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Dialogic Management in Adult Education

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Abstract: Dialogic management in adult education promotes an outstanding organizational practice for adult learning centers. The involvement of learners in decision making teams is essential to the success of shared governance and other participative structures and, is one of the aspects that explain the higher levels of participation in the school.

Purpose

This paper reports the findings of a case study investigating how a school for adults is collective-centered and how adult learners' perceive their participation in the school management. I studied how adult education and specifically the dialogic management of the educational center work and how those successful experiences help or hinder the overcoming of social exclusion. Dialogic management in adult education appears to promote an outstanding organizational practice for adult learning centers. Regularly, low literate and working-class people have been excluded of management and decision making positions of the adult learning organizations they attend. This research focused on adult learners' participation in decision-making and shared management of their school. Furthermore the study is centered on the strategies used within the community organization for the implementation of democratic adult educational practices.

Adult education is going today through a process of democratization, following the same tendency of society. In Spain and other European countries learners are organizing themselves and demanding to share with teachers and administrators the decision making about their education. In this movement – called the Democratic Adult Education (DAE) Movement – they are reinventing popular education. The DAE movement follows the dialogic tendency of current society. However, it did not appear by chance, but as a result of many years of work within the field of adult education towards the democratization of education and culture.

Theoretical framework

Nowadays the societies are more and more diverse and changing. Our societies have to confront the challenges of the globalization, as well as the opening of the market, culture and education. Adult education and education in general can be fundamental to creating transformational possibilities. Educational practice alone is not the source of progressive social change. But if we want to be relevant, we must understand and become involved with learning communities dealing with societal change (Kilgore, 1999). In our society there are still a lot of inequalities that have to be overcome. The idea of education underlying the aspiration to achieve important social purposes is not new (Welter, 1962). But in the context of the information-based global society education increasingly enables social mobility, thus explaining its centrality to movements pursuing social justice. It has been internationally acknowledged the need to have a more inclusive and participatory civil society and cooperation between all stakeholders in education (UNESCO, 2004). Some recommendations for practitioners are, among others, to make citizenship and democracy central to the design of adult education programs.

In studying management participation, researchers have long been interested in who participates and the rationale for their participation. Studies of shared decision-making in school organizations and shared governance have been conducted mostly in children schools, from the teachers' perspective, the Principal's perspective (Jones, 1998) or with the parents' participation (Serico, 1998). The conceptualization of dialogic management comes from an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, including Freire's (1997) dialogic pedagogy, Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action, Flecha's (2000) dialogic learning, Welton's (1993) and Holford's (1996) learning in social movements and, Conway's (1984) participation in decision-making. All of them, among others, recognize the significance of learners' participation and the possibility of change in society.

Methodology

There is a body of literature documenting shared governance in children schools, learning in social movements and participation in decision-making from principals and teachers' perspective, but little on the learners' perspective on decision-making in adult centers. Therefore, I was particularly interested in addressing the following research questions:

1. What occurs in the dialogic management of the learning center?
 - 1.1 How do adult learners interact with others and educators?
 - 1.2 What do adult learners perceive the dialogic management promotes?
2. How do adult learners perceive their participation in the dialogic management?

The study of dialogic management started from the need to document the practices and processes developed by adult learners who manage the learning center. The study utilized qualitative methods to determine the form of the implementation of shared governances in an urban adult school in Spain. This qualitative case study analyzed adult learner's involvement in the management of the learning center. By using qualitative methods, I acknowledged possible ethical dilemmas and included the research participants in the process. The overall research approach that I employed was the critical communicative approach (CREA, 2000). Critical communicative approach as used in this study refers to the research which promotes and takes into account the centrality of dialogue and participation in the construction of knowledge, and does not prioritize the accumulation of information, but its use and results. For instance, the dialog between the researcher and researched provided respectively their experiences and reach agreements on how management works in a dialogical way. This approach explains that it is possible to validate the facts, situations or interactions of society, paying special attention to its production whether if it is social exclusion or social transformation. The critical communicative approach opens new perspectives for educational research, since it overcomes the eternal dichotomy between researcher-subject and researched-object.

Research Design

Research Method

I conducted a case study in order to learn about dialogic management. Case studies are the exploration of processes, activities and events with clear boundaries (Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2003). I studied the aspects of the management learning centers and the dialogic processes that collectives develop to help promote social and educational change. Based on those findings, I identified the factors that may give support to other organizations to encourage democratically driven adult education and resourceful learners' participation.

Setting

There are not many experiences in which learners are at the center of the decision-making process. For that reason, I have selected to carry out a case study in an urban school for adults in Barcelona, Spain. The school La Verneda-Sant Marti has been working for almost 30 years, with a participative focus and promoting learner's participation in the management of the center. It is located in a working class neighborhood, and nowadays is experiencing the effects of immigration. This center has a load of 1600 learners and about one hundred professors and voluntary collaborators. The decision making and management organs of the center are the Monthly Committee (COME), the Weekly Committee (COSE), the Center Council, the Activities Committee, and the Projects Committee, among others. Each and every one of these structures are open to all.

Data Collection

I conducted 14 in-depth interviews with learners and 4 with educators. The learners' in-depth interviews helped me understand what is occurring in the dialogic management and how adult learners perceive their participation. The questions focused on the participants' experiences which facilitated to capture what means for them to be involved in the community and the management of the center. The educators' interviews served to understand the educator-learner relationship from the point of view of the educators, and to learn about the organization and functioning of dialogic management of the center. To triangulate the data collected, I also conducted focus groups and observations. Two focus groups were conducted, one with participants and the other with educators and volunteers. The focus group discussion helped to understand the management participation from a learners and educators point of view, as well as the relationships inside the groups. Furthermore communicative (participatory) observations at the center during three weeks were conducted, attending meetings, classes and activities in each of the four time periods of the center, observing both learners and educators.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed in two phases. The analysis was supported by the use of MAXQDA2 computer software. The first phase focused on identifying themes explaining learners' perceptions of their participation in the dialogic management of the center. The second phase of analysis was conducted to investigate the transformational and the exclusionary factors that learners and educators of this center perceived.

Findings

Dialogic management at La Verneda-Sant Marti consists of a model of organization based on democratic adult education. It promotes dynamic interactions and the development of individual and shared meanings. This type of management explains the creation of meaning from interactions and intersubjective processes of all participants in the decision-making practice. The importance of dialogic management resides in the political, sociological and educational impact that has on the creation of learning spaces for transformation and nurturance of equality.

Findings resulting from this study include: a) adult learners participating in decision-making decisional issues define themselves as more critical, supportive, worthy and self confident, b) adult learners involved in participatory activities such as decision making teams perceive the school as a tool for social change and transformation, c) adult learners, educators and volunteers are enthusiastic about taking part of a learning community, d) adult learners and educators perceive greater effectiveness in the organization.

The results of this study explain that the egalitarian dialog present in different spaces of decision-making allow a direct participation of all the learners in the school management. This suggests that the egalitarian dialog is one of the essential elements to explain the high level of participation observable at La Verneda-Sant Marti. Learners and educators share power structures. They are engaged in the decisions such as funding, scheduling, designing projects and activities and, building partnerships in a local, national and international level. Learners participating in this center not only learn but also participate directly in the decision of the school and the management which makes them experience that the school belongs to them.

In addition, educators stated to be engagement and motivated in the participation of the center because they have an egalitarian relationships with learners. They declared that learners become their partners in working together for active citizenship and social justice. Then some of the strategies to achieve democratic adult educational practices come from an egalitarian dialog, respect for all participants and the promotion of practices in which the power of the arguments are more valuable than the position from were those are stated. In conclusion, the involvement of learners in decision making teams is essential to the success of shared governance and other participative structures.

Implications for Adult Education

The study of dialogic management within community organizations is relevant to adult education and to social sciences. On the one hand, the research on models and trends of adult education provides and answers which practices promote emancipation, liberation and social awareness. On the other hand, the research involves elements that promote practices in which individuals can accurately define what they want. And therefore, make possible the definition of educational practices that contribute to the overcoming of inequalities. In addition this is a model of organization that explains one of the approaches to stimulate the participation in the management of adult educational centers.

Other researchers may use the findings of this study as a foundation for future research on this topic. For example, future research can examine the relationship between organizational and educational practices and changes in government policies in adult education.

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