Education in the Lives of Males Engaged in Street-Based Sex Work

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Abstract

Research into males engaged in street-based sex work (SMSW) tends to pathologise the person and his experience. The prevailing belief is that after their home-life fails, they become homeless, get involved in substance use, and engage in 'survival sex' that turns into prostitution. While this is one research perspective, there are other less obvious and rarely explored narratives that also help us to understand the person and their experience of life including that of SMSW.

Whether as a positive feature in life or in its absence or failure, education is a factor to be explored if we are to come to any comprehensive understanding of males who for short or long periods engage in prostitution or sex work. This paper explores the participants' educational experience, the relationships that emerge within that context and the place of education in the overarching experience of vulnerability and resilience.

These findings are based on qualitative research involving 27 males who were engaged in SMSW in various parts of Australia. Twenty-two of the participants had not completed high school with seven not completing their second year of secondary schooling. Two had completed university and two had begun to attend but withdrew from university before completing their academic program.

Various themes emerge in the data analysis. Children who experience isolation or abandonment within their primary relationships continue to seek other supportive experiences. School is one focal point for this increasingly urgent search. While counsellors within the school setting play a significant role in the provision of alternative sources of support, class room teachers, particular subject matter, the structure of school and peers also play a significant role in personal survival, growth, and school retention. Premature departure from school is a crucial moment that coincides with loss, and the escalation of other negative experiences and the deterioration of relationships. Finally, and notwithstanding this loss of connection with education, the need and desire for education remains a constant.

Some preliminary consideration of structural issues within the educational environment is explored with particular emphasis on ways that counsellors, teachers and peers may be able to support the retention of marginalised individuals and groups within education.

Key words: education, schools, male sex work, relationships, adolescents, male prostitution.

Introduction

Two critical, related and perennial questions face educationalists, allied health clinicians and policy makers alike. Why do young people drop out of the school system? How do educationalists and the education system deal with the personal, environmental and systemic difficulties faced by young people who are marginalised within such a profoundly significant life experience? This paper explores those two questions through the lens provided by research into the experience of males who engage in street based sex work or prostitution (SMSW). A number of education-related themes emerge in the analysis of data arising from qualitative interviews with males engaged in SMSW; two themes – *Reference point and guide* and *Alienation* – are explored within this paper. These two themes pick up on the polarities in the educational experience of young males who become engaged in male sex work; inclusion and what these experiences can mean, and isolation and the power of not being included in such a fundamental life experience. All of the themes shed new light on the place education has within the lives of males engaged in SMSW. The significance of this research is that it explores an often unmentioned experience in a little known-about population group: young males who engage in street-based sex work.

Literature review

Past literature has considered male sex work (MSW) from an historical perspective (Kaye 2003; Scott 2003) and examined the stratification or hierarchy of prostitutes or sex workers (Caukins & Coombs 1976; Coleman 1989; Luckenbill 1986; Parsons et al. 2001). Other research perspectives have explored male prostitution as: an issue of identity exploration (Boyer 1989; Earls & David 1989); a sociological phenomenon concerning issues of control (Gaffney & Beverley 2001); an element of personal psychopathology (Simon et al. 1992); a form of deviant behaviour (Luckenbill 1984, 1986); one sequela of an abusive childhood (Holmes & Slap 1998); coexistent with other negative life experiences (Mallett et al. 2004; Ratner et al. 2003); a consequence of negative events such as poverty or homelessness (Clatts et al. 2005; Pedersen & Hegna 2003; Zigman 1999); a commercial encounter (Minichiello et al. 2000); a significant public health and regulation issue (Belza et al. 2001; Simon et al. 1994; Sullivan 1996); and a matter for social welfare policy and social services intervention (Cusick 2002; Shaw & Butler 1998).

Historically, prostitution has long been associated with negative experiences (Lascaratos & Poulakou-Rebelakou 2000) with the research around MSW dominated by an early skew towards delinquency (Kenny et al. 2006; Luckenbill 1984, 1985, 1986; McCrystal et al. 2006) and a later orientation towards health education in regard to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (Minichiello et al. 2000, 2001; Williams et al. 2006). Although a causal connection between familial abuse, running away (or escaping) from home, and involvement in sex work is an assumption in the literature around prostitution generally (Widom & Ames 1994), the research evidence for such a link (i.e., abuse→running→prostitution) is inconsistent (Brannigan &

Van Brunschot 1997). The only reliable part of the 'hypothesised relationship' (Widom & Ames 1994 p.312) is that abuse and neglect leads to running (Hyde 2005; Sanchez et al. 2006; Thrane et al. 2006; Widom & Kuhns 1996) and substance use (Tyler et al. 2000) which in turn leads to involvement with a geographical and social environment where involvement with prostitution is more likely to occur (McCarthy & Hagan 1992; Nadon et al. 1998; Rotheram-Borus Meyer-Bahlburg, Koopman et al. 1992; Schaffer & DeBlassie 1984; Tyler & Johnson 2006).

From the early 1990s, the tenor of research and literature changed significantly in response to HIV and the AIDS crisis. This concentration attempts to achieve an understanding the behaviour of those engaged in MSW (Parsons et al. 2001) and increase understanding about what is required to achieve and maintain personal and population health (Rosario et al. 1999; Rotheram-Borus, Meyer-Bahlburg, Rosario et al. 1992; Williams et al. 2006).

Involvement with sex work is fundamentally about the person and their involvement with people, places and institutions, other sex workers, clients, hospitals, police, welfare, families, the general population and education. In the literature on MSW, education is generally a place and experience from which marginalised young people absent themselves because of the difficulty they have identifying with the experience and the content of education (Hillman 2005; Lamb 1998; Lamb et al. 2000). While this facet in the complex experience of SMSW is only explored as a tangential feature to other more dominating life experiences, education is formative of self and must therefore be examined. This paper focuses on research data that explores the educational experience of males engaged in SMSW.

Methodology

The main gathering point for SMSW in Sydney is known as 'The Wall', a 200 metre strip of Darlinghurst Road, in an inner suburb of Sydney, bounded by a technical college, a university, a court house, a Catholic church, a hospice and a park. A total of 44 young males were approached to be interviewed in this study. Of those who were approached, 27 were interviewed. Three of the participants were interviewed twice. The researcher used an unstructured interview process (Kvale 1996; Minichiello et al. 1995) beginning each interview with the same non-directive question regarding when the person came to the inner city of Sydney (where SMSW is known to occur). Topics that were discussed included: relationships with family, peers and other significant people; life events defined as positive and negative; adversity and survival; education; work and leisure; health and general wellbeing; and aspirations, emotions and intimacy.

The average age of the participants was 23 at the time of interview with the youngest being 17 years of age. The study used a combination of opportunistic, snowball and theoretical sampling (Alvesson & Sköldberg

2000; Minichiello et al. 1995; Strauss & Corbin 1998). Twenty-five of the participants had experienced homelessness from an early age and 14 had experienced juvenile or adult incarceration. Twenty-two had not completed high school with seven not completing their second year of secondary schooling. Two had completed university degrees and two others had begun to attend but withdrew from university.

Participant quotes are included *verbatim*: no stylistic or grammatical editing has occurred. Identifying features have been removed. Correct age at time of interview is provided with the participant's alias just prior to their first quote. The participant's alias is provided at the end of each quote along with a numeric or alphanumeric reference mark specifying the interview number followed by the paragraph numbers in parentheses. The paragraph numbers are generated by QSR NVivo (version 7). The use of 'a' or 'b' before the enclosed paragraph number identifies whether it is the first (a) or second (b) interview.

The current research uses a qualitative research methodology employing grounded theory (Glaser 1978, 1992, 1998; Glaser & Strauss 1967; Minichiello et al. 1995) with an added emphasis on reflexivity (Brown 2006) and hermeneutics (Paterson & Higgs 2005; Richardson & Woolfolk 1994; Taylor 1991), the latter employed on the understanding that the knowledge arising out of the research is a product of an 'intrasubjective rendezvous' (Brown 2006 p.193) where 'personal interpretation can enter into the definition of the phenomenon under study' (Taylor 1985 p.121). Thematic analysis was carried out on the interview transcripts. Major emergent themes were explored for categories, subcategories and the interrelationships between emergent themes, with the emphasis being on gaining a descriptive and in-depth analysis and understanding of the phenomenon of SMSW and of the place of education in the lives of those engaged in SMSW.

Results

In my consideration of education in the lives of young males who engage in street-based sex work, six themes emerged through the narratives. While two of the themes are explored within this current paper, the remaining four themes are mentioned by way of providing a fuller context and as a way of introducing the reader to a fuller understanding of the place and significance of education in the lives of the participants in this study.

Reference point and guide

Education can be a *protective experience* (first emergent theme). In the face of adversity, education can help the person to mount adaptive responses that build resilience. For Jeffrey (26), being at school provides some protection from exposure to negative life events. As he indicated, 'If you're a 15 year old, going to school and stuff, I mean, you don't really, unless you actually know other kids that are involved in it, you don't really see

things like working the street, drugs, etc, you know' [Jeffrey 7(380)]. The experience of education is not just about attendance at an event extending over many years; education in its totality is rich with structure, events, content, processes and people, all of which have the capacity to act as a *reference point and guide* (second emergent theme).

Drake (23) exemplifies the capacity within students to take the raw material that is the educational experience and – in concert with the people, place, processes and content – use it to create meaning within life in general. As Drake indicated, '… you'll probably see me refer to my younger years, as we go on, by my schooling. And to me, my school years and the places that I was, and how I lived and whatever is primarily my; I don't know what terms to use. I guess it's primarily my foundation to my memories' [6(72)]. There was an intense level of chaos for Drake within his family, created mainly by the presence of a step-father who repeatedly sexually abused him. School became central to his life as a *reference point* to other events, the ruler against which other things are measured and the 'foundation to [his] memories'. In the absence of other foundation points, he elevated school to a position of influence beyond learning. It held a whole-of-life significance and this was a logical and adaptive response to adversity. As he continued:

> *… some people say, I remember when my mother was a certain age, or I remember when I lived in a certain place, this and this happened. It was more, I remember when I was at this school, or I remember when I knew this person. I guess, rather than having things that are related to my close family, my immediate family and my close friends during my adolescence, I guess I refer to a lot of things that happen in my life to an external source.*
>
> *Drake 6(72)*

Education is a significant 'source' of positive input, 'external' to family, that expanded his horizon '… because every discovery that changed my life, every new ideal, and every new concept I came across, was always through school' [6(72)]. The newness of the experience was life altering for him as '… school was always the place where I had big changes in my life; where I've made big discoveries about myself' [6(172)].

The ability to engage with educational material and enjoy the content of education are both imperative to the success of the 'external source': Drake '… enjoyed reading and … enjoyed history and … math and … English' [6(80)]. Books were a 'huge part of [his] schooling' [6(88)]; they introduced him to a world in which he could immerse himself. However, the value in building resilience was not simply with objects or with the curriculum. School in its totality contributed to the experience of protection; it '… was almost like a zone, like a different place: It was a world to me. I always look forward to going to school' [6(92)] and notably, away from home.

While within that 'zone' of learning there was a particular focus of attention – books, subject matter, environment – people were also within his gaze and of significance. He was 'always looking forward to the people that [he] would see at school' [6(100)]. Peers are important but there are other relational elements to the school experience that maximise his capacity for adaptation and hence resilience. Teachers fill memorable roles.

Mr Jones was his music teacher:

> *He was fantastic. He had a way about him I guess. He was a very large man and had this very aristocratic accent, very English bloke, had these amazing eyebrows I remember that were very thick and bushy, and then sort of spun off with these two huge big spikes at the ends that hung away from his face and outwards. And he almost looked beastish but he was such a loud fellow and very much in control of his class: and he knew so much as well.*
>
> *Drake 6(108)*

While personality and control are significant factors in this experience with his teacher, what also made it a positive educational encounter was the content (knowledge) and process (pedagogy) within the educational experience; it was the teacher's capacity to lift him out of the travail of daily life and into another realm:

> *Whenever he'd teach, I remember he'd take us on journeys all the time, and he'd tell us about an instrument and how it was created and he'd tell us stories about famous musicians that had used it or made themselves famous using that instrument. He had the ability to give you a real feeling and a real essence.*
>
> *Drake 6(108)*

In a life dominated by an ongoing experience of sexual abuse, the provision by the teacher and a school of a 'real feeling and a real essence' that inspired continued participation – in the face of adversity – was of inestimable personal and social value.

School counsellors also hold sway over thinking and stability; they contribute to the security and the stability that inclusion in the educational process produces. Sister Jane was his school counsellor. She was a 'big figure in my life'. During difficult and painful times, 'she was more than just a counsellor' to Drake and he 'saw her as more than that. She was a nun and a very, sort of, ethically sound and fundamental person…who was sixty something years old. Wisdom and age being important to Drake, 'she presented [him] with a lot of new ideas and concepts and new ways to deal with things' [6(108)]. Through contact with his counsellor – another significant character in the school – he was able to gain perspective and clarity about his life experience away from the school, for example, sexual abuse. When Drake 'first spoke to Sr. Jane about it, it was the first time that [he] acknowledged that it was actually painful. Prior to that point, Drake had 'simply dealt with it by saying' to himself, 'it's not happening or it's just like it's normal' [6(308)].

This was also the case with Nick, who also was sexually abused; he discovered new ideas and concepts about his life through his conversation with his counsellor within the school context, something that wasn't achieved for either boy within the home environment. As Nick indicated, 'at the age of 14, [he] finally got told by the school counsellor what's right and what's wrong and when she was saying what was wrong' he was able to articulate, 'hey, that's happened to me before'. This allowed him to 'go home and tell Mum' [23(539)]. Making sense of life experience and gaining access to thinking that acts as a *reference point and guide* comes about through a strategy employed by some marginalised males within the education system. The strategy is: find trusted people within a trusted environment; allow the totality of experience within the environment to carry and sustain you through the people, place, context and structure; then explore the confusing elements of life within that relied-upon, safe and directive context. Notwithstanding the constructive and supportive nature inherent in the educational encounter, *alienation* (third emergent theme) is also an experience had by many males who engage in SMSW.

Alienation

For children and young people on the margins of society, participation in school is a tentative and tenuous experience (Beautrais 2003; Lisak & Luster 1994; Plummer 1999) with negative consequences where participation is halted (McCrystal et al. 2006). School participation can be thwarted by negative personal and social factors beyond the control of the student (Lalor et al. 2006). A formative experience of alienation can result. Dominic (22) experienced 'rape' at 7 years of age [22(151-163)] and began prostitution away from the inner city when he was '11 or 12' [22(147)]. He left school at 'the start of year 8' [22(147)] when he was 13 years of age. Even while experiencing such turmoil and devastation, he reported that he'd learnt more since leaving school than while there: '… more about real life'. His conclusion was that 'It's a sad world, mate. I'm looking forward to dying, the way the world's going.' [22(735)].

While home can be imbued with neglect, violence and alienation – and this forms an ever-present backdrop to life's experience – it also happens elsewhere and this complicates and intensifies the experience of alienation. For Peter (32) 'it's not just in the family; it's other things. 'Teenagers get hassled at school' and this gets defined as 'the pressure of school' where people 'hassle you, no matter what' [20(203)]. The origin of his anxiety and pain is clear:

> *Like okay, someone calls you a poofter or someone calls you a faggot or whatever, you know, someone's teasing you or heaps of people are always picking on you at school or you've got problems yourself, personal problems like you're young, you've got nowhere to live, you've got no friends, you've got no family, no one there to love you, no one there to say it's right, to cry, nothing like that.*

Peter 20(231)

This form of alienation within education arises because of peer-defined and peer-reinforced perceptions that translate into negative social behaviour. While this corrupts the educational experience, it also intensified the anxiety Peter experienced within his home. Both were places from which it was easy and necessary to run away. While escape is one response to the chaos to which Peter was exposed at home and school, there were other emotional reactions and physical responses. Peter decided that he 'had to be strong' and so he 'learnt to be nasty'. He experienced violence and he responded with violence and spent many years in gaol. On reflection he could acknowledge that 'these were … not good things, but these were things I had to learn and I found it so hard to cope with things around me: people. Someone would say something and I'd react and bash them or belt them or something like that. I was very quick to react' [20(231)].

Malcolm (18) experienced significant isolation at school, partly out of desire but also partly because of his perception that he was unable to relate and socialise. He would 'rather just go sit by myself'. He completed the higher school certificate and though there was 'a group of people' he would speak to, 'the rest of the school' he simply 'ignored, like they weren't there'. It was not the case that his peers failed to try and relate to him; they did, and he would 'just ignore them' because he did not 'know how to talk to them properly' [3(419)]. Brian (20/22) simply did not want to be at school. He 'had the opportunity a few times to get in with the popular crowd' but left school because he 'wanted to get out of there'. On reflection he was able to say, 'I wish I had stayed now' [12b(371)]. School can be an uncomfortable place where even in the face of opportunities for relating and integration, alienation based on a sense of incapacity or difference is an outcome. Notwithstanding this reality, education remains an experience of significance when thinking about the future.

While Malcolm and Brian kept their distance from peers in a pre-emptive avoidance of difficulty, Nathan (24) was ostracised within a country school after he returned from a period of education in the city. What he had become in the city 'didn't change and people thought' that he would be 'that shy guy that they knew before' but he 'wasn't; nowhere near that'. As he described that time, he 'camped it up even more really' and as a consequence, 'the minute [he] got back there [he] was getting called poofter and faggot and all that' [21(177)]. Homophobic vilification progressed to bullying and physical assaults 'like every day of [his] two years back in West Cowra in high school'. Finally, it progressed 'to the stage where [he] was getting fruit and tennis balls and rocks thrown at [him] as [he] walked through different quadrangles' of the school [21(289)]. The institution struggled to understand and support Nathan and he received 'no real support from teachers whatsoever' [21(289)]. Nathan remembers 'a couple of incidents where the PE teacher asked his year who they thought in the school was gay'. Nathan 'was pretty pissed off with that' [21(289)]. What complicated this

negative school experience was that the vilification occurred 'when [his] Mum had got sick first'; he 'had no back up' and he recognised that he 'needed parental support … and nothing happened there' [21(289)].

What we observe is a cumulative and intensified effect initially produced by peer vilification. However, the intensity of the isolation was mediated by the loss of support at home as well as school. Within a situation of such adversity, continued involvement with education is threatened. However, rather than capitulating to the negativity, Nathan confronts the situation and questions behaviour within elements of the school. He 'went up to one teacher and went, "What the fuck are you going to do about that?"' but the teacher 'just went, 'Nathan, there's no need to swear',' To which Nathan replied, 'Oh, fuck you!' [21(289)]. Some males leave school because of the vilification and assaults; others, like Nathan, resist and remain, but there is a cost when the rejection and hostility is internalised as Nathan makes clear: '…most of the time, I just keep on walking and just really try and not let it get to me; but really, it was just kind of eating away, I think, on the inside' [21(289)]. While the strategy of internalisation helps Nathan cope, it does not remove the experience nor relieve him of the consequences. As he indicates, it 'taught me how to really hate' [21(181)].

Long after school has finished and many other pathways have been explored, the search to understand the vilification remains strong. As Brian indicates, 'I have no idea why they picked on me in particular' [12b(367)]. He thinks he may have been 'a scapegoat or something for a lot of the kid's problems that were happening [in their] home' [12a(111)]. Brian has pondered the experience of rejection within the school system and the memory remains strong. Although he is 'over it now', it 'really did for a long time play' on his mind and he recognises that he 'had real issues with it' the focus of this reality being that 'other people didn't like [him and he] didn't like [him]self'. His final conclusion is that 'school kids can be so mean' [12b(367)].

The education experience of marginalised adolescents can be painful, alienating and ultimately confirm their social isolation. However, the outcome can be very different when a school understands difference and is aware of and comprehends the problem of vilification. The outcome can also be very different when *friendships and intimacy* with peers (the fourth emergent theme) develop within the educational context. Positive relational experiences – connected as they are with school – can provide access to resources within and outside of school and help maintain the person's link with education and hence stability. There is a stark absence of references to education within the literature on SMSW and yet the participants in this study had an ongoing interest in and use of education as a method for *crafting a future* (the fifth emergent theme). Even after school had long vanished, they sought out *alternative forms* of education (the sixth emergent theme) that ensured education would remain a significant and driving force in their lives.

Discussion

Common belief separates those involved in SMSW from the experience of education expecting the two to be held in irresolvable conflict. However, education is present, enjoyed and hated, valued and scorned. The current study adds to a body of research that sheds light on the multi-faceted phenomenon of SMSW. However, it also focuses attention on education.   The narratives of this research reveal intersecting relationships – individuals and systems – over which there are degrees of influence and in which there occur the conversations that make and form our humanity (Taylor 1991).   In this study, we learn about the significance of the content, structures, motivations, and agency within the experience of education, even for those engaged in SMSW.

Key themes and strategies employed by those engaged in SMSW have been outlined in this paper. Education has a capacity to protect against adversity, sometimes when other social experiences (such as family and friends) cannot. The content of the educational experience is important but so are the structures and the people. It is the teachers and counsellors concerned with the person's wellbeing that embody the efficacy that is evident in the educational experience of those engaged in SMSW.

Education can fail. When this happens, it is invariably because the content of education doesn't match the participant and the people embedded within educational experience – students and teachers alike – have little regard for or understanding of personal context and difference. Schools can be harsh, cruel and unforgiving places, especially for those who are 'different': notably for those struggling with sexual identity. Notwithstanding the adversity sometimes experienced within the school environment, the inherent value of education is rarely lost on the person engaged in SMSW. It can be a source of friendship, support, intimacy and pleasure. It has the capacity to stimulate thoughts of a future and to act as a fulcrum for resilience. Whether positive or negative, initial educational experiences and social expectations drive an ongoing search for education.

A critical issue arising out of the narratives in respect of difference is that personal silence in the face of realised difference is often fortified within the education system. What is also notable is that the breaking of silence and the consequent offering of support mediates retention in education and stability within other aspects of life, even in situations where other key supports are abusive or fragmented. While silence as a response to an acute sense of difference threatens participation, the breaking of silence serves to ground the person, with their difference intact, within a supportive space that education can be; it enriches life, primarily through the experience of being understood and of no longer being alone. Where difference is mocked and silence remains, the pain associated with silence inhabits an inner world dominated by unrelenting critical dialogues. This chain of events leaves the person desperate and sometimes suicidal.

The question remains as to how people should intervene in this world in order to maximise the potential for education to play a positive role in the lives of males engaged in SMSW. Those marginalised by personal experience and an overwhelming sense of their difference, need educational content, information, health and welfare services, opportunities and pathways that match their situation and provide a safety net that secures participation in education. This will be located in content that engages those who experience marginalisation, teaching processes that engage difference and systems that protect difference. What they most need within the education system is an empathic structure, understanding and connections that break the personal and debilitating silence so evident in this research.

Acknowledgments

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