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Weaving Quilts: Remaking and Reimagining Women's Spaces and Places in Adult Literacy

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Abstract: In this paper two adult literacy educators critically reflect on the two programs upon which their dissertations were based. Utilizing the words of female students, they offer reflections on adult literacy pedagogical practices from a gendered, social justice perspective. Recommendations for creating more democratic adult education learning communities are also outlined.

Introduction

I see a part of myself inside each woman the first time I meet them....I dream of us working together and helping each other. I want us to stand up together. I want all women to be able to stand up for themselves the way I did. (Basemah, a former student at The Open Book)

One shouldn't criticize other one, but we should love one another and...find out what - other sisters, you know, go through, like ask them, you know, is it something - do you need help...how are you...what can I do for you...You know, we should embrace other[s] - we - as women we should embrace other women... (Donna⁷, WREAD participant at Literacy Chicago)

The Open Book was a community literacy program in South Brooklyn, NY. Literacy Chicago was located in downtown Chicago. With a student body in both programs of primarily women, there was a strong sense of community and commitment to student-involvement in decision-making. In this examination, which grew out of both of our dissertations, we explored the following intersections: the importance of nurturing sustainable women's spaces in adult literacy programs, conscious efforts to build community within the school environment, and efforts to develop/implement authentic and participatory democratic practices. We explore ways these three aspects inform and support each other, while offering some direction for others interested in developing liberatory adult literacy models.

While The Open Book and Literacy Chicago were not designed only for women, there were many elements and characteristics of women's spaces inherent in the culture (Jones, 2012; Ramdeholl, 2011). Because the program consisted primarily of women, there were more opportunities for women to become actors in shaping and unleashing powerful possibilities. Examples of this include: women's oral histories being used as a tool/vehicle for consciousness raising and agency, space being made for conversations in a reading discussion group around issues of abuse and trauma, and a group of women students forming a women's support group with time and space to address issues unique to them as women, representing a space where there

⁷ Names of all students are pseudonyms.

isn't one outside expert coming in to solve problems but a group of insiders wrestling together in co-construct new ways of rewriting scripts rooted in agency (Darder, 2003; Horsman, 1999; Miller, personal communication, October 5, 2013).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to document these important practices in order to support a sustainable dialogue centered on fostering democratic spaces and pockets of resistance within their own agencies. The goal is to contribute to a collective conversation grounded in deconstructing regimes of truth, engaging in a pedagogy of resisting and contesting sacred truths about mainstream literacy and eventually becoming a field about transforming the word and the world (Freire, 1995; Macedo, 1994). Our interest in unpacking these processes was supported by two research questions:

1. What principles were embedded in women's spaces and womanist education at The Open Book and Literacy Chicago?
2. What did the participatory practices in that program look like and how were they nurtured?

Theoretical Framework

The Open Book at its core represented a critique of the dominant ideology. In honoring this, critical theory/liberatory education is the theoretical lens in which this project was grounded. Brookfield (2005) states that from the perspective of critical theory, we can discern how the ethic of capitalism pushes people into dehumanizing ways of living that perpetuate economic, racial, and gender oppression. This culture has mastered pouring inconsequential sums of money in programs that attack symptoms but keep systems that promote poverty and inequity intact. Freire (1970) unequivocally states the solution is not to integrate people into the structure of oppression but to transform that structure so they can become beings for themselves.

This study was also informed by womanist ways of being in the world and the ways in which female students at The Open Book shaped the culture of the program in critical ways by bringing those issues to the fore and informing pedagogy (Davis, 1983; hooks, 1994; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sheard, 1999). Given what women were saying, womanism clearly emerged as a theoretical construct guiding this study. Because marginalization occurs when one person's views are valued and voiced at the sociopolitical and historical expense of others, and because understanding the individual's polyrhythmic reality gives us a way of giving voice to the multiple and varied realities found in the classroom (Sheard, 1999), womanism made sense as a theoretical cornerstone undergirding this project. Womanism specifically offers to adult education a certain inclusivity, a more pluralistic way of understanding the field and the various actors who inhabit it, whether as practitioners or students.

At Literacy Chicago, the development of a reading discussion group – Women Reading for Education, Affinity and Development (WREAD) - designed for black female adult literacy students who had survived abuse and trauma reflected similar alignments with critical literacy and womanist/black feminist perspectives. By supporting critical dialogue around texts that centered the black female voice, WREAD emphasized the sociopolitical framing of experience and education, and honored the perspectives and survival strategies of marginalized women (Collins, 2000; Freire, 1970; Papen, 2005). WREAD also embraced a relational-cultural theoretical context that provides a mechanism for acknowledging the bonds that women create in a group setting and the emotional sustenance that these connections can provide (Fedele &

Harrington, 1990). Overall, the perspectives embedded in these frameworks help to build a deeper understanding of how women-centered spaces can nurture learning, connection and healing.

Research Design

Oral history, honoring locally constructed knowledge was the most appropriate way to chronicle the history of The Open Book and Literacy Chicago programs, told through the voices of the people who represented/lived that history/struggle. Participants could now be actors in a historical script which they themselves had authored, instead of being consumers in scripts authored by other groups (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Thompson, 2000). The primary source of data collection was tape-recorded small group or individual interviews with many participants being interviewed more than once. Field notes were also utilized at Literacy Chicago to document individual discussion group sessions. We also had access to articles and other artifacts written by program staff and students which provided another level of depth in triangulation. We simultaneously generated a number of themes and sub-themes, afterwards developing a mindmap.

Findings and Conclusions

The Importance of Community

What community means to me; to be there for others and to try to lift each other up when we're down...we're from different places and also different cultures but we are still one in this school. (Maria, former student at The Open Book)

Why do students so often point to the significance of community? Are they in fact articulating a theory of learning? Is this attention to community particularly common to women? What are the implications for those of us (students and teachers) engaged in the practice of adult education? (Ramdeholl, Gordon, & Evans, 2008). Maria discusses a level of comfort and unity she found at the school. She identifies a feeling of solidarity and mutual support with other students as part of the community. Because the student body was overwhelmingly female, there were many opportunities for women to shape the culture. Women's concerns and perspectives dominated the classroom discussion and they were likely to be involved in any activities that occurred. Some embraced the program and made the space their own - bringing in plants, building relationships, and telling stories. They brought their personal lives into the classroom and made them part of the ongoing dialogue; they placed certain practices at the center of the program's culture. In other words, they were articulating a philosophy of education.

For women in WREAD, community was illustrated by the commitment to creating a non-judgmental space where women could talk about their feelings and also receive positive and often practical feedback from others. The supportive connections they developed provided hope and encouraged them to take control of their circumstances in ways that validated their strengths. *[Being in WREAD], it made me, you know, um, appreciate myself to feel good about my - myself, and to hold my head up, and to be proud of who I am and what I am, no matter what happened, no matter what people say, or whatever...I know who I am, and - and God made me for - for who I am, not for what everybody else see.* (Jean, participant in WREAD)

In both programs there was recognition of the profoundly dehumanizing society we live in and an intentional pedagogy of caring and compassion to counter that. Horsman (1994), Isserlis (2008) and Miller (personal communication, October 5, 2013) all speak to the ways that violence can incapacitate women (and men) and prevent learning.

In my life I had to deal with a lot of abuse. I wrote this piece when we were writing our autobiographies for a book of student writing. It was about when my husband and I went to a party...and when he grabbed the back of my dress and ripped it. I thought he was going to kill me. I still think the worst experience was the rug. Every time I see a rug, I see myself wrapped up in it. I overcame a lot of it through writing....just writing everything down. (Edami, former student at The Open Book)

Woman Centered Education

Many of the women who came to The Open Book and Literacy Chicago had suffered from trauma and violence in some way. Both violence in the individual sense of battering and abuse that Edami hauntingly describes but also violence in a broader sense. The violence of oppression, the marginalization around issues of poverty, race, class, ability, and language. The daily put downs that will contribute to a well of anger and pain. As Antonia poignantly says, *"Although we are adults, we come to these programs because something in our lives didn't go right. Something didn't happen in school for us and we need encouragement. We need someone to say you're not just another number passing through here, you're a human being and you came here with so many struggles and dreams."* At The Open Book, this was taken into account. There was a woman centeredness to the program. According to Sheard (1999), woman centeredness honors one's everyday lived experiences grounded in race, class, and gender. At the Open Book's teaching and learning space, students defined themselves on their own terms in their own realities as they explored and co-constructed alternative ways of being and living with each other in the world.

In WREAD, novels stimulated reflections around the traumatic aftermath of this cultural marginalization that were further examined and challenged through the group process. For example, while reading *Passing* by Nella Larsen, the cultural devastation wrought by internalizing Westernized images of youth and beauty was raised in the group when a participant, Anne, casually noted that she was *"just a plain Black person, I'm not no beautiful Black person."* All of the women in the group quickly and loudly responded. Several challenged Anne outright, Donna told her she was *"a beautiful Black young lady, you need to squash that"* while Kim linked her lack of appreciation for her beauty with people telling her she *"would never 'mount out to nothing, you ain't gonna have nothin, you ain't gonna be nothing in life, and you don't look good."* At the end of discussion that included women talking about how they also struggled to see themselves as beautiful in a world that centered and valued whiteness (and youth), Anne noted: *"But I'm gonna leave that negativity alone, I'm just gonna look in the mirror and say, 'I'm beautiful!'"* As other women shouted: *"Exactly!"* and *"Amen!"* Anne stated with a newfound conviction: *"I'm a beautiful person."*

Democratic Practice

At The Open Book there were also conscious efforts to redistribute power in more equitable ways that included students' voices and perspectives. From the very beginning, student participation at the program began with conversations about curricula in classrooms but made its way into how the program was shaped. One example was a woman's group that was student initiated. Another example was students being hired as assistant teachers. Yet another example was including students in the hiring process of new teachers. One author (Dianne) was interviewed by a panel of students during her interview. Town hall meetings in which the entire school discussed what the school should look like were also student-driven.

At Literacy Chicago, the use of critical literacy, womanist and relational-cultural perspectives to stimulate dialogue centered explanations and insights that were grounded in the students' multilayered experiences (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). This model of learning incorporates culturally-specific ways of knowing and complicates the notion of "literacy." Through involvement in WREAD, women became better at both problem posing and identifying ways to promote personal, communal and political transformation (Freire, 1970; Morrish, 2002). The result is an educational space comprehensively and consciously linked to social change and student empowerment.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Since so many of the students at The Open Book and Literacy Chicago were poor women of color (i.e., juggling precarious life situations; in difficult relationships) it felt especially important that the program be rooted in a script that honored issues students brought with them. Actions taken at both programs challenge and problematize traditional teaching methods by illuminating how theory-driven, socially progressive perspectives can enrich instruction and engage learners.

According to Fanon (1952), imperialism leaves behind "germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land but from our minds as well." Because so many female students come to programs bearing the scars from living in a dehumanizing society which is supported by capitalist imperialism, domination, and patriarchy, more attention to supporting and sustaining women's groups and womanist principles in adult literacy programs (and curricula) is necessary and urgent.

Literacy policy in this country is dictated by the interests of capitalism which ensures the perpetuation of a human underclass. With few exceptions, students' voices aren't reflected in any major decision-making (e.g., hiring, curricula) which ensures their voices remain invisible. Women's voices are even less visible or heard. In order for adult education to be consistent with fostering democracy, space must be made to include/listen to students' voices at every level of program decision-making and policy.

We recommend space in programs be made for issues to be addressed and power to be rerouted. If programs represent a microcosm of society, we recommend that alternative, more egalitarian scripts be practiced in order to achieve a more humane and compassionate society. Adult literacy in large is about redefining what's possible in people's lives. Students' concerns and selves should be at the center of the program. Writing and publishing oral histories is one way to make space for people to tell their stories on their terms. This forum honors that students have powerful things to say that demand to be heard. It is essential to situate adult literacy's long history within other freedom/human rights struggles that are connected to class, race, gender, and other inequities that seek to exploit, imprison, and oppress certain segments of our society. WREAD reinforced the importance and benefits of creating an environment where learning and support from other women are centered in opposition to the cultural marginalization they might face in the larger world (Horsman, 1999; Mojab & McDonald, 2001).

Though noted adult education scholar Paulo Freire (1970) openly acknowledged connections between marginalization, education and social change over thirty years ago, his message that education should allow "men and women [to] deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (p. 34)" has been challenged by the erasure of liberatory adult education practices in an accountability-driven, increasingly privatized education culture. Weaving women's experiences into educational spaces

brings his vision of critical consciousness to the forefront, and positions these spaces as sites of empowerment and change. According to Nadeau (1996), studies that preserve historical memory help to affirm both who we are collectively and who we might become. In that vein, we plan to disseminate pedagogical findings and implications of this work to the adult literacy community in the form of a study circle guide.

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