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Interrogating Gender Texts: A Critical Review of the Literature

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Abstract: This paper synthesizes the Canadian adult education literature related to gender and adult learning. By examining how it has been written about, what it focuses on, and what the gaps are, the authors identified current contributions in the Canadian literature.

This paper provides a synthesis of the extant literature on gender and learning with a particular emphasis on Canadian publications, though its results have considerable implications for a much wider audience. One only has to consider the continued dominance in this field by American authors such as Belenky et al. (1986) to realize that Canadian work has not been highlighted to the degree that it might have been.

Search Strategy

This paper reviews extant literature, research programs, websites, government initiatives and various other publicly available sources in order to articulate the principal issues and remaining research themes that need to be investigated. Our review focused mainly on (a) Canadian sources (b) sources that linked gender and learning, (c) major themes, gaps and authors, and. We limited our search to the last 10 years, except in cases where older sources seemed germane. The last search was conducted in January, 2006, when we wrote the first draft of our review.

Themes in the Literature

To facilitate reading and to focus the discussion, we have limited the review to the most prominent areas that surfaced during the research phase of this study.

Feminist Theory

Within Canada there are a number of adult educators contributing directly to the building up of feminist theory (e.g., Gouthro, 2005; Miles, 1995). They have taken the lead in bringing to the forefront the interlocking power relationships of gender, race and class (Fenwick & Mirchandani, 2004; Ng et al., 1995). The literature stresses that students or practitioners who embody multiple privileged locations can wield more power in classrooms (and society) (Butterwick, 2005; Mojab, 2005). Authors such as Butterwick note that feminism can address inequities in the classroom and educational institution through feminist pedagogy while theorists such as Ng et al. (1995) believe that feminist pedagogy alone is insufficient, and just as analysis must include race, gender and class, pedagogical theories must also be open to cross-pollination from critical theories such as anti-racist education and critical pedagogy.

Ng (1996) notes that feminist theory has critiqued traditional analyses of work and training as ignoring the sexual division of labour and ignoring that conceptions of what comprises “skill” are not value-neutral. Women’s greater responsibility for child-care and family labour works to restrict their freedom and their opportunity (Miles, 1989). Feminist theorists argue for the need to bring critical and feminist analyses into academia and to challenge the educational inequalities that are built into education based on commercial values and agendas (Gouthro, 2005).

Workplace Learning

Canadian researchers have been very attentive to the research on work and learning. Research on specificities of work opportunities, placements, job markets, and training is complemented by analyses of issues developing from the “new economy,” a theme that has been highlighted in the SSHRC call for proposals for the Initiative on the New Economy (INE) project. Fenwick (2002a) observes that gender division of paid and unpaid labour continues to create barriers for women to participate in both formal/informal learning, including training programs, vocational learning and business development.

Researchers note that the social perceptions of wives and mothers have not altered as rapidly as women’s roles as workers, resulting in juggling for women (see Barr, 2001). Bannerji (1997) observes that those subject to multiple barriers, such as immigrant workers and women of colour, continue to struggle to gain equal educational opportunities and commensurate employment (also Gaskell, 1995). Mirchandani (1999) points out that “flexible” at-home work can contribute to women’s isolation and confinement to low paying work in the racialized job sector (also Ng, 1996).

Immigrant Women

There is a growing field of work examining the social contexts for immigrant women in Canada (e.g., Brigham & Walsh, 2005; Mirchandani, 2004; Mojab, 2000). This research acknowledges that race, class and gender are interconnecting social axes, and plays into the social location of immigrant women, and for visible minorities. Mirchandani (2004) notes that immigrant women tend to hold a unique and unenviable position within the labour market. Ng (1996) agrees. Graveline (2005) points out the irony that the only group with a more precarious relationship to quality work is the only real non-immigrants – aboriginal women. ESL is another issue in this category (Ciccarelli, 1999). Maitra and Shan (2005) identify a need for workplace education tailored to immigrant populations, yet note that the knowledge these women already possess is frequently unrecognized. Slade et al. (2005) add that these women use numerous informal learning strategies to improve their employment opportunities.

Technology and Distance Education

Canadian researchers increasingly consider what role and effect technology may have in education and how gender affects access and comfort level. Butterwick and Liptrot (2003) note that technology and the flexibility offered by distance education have the potential to offer important support to women learners, if available and gendered conceptions of technology are acknowledged. According to Gouthro (2004) and Home (1998) distance education allows women to accommodate their student, worker, wife, and

mother roles. Sumner (2000) says that distance educators must make value choices to ensure that learning serves the lifeworld.

Community Based Research

The review shows that researchers in Canada have contributed significantly to both local (Clover, 2001), and global adult education research to groups such as the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) and specific UNESCO (1997) conferences such as CONFINTEA V. Miles' (2002) studies of women, social movements, and globalization have furthered the international knowledge base. English's (2004, 2005) postcolonial work has contributed to an understanding of women who work globally, as has Walter's (2004) on Thai women, Gouthro's (2004) on Jamaican women, and Ryan's (Ryan & English, 2004) on Grenadian women. While focused internationally, this research supports gender and learning studies at all levels, and needs to be continued.

Research into learning and power in local women's organizations (English, 2005), economic issues affecting women's learning at the grassroots level (Andruske, 2001) the use of theatre to assist in community education (Butterwick & Selman, 2003) and the use of arts and crafts in community adult education (Clover, 2001; Clover & Markle, 2003) demonstrates the rich activity in this thematic area and highlights potential for further exploration.

Discussion of Aspects of Research in Canada

In this section we address the strengths and gaps of the research.

Support for Community-Based and Rural Research

At the community level in Canada, there is a high degree of activity in formal and nonformal education by women's organizations and centres, both in urban and rural areas, often federally funded from Status of Women Canada and other relevant departments. This funding is project-based and difficult to obtain. Funding is needed to support research and advocacy work for community based Aboriginal women. The research shows also that there is a noticeable gap in the area of rural women's learning.

Support for Interdisciplinary Research

A second research area in need of support in Canada is interdisciplinary work on gender and learning. For instance, there are a number of researchers who are crossing into history and women's studies simultaneously. One only has to think of the historical work on Betty Murray (Harris, 1998), the YWCA (Buchanan, 1997), the Women's Institutes (Cox, 1997), the Women's Christian Temperance Movement and activism (Lander, 2005), and the Antigonish Movement (Neal, 1998) to realize that this is fertile ground (see Welton, 1992).

Support for Knowledge Dissemination and Application

Another area of concern is the lack of intentional academic/policy collaboration in Canada with regard to women and learning. Cruikshank (2005; see also Priegert-Coulter, 1996) emphasizes the importance of researchers becoming further involved with policy research centres such as the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA). Along with collaboration there is a need for dissemination of the knowledge that is produced. The

extant research is not well coordinated or systematized, and there is no centralized dissemination portal for this research.

Other Areas Needing Research

Yet, we can see that there still are a number of challenges and gaps in the Canadian knowledge base on gender and learning. More research is needed on Native Peoples; Issues around Disability. Though these issues do not connect directly to encouraging employment, they must not be neglected in research agendas and funding initiatives.

Summary Comments and Recommendations

Canadian researchers have been strong in their contributions to feminist theory and adult learning. They have paid increasing attention to work and learning, especially as it focuses on Aboriginal, immigrant, and economically disadvantaged women. They have been attentive to the plight of immigrant women and learning, as well as to the intricacies of technology and gender, and have been interested in community-based research both locally and globally.

A clear strength of the existing research relates to how it has been done. A great number of Canadian research projects have been situated in the community with community agendas at the forefront. We observed that the majority of published research on women and learning in Canada has been qualitative in nature, and has involved community based organizations. Such collaboration seems to be a strength in the research in that it has produced rich data that furthers gender and learning. More action research projects that collect both qualitative and quantitative data would be an asset in this regard. Much remains to be done.

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