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Perspectives on Feminist Approaches to Adult Education in International Education and Development Settings

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Abstract: This empirical paper describes the preliminary results of a qualitative interview study about the feminist pedagogy of women adult educators teaching in transnational adult education settings.

Keywords: feminist adult education; feminist pedagogy; transnational adult education

In order for educators and trainers of adults to create more inclusive learning environments, scholars have suggested integrating feminist and other social justice-oriented pedagogies (Enns, Sinacore, Ancis, & Phillips, 2004; Lather, 1992; Tisdell 1995; 1998). Despite the need for feminist adult education, focusing on women's learning has been waning in the field of adult education (Eichler, et al., 2010; Stromquist, 2013), and direct references to women's learning and feminist pedagogy in adult education has frequently been hidden or subsumed under the umbrella of 'good teaching,' (English & Irving, 2015a). Because multiple strands of feminisms exist, descriptions of varied approaches to doing feminist pedagogy with adults is needed. Additionally, in many transnational adult education spaces, resistances to feminist pedagogy, such as neoliberal discourses, anti-feminist sentiments, and postfeminist sensibilities impacting the way feminist pedagogy is done with adult learners.

Work exploring the connections between women and feminist adult educators in international contexts, paying particular attention to the roles of women's learning as it relates to community and activism have been explored (English & Irving, 2015a). However, conducting empirical research that explores the kinds of feminist strategies, activities, and practices that are used by women adult educators, how key feminist topics are taken up by educators and adult learners, and how women adult educators' teaching philosophies, values, and personal beliefs inform their teaching, will help contribute to deeper theoretical and practical knowledge on the topic of feminist pedagogy and women's learning in adult education.

The purpose of this study was to explore how women adult educators enact feminist pedagogy in international education and development settings. The research questions that guided this research included, 1) What are the teaching philosophies, personal beliefs, feminist strategies, and sources of wisdom (practices) that women adult educators doing feminist pedagogy report bringing, 2) What feminist topics or issues (episodes) have women adult educators doing feminist pedagogy described as occurring, and 3) what kinds of feminist classroom activities (encounters) do women adult educators doing feminist pedagogy in transnational adult education settings describe? This paper will explore some of the preliminary findings from this study and discuss the implications for continuing with the research project.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Feminism as a political and academic movement has endured multiple waves, backlashes, and mutations. Since at least the 1960's in the West, the feminist movement brought about increased support for women's and feminist issues such as reproductive rights, equal access to healthcare and sanitation, education, and reducing violence against women and other marginalized populations. International policy reflecting a world-wide feminist movement can be seen in the United Nation's (UN) Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination

Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 and the inclusion of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment as one of the UN's eight Millennium Development Goals. Recent phenomena such as the #MeToo movement and the International Women's March are exemplars of current feminist issues and movements that span traditional nation-state boundaries.

The current period of global capitalist crisis intersects with contemporary trends in feminist thought. Global capitalist crisis is characterized by neoliberal discourse focusing on individualism, hyper commercialism, competition, increased reliance and use of technology, and the belief that more is always better. Transnational feminist moments in thought are also influenced by neoliberal discourse. Charting this influence, feminist scholar Nancy Fraser (2013) argued that aspects of feminism have been co-opted to serve as a 'handmaiden to capitalism.' As a handmaiden to capitalism, some symbols of feminism have been co-opted to support global capitalist system. Ultimately, this fails to improve women's lives across the globe if the focus is solely on individual empowerment without communal solidarity (Fraser, 2013). Fraser (2013) called for a reinvigoration of feminism's original promise through the implementation of a truly emancipatory feminism that incorporates 1) redistribution (of material resources), 2) recognition (of various intersecting positionalities and diversity), and 3) representation (on a global scale). This approach to feminist praxis can help feminism achieve emancipatory ends in the face of financial crises, political turmoil, and global capitalism (Fraser, 2013). This theoretical framing of feminism guides this study on transnational adult education settings.

Feminist pedagogy and women adult educators have helped inform the history and practice of adult education, although their influence has often gone unnoticed and understated (Brookfield, 2010; Imel & Bersch, 2015). Feminist adult educators share the goal of political, economic, and social equality, which also describes the social foundations of adult education praxis. However, focus on women and feminist pedagogy in adult education has declined in recent years (Eichler, et. al, 2010; Stromquist, 2013). The global spread of neoliberal values and norms have fueled tensions between practice and critical practice in adult education (Taber, 2014). Neoliberalism has also impacted feminist adult educators who struggle to forge solidarity in communities across national borders (English & Irving, 2015b), and these struggles highlight an important area of study for the field of adult education from a transnational perspective.

Existing research on the connections between women and feminist adult educators in international contexts has led to more questions about how feminist pedagogy is done with adults in various transnational adult education settings. English and Irving (2015a) documented this connection by exploring the roles of women's learning related to community and activism. More research on the various kinds of feminist practices, topics, and activities in transnational adult education settings is needed. This study uses Fraser's (2013) framing of feminism to explore feminist pedagogy in transnational adult education settings through the transnational lens of neoliberal crisis as it impacts education.

Research Design and Methodology

This research study sought in-depth knowledge about the ways women adult educators use feminist pedagogy in transnational adult education settings. A qualitative in-depth feminist interview study was conducted. The participants were educators who identified as women, and as using feminist pedagogy in their work as an adult educator working in transnational adult education settings. The participants identified as working and teaching adults in one or more of the following contexts: International Teacher Preparation programs, English Language Learning and English Language Civics Courses, workplace or community ESL courses, foreign language courses in preparation for a study abroad, projects and trainings by international non-profit

organizations, a woman's prison in Nigeria, and an adult education research methods course with a transnational focus.

The participants were selected after being identified by the researcher at various adult education conferences and later as recommended to the researcher by interviewees and adult educators. Eight, two-hour long interviews were conducted with eight women adult educators using a feminist approach to qualitative interviewing. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. A feminist thematic analysis of the interview data was conducted to reduce the data in meaningful ways (Grbich, 2013) and address the research questions. This paper will report on the preliminary findings from this empirical research.

Preliminary Findings

Following the first iterations of data analysis, three preliminary findings were noticed by the researcher. These preliminary findings began to answer research questions related to what kinds of feminist practices, topics, and activities were described by the participants. Preliminary findings indicated that participants described, 1) Making space for marginalized and vulnerable learners, 2) capacity building, fostering solidarity, and building community were important outcomes of feminist pedagogy, and 3) having to be strategic about using the word 'feminism' and explicitly referencing feminist topics due to potential backlash.

Making space for marginalized and vulnerable learners. The women adult educators in the study described making space for marginalized and vulnerable learners in class. For example, Vivian, an African-American woman in her 30's doing international development work with her own non-profit organization in Ghana and Senegal, discussed how allowing and embracing children in community learning spaces and workshops made education more accessible to women in the community.

You know...to be able to say, "I want to take you away and do a training for a week." Well, maybe you are a new mom, or you have to go to work, or you have to man your stall for your new business. How do you create the access for people to learn to be able to participate in trainings? Another thing that has been really helpful, ...allowing children to be present...there is a picture of this one baby who I just adore... Her mom wanted to participate, but she was just a little baby and she wasn't even weaned from breastfeeding yet. And so, it was like, "yeah, bring her along!"... We have to create an environment where maybe it's not going to be so physically rigorous for a (pregnant) woman to participate in. Vivian also described providing free childcare during another educational program she facilitates that conducts international dialogues for people of African descent. Like many other participants, making education settings accessible was described as important in their feminist pedagogy.

Another way that educators make space for marginalized and vulnerable adult learners was in encouraging autonomy of voice in the learning spaces. This sometimes involved inviting adult learners to speak but letting them know that they could decline. This practice takes up the feminist topics of consent and voice that are especially important for marginalized learners. Laurie, a longtime ESL adult educator in workplace and community settings described the practice as follows,

And that's really important because a lot of people are shy. They're not gonna be the first one to speak up and there's a certain awkwardness to calling on people. You can do it, but I try to give people a lot of autonomy about speaking. I don't like to call on people, but if I do call on them, I often say, "it's fine if you want to pass."

Adult educators also made space for marginalized and vulnerable learners, making sure students had access to materials. Educators often provided the materials for learners or made them

available in a digital format. Many participants noted making space for learners meant adapting to the technology that adult learners were comfortable with. For instance, Kirsty described her surprise at the widespread use of smart phones for learning in her teacher education courses in Jamaica, and how this led to a more empathetic reading of the use of the technology.

They all have phones. Now, this was me being really bad a few years ago, I said to a student who was on her phone all during class, I walked over to her and I said, “I’d really appreciate it if you’d put your phone down while we are having class.” I said, “It’s kind of distracting to me that you are on your phone.” And she turned it around, she said, “I’m looking up the words you are using that I don’t know the meaning to.” So as a teacher, I am learning also. ESL workplace adult educator Ari noted that using technology and games was fun for the adult learners she worked with, especially since their class times took place immediately after a work shift when her students were often tired or preoccupied with events of the day. She described using the app Quizlet as follows:

So, it’s an app or website used mostly for vocabulary learning and they have a lot of flash card activities from matching to spelling practice to matching the spelled words to pronunciation, and they had team exercises as well...talk to a partner for three minutes using this topic, and they always really liked when technology was involved. I think it kind of upped the seriousness of the class. They really bought into it when the computers and phones were involved. I was also fortunate enough to have an iPad I could loan out, in case a student forgot a phone.

Participants in this study also described intersectional and transnational feminist teaching philosophies influencing their feminist pedagogy, and this impacted the way they made space for marginalized or vulnerable learners in transnational adult education settings. Other issues participants noted intersecting with gender issues in their work included racial justice, disability rights, worker’s rights, housing justice, children’s rights and childcare justice, human rights, social justice at large, LGBTQ+ issues, and age discrimination. These issues touched upon were wide and varied, but also implied that feminist issues are those that impact the entire community. This leads us into the next preliminary finding emphasizing community building and other activities benefitting whole communities as important outcomes of feminist pedagogy.

Capacity building, fostering solidarity, and building community. Participants in this study described doing feminist activities to support capacity building, fostering solidarity, and building community. Women adult educators in this study emphasized the importance of building capacity within individuals, across communities, and working to make sure knowledge and empowered actions spread beyond the learning space. Some participants connected capacity building to the act of fostering leadership and connected ‘becoming a leader’ to ‘finding a voice’. For instance, Kirsty described this in her discussion of her experiences in teacher education in Jamaica. “But I also talk about, if you become a leader, I hope you will take these same ideas to your leadership and you will empower the people around you. You will give them a power to have a voice, and what we’re doing and how we’re changing.”

Building community amongst the adult learners within the learning/ classroom setting was another important outcome of feminist pedagogy. This outcome is described in the following quote from Laurie, who was referring to the outcome of an activity she called “the go-around.” In this activity, done in a workplace ESL setting in the U.S., adult learners sit in a circle and respond to a prompt question. When they are finished speaking, the person sitting next to them asks the original speaker a question, “going around” until everyone has a turn answering questions, listening deeply to their neighbors, and asking questions of them. Laurie noted, “I felt

like everybody tuned-in in a really different way. It also just created this really good feeling of community, because by the end people had a lot of information about each other, that they didn't have before." Doing feminist pedagogy to building community and relationships amongst learners within learning spaces was mentioned across all participant interviews.

Having to be strategic about the word, "feminism." Participants described having to be strategic about using the word 'feminism' and explicitly referencing feminist topics due to potential backlash. Whether or not women adult educators would openly say their practice was "feminist" depended greatly on the setting and the students. Many women adult educator participants described neoliberal forces at play in higher education, development, adult education, and feminism that ultimately impacted how and when they could use the word, "feminism". In her work with an international development non-profit, Vivian described how she had to frame her feminist work as rights and protections for women and girls, instead of feminist. "Even the women's movement, I never talk about that. I talk about rights or protections, and I use those words instead of feminism because they carry a certain Western connotation that is not embraced by certain communities." Vivian described how misunderstandings about definitions of feminism made it difficult for her to use the word directly. Similarly, Kirsty described how she often framed her feminist work as social justice work, noting that using the word, "feminism" would cause her to "lose people." Maya, a participant teaching adult education research methods at a university with a transnational lens, described how, even though she explicitly used feminist material and feminist scholars who were Women of Color in her class, she didn't care if students called themselves feminist or not, as long as they were being exposed to feminist ideas and doing intersectional, gender, and post-colonial work.

Many participants mentioned how they would identify some of their students as feminist, but few students that would identify themselves as feminist or use the word "feminist." For instance, Laurie explained, "I don't know if anyone would call themselves a feminist, but there are really powerful women with a really strong sense of right and wrong." The one exception to this trend was in the practice of adult educator and ESL instructor Gina who openly used the word feminist and feminism with students. Gina described that although her adult students were resistant to the concept and word "feminism" at first, after being directly introduced to feminist topics and materials, such as TEDtalks and popular books discussing feminism, they became more open to the idea of calling themselves "feminists," and many did.

Discussion and Conclusion

While many education scholars have discussed the importance of feminist pedagogy, a transnational perspective on how women adult educators deliver feminist pedagogy with adults remains under-explored. This study can contribute to existing scholarship on feminist pedagogy, teaching adults in international and development settings, and contribute to adult educators' knowledge and practice. The preliminary findings in this study illuminate the neoliberal influences on feminist praxis. In particular, a reluctance to address feminism directly or use the word "feminist" was prominent. Participants cited the reluctance due to potential backlash from learners associating themselves with the label of feminism and due to larger economic structures, such as the ability to gain or maintain funding or receive positive teacher evaluations. However, adult educators highlighted feminist issues in their practice, even if they didn't name it out loud. They also noticed feminist topics as they arose in class and recognized students as having the characteristics of feminists. This speaks to the fact that feminist pedagogy is seen as effective, even when the word "feminism" goes unnamed. It also shows how feminism remains a radical yet important idea in adult education, despite dominant neoliberal and post-feminist sensibilities.

Future research could include highlight the feminist work of adult educators who identify as men or non-binary, to explore varying approaches to feminist pedagogy across gender identities. As LGBTQ+ issues were noted as salient topics for discussion by women adult educators, more research about the intersections between LGBTQ+ justice and feminist pedagogy could also be explored. The preliminary findings of this research indicate that feminist issues are salient and intersect with all aspects of the work of adult education. The work of feminist pedagogues in these transnational settings demonstrate an intersectional approach to fostering more inclusive and socially-just learning spaces by building community and capacity, fostering solidarity, encouraging learners to find their voice, and making space for marginalized and vulnerable learners in creative ways. More work will be done to analyze and interpret the findings of this research in order to highlight and honor the innovative work of adult educators doing feminist pedagogy in international education and development settings.

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