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LATE TRANSITION TO TECHNICAL COLLEGE: PERSPECTIVES FROM MALES APPROACHING ADULTHOOD

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Abstract: This study was about the transition experiences of a sample of nine young adult males who enrolled in technical college several years after leaving high school.

Introduction

This study focused upon the personal experiences of working class adult males who enrolled in a large midwestern technical college. The participants all left home and high school several years ago, with no apparent goals toward continuing their education. The rationale for including only males was based upon current reports that fewer males are enrolling in post secondary institutions (Marklein, 2005; Tyre, 2006). The purpose of the study was to better understand how or why working class males found themselves able to reengage their education; despite being disconnected from formal schooling for several years. The study specifically addressed the internal and external factors that facilitated the transition of males situated in the early adulthood stage; from work to school or concurrent engagement in school and work. Life stage development provided a conceptual framework related to the transition process and phases of exploration and stabilization that characterize movement towards our conception of what it means to be an adult (Levinson, 1978). As much as adolescence emerged as a distinct life stage a century ago, early adulthood is now emerging as a unique period characterized with new psychological identities and social affiliations (Arnett, 2004; Settersten, 2005). Other pertinent theories and studies centering on adult and career development were examined in order to learn more about psychosocial factors that facilitate or hinder the progress of individuals in the transition process (eg., Lewin, 1953; Erikson, 1968; Rogers, 1977; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Bandura, 1986; and Super, 1990).

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were consistent with seeking to interpret the meaning of human experience from the subjective view of participants. Borg & Gall (1999) stated that reality is constructed from the perspective of the participants who are best suited to describe their own reality. The emphasis is on the social processes and the meanings that participants attribute to social situations (p.p. 386-387). Following a set of semi structured questions; the participants were asked to reflect upon experiences after they left high school and up to the present time. The interview questions were designed to elicit an open dialogue about factors perceived to facilitate or hinder college transition (Glesne, 1999). The 90-minute interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and initial coding was accomplished with the assistance of a qualitative analysis computer software program, ATLAS.ti, developed by Thomas Muhr in 1997). Several themes emerged from the thick descriptions included in the individual written profiles, and a cross case analysis was chosen to highlight the key themes.

Findings and Discussion

Emerging themes were organized under two broad areas, exploration and stabilization, that categorized experiences in early adulthood (Levinson, 1978). Exploration contained the following: separation and independence, work experiences, peer relationships, schooling attempts, and at risk behaviors. Stabilization included: sustained college enrollment, family reconnections, enhanced peer relationships, and goal clarification.

Findings suggest that we take a closer look at developmental factors within three broad areas that influence the transition process of males approaching adulthood. All participants left home and school, and entered into early adulthood with varying degrees of discontinuity that affected their decision-making, goal orientation, and rate of growth and development. Two participant's comments described the range of experiences from exploration to stabilization: "My main interests at that time were sex, drugs, and rock and roll". "We should realize we're in a situation almost like a river, it's carrying you and you have to decide whether you want to swim over to the bank and pull yourself out or keep on going".

Personal change that affected adult and career development relative to certain psychosocial factors were found within three areas of focus: (1) Family (2) Workplace (3) and Lifestyle. The degree of internalization of experiences within the three areas influenced movement toward personal change. Low quality workplace experiences had a negative effect upon the participants. Individual lifestyle was closely associated with peer relationships and at risk behaviors (including substance abuse). Sustained enrollment in technical college was seen as a stabilizing factor resulting in some degree from personal reflection.

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