Do You Hear What I See: Learning Experiences of Black Men who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing

Mavis A. Clark
Georgia Perimeter College, USA

Recommended Citation

Do You Hear What I See: Learning Experiences of Black Men who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing

Mavis A. Clark
Georgia Perimeter College, USA

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine how non-hearing adult Black male learners understand their learning and schooling experiences. In order to understand their educational experiences, I am reconceptualizing the triad race, gender, and class paradigm by introducing the notion of deafness. I bring to the fore, a discussion on positionality and identity development as it relates to non-hearing adult Black male learners within the adult education context.

Introduction

Non-hearing adult Black male learners are uniquely positioned within the learning and schooling context because of their multiple and intersecting memberships with the Black American and Deaf communities and disabled groups which are all marginalized in this society. Non-hearing adult Black male learners are further marginalized because our society operates with an ableist, audist, and racial paradigm. Mitchell and Synder (1997) contend that an ableist paradigm maligns disabled individuals as more abnormal and are subsequently distanced from individuals who are normal or meet the dominant ideology of normal. With this view, deafness is considered a disabling condition rooted in the ableist paradigm. Deaf author Katherine A. Jankowski cements this argument as she discusses the impact of audism in our society. She contends that audism is the hearing society's systematic practice of discriminating against the natural language of Deaf Americans (Jankowski, 1997). She argues that audism can be best understood when connected to the 'isms' of our society (i.e., racism, sexism, and heterosexism). These two converging paradigms (ableism and audism) are produced and reproduced in our schools. They serve as contributing sociopolitical variables that perplex and complicate the educational process of non-hearing adult Black male learners.

Contextual Background

A census taken in 1852 documented that there was one Black Deaf person per 3,000 free Blacks and one per 6,500 among Black slaves that could be accounted for (Moores & Oden, 1977). The low incidence of Black Deaf people could explain why very little information existed about them and their educational history during that period. However, it is more likely that the educational experiences of both Deaf and hard-of-hearing African Americans were subsumed with hearing Black people, whose learning needs were simultaneously being oppressed, suppressed, or denied (Anderson & Grace, 1991).

After the Civil War, many Black Deaf people continued to be barred from attending special schools for Deaf Americans. Gradually, thirteen states established special schools for Black Deaf people. Many of these schools were located near Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Gannon, 1981; Hairston & Smith, 1983; Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996). But non-hearing adult Black male learners' learning and schooling experiences were constrained because it took place alongside blind Black students, hearing Black students, and/or deaf/blind Black students (Gannon, 1981; Hairston & Smith, 1983). It is not known how successful non-hearing adult Black male learners' learning experiences were, nor how their

hearing loss was accommodated within a classroom that had a range of sensory differences.

The most thorough account about the experiences of Black Deaf Americans can be found in *"Black and Deaf in America, Are we that different?"* authored by two Black Deaf authors, Ernest Hairston and Linwood Smith (1983). They document that Black Deaf Americans were denied equal access to the same educational experiences as White Deaf Americans, forced to attend segregated schools, and often graduated with "a second to fourth grade achievement level or less" (p. 11). Furthermore, the schools where Black Deaf people attended (along with other schools for Deaf learners) were prohibited from using sign language to educate Deaf learners. Sign language had been prohibited as a result of the Second International Congress on the Education of the Deaf in Milan, Spain, 1880 (Brill, 1987). Influential oral advocates (i.e., Alexander Graham Bell) vehemently opposed the use of manual communication and worked to have it repressed as a primary language for Deaf people (deLorenzo, 1987). The net affect nearly obliterated Deaf signers' natural language – American Sign Language. But the congress' most telling affect was the elimination of Deaf educators from the educational terrain in the United States. For nearly one hundred years, the oral method would dominate the educational process of teaching non-hearing learners (Turkington & Sussman, 1992).

The heavy reliance upon the oral approach placed the education of Black Deaf people at a severe disadvantage. Many of the teachers lacked the professional training in the oral method to teach Black Deaf students. What education that did transpire was vocational in nature. Unlike their White Deaf peers and regardless of their age or mental intelligence, Black Deaf learners were placed in service vocational programs (i.e., barbering/beauty culture, dry press cleaning, shoe repairing, and printing press) in order to learn a trade or profession (Hairston & Smith, 1983).

On the larger sociohistorical landscape, the education experiences of Black Deaf learners continued to be compromised due to intersecting and overlapping sociopolitical factors. First, racial inequities continued to permeate the learning and schooling process for all African American learners (Harley, 1995; McCarthy, 1990; Omi & Winant, 1994). Secondly, as schools began to incorporate sign language as a pedagogical tool of instruction for Deaf learners, so too did the debate re-emerge about its appropriateness in teaching spoken English language, literacy skills, and writing. This debate dwarfed the dismal educational conditions that non-hearing adult Black people already faced within the learning context. Third, the hearing Black American community was besieged by its own particular needs of survival and the elimination of discrimination and racism, and did not concentrate on disability issues affecting Black Deaf members. Similarly, the disability community failed to concentrate on problems affecting minorities with disabilities because they too were occupied with general disability issues, (i.e., access to health insurance, personal assistance services, etc.), (National Council on Disability, 1993).

Contemporary Issues in Deafness

There has been a long-standing issue of incompatibility between Deaf learners and educational institutions borne out of a difference between two conflictual communication modalities. The conflict between the two communication modalities is a manifestation of the medical or clinical paradigm, which continues to fuel our society's audist view towards deafness. The clinical paradigm assumes that hearing loss is pathological and can be cured and/or remedied. Its' guiding principle is to enable Deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals to "function like a hearing person in mainstream society" (Paul, 1998, p. 21). Contrasting with the

clinical paradigm is the radical view posited by Deaf scholars and those who support the Deaf community (Davis 1995; Jankowski, 1997; Lane, 1992; Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996). Philosophically, they argue that the clinical paradigm promotes a deficient view of Deaf people and rather seek to depathologize it by situating deafness within a sociocultural and linguistic paradigm. Thus, deafness is conceptualized as a social identity marker instead of a disability. The term Deaf is capitalized and is representative of a people within a community who share at the core an etiology, a visual language, social and behavioral norms, and advocacy for political rights for Deaf people (Scheetz, 1993).

Deafness and Adult Education

The field of adult education embodies an extensive discussion about learning theories and motivation and barriers to participation (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). However, Deaf adults are atypical of the learners described in the numerous participation studies, and the barriers they face are little understood by adult learning theorists. These barriers are erected upon discovery of a hearing loss through an unintended but systematic process. The causal agents of these barriers are human, physiological, and psychological in nature. The human barriers are the Deaf and hard-of-hearing child's parents, hearing medical professionals, social services agencies and educational institutions that may view non-hearing people through the clinical paradigm (Meadow-Orlans, 1990). The physiological nature of these barriers are attributed to the age of onset of hearing loss, age when hearing loss was discovered, amount of residual hearing, nature and amount of communication in the home with parents and family, and the family's attitude toward hearing loss. The psychological nature of these barriers can be attributed to the amount of time, energy, and resources (e.g., speech therapy, personal, and mental health counseling, spiritual and religious guidance) family members spend seeking solutions to a problem they view as detrimental in a hearing society. The combined effect and impact on the non-hearing adult learners serve to delay their introduction to language (i.e., sign language or speechreading), school choice (i.e., residential schools, mainstream, oral, or self-contained education), and subsequently, learning (Meadow-Orlans, 1990; Scheetz, 1993).

Adult education literature has not examined the above issues because scholars and theorists are predominantly hearing and are unfamiliar with how the educational process currently affects non-hearing adult Black male learners. Issues of sociological impact of acquiring a hearing loss, different or incompatible communication language modalities (sign vs. spoken language), mismatch of pedagogical approaches (i.e., manual communication vs. oral approach), and delayed introduction to language have not been examined with respect to the adult learning context. Secondly, the absence of research suggests that there is an unconscious assumption of a hearing construction to learning and knowledge acquisition. A hearing construction of learning and knowledge acquisition is operationally defined as the linkage between the ability to use the dominant modality of communication, which is the spoken language, to the processing of what we aurally (deliberately or tacitly) receive. The hearing construction assumes that Deaf learners function similarly as hearing learners who have since birth learned to mastered and manipulate the phonetic codes of spoken English, which has enabled them to decode and/or decipher printed words (Paul, 1998).

Race, Gender, and Deafness

Deafness can be conceptually linked to the existing literature on adult education with respect to race and gender. Johnson-Bailey, Tisdell, & Cervero (1996), Rocco and West (1998),

and Tisdell (1992) show that when race and gender intersect within the learning context, the social dynamics between learners and the learning setting alter into issues of positionality and power (Maher & Tetreault, 1993). Anthias (1998) conceptualizes positionality as a socially constructed system that hierarchically situates people in a dominant or subordinate position. These positions are predicated on the interplay of intersecting identities of race, gender, and class. However, when race and gender intersect with deafness, issues of positionality and power within the educational context become multi-dimensionalized. In other words, binary issues of intersecting identities no longer characterize the classroom; it is more, an environment characterized with issues of intersecting identities manifested by positionality and the politics and demand for language (Natapoff, 1995). Thus, non-hearing adult Black male learners are situated in and confronted by a pendulum-like phenomenon unique to any other previously described adult learning situation.

Literature Review

Positionality

Positionality provides a theoretical frame of analysis that can inform an understanding of the way human beings are socially situated within a hierarchical structure. Scholars agree that positionality is socially constructed and dictated by oppositional difference (Maher & Tetreault, 1993; Navarete Vivero & Jenkins, 1999; Stonequist, 1935; Wade, 1996). W. E. B. DuBois' work on double consciousness (circa 1903/1989), shows that positionality is predicated on an identity conflict between oneself and two oppositional cultures. Everett V. Stonequist (1935), who refers to the work of noted sociologist, Robert E. Park, conceptualized positionality vis-à-vis the 'marginal man'. He defines marginal man as "one who is living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples, never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he now seeks to find a place" (Stonequist, 1935, p. 3).

Contemporary scholarship shows that positionality is still socially constructed upon race, gender, and class. Maher and Tetreault's (1993) examination of positionality shows that race, class, and gender are "relational markers" and when interlocked, they determine how people are socially situated and/or placed hierarchically (p. 2). They further argue that these relational markers define our identities and, subsequently, shape our understanding and knowledge about the social order of our society.

Anthias (1998) constructs positionality as a theoretical frame of analysis for sociocultural hierarchies. She postulates that positionality represents a social order where people are situationally placed based upon a "grid" (p. 507). Grids are understood as levels of experiences, actions, and practices, organizational (i.e., family, church, work and school, etc.), and symbolic representation in a wide range of communication media (e.g., text, information, images, signs, etc.). Relying on this definition, it can be seen how positionality is cemented in place. Depending upon the context, positionality is established and solidified by the allocations of resources and a group's ability to use its collective power to maintain its place within the hierarchical social structure.

Positionality is inherently conflictive and rife with tension as members of the dominant and subordinate groups negotiate for power, place, and identity. Positionality is also constraining. It is fixed yet mutable. Positionality is fixed because it is inherent to a society's social structure and because of racial classification and/or gender role identity. Positionality is

mutable because it changes as a result of the interplay between other sociocultural variables (i.e., class, education, heterosexuality, Christianity, normalcy, and able-bodiedness, etc.).

Identity Development

Exploratory work on identity development stretches across the continuum of disciplines with certain themes receiving the lion's share of scholarly attention. One such theme is the relationship between identity construction and the social context (Burke & Franzoi, 1988; Deaux, 1993; Howard, 2000; Kivel, 2000; Pittinsky, Shih, & Ambady, 1999). Secondly, scholars are more often than not engaged in a conceptual struggle to articulate and define identity (Anthias, 1998; Deaux, 1993; Robinson, 1999). Furthermore, they work to empirically investigate the interconnectedness between categorical boundary markers (e.g. race, gender, class, able-bodiedness, and etc.), and how they manifest at the micro and macro levels of analysis (Hanna, Talley, & Guidon, 2000; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). Finally, there is a shift towards identity politics (Hill-Collins, 1999; Nelson-Barber & Harrison, 1996; Reynolds & Pope, 1991; Williams-Crenshaw, 1995). Identity politics include an analysis for examining structural inequalities, which are endemic to the varying degrees and dimensions of oppression.

The above thematic discussion can serve as a basis for understanding identity development and its relationship to the field of adult education. Clearly, identity development and the social context are of crucial concern for adult educators as Tennant (2000) contends. He sees the self and the social as inseparable and argues for a shift in thinking about "theories of the knowing subject, to theories of discursive practices" (p. 92). He further argues that to continue the practice of viewing self and the social as separate and independent agents can produce a false consciousness that is "largely illusory" (p. 91). Chevez and Guido-DiBrito (1999) share this view as they discuss how the intersection of race and ethnic identity development shapes and defines the adult learning context. They carefully acknowledge that all learners have an ethnic identity (whether it is acknowledged or exists beyond adult learners' consciousness). Nevertheless, race and ethnic identity are sociocultural issues that define, shape, and influence the learning experiences of adult learners, as well as instructional practices of adult educators. It is evident that they believe that identity development plays a critical role for the field. They favor a multicultural frame of references as praxis for adult educators.

Ross-Gordon (1999) explored gender development models and examined their impact on adult learning. Her examination on gender and gendered adult development includes a theoretical view of understanding how gender identity is constructed and maintained. Additionally, she shows how cultural influences shape and define gender identity. With respect to adult education, she debunks previous research that has been universally used as a measurement for all adult learners. More importantly, her discussion builds a pathway for understanding how identity constructs differently for non-hearing Black adult male learners.

In her analysis of the adult African American male gender identity, she shows how Black adult men have two cultural interpretations of masculinity identification, which are inherently conflictual. Adult African American males must negotiate between their masculine identities as constructed by European mainstream values, and their masculine identities as framed by African tradition. Relationally, these masculinity identities have been forged in conflict, resulting from a history of social oppression, discrimination, violence, and racism (Cullen, 1999; Wade, 1996). Ross-Gordon's (1999) point about the conflictive nature of the gendered identities of African American adult male learners is an important one because it establishes a way of understanding

the development of the intersecting and multiple identities of non-hearing adult Black male learners.

Conclusion

It is clear that the positionality of non-hearing adult Black male learners is fixed as a result of their intersecting and multiple identities (e.g., their deafness, gender, and racial status). However, they are positionalized differently from other marginalized learners because of the manner in which their identities and social status have been historically and socially constructed (Wade, 1996; Cullen, 1999). Furthermore, they are positionalized in opposition to the dominant society because of inaccessibility to hearing the spoken language. While the experiences of non-hearing adult Black male learners parallel those of the hearing Black men, their experiences are made more complicated due largely to tacit and explicit practices of audism and ableism (Davis, 1995; Hairston & Smith, 1983; Mitchell & Synder, 1997; Moore & Chester, 1997). Thus, the net affect, perpetuate non-hearing adult Black male learners' experiences of continual confrontation with multiple, interlocking, and simultaneous oppression within and out of the learning context (Vernon, 1999).

References will be made available upon request