A Phenomenological Study of the Educational Experiences of Black Women: Learning as You Go

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Abstract: This research study provided a descriptive picture of educational experiences of three sets of Black sisters who grew up in the inner-city. A qualitative existential-phenomenological research study design was used to derive common themes that represented the universal essence of the participants' experiences. This study illuminated the formal and informal learning experiences of Black women and the profound role cultural experiences of family and community play in shaping their learning experiences through adulthood. Findings suggest that the educational experiences of Black women influenced their development, voice, self-esteem, and self-defined achievement and success. These findings dispute adult development theories that suggest learning or development must precede or trail the other.

Introduction

Although there is considerable literature on adult development, little focuses on Black women's development or the relationship between development and educational experiences. Adult development theories from a psychological perspective ignore the role that culture plays in Black women's developmental process (Goodman, 1990; Littleton, 2002). Many traditional adult development theories focused specifically on biological, psychological/cognitive and sociocultural development, but did not account for differences in culture, race, gender, class, and sexual orientation (Baumgartner & Merriam, 2000; Littleton, 2002). Because of this gap in the literature, Black females' development may be different from that of other women (hooks, 1994; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996). For example, we do not know whether or how the development of Black women may be influenced by their educational experiences (Harris, 1992; Jeffries, 1985). This underrepresentation of Black women in the literature is a gap that has implications for practice in adult education. The goal of this research was to illuminate the educational experiences of inner-city Black women, from their perspective, who live in a similar socioeconomic and cultural context. Findings suggest a more integrated theoretical approach to adult development that goes beyond traditional theories.

Since the focus of this study was on the women's experience, phenomenology served as a guiding theoretical framework that provided both a philosophy and method for this study. The phenomenological approach explores the events of human existence in an unbiased way so we might come to an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience. Phenomenology seeks to explain the basic nature, structure, or form of both human experience and human behavior as revealed through descriptive techniques. The phenomenological approach takes experiences in everyday life and probes the underlying meaning of the experiences for the individual and groups of individuals (Collins, 1986; Valle & Halling, 1989). The purpose is to find essential meanings that are common to the human experience.

Ihde (1986) describes phenomenology as a radical philosophy that "departs from familiar ways of doing things and accepted ways of thinking. It overturns many presuppositions

ordinarily taken for granted and seeks to establish a new perspective from which to view things (p. 17)." Because of this, phenomenology has become increasingly important in studying the philosophical perspective in adult education (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Phenomenology is rooted in the idea of giving respect to the lived experience of individuals by examining meaning (Stanage, 1989; van Manen, 1997). Although phenomenology provides a theoretical framework for understanding experience, it also has evolved into a research methodology. We agree with Allen (1995), the overall purpose of phenomenology is to explore ordinary human experience that is often taken for granted in order to establish a new perspective from which to view things.

Method

As an inquiry method, phenomenology focuses on describing an experience and determining its essence. Brookfield (1994) encourages researchers to conduct phenomenological studies so learners' can describe their experience in their own words because this type of research is lacking in adult education. The phenomenological method was appropriate to address the following research question that guided the study. "What are the shared meanings of educational experiences for Black women in a southern inner-city neighborhood?" Conducting a qualitative study with a phenomenological design provided a rich picture of the social phenomenon of education and how women described their experiences. The design allowed for collaboration between researcher and participants to ensure research findings accurately reflected the participants' perceptions (Van Manen, 1997).

The study design and procedures followed the methodology described by Thomas and Pollio (2002) and practiced by the University of Tennessee Applied Phenomenological Studies Colloquy, under the direction of Dr. Howard Polio and Dr. Sandra Thomas. The group serves as a forum for colloquy researchers to share aspects of their studies with an interdisciplinary group of faculty and students. Researchers bring their interviews to be read aloud by the group and during the reading identify themes in the text. Data analysis followed the procedures also developed by Thomas and Pollio (2002) so the individual interviews were analyzed and reviewed by the Colloquy or a research team that followed similar procedures. Eva Young conducted this research as her dissertation and Mary Ziegler and Kathy Greenberg served as co-chairs of her committee. All authors participated in the collaborative data analysis process of the Phenomenological Studies Colloquy. This collaborative process added to the study's rigor because of the dialogic process used to identify and understand themes in the data.

Two principal criteria for selecting participants for a phenomenological study are (1) an individual having experienced the phenomenon and (2) an individual who is willing to talk about that experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Ten women participated in the study – three groups of sisters, ranging between 24 to 60 years of age. The purpose for choosing groups of sisters, who had similar inner-city educational experiences in their youth, was to see how their experiences influenced their choices as adults. (All participants were given pseudonyms.) The phenomenon of educational experience and its influence over the course of one's life, revealed through in-depth interviewing, provided a means of reflection for the exploration of meaning (Collins, 1986; van Manen, 1997). Although phenomenological research does not allow for generalizations due to the characteristics of this type of research (Creswell, 1998), it illuminates the universal essence of the educational experiences of Black women within their lived reality. The resulting themes that formed a thematic structure of the educational experience of Black inner-city women were also reviewed by a research team.

Findings

The findings are reported in two parts based on the concept of figure/ground, which is essential to phenomenological interpretation (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). A theme describes an aspect of the experience. These figural aspects of the experience stand out against a common ground. The figural themes and the ground represent the essence of the whole experience. Labels for themes were drawn from participants' quotes that reflected the meaning of the theme; both the label and its location in the quote where it occurred are presented first. Following the themes is a description of the ground of the experience.

Theme one: I Seemed Like A Stupid Little Girl Again/I Was This Smart, Intelligent Woman. …after a bunch of mistakes I finally ended up over here at (name of school) and I hated it. It wasn't you know, I thought that I was this smart, intelligent woman and I seemed like a stupid little girl again" (Lilith). This theme that described positive and negative feelings experienced during the course of educational experiences. The women moved back and forth between the positive self-esteem of an intelligent woman to the negative self-esteem of a stupid little girl. Self-esteem refers to global feelings of self-worth held by the individual (Bednar et. al., 1989). Kim discussed how her low self-esteem during her childhood made her feel *Like a Stupid Little Girl*. Kim was afraid to let people know she didn't understand many school assignments.

> Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. So I've always felt I couldn't tell anybody. Lets say that you didn't understand. They would look at me like "You don't get it?" And that made me have very low self- esteem about myself. (Kim)

Several women in this study also felt periods of doubt concerning their capabilities and had low self-esteem after leaving high school which made them feel like Stupid Little Girls, again. Lilith, shared her negative feelings and low self-esteem when she went to college.

> I didn't know anything, I didn't know how to write a paper, I didn't know how to, you know do all the things that I excelled in high school and in all my other years of school, and I hated it. I hated it. (Lilith)

The theme *I Seemed Like a Stupid Little Girl Again/I Was This Smart, Intelligent Woman,* described how women in the study battled feelings of high and low self-esteem during their adolescence and into adulthood.

Theme Two: Staying in the Box/Stepping Out of the Box. "Well, it's like you have a fear and you're so used to being in an area with your safety net around you and if you do step out of the box you might fail or you might mess up and so it's easier to stay in the box than to step out of the box and I have always had a safety net around me and afraid to step out of the box" (Angel). *Staying in the Box,* described the need to place others first, limiting life possibilities. While *Stepping Out of the Box* described how women made choices about what was important for them, *Staying in the Box* was about taking care of, and pleasing others by doing what was acceptable as described by family.

The idea of "self" among Black females is very complex and involves the idea of having a "voice" within the family structure. Black women are reared to value other people's happiness and need the approval of others to provide them with a sense of sense of self-worth. Kim stated she wanted to please people but that it was an exhausting task.

> I just felt like I've always wanted to be the type of person to want to please people. It was very exhausting. I had a great mind to think on my own but I always wanted to make other people happy. (Kim)

Black women in this study seemed to face a constant battle of fear of failure. Many minority students are left with a sense of insecurity about their ability to learn and a feeling of confusion with regard to their own cultural identities (Cummins, 1986; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1996). Continuing any form of education past high school was viewed as *Stepping Out of the Box*. They viewed education as a means of personal development and not as a means to financial security.

Theme Three: You Can't Let People Keep You Down/They Taught Us the Values. "The guidance counselor, who was not of my color, uh, said to me, 'Well you really don't need to go to college because uh, you'll never make it I college anyway.' So I made up in my mind that day that you know, that person could not tell me I could not succeed because my parents had always said to me that I could" (Stella). Participants in this study recognized how some individuals in society challenged them with racial ideology and stereotypical ideas. The women's experiences led them to believe *You Can't Let People Keep You Down.* They also recognized that individuals who provided positive emotional support were sources of strength.

Women in this study found positive and effective strategies taught by loved ones when faced with obstacles. Research suggests Black women utilize social support networks such as family, friends, and church to deal with basic social and emotional problems (Torres, 1996).

It is notable that only three out of the ten women had college degrees, with one participant having a graduate degree. Lilith constantly negotiated *Staying In the Box*, to have family support and acceptance, and *Stepping Out of the Box*, in order to succeed in academia.

'We've seen you graduate once (laugh).' And I wanted them to understand the significance of that accomplishment. But most of them didn't. (Lilith)

Lilith discovered support also comes from individuals other than family members. Participants recognized individuals who were sources of strength. By doing this, *They Taught Us the Values* .

Learning As You Go. The Ground of the Experience. "We've experienced so many different things, you learn as you go 'cause you don't have any instructions" (Sha). The common ground of the experiences shared by women in the study was *Learning As You Go*. The ground of the experience makes the themes visible because they stand out against it (Polkinghorne, 1989; Thomas & Pollio, 2002; Valle & Halling, 1989). The themes are related to one another and comprise the totality of the experience.

Learning As You Go involved not only individual needs, wants, or desires, but occurred within the context of what they perceived as most important to the lives of their families, and not necessarily for themselves.

Discussion and Implications

Educational experiences shared in this study provided important insights into the relationship between learning and overall development and refutes Vygotsky's (1978) idea that learning comes before development. The reflective process builds upon what is learned, or not learned, from past experiences (Brookfield, 1995). This study should add to the literature to help create newly integrated theoretical approaches to adult development that go beyond the traditional models.

The findings in this study also suggest that the educational experiences of these Black women influenced sense of voice, self-esteem, and self-defined achievement and success.

Therefore, this study contributes to the practice of Adult Education. This is crucial to understanding lifelong education as a means of self-improvement, empowerment, and as a way to help family and community.

Educators' methods should encompass narratives, family history, and autobiographies to draw on the strength of the lived experiences minority students bring to the classroom (Bell, 1987; hooks, 1994; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Tisdell, 1998). Examining the educational experiences of students of color can help gain better understanding of the most appropriate ways to help students achieve educational success (Frazier-Kouassi, 2000).

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