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Resistance to Interlocking Power Structures Among Adult Educators

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Abstract: Six graduate students were interviewed and focus was given to how the education they received impacted the ways in which they addressed issues of power and control in their own classrooms. Awareness of unequal power structures in the classroom, written words matter, lived experiences and moving from theory to practice were themes that emerged from the data.

Introduction

The literature is replete with examples of the ways in which power relationships are formulated between teachers and students and among students with other students. The literature offers critical analyses of domination, oppression, and hegemony in the context of the classroom environment (Freire, 1970; Ellsworth, 1992, Welton, 1995), feminist pedagogy (Tisdell, 1993), African-centered or race based analyses, postmodern perspectives (Collins, 1994; Sheared, 1994,), and multicultural education approaches (Sleeter, 1995), as well as, addresses identity politics, silencing, and making space (Sheared and Sissel, 2001). In addition to this, curricula goals and factors influencing the ways in which the curriculum in graduate programs effect one's teaching philosophy and practices have also been explored. In order to address these issues Amstutz suggests that we must "examine biases"(Amstutz, 1994, p.44) and Colin (1994) proposes "curricula integration (Collin, 1994) as ways in which we might begin to change hegemonic relationships that ensue by virtue of who we are and how learning environments are established. While previous literature has provided a framework, there is an increasing attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Hayes & Colin, 1994, Sheared and Sissel, 2001).

Purpose of the Study

Studies have primarily centered on how instructors address issues of power and control in their work and attempt create classrooms that serve as sites of contestation, to liberate both themselves as teachers as well as their students (Cale, 2000; Ellsworth, 1992). In other words they attempt to find ways in which teachers pivot the center and move into the margins (Sheared, 1999). The purpose of this study was threefold. The study examines the ways in which graduate students engage in changing their own teaching patterns to develop classrooms that become sites where hegemony and marginality are explored. Second, it aims to assess the extent to which adult educators are consciously aware of the interlocking hegemonic factors that contribute to the creation of dichotomous either/or relationship in the classroom. Third, it attempts to document the strategies used by six adult education practitioners after they have been immersed in classrooms where hegemonic and counter-hegemonic influences are explored both in the literature and in techniques used by their instructors.

Research Questions

The following questions were used to guide this study: a) To what extent practitioners are inspired by the power-related theories? b) To what extent are adult educators aware of the ways in which interlocking factors of race, class, gender, disability, sexuality and so forth affect and contribute to hegemonic relations in the classroom? c) In what ways has hegemony been dealt with in the context of teaching and learning? d) What strategies do adult educators use that appear most helpful to resolving the hegemonic relations between students and teachers in the classroom? This study will attempt to shed some light on these questions and propose some additional areas for adult educators to think about as they engage in counter-hegemonic activities in the classroom.

Research Design

A qualitative research design is used for this study. This study is designed to explore, the perspectives and experiences of six former graduate students, who currently teaching in their own classrooms. Participants were asked to share their experiences, regarding their awareness and understanding about the ways in which hegemony affects their own teaching practices.

Data Collection and Design

Six practitioners represent a convenient sample for this study. They have all participated as graduate students in the Adult Education Master's degree program in a major university on the west coast, where issues related to social justice, power, and equity in education are integrated into the curriculum. The six participants include one African-American male, one Latina/Asian American male, one Euro-American female, one European female immigrant from England, one African-American female and one Asian American female. Efforts were made to recruit participants representing similarities in educational levels and differences in terms of gender, race and working contexts to ensure a range of experiences and backgrounds. Interviews were conducted with every participant by at least two researchers per interview. The interview was guided by a series of questions that the researchers developed in order to provide the participants with an opportunity participants to reflect on learning and teaching experiences. The interviews were transcribed, and collectively analyzed by the researchers. The following themes emerged from the data analysis and are presented in the findings.

Discussion of Findings

Participants were asked to reflect upon and describe experiences from their own teaching or learning. Each participant vividly articulated events they encountered as teachers as well as when they were students working on their adult teaching or Master degree. The following are excerpts taken from those interviews that seem to demonstrate their "awareness of the imbalance classroom relationships," "self-ethnic reflectors (Colin, III, 1989)," "the written word matters," "lived experiences (Sheared, 1999) and "moving from theory to practice."

Awareness of the Imbalance of Classroom Power Relationships

An African American female instructor teaching career skills at a vocational setting, recalled two incidents - one as a teacher and the other as an adult student in class. The first incident was in the form of a comment made by an African American female

student after her initial introduction as their teacher. One of her student's remarked, "You must not be a very good teacher if you teach here." This instructor felt that the remark was a reflection of self-hatred on the student's part that was then projected on to her. It was clear to this instructor that even though they shared the same gender and race, racism affects people in various ways. This incident caused this instructor to reflect on images or "old tapes in our heads, about stories I heard of old black schools and stereotypes that African-Americans perpetuate themselves."—one, in which we are seen as deficient or incompetent by those from our own race. In another situation, this participant noted that the difference in classroom power relationships is related directly to one's own learning experience. She recalled:

In more than one class, when I asked the professor a question, other students, especially white students, help ask and answer the question. It was very upsetting for me, as if I couldn't speak for myself or I was speaking a foreign language with an accent. One day I just blurted out 'Would you please be quiet I am trying to get an answer here!'

Sheared (1999) refers to this as a form of silencing. "Hegemony leads to silence and eliminates the students voice," according to her analysis (pg. 42).

A Latina/Asian American male participant described a learning experience in which he had of standing in line and waiting to talk to his instructor. He indicated that his instructor skipped him and directly talked to the student behind him. Recalling this incident, he said "I should have cut in, but if I cut in, I am loud and I am a trouble maker". His narratives implied the double-bind barrier many people of color often have to deal with in their life.

A white female instructor teaching at a jail examined the power relations between her and her students: She stated:

We encountered the sexual politics because I am the only woman along with the twelve men...I have slightly more power than they do. I got to leave the jail but they cannot. And I also have more cultural capital.

These are just some of the scenarios recalled during the interviews. These narratives not only characterized how the instructors perceived power relations between teachers and students, but also reflected their awareness of the interlocking power structures that operated to shape their learning experience and teaching context.

Written Words Matter

The existing literature has shaped and heightened the awareness of these adult education practitioners. Literature is one important factor that affected these teachers' practice. Many mentioned that writers such as "Paulo Freire," "Myles Horton", and "bell hooks" have been very helpful to their practice because these writings present different ways of viewing teaching and roles of teachers. Also "Flannery's article" [Changing the dominant understanding of adults as learners], and "Vanessa's new book" [Making space] were also pointed out by two participants and were included in their own

curriculum. Three of the teachers mentioned that they have never been exposed to, or considered this type of power relations before at their undergraduate program. These counter-hegemonic writings opened up a new door for them, from which they could see how the power structures actually operate in the society. Among the participants, the African American male instructor characterized his process of “coming to understand” most specifically:

It empowers you, it makes you feel that hey, O.K. I am not crazy, this is what’s going on... it just gives you the power, and you start to read and write, it’s exciting and it’s empowering... such literature has never presented to you until you come here. I never know bell hooks, I never read issues like race, class, gender; it never came up when I went through my bachelor degree; it’s always like, just get the job done, just get your writing done, no one wants to talk about anything political.

Another white female students described the similar experience she has had in her graduate program:

When I was a student, these issues were brought up constantly by almost every class I was in... personally I appreciate it and it has heightened my sensitivity, it helped me in my awareness, too. It helped me to be more aware of my own privilege as a white woman.

Lived Experiences

Other sources of knowledge, such as identity and lived experience, also contributed to the participants’ awareness of and motivation to address the unbalanced power structures. In addition to counter-hegemonic literature, one’s lived experience and identities affected one’s willingness and motivation to deal with unbalanced power structures in their classes. For example, all of the participants stated their identity affects the ways they interacted with their students. A white female instructor said:

The thing that affected me most, is my gender, in that way, I have encouraged a lot of women to achieve. I felt my strongest role in the adult education class is to be the cheerleader and coach. The most beneficial thing I did with these students was to encourage them.

Like this instructor, the Asian American female instructor also explained how her racial identity precipitated her decision to deal with issues of power and diversity in her class. She said,

I came away with that I am an Asian American. Although I grew up and knew that I am an ‘other’, but my neighborhood is mixed enough that I feel pretty strong for my racial identity. I feel very strong in my Asian identity and it is a source of strength and pride.

Given her identity, she said she wanted to provide her students similar opportunities to reflect on their experience and hopefully, like her, they could also take pride in their own racial background.

The Latina/Asian male participant admitted that his community development experience working with a group of working class, female cleaning workers has taught him to reflect on his experience and to be conscious of his own stand in relation to his learners. He can still vividly recall one of the woman's words today: "I am not a servant. I am not a maid. I am a service provider." Working with this group of women for almost two years, he realized:

I need to be more mindful of my upbringing and the values that have been imposed on me...I really have to open myself, and I need to be clear about what I am about, I need to step back and allow myself to reflect back, not just take action. I need to raise consciousness about my own prejudice...

Some considered their lived experiences reinforced their motivation to address factors such as race, class, gender, sexuality, etc in their teaching.

Moving From Theory To Practice

Multiple strategies were used to address the interlocking power structures that often surface in a teaching and learning environment. The strategies used by these participants mirrored principles that are grounded in the theoretical frameworks of adult education. The strategies described by many include "discussion" "case study" and "bringing in people's experiences. These strategies, while often associated with traditional teaching approaches, were also used by these participants as a way to help their students critically reflect on their lived experiences. In addition to these approaches, the participants in this study also indicated that they used techniques, like dialogue, questioning, critical reflection and other liberatory forms of learning.

The participants in this study recalled various techniques used in their teaching practices. Critiques of articles and discussions related to the lived experiences of male students as absentee fathers are explored by the female instructor. Poetry produced by rappers, like Tupac Shakur is used by the African American female instructor to help students' self-identify with their own culture as well as with the larger society. She noted that when she did this, three of her students reflected on how they felt about their own situations. She shared the following student reflection, "I have no father, I have no money, I have no guidance, that's me, he is talking about me." This instructor knew then that she had found the way to connect with her students.

Summary

This study reveals that many teachers who have had instructions on power related factors often find themselves using teaching strategies that reflect a concentration on an examination of hegemony and counterhegemony in their own classrooms. Moreover, these participants were all influenced by their own varying modes of learning, as well as lived experiences. The themes emerged from the data suggests that these teachers were aware of the ways in which power relationships are structured. These participants were a

aware of the unequal power relationships operating within their classroom environment and society. They also acknowledged that written words clarify the existence of inequity and offers them as teachers more insight and perspectives. These words when combined with their lived experience of the teachers validate their identity and experiences. Finally, this study shows that there may be some relationship between where adult teaching candidates obtain their education, what they are taught, and ultimately what type of teachers they will become.

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