe in themselves, they are learning to become successful learners.

The local impact of Neighbourhood Houses

Low skilled workers who have lost their jobs or those wishing to enter the workforce have often had limited access to skills training programs and suitable adult education programs. This problem is further exacerbated by a lack of access to close-by TAFE colleges and costs associated with further education and training programs. Neighbourhood Houses have proven to be well positioned to take on an increasingly important role in transitional education. The major themes emerging from this research are inextricably linked, highlighting that adults succeed in achieving their goals given a 'second chance' in learning through the flexibility and inclusivity of Neighbourhood Houses. The data revealed

in the case vignettes show the impact of leaving school early and the subsequent challenges people faced in terms of re-engaging with education. This is bridged by the supportive and inclusive social space of the Neighbourhood Houses. Major themes include the high level of satisfaction of neighbourhood house users; the importance of flexibility for Neighbourhood Houses to respond to local needs; local decision-making and consultation; and the importance of Neighbourhood Houses in building stronger individuals and communities. Through their involvement, adults are able to develop useful knowledge and skills at their own pace. Participants appreciate flexible learning environments with non-hierarchical relationships, individualised and small group programming, learning and social support networks, and the personal benefits associated with work placements, training and employment opportunities.

Neighbourhood Houses help adults to move from welfare or reduce their dependence on welfare. Neighbourhood House personnel develop relationships with local industries to offer participants traineeships after completing compulsory placements and specified internal learning requirements. They organise work placements for individuals, develop employability skills such as application writing and interview practice, and demonstrate high success rates for many learners in gaining employment. In the Barwon region, for example, Neighbourhood House participants have obtained employment in varying industries including aged care, youth work, warehousing, early childhood services, and administration.

Neighbourhood Houses reinforce the view that everyone can learn successfully irrespective of age or past experience, with many participants declaring that as a result of their involvement with houses they had reconceptualised themselves as learners. These positive findings were perhaps surprising, given that many learners also reported they had been enrolled to fulfil their requirements as job-seekers. As locally run social spaces, Neighbourhood Houses are unique in their practices, habits, discourses and dispositions to welcome all comers. Participants attest to the effectiveness of Neighbourhood Houses in “getting them in”. Participants are welcomed for who they are without judgment while finding connections with others who are “just like them”. A factor that makes Neighbourhood Houses so successful is their

connection to schools and childcare facilities – and often they are closely located to these other community assets. Adults can talk, have a coffee, borrow a book, access a learning program. Individuals and communities benefit. Individuals feel socially connected and communities are strengthened by using and linking the talents and interests, knowledge and skills of their members. Communities determine their needs and social priorities and apply for funding, which is allocated on a needs and demand basis.

The adult education programs in Neighbourhood Houses adapt and change to meet local community needs. Staff, volunteers and Committee of Management members in Neighbourhood Houses have access to regionally prepared professional learning programs that meet their professional needs in context. Examples include responding effectively to mental health issues, using social media, health and wellbeing, and ensuring good governance. The peak body, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia also develop regular and useful webinars to enhance management capacity within the houses.

Neighbourhood Houses in the national policy context

The interviews, observations and literature review conducted for this research disclose a range of common themes and issues confronting learners, educators, and those charged with leading, managing and governing Neighbourhood Houses. Globalisation and technological change have intensified international economic competition, motivating governments to increase national growth, productivity, efficiency and innovation. Training and education are seen to play a major role in enhancing national competitiveness and productivity in a global marketplace by increasing knowledge yield and ensuring a well-educated, effective workforce and citizenry.¹ Governments of all persuasions have instigated ongoing structural reforms to align national education, training and employment agendas with the demands of intensified global competition. As a result, education and training policies throughout the developed world have increasingly subsumed economic imperatives to achieve national objectives. Current policy is, therefore, heavily influenced by the needs, values and underlying philosophy of global market economics and neo-liberal political agendas (Tyler et al 2013). As the nation rapidly moves away from mass

¹ (see for example, Productivity Commission, 2013).

production, inflexible employment conditions, and social democratic agendas in social service and welfare provision, education and training policy emphasis on increased worker productivity, organisational efficiency and innovation. Being a contested and highly controversial realm of social life, education and training policy reforms are deeply political, raising questions about fundamental purposes. The global financial crisis (GFC) of 2007-2008 reinvigorated and fortified a *laissez-faire* economic and neo-liberal policy hegemony, which has changed the operations and behaviours of education, training and employment programs and institutions over the past three decades. Hence the relationship between education / training and national economic fortunes has assumed primacy over individual, civic or social benefits (Reid, Gill & Sears, 2010).

The way we envisage, experience and conduct learning, training and teaching are no longer resting on assumptions that have guided governments and populations for centuries. Neighbourhood Houses are altering previous conceptions, highlighting how local communities are coming to grips with policy disruption, incongruities and inconsistencies.

The research findings expose the enormous complexity, challenges and opportunities facing Neighbourhood Houses as they shape and respond to change. To survive in the new economy, individuals must constantly learn and adapt to the demands of the market (Beck 1995). Neighbourhood Houses help reduce or move adults away from welfare dependency whilst providing local support structures to connect learners with the realities of the current economic environment. Neighbourhood Houses are learning organisations. Emphasising the need for a knowledge economy and productivity, Neighbourhood Houses provide skills development and training to those who, in the past, have often been left behind. They reinforce lifelong learning and personal 'agility' and risk responsibility to cope with workforce reforms.

Conclusion

This research on learning in Neighbourhood Houses connects the personal and the political, the social and cultural. It speaks to localised responses to macro and meso policy decisions by governments, multi-national companies and social agencies. It provided an opportunity for

“situated theorizing” (Fraser 1989), as participants in Neighbourhood Houses collaborated by expressing their views and describing their experiences. The research raises many questions and challenges about the future of these important providers of ACE. It suggests a need for further research across Victoria and the Australian states. Being introduced only over the past four decades, Neighbourhood House programs are still an emerging and evolving form of education delivery, a new type of educational institution, and their successful but unregulated practices could portend further policy opportunities.

In the current dynamic policy environment it is important the possibilities associated with Neighbourhood House programs be documented and noted by instrumental players such as governments, policy-makers, skills development and training leaders, governing trustees, researchers and analysts. It is notable that there is a dearth of research in Neighbourhood Houses, which is surprising given they have operated in Australia since the 1970’s. These complex spaces of formal and informal learning, offer significant learning experiences for second chance learners, for individuals to further their skills, qualifications and provides opportunity for further study transitions to higher education or employment. They are sites of social inclusion and community building for individuals who are reframing and rebuilding their lives. We argue they are significant spaces for people to reconstruct previously held negative views of themselves as learners, a result of not having finished secondary school and taken the traditional pathway to higher education.

In an era of lifelong learning with declining manufacturing industries and workers having to retrain and develop new knowledge and skills, Neighbourhood Houses offer significant adult learning opportunities and intensive individualised support so that learners can be successful.

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