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Immigrant Adult Education: A Literature Review

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Abstract: This literature review explains and discusses challenges immigrants face when continuing their education in a foreign country, what the research suggests about immigrants continuing their education, and gendered immigration.

Key words: Immigrant; adult and continuing education; gendered immigration

Merriam & Bierema's (2014) characterization of what constitutes an adult learner is defined by filling many roles, such as caretakers, students, employees and citizens (pp. 11-12). This characterization also defines immigrant adult learners. Many of them enter formal education and attend adult education programs to overcome the challenges that come when immigrating to a new country (Isserlis, 2008). It is therefore important to take notice of these adult learners as a social group in the United States. Here, we attempt to produce a literature review that explains and discusses the challenges these immigrant adult learners face. Keywords used to search through Education Source (EBSCO) were *immigrant adult learner*, *adult education*, *English as a Second Language*, and *women and immigrant women's education*. This study is situated in adult education as immigrants seek educative programs to learn English, continue or finish compulsory education through the General Education Development (GED), increase skill level to find gainful employment, receive financial literacy training, find a pathway to higher education, and other skills necessary to function as a contributing member of society. The research questions guiding this literature review are:

1. What expectations do immigrants have when they continue their education in the U.S.?
2. How is immigration gendered in the workplace, educational settings, or as members of the community in a new society?

Journals situated in adult education, most commonly *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* and texts written by Alfred were consulted. Alfred contributes to the literature concerning immigration and learning, transnational women, and women's economic development. The journals and other literature analyzed expand the current literature

documenting concerns educating immigrants in adult education. Implications for practice include better pedagogical tools for immigrant adult education, continued research for social inclusion of immigrant learners to give voice to their stories, and increased research on immigrant women. Scholars suggest new studies, especially mixed method studies, are needed because previous studies were focused on a deficit model—assimilation rather than acculturation (Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2013; Warfa et al., 2012). Addressing immigrants' lack of social and cultural capital when entering adult education programs is unequivocally needed. There is also a wide gap in the literature on female immigrants and how they reimagine or reshape their educational journeys in a new country.

Literature Review

Much of the current research on immigration in adult education explores the reasons why many immigrants migrate. Isserlis (2008) states that many immigrants uproot from their native countries because they are escaping war and upheaval; others theorize a “push and pull” factor lures immigrants to the United States (Alfred, 2001; 2004; 2015). Most scholars agree, immigrants seek to better their lives as their reason to leave their native country (Alfred, 2004; Ojo, 2009). What is also known is the long-standing history of the United States creating immigration laws to keep unwanted groups out (Alfred, 2004; Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Ojo, 2009). Immigration laws historically favored European White immigrants and were created out of xenophobia (Alfred, 2001; Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Ojo, 2009). The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was an example of a law created out of this fear and limited the number of immigrants from China entering the U.S. (Alfred, 2004; Ullman, 2010). Thus, immigrants of non-European White descent were labeled as Other and excluded from entering the United States.

History of Adult Education Relevant to Immigration

According to Ullman (2010) and Muñoz (2012), the beginning of adult immigrant education was during the surge of “settlement houses” and a movement towards “Americanization” during the late nineteenth century. Both authors explain that the settlement houses were designed to educate newly arrived immigrants and integrate them into both employment and in to the community.

Other organizations also mobilized and created adult classes teaching basic education, English as a Second Language (ESL), and civic education (Muñoz, 2012; Ullman, 2010). Around

WWI, government funding became available to assimilate immigrants due to the anti-immigrant sentiments, the fear of communism, and the Sedition Act of 1918 (Ullman, 2010).

Carlock (2016) argues that because adult education is the common denominator among immigrants, it is crucial to develop this resource authentically. Larrotta (2017) also states the realm of adult education should serve adult immigrants better. Lee (2013) writes:

[The] learning of English as a second language among adult immigrants is an important area of research because this group of people, whose voice is seldom heard by the mainstream society, deserves an outlet to tell us what they can offer to the teaching and learning process. (p. 22)

Other authors insist on making current adult education classrooms culturally relevant for immigrants (Alfred, 2015; Carlock, 2016; Guo, 2015). There is a need to continue researching because there is minute information found on the topic (Guo, 2015; Larrotta, 2017).

Current Immigration Trends and Adult Education

The research states that current waves of immigration are largely from non-Western countries (Alfred, 2004, 2015) and globalization contributes to changing demographics (Alfred, 2009, 2015; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). While many countries benefit economically from immigrants, due to globalization, there is still a xenophobic feeling (Alfred, 2001). Thus, the cycle of marginalization to certain ethnic immigrant groups necessitates the need to be socially inclusive and diverse in adult education.

Many scholars also agree, how can adult educators help this growing population of immigrants transition better (Alfred & Guo, 2012; Guo, 2015; Isserlis, 2008; Merriam & Bierema, 2014)? Better yet, Alfred (2015) posits a more befitting question highlighting the adult immigrant learner in regards to current globalization immigration, "how can education, especially adult and higher education, help adults develop capacities to challenge and counter the negative effects of neoliberal globalization, and at the same time develop the skills and competencies necessary to compete in such environments" (p. 93)? However posited, both these statements make valid points about the need to help immigrants continue their education.

Alfred (2015) and Guo (2015) detail adult education's socially inclusive and social justice mission tailored to immigrants because they are considered part of the minority (Alfred, 2015; Guo, 2015;). Yet, not much research is found or being done on immigration (Alfred, 2015), especially in adult education (Isserlis, 2008), nor specifically on undocumented immigrants in adult education (Larrotta, 2017). Alfred & Guo (2012) conducted a study surveying conference papers from the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) and the Canadian Association for the

Study of Adult Education (CASAE), along with curriculum from different universities (p.56) and found little research and pedagogy on the topic.

Towards an Inclusive Adult Education Pedagogy

Guo (2015) suggests that adult education can be both an enabler and inhibitor to immigrants' education. Guo (2015) points out that many professional immigrants prior knowledge is discredited. Professional immigrants come into another country and become taxi drivers when they used to be optometrists (Guo, 2015). Guo explains the prior knowledge of immigrants is negated by the ideology that they immigrate from developing countries and the knowledge obtained there does not equate to the knowledge of the host country. Thus, these ideologies marginalize immigrants and "denies [them the] opportunities to be successful in the new society" (Guo, 2015, p. 12).

Njenga (2016) reaffirms that suggestion by reporting the transition from another country, especially to the U.S., many immigrants' "education and experience [becomes] less relevant" (p. 30). Accreditation of their foreign degree in the United States is difficult to obtain and they enter job sectors that have low-paying wages (Njenga, 2016). The language also poses a challenge when trying to obtain higher-paying jobs and communicating within their new community (Njenga, 2016). Alfred (2004) also informs us that the present day immigrants speak "a language other than English in the home" (p.4). This reiterates the necessity of adult education for immigrants to be a non-generic pre-packaged curriculum and become more socially inclusive (Alfred, 2009, 2015; Guo, 2015). Alfred (2009) calls adult educators to design a pedagogy culturally inclusive of their immigrant adult learners.

What About Women and Immigration?

Women are important to consider on the topic of immigration because of the lack of information found, their historical relevance (Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015), and the need to hear their stories and voices. Researching *women* and *immigration* for this literature review did not give a lot of search hits. Although, it is not a wonder that women and immigration are not highly discussed, since historically, women have been excluded and marginalized in the immigration sector of literature and history (Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015). During the 1800s, the United States strategized several laws and acts that prevented the rise of immigrant populations, more specifically, Asian immigrants (Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015). The United States tried to prevent the combining of races by incorporating miscegenation laws forbidding Asian immigrant men and women from consorting and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882,

strictly prohibited unmarried Asian women from immigrating (Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015). It is also important to discuss immigrant women did not and do not have the same challenges as men because traditionally they are socially deemed as the weaker sex and marginalized into these gender roles when immigrating (Guo, 2015; Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015).

Current Trends of Immigrant Women

Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey (2015) reported the rise of discussion of women in immigration topics in context to adult education because they are now immigrating in equal rates to their male counterparts. They also identified two common themes when discussing immigrant women, their marginalization due to sexism and the acquirement and attainment of low-paying jobs in the traditional feminine labor sectors (Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015). Guo (2015) also explained when looking at these women's lives, they have worse barriers, are exploited in the labor market, and marginalized because of traditionally gendered ideologies (p. 12).

Women take education into their own hands. In a study conducted by Maitra & Shan (2007), women have two ways of learning in the labor market; conformative or transgressively. The women who learned to conform to their work environment did so by informal training among their co-workers so they could maintain their jobs. The other women learned transgressively by taking agency in their training and resisting the exploitive nature of their job environment.

Maitra & Shan's (2007) study utilized the theoretical framework of scholars such as Freire and hooks addressing this critical consciousness that empowers immigrant women in the labor market. Their framework aligned with Mezirow's transformative learning because the individual learner's process is the focus and not the "social or political interests of the learner" (p. 289). In a deeper analysis of immigration, this is a significant life altering event, also aligning with Mezirow's transformative learning approach (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The transgressive learning done by the women in the study is "emancipatory" and individual learner focused (p. 293). Analyzing the study through the transformative learning lens gives rise to a critical consciousness in the individual learner (Maitra & Shan, 2007).

Studies like that of Maitra and Shan (2007) bring awareness to the need to be critical of the education of immigrants and be aware of the exploitive circumstances many face. Women specifically can be their own agents of change, and if adult educators take a critical stance to their curriculum and instruction, even more change can occur (Alfred, 2009, 2015; Guo, 2015; Ojo, 2009). Maitra and Shan (2007) also suggested that policy makers, educators in the employment sector, and employers should understand and utilize the prior knowledge women

have. In doing so, this will create better work equity which could potentially also create a better quality of life for immigrant women in their new communities (Maitra & Shan, 2007).

Challenges for Women in Academia. Immigrant women face many challenges outside of the workplace, too (Ojo, 2009). Ojo's literary analysis claims that African Diasporan women feel isolated and rejected when in U.S. higher education. Ojo also states that they feel alienated and made to feel invisible in academia by their fellow peers and at times by their professors. Thus, with this invisibility and isolation comes the challenge that prevents them from gaining opportunity to further their career or education (Ojo, 2009).

Alfred's (2004) own analysis on invisibility and marginalization in higher education reiterates Ojo's literary findings. Alfred (2004) discusses the social capital many African diasporan immigrant women have from their native country, but it is not similar to the social capital of the United States. With this difference comes "marginality, alienation, and isolation" because of the fall out of the normalcy of traditional learning in the U.S. (Alfred, 2004, p. 154). Alfred (2004) states many in academia renegotiate their identities, change their speech patterns to fit into the expected "academic culture," and become visible (p. 154). Hence, adult educators need to create more inclusive spaces for immigrants regardless of race, class, or gender to prevent this marginalization.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice from much of the existing literature revealed efforts to raise awareness to break through the challenges immigrants face using a resiliency model. The literature also kept reiterating a lack of social and cultural capital when immigrants entered adult programs or higher education institutions. Women were also perceived as agents of change in their education and on-the-job training. Scant information was found on women immigrants and how they reimagine or reshape their educational journeys in another country. This would imply that more research is needed on the topic of immigration and, more specifically, women immigrants.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature on current immigration as it relates to adult education seems to be growing. Scholars are researching the history of immigration and stating the changing population of immigrants. The call for social inclusion of immigrants is on the rise and so is the

need for better pedagogical tools in the adult learning and teaching field. We also found scant studies on immigrants' stories and voices, and the few discovered use mixed method approaches with a deficit model theoretical lens (Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2013; Warfa et al., 2012). We also came to the conclusion that research done during this presidency would immensely help adult educators alleviate the fearful immigration sentiment currently expressed.

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