

EXPERIENCE OF LIFE LONG LEARNING IN TERTIARY EDUCATION AMONG MIDDLE AGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Midlife is typically viewed as a normal developmental experience in life course but, historically, it has been overlooked. Lifelong learning is the key element in developing human capital potential in 21st century. Today the rate of change and innovation is too rapid, many middle adult are going back to school to continue their postgraduate study in order to learn new knowledge and skill that will be used to prepare them during retirement age. However, the study of experience of middle age student in lifelong learning journey is lacking. This is important because middle age population represent a growing segment of the aging population. The researchers hold on the ontological view that human experience consist of multiple realities. Furthermore the best epistemological questions to answer experience is by "how, why and what" Therefore this qualitative study attempts to understand the meaning of life long learning and the experience of life long learning among middle age student in a tertiary institution. A descriptive qualitative study design was employed in this pilot project. Two informants are purposely selected because they are postgraduate student at middle age range (35-55) who is currently doing a postgraduate program. The researchers use combination of purposive and snowball sampling method in selecting informant. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interview. This study has synthesized some ideas that mid-life can be "the best of time" or "the worst of time" throughout life time. To engage in lifelong learning, middle age students develop wisdom in problem solving and self management. At time, they feel lost due to stress-related growth at mid-life. However, the lifelong learning journey forms an interesting bridge between the loss-related stressors and personal development in middle age student.

Key words: *Life long learning, middle age, midlife, tertiary education*

INTRODUCTION

Mid-life is a time of contradictions or alternatively, a time of frantic overload from juggling the multiple roles of parents and caretaker for elderly parents, members of the so-called "sandwich generation" (Brody, 1990). However to these perspectives on the putative crisis of middle age, survey routinely find individuals in mid-life to have fewer psychological symptoms, higher level of marital satisfaction, better life satisfaction and mastery, and in general, to be in fairly good health. Revolving these seeming contradictory findings is crucial to understanding adaptational processes in mid-life. However, middle age adults are the higher number of student in tertiary institution, (Timarong, 2007). Therefore, stress in life might act as one of the motivator, for adult to indulge in lifelong learning. This study aims to explore and to

gain insight about experience of middle age student in coping with mid-life crisis and life long learning.

The significance of the study is to contribute this study finding to the academic staff in teaching middle age student and middle age students themselves, whereby they could gain an insight about the ‘truth’ or “struggle” behind a middle age student who engage in postgraduate study. With the understanding, to whom it may concern will be more to empathize middle age student who go back to school; on top of that, education system and learning activities are also able to modify according to their learning needs. The purpose of the study is to explore the experience of lifelong learning in people at middle age. The study will be guided by the following research questions: How does middle age people experience life long learning?

Literature Review

The government of Malaysia is working towards a quality of the Nation’s Human capital. This will be the most critical element to be achieved in the achievement of the National mission. In the ninth plan period the human capital development will be holistic: encompassing the acquisition of knowledge and skills or intellectual capital including science and technology and entrepreneurial capabilities as well as the internalization of positive and progressive attitudes, values and ethics through education, training and lifelong learning. The implementation of lifelong learning program will be accelerated to encourage skill upgrading among all segments of society.

According to Department of Statistics and Economic Planning Unit in the Ninth Malaysian Plan; 2006-2010, the population of Malaysia increased to 26.75 million in 2005 and will increase to 28.96 million in 2010. This population includes permanent residents, foreign workers with permits, expatriates and foreign students. Based on the population size and age structure 63.1% is considered in the group within 15-64 in 2005 and will increase to 63.6% in 2010. Thus, this range of age is considered as adult learner. This age structure shows that more than 63% of Malaysian adult population should manage their life to become as apart of k-workers in order to support the knowledge economy society.

Learning

Learning is very hard to define. It is a part of the process of change and adaptation to different circumstance. It enables us to draw on the past in order to cope better with the future. This is something to do with change. But what is change? What kind of change could happen? Through learning, people might change their view towards the world, or maybe their understanding about themselves or might be their behavior or something else. The changes may not be immediately obvious to somebody or to the learner. However, learning produces something to be observed. Thus, mentioning that learning is a process, it shows a series of elements that works to make up learning.

Specifically there are many ways to define learning. Learning is about how we perceive and understand the world, about making meaning” (Marton & Booth, 1997; refer by Fry et al., 2003), Therefore learning could be abstract principal, information, facts, methods of doing something, technique, idea, behavioral for certain situation or reasoning (Fry, et al., 2003). Coombs (1973) categorizes learning through three aspects such as: (1) Formal Learning: involved learning in school, universities and colleges; (2) Non formal Learning: learning outside from the normal system such as

training, visit to a certain place to learn something; and (3) Informal Learning: learning through daily interaction.

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is a global national, and personal process. According to the European Commission's "Education and Training 2010" Communication, lifelong learning" is defined as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within personal, civic, social and/or employment related perspective."

The definition also highlighted the objectives of learning, "including active citizenship, personal fulfillment and social inclusion, as well as employment-related aspects. The principles which underpin lifelong learning and guide its effective implementation emphasize the centrality of the learner, the importance of equal opportunities and the quality and relevance of learning opportunities" (Commission of the European Communities, 2000). Moreover, the needs and the importance of lifelong learning was expelld by the statement from Asian Europe meeting stated as there is a trend recently of the increasing importance and significance of lifelong learning in the world today (ASEM, 2002).

In terms of implement the lifelong learning there is a views explain that "Education is not just something that happens between ages four and 22: it's something that has become, and has to become, a lifelong process," "It's got to be about educating young and old, rich and poor, skilled and unskilled, laborers & professionals, and even retirees. Our challenge is to give people the infrastructure and the environment they need to do that." (Kim Jones, 2004).

Challenges in mid-life perspective

One of the characteristic of mid-life which was thought to be highly stress full is the existence of the "empty nest" phase. The majority of women of child bearing age now work outside of the home, and presumably will continue to do so after their children are launched. For those women who have opted out of the workforce to raise their children, there is increase acceptance of "off time" education, with more women then ever returning to school in order to increase their job market potential. Nevertheless, the "empty nest" phase does not appear to constitute a generalized crisis, but it may evoke a re-evaluation of life goals in women.

In addition, the crisis that women in mid-life are currently thought to face is overload role from being a member of the 'sandwich generation". This pertains to the idea that mid-life is a time of great stress because individuals (mainly women) are facing simultaneous demands of caring for both adolescent and frail parents, often while juggling the career demands.

Adult have many reasons for returning to school, and their goal shift slightly with age. Few studies of the middle aged adult's education goals exist, but Hoffman, Paris & Hall (1994) have suggested four broad objectives that are related to occupational and personal development. First, many adults are preparing themselves for second career. They may lost all interest in their present occupations often because the jobs require an intense emotional involvement or the daily grappling with overwhelming problems. Second educational objective is combating technological or social cultural obsolescence. Thirdly is the generation of satisfactory retirement roles.

According to Erikson's theory of generativity, that defined individual's middle aged adults' abilities to be useful to ourselves and society. As in the industry age, the

goal here is to be productive and creative. However, productive in industrial stage is a means of obtaining recognition and material rewards. The way middle age adult respond to life challenges and changes affects the way they feel about themselves. Stress may be an inevitable part of changes in middle adulthood, but as Levensen & Aldwin (2006) argues that, the stress its elf does not lower self esteem, erode self concept, or destroy the sense of self-efficacy. The sense of self remains firm when people under stress can alleviate or tolerate the distress, maintain a sense of personal worth in the face of defeat.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive qualitative study design was employed in this pilot project. Informants are purposely selected because they are postgraduate student at middle age range (35-55) who is currently doing a postgraduate program. The researchers use combination of purposive and snowball sampling method in selecting informant. The first respondent identified has recommended another respondent who is his acquaintance.

Data collection method

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interview. The interviewer initiated by explaining the purpose of the study. Subsequently an interview guide (see appendix 1) serve as a few entry questions, while the subsequent dialogues proceed according to the answers obtained. There was little requirement in prompting. The respondents told their stories in the context of their experience, generally initiating points of discussion themselves. What is important is the researcher's interest has for the others' stories but not "contaminating" the data by diverting and too much probing in the interview process. The interview was held at the convenient time and place such as at home or at their resting area for and 1 or 2 hours in length. The interviews were audiotape recorded and observation on respondents expression recorded in the field notes.

Data analysis

The audio taped interviews later transcribed verbatim. The method used to familiarize the data was "reading and rereading". Before the reading of transcript, the researcher listens to the recorded tape several times in the car during driving. This practice is very useful and facilitates the process in typing out the transcript. The errors in the transcripts were corrected while rereading and re-listen the tape. This reading experience enable the researcher to keep some important statement and sentences in mind and continuously do reflection on the specific points and said by the respondents. Important concepts were identified through active –reflection. The data then further analigzed go through the process of condensation or reduction-to find the central part of longer answers. Next step is to group the categories of answers by classifying similar answers in respective group. Sub themes were named and compared to establish borders between sub themes. A group of sub themes with similar categories had been given a theme in each border. Finally when themes were developed, literature review was required to start concurrently to substantiate the meaning of each theme. Deeper understandings of the themes will describe in the discussion section.

Trustworthiness of the study

Trustworthiness of the study is discussed in three aspects (Sharan, 1998); firstly internal validity of the study is the strength in qualitative research because the researcher is the primary instrument in the study. In other words the researcher is the instrument that knows what to measure in the study. Secondly, the researcher refers back to the transcript and themes of two informants for member checking the data. Meanwhile as themes emerge, peers were invited to comment on the finding and discussion. Third is external validity of the study; the finding is not meant to generalize to the general population but to serve as a working hypothesis to the reader. This working hypothesis will help them to apply the meaning and understanding in their own setting related to middle age student experience in life long learning.

Findings and Discussion

The participants involved in this study were two women currently taking post graduate study in University Putra Malaysia. Their ages range from 38-40 years old. Six common themes reflecting the experience of middle age students undergone post graduate study were identified: Meaning of learning, prepared to venture the second career, overwhelm with challenges, reduce stress, adapting and maintain self esteem.

Table 1: Themes and Sub Themes that Derived from This Study

Statement	Sub themes	Themes
<p>A. Lifelong Learning is to <i>get ourselves involved with a situation of seeking knowledge</i>. New knowledge to help us understand something more. And the specialty about the management course it helps me a lot in managing my own life style. It helps me in making decision and many others. Learning also means knowing something through observation, through TV news, through reading papers, through chatting with members and etc.</p> <p>B. I actually nor really know the exact meaning of life long learning but my interpretation to this word is "continue to learn through out your life" am I correct? I hope not. In fact life long learning to me is not necessary happens in postgraduate or in tertiary institution. You know, I can learn from home, I can learn from my workplace or during leisure. Anyway, people always think that life long learning is equivalent to continue study especially at my age now-or go back to school.</p>	<p>I can learn from home, I can learn from my workplace knowing something through observation, TV news, reading papers, chatting with members and etc.</p> <p>"continue to learn through out your life" am I correct? In fact life long learning to me is not necessary happens in postgraduate or in tertiary institution.</p>	<p>Learning can be formal, informal and non formal</p> <p><i>continue to learn through out the life span</i>"</p>
<p>A. I my self is <i>a person who like to know and explore something new. My career as a lecturer in Teacher Education Institute motivate me to become more knowledgeable</i> compare to my students. <i>The system and the nature of the profession that needs us to upgrade ourselves</i></p> <p>B. I decided to take up PhD study is because I <i>am planning to change my carrier direction</i> I also want to have <i>better self-esteem</i> if I work in academic institution where PhD is the requirement in teaching post as a lecturer want to be respected, strong in research knowledge and confident in front of student.</p> <p>Also, I hope for a better income if I got my PhD, <i>a more stable job, and be a role modal</i></p> <p>A:</p>	<p>Better self esteem</p> <p>Career requirement in higher qualification Getting Better Job and better income</p>	<p>Preparing to venture into second career</p>
A:		

<p>First challenge is Time. I do the master of management as a part time student. I've to attend the class every week end its started from Friday evening at 5.30 until Saturday from 8 in the morning until 9 in the evening. Even though there is a break in between subject but it is very tired. Since the class finish it was not ending there. We have to continue with our group discussion and preparing our paper project for each subject the next day. at least we will spent for another 5 hours in Sunday to do our discussion and our preparation for next class.</p> <p>Second challenge is office workload. Besides the tough time of studying I've to face a situation where my office workload sometimes limit my time to study. I also have to face my family needs. I seldom going back to my parents house when I started my study. I've a challenges to get my family understand with the situations</p> <p>B: You know now, I am a mother of two. My husband and I have certain commitment on house loan, car loan, insurance, and children educational fee, in addition, I have to give some money to my parents when I go home. Although my mother didn't ask for it, I will still give her some money. so money constraint make life not really comfortable like before, beside paying for my PhD fee from my own saving, at the moment, I do give some tuition to secondary tuition school children.</p> <p>You know once I resigned, I can't support my husband like before, I use up almost all my saving in study. Money is the problem I not really can concentrate on my study sometime, at one time I feel sorry for my children because they have to stay in nursery longer because I can't take them home due to my coursework</p>	<p>Time, Tiredness, Extra energy, Office Working load, Family commitment, Caring for elderly, Financial constraint, Work part time, Caring for the young, Used up saving</p>	<p>Overwhelmed with challenges</p>
<p>A: First when I do my master I'm still single not yet married. I cope with the changes but focusing that in these two years you must get your Master Degree. What ever happened you must focus that you are studying to get your Master Degree.</p> <p>Besides I've to study in a group, I've friends to talk to .If the situation is too tense I will fine somebody to talk to.</p> <p>B: I actually try to minimize all problems in life, for instance, I will try to reduce personal conflict with my husband, ex-colleagues, course mate and other family member. You know, once all this conflict pop up, I will have emotional breakdown, all this I have experience, it make me can't carry on my study.</p> <p>I will bring my children almost to park, garden every week which I do not need to pay anything. I still talk with my in-law, cook for them when they come to my house. I make as if nothing happen, life go on as usual. I will smile with any critic from my ex-colleagues. I still maintaining my saving, FD. I must make sure it is enough for me to survive till I finish PhD</p>	<p>Set target to reach goal; Group sharing; Talk to friend; Reduce personal conflict with others; Cut down unnecessary expenses; Maintain good relationship with others</p>	<p>Reduce stress by maintaining good personal relationship and spend wisely</p>
<p>A: Because when I start studying I have to used my money for buying books, Photostatting, buying outside foods , no more cooking because my time is limited. So it makes my expenses increase. Every time I got problem I've to get my friends and talk to her until everything release.</p> <p>I was the one who always spent my weekend for my parents, doing shopping or traveling. But when I start study I've to accept that I've to change. I've to focuses with my study</p>	<p>Adjusting lifestyle to cope with busy study schedule; Need to talk to friends; Change to positive mindset</p>	<p>Adapting with lifestyle and mindset changed</p>

go home. Although my mother didn't ask for it...so money constraint make life not really comfortable...I can't go home like before especially on festival season.

Brody (1990) explained that mid-life is a time of frantic overload from juggling the multiple roles of parents and caretakers for elderly parent, member of the so called "sandwich" generation.

Theme 4: Reduce stress

In the findings, the researcher find out stressors identified were: personal conflict and over workload. One of the participant mentioned:

.....I will try to reduce personal conflict with my husband, ex-colleagues, course mate and other family member. You know, once all this conflict popped up, I will have emotional breakdown, all this I have experience, it make me can't carry on my study.

Maintaining good relationship with others, talking to friend and setting target in work are some of the strategies suggested by the participants. Robinson, Rossenberg & Farell (1999), points out that stress does not necessary entail crisis; it was certainly a time for re-evaluation. Meanwhile stress may become a catalyst for change in life

Theme 5: Adapting

In the research, the participants adapting themselves by modifying their lifestyle and changes their mindset. This was mentioned in the statement below by one of the participant:

.....But when I start study I've to accept that I've to change.....

The other participant mentioned that,

.....I must think positively and hope for the best.....

Arpanatikul (2006) explains that the phenomenon above as an adapting means of altering or adjusting ideas or behaviours into successfully incorporate study process. During midlife, transition and individual lifestyle and mind set are changing as well as his or her emotions and relationship. Thus some women show strength in facing midlife change by reviewing their life and making practical adjustment to reflect those changes.

Theme 6: Maintain self esteem

The way middle age adult responding to life challenges and changes affects the way they feel about themselves. Stress may be an inevitable part of changes in middle adulthood, but as argues that, the stress its elf does not lower self esteem, erode self concept, or destroy the sense of self-efficacy. The sense of self remains firm when people are under stress can alleviate or tolerate the distress, maintain a sense of sense off personal worth in the face their defeat. Maintain good relationships with friends and family member and meet any stress related challenges (Travers & Dacey, 2004).

The participants were trying hard to come out with a presentable works, they even hold on a particular philosophy to be their guidance to reach their goals. These behaviors showed that, they are trying to maintain self esteem, self concept and sense of self efficacy as mentioned by Travers & Dacey (2004).

One of the participant said that :

.....I wish I could submit a presentable work to my lecturer.

Another statement by the participants is:

.....I always live with one philosophy which is” finish one task at one time following priority” no delay, no postponing, not too ambitious to finish many task at a time.....

CONCLUSION

To sum up, this study has synthesized some ideas that mid-life can be “the best of time” or “the worst of time” throughout life time. To engage in life long learning, middle age students develop wisdom in problem solving and self management. At time they feel lost due to stress-related growth at mid-life. However the lifelong long learning journey forms an interesting bridge between the loss-related stressors and personal development in middle age student.

While much of this study is too brief to speculate on experience of middle age student in process of life long learning. A future study with a better representative of sample size may elicit more information and understanding in experience on middle age student in life long learning

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