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Adult Students of Color in Predominately White Classrooms

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Keywords: Students of color, voice, active interviews

Abstract: This study explored the experiences of adult students of color in predominately white classrooms. My aims were to (a) better understand their educational experiences, (b) share their stories in their respective voices, and (c) conduct a secondary level of data analysis that examined issues of race, class, power, and privilege.

Two recent analyses of higher education literature from the 1990s revealed a persistent lack of refereed articles on adult students (Donaldson, Townsend & Thompson, 2004; Pascarella Terenzini, 2005)--especially students of color. However, a select body of literature on adult students of color described how institutional policies and practices could marginalize students (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Kasworm, 2002; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 1998). Some scholars further suggested that a prevailing white, Eurocentric ideology could negatively shape the classroom experiences of students of color (Brookfield, 2003; Huber & Cale, 2002). My aims for this study were to (a) better understand the educational experiences of adult students of color, (b) share their stories in their respective voices, and (c) conduct a secondary level of data analysis that examined issues of race, class, power, and privilege.

The sixteen participants were undergraduates of color, age 30-50 years old, enrolled in one of two predominately white, four-year institutions in the Midwest. Every participant was actively enrolled in courses and persisting toward a four-year degree. Rather than a detached, question-and answer interview approach, I chose a more conversational, dyadic interview process that permitted me to share personal experiences and understandings with the students (Ellis & Berger, 2003). We jointly constructed interpretations, starting with an active interview process (Holstein & Gubrim, 2003) that included reflection and reflexivity (Fontana, 2003; Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Oleson, 2000). In an effort to minimize problems of power, control and silencing voices, I adopted reflexive interpretation strategies (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000), that included the participant's input and several levels of data interpretation. In my secondary level of data analysis, I applied critical postmodernism as a filter to further explore the students' stories.

Considering the void of scholarship on adults in the higher education literature, one is prompted to question how higher education institutions can possibly meet the learning needs of the nearly 100 million adults (Kim & Creighton, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 2004) who are engaged in degreed and non-degreed programs. Therefore, it is my hope that the unfiltered stories and constructions from adult students of color will be germane to those who influence higher education policy, curriculum design, and professional development planning in a variety of post-secondary settings.

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