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# Education For All? Examining Informal Adult Learning, The Men's Sheds Revolution, and Their Role in Older Males' Participation in Learning

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*Education for All is a global pledge to ensure that quality basic education (either formal or informal) is provided for all, regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity. This paper addresses some issues about adult learning initiatives and gender and ageism through the eyes of older adult males. The paper also examines Men's Sheds (one informal learning site) in order to highlight their possible benefits and potential to foster greater involvement of older adult males in adult learning opportunities. Firstly, a discussion about situating adult education and learning is presented in which a brief definition of adult education is given. Attention is also paid to informal learning in order to elucidate its implication for adult education and learning. Secondly, an overview is given about Men's Sheds and its appeal and benefits to older adult males. Thirdly, a discussion ensues about overcoming barriers and encouraging participation of older men. Finally, a synthesis of the arguments is presented in the form of concluding remarks which reiterate the possibility that Men's Sheds can serve as a potential catalyst for promoting informal adult education and learning in older adults. It is suggested that Men's Sheds can be explored in the Caribbean context, as they can create an avenue to facilitate active ageing among older men in the Caribbean.*

**Keywords:** informal learning, adult education and learning, later life learning, Men's Sheds, older men, Freire, social justice.

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## Introduction

While within the last decade there has been an unprecedented increase in the number of adult learners, troubling inequalities have been identified in terms of the level of participation among different groupings (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010). Areas in which disparities in educational opportunities and participation in adult education and learning are observed include gender, age, disability, ethnicity, prior academic qualifications, and socioeconomic class. With the quick rate at which knowledge and skills are becoming ever more obsolete (Gorard & Rees, 2002), along with the rate of societal change, a blind eye should not be turned to these factors which cause unequal participation. It is fundamental for critical assessments to be conducted and analysed, with regard to finding existing and alternative pathways, in order to facilitate the provision of education for all adults.

In April 2000, an Education For All (EFA) World Education Forum was held in Dakar, Senegal. The *Dakar Framework for Action* was espoused by all 198 countries represented at that Forum. One of the most significant charters emanating from this conference was the six EFA goals (UNICEF, 2012; UNESCO, 2017), which are as follows: (1) Expand early childhood care and education; (2) Provide free and compulsory education for all learners; (3) Promote learning and life skills for young people and adults; (4) Increase adult literacy; (5) Achieve gender parity, and (6) Improve the quality of education. These EFA goals reiterate that education should be (easily) accessible, diverse, and it should also meet learners' expectations. The underlying vision which drives these EFA goals is reverberated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is a commitment and a plan of action to achieve *sustainable development*, the principal objective of which is to ensure that *no one is left behind*.

Considering the above, this paper seeks to examine some of the issues surrounding participation in adult learning initiatives, with reference to gender and ageism, through the lens of older adult males. The aim, through a review of literature, is to examine

Men's Sheds as one valuable site of informal adult education and learning in an effort to reveal their possible benefits and potential to encourage greater older adult males' involvement and engagement in adult learning initiatives. To facilitate this discourse, three pertinent and inter-related issues are discussed: (1) Situating adult education and learning; (2) Men's Sheds – another men's club or a centre of learning?; and, (3) Overcoming barriers and encouraging participation of older men.

Within the discussion, a brief definition of adult education is offered. Focus is placed on informal learning in an attempt to illustrate its significance to adult education and learning. An overview is given of Men's Sheds, its appeal to older adults, and its many benefits. Arguments are presented about how barriers could be overcome to encourage greater participation of older men in later life learning. Concluding statements reaffirm Men's Sheds as a potential catalyst for fostering informal adult education and learning in older adults. The importance of investigating initiatives like Men's Sheds in the fulfilment of the vision of EFA, is underscored. A recommendation is made for the exploration of this medium in the Caribbean context, taking into consideration that Men's Sheds can pave the pathway for active ageing among older men in the Caribbean region.

## **Situating Adult Education and Learning**

The face of education is changing. We are living in an era of globalisation, where our societies are interconnected through technology. In these societies, competition and expectations are increasing (Alfred, Robinson, & Alfred, 2011), and change is occurring exponentially (Gorard & Rees, 2002). These rapid changes have not only placed greater demands on our economies, but also on their education sectors. After all, it is through learning that we understand, adapt, and even recreate our worlds (Wolf & Brady, 2010). Learning equips us with the necessary skills, knowledge and competences to function effectively in society. As Jarvis (2011) affirms, "this is an age of learning" (p. 163).

Consequently, to avoid people being left behind or excluded, governments at various levels are transforming their perception of education (Osborne & Longworth, 2010). In this reconstruction, adults – a critical segment of the population – should not be ignored or disregarded.

The fulfilment of the goals of EFA lends itself to a *social justice* ethos. For instance, the attainment of its vision necessitates that no group should be disenfranchised from accessing, or participating in, educational activities. Social justice mandates that everyone should be allowed the same opportunities and access to education (and its delivery), and to the fundamental democratic right to educate, to be educated, and to learn. Yet, there still continues to be a primary emphasis on young(er) learners as it relates to policies and provisions within certain educational contexts (Findsen & Formoso, 2011). Within some countries of the world, for example, in Latin America and the Caribbean (Alfred et al., 2011; Jules, 2013), adult learning and education tends to be an area of low prioritisation. This can be considered as being in direct contravention to the principles of social justice.

The competencies and skills of adults play a major role in “the capacity of nations, governments, civil society, labour markets, firms and individuals to adjust to change, improve standards of living and capitalise on technological development” (Desjardins, Rubenson, & Milana, 2006, p. 17). Beyond the realm of economics and labour force participation, adult education and learning is an important contributor to the fight against environmental degradation and the promotion of sustainable global development (English & Mayo, 2012). Adult education and learning is also necessary for meeting personal lifelong goals and the well-being of individuals (Golding, 2012a). There is increasing support for the need to invest in educational provisions for adults within the countries of Latin American and the Caribbean (Alfred et al., 2011; Jules, 2013). Hence, making an investment in older adult education and learning becomes essential.

Definitions of adult education can be quite varied, and even what counts as adult learning can be problematic to demarcate (Desjardins, 2010). Rubenson (2010) attributes this to the growing

interest in adult education and adult learners from other fields of study and disciplines, and to the changing needs of society and the environmental and situational contexts within which learning takes place. English and Mayo (2012) argue that the field of adult education is broad, diverse and amorphous. One definition posits that adult education allows for the organisation of adult learners' contributions into some form of social purpose (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2014). This seems plausible because learning is an *active, social process* in which learners are *social agents* (in the learning process) who should be involved in collaboration, cooperation, and reciprocity. Though the description coined by UNESCO is most commonly used in the literature on adult education and learning, this paper utilises the definition proposed by Merriam and Brockett (2007, p.8) which states that adult education includes "all activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults". The explanation offered by Merriam and Brockett (2007) is an all-encompassing, inclusive definition of what may count as adult learning activities/settings whether they be formal, non-formal or informal (the latter being the focus of this essay).

Formal learning can be described as knowledge acquired in an institutionalised and structured classroom-based environment that results in the awarding of traditional academic certification. In the minds of many, formal learning is held in higher esteem than informal learning (Eraut, 2000). As the evidence in much of the discourse on adult education shows, however, to compare the two is like comparing apples and oranges. Each form of learning is different and has its place and value.

The precise meaning of informal learning is said to be indefinable (Hodkinson, 2010). Cullen, Batterbury, Foresti, Lyons, and Stern (2000) contend that "there is not much to be gained" in attempting to squeeze the term into a definitional box. Although it is even suggested that the lines between informal and non-formal learning are blurred (Carragher & Golding, 2015), there are some main defining characteristics that tend to be associated with informal learning. As a term, informal learning tends to

be used to describe any process of knowledge, skill or attitude acquisition – whether planned or unplanned, implicit or otherwise – which occurs through the interface in informal situations and everyday life (Jarvis, 2002; Rubenson, 2010; Tummons & Ingleby, 2014). Typically, this form of learning often develops organically and does not conclude with certification, though its purpose may be similar to other forms of learning. Peeters et al. (2014, p. 182) highlight three categories in which these learning processes are conceptualised: (1) Self-directed learning (conscious and built on prior intention to learn); (2) Incidental learning (unplanned learning which is only recognised by the learner during or after the activity); and, (3) Tacit learning (referred to as socialisation, which involves the internalisation of values, attitudes, behaviours, and knowledge occurring in daily life). For these processes to occur, the setting does not have to be restricted to a traditional learning environment. They can occur in an informal communal location.

Within the field of adult education, educators are progressively embracing informal learning (Peeters et al., 2014). Renowned educationist Paulo Freire, and other proponents of critical pedagogy, lobbied for education as a medium for social change. They all contend that informal learning strategies have great merit, such as facilitating civic participation, fostering community development, and changing persons' attitudes and beliefs (English & Mayo, 2012). Freire was not oblivious to the fact that a measure of planning and organisation was necessary for adult education; he recognised that adult learning also included "learning from life situations" (Mayo, 2010, p. 32).

Freire and advocates of his teachings are not the only ones who support informal learning. Over the past three decades, researchers have been rediscovering the fact that much important learning is taking place in daily life outside of the confines of structured classrooms, and without the intervention of educators (Hodkinson, 2010). This has led to increased attention from some policymakers, researchers and others who seek to promote lifelong learning through the use of more inclusive methods (Peeters et al., 2014). For instance, the European Commission and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development have both penned

their support for the important contribution of informal learning to lifelong learning (Carragher & Golding, 2015). The Japanese government also provides support for informal learning and even gives financial assistance and tax breaks (Halliday, 2010).

Nonetheless, like almost everything else, the focus on informal learning is not without its criticisms. Questions have been posed about its underlying motive and whether it is part of a broader move to shift responsibility to learners, and even about whether a clear distinction exists between informal learning and formal learning (Hodkinson, 2010). These critiques, though, are not without query themselves (which have left many cognitive researchers unconvinced of their stance). While informal learning may or may not be infallible, inescapable is the fact that it has been identified as a very important type of learning for adults (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010), and it can also “enrich and complement formal learning” (Peeters et al., 2014, p. 181).

Informal learning can inspire personal fulfillment and well-being (Field, 2010), along with societal development. As shown by Cullen et al. (2000), informal learning can have an important “catalytic” function which can operate at different levels (individual, group, community, and societal). In their study, it is affirmed that a connection exists between informal learning and increased participation in education, individuals’ reconstruction of themselves, increased self-esteem, confidence, employability, capacity building, and civic engagement. As a result, its outcomes, which can be far-reaching, can facilitate social change and social justice. Similar findings have been shared by other thinkers such as Peeters et al. (2014) whose study supports the view that informal learning can serve as a crucial facilitator of social care and inclusion. Therefore, involvement in informal learning not only produces positive outcomes, but it can also potentially lead to the widening of participation of socially disadvantaged adults or marginalised groups in learning (Carragher & Golding, 2015). Hence, the increasing interest that there is in the possibilities that Men’s Sheds may offer.



## **Men's Sheds: Another Men's Club or a Centre of Learning?**

Men's Sheds are a rapidly growing phenomenon which has taken Australia, the United Kingdom and Ireland by storm (Milligan et al., 2016) and has also spread to places like New Zealand, Kenya and Honolulu (Golding, 2012b). Upon first hearing of them, the image which would/could to mind would be that of another all men's club or something of the sort, where men would go to indulge themselves. Although Men's Sheds target men of all ages, they can be described as more than a "boys' club". A true understanding of Men's Sheds comes with a visit to a shed where you get to interact with its participants (Golding, 2012b).

The Men's Sheds movement began in Australia in the 1990s (Carragher & Golding, 2015). It originated as "a grassroots expression of a perceived need by some men to have somewhere to feel 'at home' by contributing to the community, beyond paid work or home" (Golding 2012b, p. 123). With the passage of time, the structure of Men's Sheds has become more defined. The Australian Men's Shed Association, cited in Carragher and Golding (2015), explains that the Men's Shed includes:

Any community based, non-commercial organisation that is accessible to all men and whose primary activity is the provision of a safe, friendly and healing environment where men are able to work on meaningful projects at their own pace in their own time in the company of other men. (p. 155)

Though variations may exist in the definition of Sheds, they are generally informal learning settings with workshop-type spaces where predominantly older males in their post-retirement phase, or those who are unemployed, socially share and engage in hands-on activities (Golding, 2012b). Participation is voluntary, so members or "shedders", as they are called, come and go as they please. The activities in Sheds may vary according to the interests, needs, and abilities of shedders. For example, while woodwork and craft may frequently be the activities found in Sheds, some

Sheds alternately offer beekeeping, cooking, creative writing and computer classes since the focus of activities are generated by members and sometimes also delivered by them (Carragher & Golding, 2015).

Contrary to popular belief, Men's Sheds are not entirely a no-girls-allowed movement. To a certain extent, women are actively involved in the organisation and activities of some Sheds, though with some conditions attached. In Australia, for example, most Sheds welcome women, but on the agreement that they first inform the Shed, prior to their arrival, so as to verify that there are activities in which they would be able to participate (Golding, 2012b). Carragher and Golding (2015) indicate that some Sheds do have female coordinators, even though there may be no female members in them.

### **Benefits of Men's Sheds**

The provision of educational opportunities for older adults has been heralded as an avenue through which the lives of the elderly may be enhanced. Older adults become involved in constructive activities which can "help satisfy the need for a well-rounded retirement" (Midwinter, 1982, p.1). While many older folks may have a lot of time at their disposal, most of them have little or no interest in vocational or academic qualifications. It is no secret that older adult males are not the easiest cohort to attract to learning activities. Lack of interest in some programmes is identified as one cause for their non-participation (Golding, 2012a). As indicated by proponents of andragogy, though adults may value learning, they are more inclined to participate in activities that pique their interest, and which are deemed to be practical to their lives (Knowles et al., 2014).

Consequently, in the design of activities which, in essence, are geared also towards the promotion of lifelong learning, the focus should be on providing a range of educational opportunities so that the learning needs of older adults are met (Findsen & McEwen, 2012). Hence, the appeal of Men's Sheds is attracting attention from various circles, including policy makers in Australia, and adult education practitioners and researchers, among others (Golding,

2012b). Where other more conventional programmes may have seemed to be unsuccessful, Men's Sheds have proven to be the opposite and have been able to attract and cater to the diverse needs of older men (Golding, 2012b).

Contrary to ageist stereotypes, it is acknowledged that older adults are capable of acquiring new knowledge and that they do continue to learn as they age (Jarvis, 2011). This would therefore warrant the need for educational avenues to be available to older adults. Men's Sheds may not be primarily a social justice-oriented movement. However, they offer older men, a group typically under-represented in adult learning, a space to partake in informal learning (Carragher & Golding, 2015). This signals an opportunity for older men to have more equal access to their right to education. Men are more inclined to participate in educational activities that are technically or vocationally oriented (Findsen, 2005). Within Men's Sheds, older men get a chance to engage in hands-on training in a situated, communal setting, according to their preferences, needs and interests. In such an environment, older adult males are continually empowered to become their best selves.

As Spencer (2006, p.10) states, "true adult education is social". By their very nature, Men's Sheds lend themselves to facilitating social inclusion and cohesion. They provide a space where men can meet and converse with each other, sharing experiences and challenges, and paving the way forward together. Concerning the social nature of education, Freire (1970) believed in the ability of human beings to reconstruct a social world and create a dynamic society, considering that the principal objective of education is to help learners apply knowledge. When knowledge is put into action, people are empowered to change the world around them. In their study of Irish Men's Sheds, Carragher and Golding (2015) conclude that the shed-based tête-à-tête is not to be taken lightly, given that Sheds are an invaluable aid to older men with difficult life transitions.

Men's Sheds could be deemed a progressive, social movement. They represent the interest of men and can assist in developing their sense of agency. For a man who has been the mainstay of the

family, retirement can prove to be a difficult transition. Thus, with aging comes the need for men to find other identities (Findsen & McEwen, 2012). Crucial in assisting them to develop these identities are *lifewide learning* and *lifelong learning* (Golding, 2012a). Golding (2012b) suggests that these two types of learning are acknowledged and considered in Men's Sheds, since they emerged mainly from a desire to informally develop identity via participation. Learning ought to help learners to establish a better world, and to support the development and liberation of people (Freire, 1970). Thus, the aims and objectives within the learning environment should be adapted to societal and individual improvement. Nonetheless, individuals should be recognised as a responsible "subjects", and not objects of the educational process (Freire, 2000). In essence, they should be active participants of the learning process and not receptacles of knowledge. The informal nature of Men's Sheds grants older adult men the choice of what, when, and how they learn. As evident in studies of Sheds in Australia, Golding (2012b) asserts that the vast majority of shedders have reportedly agreed that their participation in Men's Sheds has helped them to feel better about themselves and has given them a sense of belonging.

Additionally, older men's health is a serious concern to those in public health (Milligan et al., 2016). Based on men's health studies, it has been shown that men are sometimes reluctant to discuss their health issues or to seek intervention because some men find this type of conversation to be stressful, to the point where they are forced to isolate themselves (McGivney, 2004). It can therefore be quite a challenge to reach this group (Milligan et al., 2016). However, in all the literature surveyed thus far about Men's Sheds, one common theme emerging is a positive association between involvement in this organisation and men's health and well-being (Carragher & Golding, 2015). Through informal shed-based learning, mental health and well-being are stimulated, even though these outcomes are not explicitly stated or foregrounded (Golding, 2012b; Milligan et al., 2016). Indeed, Moylan, Carey, Blackburn, Hayes, and Robinson (2015) maintain that with the diminishing impact of traditional religious affiliations, community Men's Shed programmes are providing much needed spiritual

support which can have a positive effect on men's health and well-being. The effects of older men's improved health has been found to extend to the society as men take on multiple roles (as fathers, husbands, etc.), and this makes their well-being essential to the society as a whole (Carragher & Golding, 2015). Improvements to, or maintenance of, the overall health status and well-being of "Shedders" assists in alleviating undesirable strains on healthcare, and this can indirectly contribute to economic growth.

Four main benefits of Men's Sheds have been underscored:

1. They promote multiple social benefits of learning, including establishing networks and connections with other men outside of the work environment who have similar interests (MacKean, 2009). (2) They provide novel ways of making positive connections between learning and health and well-being (Englebrecht & Skladzien, 2010).
2. They incorporate different ways of distinguishing men. Simultaneously, they are active agents in social transformation which extends beyond themselves and the community (Golding & Foley, 2013).
3. They underscore the need for less conventional services, particularly for those men who are not engaged in paid work (Kinsella-Taylor, 2001). Men's Sheds work because the older adult males involved are active participants. There is a sense of belonging and meaning when they come together to work.

## **Overcoming Barriers and Encouraging Participation of Older Men**

Learning through life is vital. The positive impact of education and learning on an individual's life chances cannot be overstated. The same can be said about ageing. In fact, in governmental positive-ageing strategies, lifelong learning is increasingly being

featured (Findsen & McEwen, 2012). Yet how can one reap these benefits if one cannot participate in such initiatives, or even have access to them? This section deviates a little to examine older men as a segment of the population who are often absent from adult learning programmes whether formal, non-formal or informal. The discussion returns to Men's Sheds to illustrate briefly its significance in boosting older men's participation in learning.

A scan of the pages of literature on gender and education will reveal that though equality and equity of participation are the ideal, the focus of the greater part of the research literature is mainly on women. While it is not the intention to rebuke the seriousness of the challenges women face in education, or to lessen the importance of the work of previous writers, it is important to note that gender connotes both male and female. Yet, there exists a bias in adult learning research towards women; due to this, the subject of masculinity has seldom been addressed (Golding, 2012b). In the discourse on masculinity, the tendency is to treat males as a homogenous group, disregarding their diversities and power differences (Bowl & Tobias, 2012). While it is reported that a comparatively small difference exists between male and female educational participation, the dynamics change when geographical location, previous educational achievement, occupation, and age are taken into account (Tobias & Bowl, 2012).

Within the social and educational spheres, older adults are disadvantaged and educational provision for them remains relatively invisible (Findsen, 2005). Socially, they are schooled in some societies into accepting that they have had their chance in life and are confronted with such sayings as "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" (Midwinter, 1982, p. 49). However, in some cases, older women tend to have a more supportive and extensive social support network of friends compared to men (Golding, 2012a). The fact is that older men are inclined to have less social ties and less involvement in community activity; in this regard, the research literature proposes that men are more likely to be isolated from learning (McGivney, 2004). Nonetheless, the literature on adult learning has paid very little attention to this group (Golding, 2011; Carragher & Golding, 2015). Participation

in adult education becomes even more important to them, as it can be very useful in helping those older men who are isolated, those who are no longer engaged in paid employment, or those who are going through difficult periods or transitions to manage and adjust to everyday life (McGivney, 2004).

It is a given that all unemployed adults are susceptible to social exclusion. Golding (2012a, p.134–135) states that “older men not in paid work, with limited education or community connections ... are particularly vulnerable to exclusion or withdrawal from formal learning”. The author contends that when learning objectives are not explicit or formalised and when social relationships are emphasised, learning is most effective. This view is supported by other studies which suggest that for older male learners, the learning environment needs to be relaxed and informal (McGivney, 2004; MacKean, 2009; Golding & Foley, 2013). Ensuring a relaxed, informal learning setting can help to widen participation of some marginalised groups (Carragher & Golding, 2015). Measures that increase access and foster equality of educational provisions facilitate the promotion of social justice. As pointed out earlier, social justice is a very critical element of the goals of EFA. In promoting EFA, it is understood that equal access to (and participation in) education and educational activities should be of paramount importance. Considering the large following of older men in a Men’s Shed (in Australia alone, for example, the figure is 125,000 men [Moylan et al., 2015]), can this educational site be used to reduce the marginalisation of older men in learning, uphold the tenet of social justice, and improve older men’s participation in learning?

Numerous studies have found that Men’s Sheds are important learning environments for older men (Englebrecht & Skladzien, 2010; Carragher & Golding, 2015). In their efforts to encourage adult education to be more inclusive, Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2010) recommend that culturally relevant instructional practices should be employed. Looking at it closely, it can be seen that activities in a Men’s Shed are not divorced from the community or real life. These informal learning communities, through their approach, embrace real-life, real-world practices and experiences.

Formal settings may lend themselves to what Freire (2000) terms “banking education” where a teacher dominates and dictates the learning process and stifles learners’ creative power. In such a setting, the educational process is teacher-directed or teacher-controlled. However, the flexibility of the Men’s Sheds’ setting can allow for greater practice of freedom. This is an *emancipatory* approach to learning which can lead older men to discover strategies which can help them to transform their world.

Additionally, Golding (2012b) argues vehemently about the significance of alternative places like Men’s Sheds to informal learning when it comes to communities of older males. Drawing on past studies, the author illustrates that other adult education initiatives in Australia, in which older men would consider to be engaging, were described by most participants as being either inaccessible, inequitable, ageist, or demeaning. However, the structure of Men’s Sheds is apt to overcome these barriers, since by their very ethos they acknowledge shedders’ agency and diversities. Sheds are flexible, open spaces where participants decide what they do and how, without authority figures. There are no hierarchies which may influence a dichotomy of dominance and oppression. It is like a home away from home for members. Though Golding (2012b) does not profess that Sheds are for all men, the author maintains that it is a very effective learning organisation, especially for older men.

Moreover, it is significant to note that finance can be a barrier to involvement in any learning initiatives. In a study conducted by Carragher and Golding (2015), the authors showed that financial issues did not serve as blockades to motivation for participation in Men’s Sheds. They reported that very few Men’s Sheds studied requested membership fees for participation. In some cases, Sheds tend to receive funding from the state or voluntary-sector organisations (Milligan et al., 2016) which can certainly ease any heavy financial burden being placed on shedders. This practice can eliminate any impediment to adult education learning and active participation.

Cullen et al. (2000), in their study, discuss another factor – peer and family pressure – which could obstruct the individual’s



continued participation in informal learning activities. However, this may actually not be an issue for shedders since they receive support for their learning inside and outside of the Shed. Not only do they get the backing of their peers in the Shed, but many are also reportedly encouraged by their spouses and families to participate due to the health and fitness benefits that come from being involved in Shed activities (Golding, 2012b).

Although Men's Sheds can be termed as gendered and may make this discourse on equity seem hypocritical, it must be noted that some things are not straightforward and that everything has its place. Women's groups, such as the Irish Countrywomen's Association and Mother's Groups in Saint Lucia, have similar objectives as those of the Men's Sheds, one of which is to provide a space for women. Further, as illustrated in previous studies, some men, especially from working class backgrounds, tend to be detached from anything they "perceived as feminine" (McGivney 2004, p. 57). Right or wrong as this perspective may be, it can be difficult to overcome the effects of socialisation.

Acknowledging that the location of learning can contribute to non-participation (McGivney 2004), it therefore becomes necessary to ensure that learning sites are conducive to all learners. Therefore, considering this factor, as well as all the positive benefits of Men's Sheds, it is without reservation that we add to other researchers' support of them, in that they are a mechanism designed to increase older men's participation in learning in regions where they may have been marginalised. Further, it is recommended that such a project be explored in the Caribbean region where writers (for example, Miller, 1991; Prendergast & Grace, 2006) have expressed their concern about men being at risk. Due to the dearth of empirical studies on older men and learning in this region, a feasibility study, which explores the perception of older men about their learning preferences, needs and interests, may first be required to determine how best Men's Sheds can be effectively adapted within this setting.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shed light on the significance of the provision of informal later life learning opportunities as an avenue for the promotion of lifelong learning for all. Topics such as EFA, informal learning, informal adult learning, adult education and learning, gender and ageism, older men and their active participation in later life learning, Men's Sheds and their benefits, and overcoming barriers and encouraging participation in older males have been discussed. These themes fall within the broader context of adult learning and education which are crucial to the advancement of lifelong learning.

Equity of participation is essential if adult education and learning is to reach its full potential as a medium for enhancing individual well-being, social change, and social justice. Especially in our ever-changing world, this area is a significant medium for disadvantaged groups (such as older men) to respond to changes in their societies and their lives, as highlighted in this paper. It is important to meet learners where they are, as well as to afford them opportunities to tap into their own experiences, and to not treat them as knowledge banks into which knowledge is to be deposited. Informal learning initiatives, such as Men's Sheds, play an important role.

This paper has shown that considerable progress and success has been achieved in some parts of the wider world, in the establishment of Men's Sheds as a catalyst for promoting adult learning and informal learning in older adult males. In the same vein, as discussed in this paper and in the literature on Men's Sheds, this movement's informal structure has lent itself to many far-ranging benefits for older men which can secure their greater involvement in learning, thus fostering lifelong learning. These Sheds cater for a diversity of learning styles and strategies, with the express objective of ensuring that adult learners benefit significantly from their learning experiences. As this paper has shown, the whole concept of adult learning and education is crucial and pertinent, considering that, quite often, when it comes to later life learning, the elderly are disregarded. Instead of discouraging

them, it is better to encourage them to become actively engaged in activities that can help them to adapt and function better in their new reality, and which can certainly transform their lives, and their communities and societies.

In the specific context of the Caribbean, these are important issues which can help to shape the whole concept of older adult learning in member states of the Caribbean Community. Although a plethora of literature has been reviewed in this paper, the majority of papers written on later life learning, especially as it relates to older men, are from the developed world's perspective. In the Caribbean, there is a lack of literature on this subject matter, the reason for which this paper is so essential. The information shared in this paper can be used to foster greater older adults' participation in adult learning ventures, thus making lifelong learning even more meaningful. Since Caribbean writers have voiced their concern about at-risk men in the Caribbean society, the recommendation is made for Men's Sheds to be explored in the Caribbean context for two reasons: (i) Men's Sheds can create a revolution in later life learning in the Caribbean, and (ii) Men's Sheds can create an avenue to facilitate active ageing among older men in the Caribbean.

It is hoped that those who have an interest in informal learning and/or adult education and learning can build on this paper, with a view to creating a revolution in later life learning. Given the increasing importance of this subject matter, it is also hoped that (relevant) education practitioners and researchers, adult educators, and gerontologists, especially in the Caribbean region, engage actively in the discourse for older men's learning and well-being. In this way, a culture of lifelong learning through adult education and learning could be fostered.

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