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Jaye Jones
CUNY Lehman College, jaye.jones@lehman.cuny.edu

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“We’re All on the Same Journey, but [Are Taking] Different Paths”: Relational Connection, Critical Consciousness and Visions of Possibility Among Female Adult Literacy Learners

Jaye Jones

Adult Learning Center, Institute for Literacy Studies, Lehman College – CUNY

Abstract: This paper describes the impact of a modified version of Women Reading for Education, Affinity & Development (WREAD) - a reading discussion group for women of color with self-defined histories of trauma – and outlines the importance of nurturing culturally affirming, women-centered spaces for learning and healing.

Keywords: adult literacy, women, critical literacy, trauma, critical consciousness

“I went through a lot to get to the point where I am. I did it by myself; I really didn’t have nobody to do it for me...all the changes that I had to go through and the abuse...the neglect, the abuse - physically mentally, spiritually...and just making it in life...and how far I done come...”

Sue, WREAD participant

For many female adult learners of color, the journey to literacy begins with a narrative of trauma - both individual and collective - and a desire to resist. As women of color with literacy struggles, their painful experiences of oppression and cultural marginalization are often complemented by a sense that education will be a catalyst for personal transformation, collective empowerment and healing (Jones, 2012; Mojab & McDonald, 2001). This awareness is connected to an understanding of experience that is nested in identities shaped by race/ethnicity, class, gender, level of access to educational opportunities and histories of migration (Cooper, 2015; D’Amico, 2003; hooks, 1984/2000). To support these learners, educational spaces need to have a commitment to democratic education that actively contests silencing discourses and nurtures a range of resistance strategies (Darder, 2015; hooks, 1994; Horsman, 2001; Morrish, 2002).

Women Reading for Education, Affinity & Development (WREAD) is a response to this reality and an outgrowth of research identifying links between trauma, the literacy challenges and isolation of women of color; and the emancipatory potential of critically aware learning spaces that center their stories (Horsman, 1999; 2004; Isserlis, 2008; Sheared, 1999). Originally developed as a reading discussion group for African American women with self-defined histories of trauma, WREAD utilizes an interactive, thematic group structure along with culturally relevant literature to build learners’ basic literacy skills and content knowledge (e.g. history), and promote personal growth and supportive connections with other women (Jones, 2012; 2014). WREAD is also embedded in critical literacy perspectives that recognize the sociopolitical aspects of literacy and through its configuration emphasizes the links between learning, healing and collective empowerment (Freire, 1970/1993; hooks, 1994; Mezirow, 2000).

Research Questions and Purpose

The research questions that informed this study focused on the educational, critical literacy and interpersonal aspects of WREAD in an effort to illuminate the layers of impact on (a) women’s literacy levels and content knowledge development, (b) their perceptions of their experiences with both personal and collective traumas and (c) how relationships formed in the group created a sense of community and impacted learning.
WREAD’s dialogic structure and commitment to exploring literature that centered the experiences of marginalized groups provides a frame for critically exploring how the personal and political interface, and how strategies of resistance are established within oppressive environments (Brookfield, 2003; hooks, 1994). By engaging closely with learners, their visions of self and community are incorporated into the development of adult literacy theory and practice (Sheared, 1999).

**Theoretical Foundations**

Several theoretical perspectives informed and framed the development, structure and implementation of WREAD. These include, relational cultural theory (RCT), which emphasizes the importance of relationships to women’s well-being and personal growth (Miller, 1986; 1988); critical literacy theory, which highlights the need for dialogue and consciousness-raising to support deeper learning and social action (Darder, 2015; Freire, 1970/1993); and feminist theory, which centers the experiences and strengths of women of color within an intersectional and global context (Collins, 2000; Cooper, 2015; hooks, 1984/2000). Freire’s (1970/1993) model of adult learning provides a theory for learning and action that emphasizes the importance of critical dialogue that allows the oppressed to become “beings for themselves”; a process supported through educative encounters that honor cooperation, unity, organization and the centering of the culture of those who are subjugated. Through these practices, the oppressed become more critically aware and move from being objects to subjects who can utilize education as a “practice of freedom” (Darder, 2015; Freire, 1970/1993). WREAD’s integration of a culturally relevant text (*The Warmth of Other Suns*) also reinforced critical literacy processes by bridging literacy development, content knowledge learning and reflections on learners’ journeys toward empowerment and healing.

Finally, the implementation of the Common Core standards in the adult education field has heightened the emphasis on strategies that help adult learners become “college and career ready, and has led to changes in the High School Equivalency (HSE) examination (e.g., GED). There is now greater stress on helping adult learners (a) critically engage with informational/non-fiction texts, (b) gather and analyze evidence from a range of scholarly sources, (c) effectively utilize academic language, and (d) write about concepts in a persuasive and organized manner (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In New York State, the roll out of these standards and the new HSE examination has strained already under-resourced programs and increased student anxiety (Morrison, 2014). This iteration of WREAD provides an opportunity to explore how these new standards can be integrated into student-centered, emotionally responsive contexts with adult learners.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Female adult learners (ages 18 and above) with a self-reported history of trauma/violence and documented reading levels between the 1st and 7th grade level (which corresponds with the “literacy” through “medium” reading levels on the Test of Adult Basic Education [TABE]) were eligible for the group. They were recruited through their participation in a community based literacy program located in New York City.

**Structure of the Group**

WREAD met once a week for three hours for a total of 12 weeks. The primary text was *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which provides a history of the African American Great Migration...
through the stories of three families who migrate from the south to the north, east and west (Wilkerson, 2010). Poems and short non-fiction readings supplemented the text. The theme of “possibilities” provided a frame for the presentation of content emphasizing movement and change, and helped to organize group discussions. Due to the length of the book (it is over 600 pages), students read selected excerpts that included aspects of each migrant’s story. The excerpts were structured using a model that followed the text’s narrative, and a possible trajectory of change: (a) initiating a change/move (exploring the reasons for leaving or making a shift), (b) first steps (early experiences in a new place or with a new way of thinking) and (c) adjustment (getting used to a “new normal” or the integration of internal and external changes into a new vision of self). The use of interactive didactic techniques (i.e., audiobook of the text) and audiovisual presentations were employed to support learning and engagement as well (Burns, 2006). There was also a culminating visit to the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) where the group experienced One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North, an exhibit of Lawrence’s art and auditory, literary and documentary presentations on the migration.

An approach that incorporated feminist qualitative techniques was utilized to collect and analyze the data and illuminate deeper understandings about WREAD’s impact on participants (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Kleinman, 2007). At the beginning and end of the group, learners completed the reading section of the TABE survey test and an adapted version of the Posttraumatic Maladaptive Beliefs Scale (PMBS), a 15-item scale that measures distorted beliefs about current life experiences that may occur in people who have experienced trauma (Vogt, Shipherd & Resick, 2012). Semi-structured pre- and post-group interviews supported reflection on participants’ engagement with the group. Facilitator field notes and transcriptions from audi-taped group sessions were reviewed in concert with learners’ pre- and post-group interviews to understand how their experience in the group was impacted by (a) the content presented in the primary text (b) their life circumstances and self-defined traumas, and (c) their relationships with other women in the group.

Findings

A total of seven women of color (two Afro-Caribbean, one African, two African American and two Latina) participated in WREAD (one Latina participant was unable to complete the group due to a family illness). The average age of the women who completed the group was 39 years (range: 24 years old to 51 years old) and their average reading grade level was 6.4 years (range: 3.9 years – 9.1 years). Learners described an array of self-defined traumatic experiences including: sexual abuse, abandonment and rejection by family members, teen motherhood, domestic violence, homelessness, multiple family deaths, and chronic illness. All except two of the women had children or grandchildren.

As compared to participants in the pilot of WREAD (Jones, 2012) these women were more culturally diverse (all the women in pilot were African American), younger (average age 39 years old vs. 48 years old) and had a higher reading grade level (6.4 years vs. 3.0 years).

Visions of Possibility, Possibilities for Growth

“The things they [migrants] wanted...we’re still them, we still want here in our lifestyle now. I want something today. I want my kids to understand me better and I want better for them. I want better for us.” Kim, WREAD Participant

The theme of “possibilities” provided a framework for group discussions as the women explored personal challenges that had influenced their educational trajectory and their dreams for
the future. Their notion of “possibilities” included opportunities for growth and empowerment, acceptance of things (or people) they could not change, and challenges they had successfully overcome. The reality of posttraumatic growth seemed to be reflected in their descriptions of how past difficulties and experiences with discrimination were also sources of motivation, stronger familial relationships and an enhanced appreciation for life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). This ability to cultivate an advantage from traumatic experiences did not diminish the powerful, often devastating impact of these events on their lives, however. All of the women were living under circumstances that reinforced the violence that increasingly defines urban poverty – fear of eviction, living under state and/or police surveillance and ongoing struggles to keep children physically safe (Martin, 2010; Yancy & hooks, 2015). In addition, for Assi the stress of being a caretaker for an ill family member was embodied by her distressed facial expression and slumped posture. Concerned, the women in the group tried to help her grapple with her situation by providing emotional support and practical advice.

By the final session of WREAD, Assi had been able to utilize some of the resources she had gathered from other students, and had also begun to advocate for more comprehensive family support services. Posttraumatic growth was an option since the trials that Assi and the other participants had endured were scaffolded by a vision of hope that centered their strengths (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Morrish, 2002). In the passage written by Richard Wright from which Wilkerson (2010) took the title of her work, Wright outlines the migrant’s tempered optimism: “…I was taking a part of the South, to transplant in alien soil to see if it could grow differently…” Similarly, WREAD participants believed in their capacity to thrive and they had faith that a new generation would “grow differently” as a result of both their sacrifices and their dynamic responses to intrapsychic and structural obstacles.

Critical Consciousness, Cultural Connections

“[The book] opened up your eyes…We got to see it is still existing….but it’s in another way…It’s still Jim Crow but it’s a whole other form…what was going on then is still going on now, it’s just a different way…” Kim, WREAD Participant

Reading about the ongoing discrimination that migrants faced once they left the south – especially in the area of housing - prompted WREAD participants to reflect on their own experiences with segregation and marginalization. Kim was especially perceptive as she noted the impoverished circumstances of life in her overcrowded housing project: “They call it lynching and Jim Crow back then, we give it a different name [but it’s] still going on…..” Though she had never heard of Michelle Alexander’s (2010) groundbreaking book, The New Jim Crow, her experiential theorizing unearthed how oppressive dynamics were both historically situated and refashioned through different mechanisms of control. Kim also saw these systems linked to an increasing level of surveillance, both globally and in communities of color, where cell phones, transit cards and cameras were able to “follow” and essentially manage people as they went about their lives. For Katherine, the stories of African American migration generated thinking about the discrimination faced by Mexican immigrants in the United States as well as the plight of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic. Her global connections linked and historicized oppressive arrangements tied to colonialism, language privilege and internecine conflict allowing them to be framed within a broader, more collective context.

As the women engaged with the text and developed a sense of themselves as part of a past and present embedded in a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2000), they illustrated how groups like WREAD can encourage learners to critically examine the foundations of subjugation and survival (Brookfield, 2003). This deeper exploration of racism and oppression was cultivated
through an explicit centering of learners experiences and support of collective critical consciousness as a basis for engaging with literature. bell hooks notes that “critical thinking and theory can be [a] source of healing. It moves us forward” (Yancy & hooks, 2015); and indeed, theorizing from experience allowed women like Katherine and Kim to make connections between resistance to systems of oppression and mass action. Tamara noted that learning history in this manner “makes you want to be more, make a stand, become someone.”

**Relational Connection, Pathways to Care**

“...We’re all on the same journey, but [are taking] different paths. You’re going to get there the same way, it’s just that some people have missteps and that’s OK.” Ayanna, WREAD Participant

The development of a sense of community among the women of WREAD was a critical source of knowledge and empowerment. By recognizing their shared struggles as women of color – across time and history - WREAD participants were able to develop a greater sense of their own capacities and access opportunities for communal learning and growth. The dearth of spaces for women of color to connect and cultivate awareness is linked to a lack of value placed on their healing or practices of self-love (hooks, 1993; Yancy & hooks, 2015). In addition, the diverse experiences of women of color mean that recovery and progress will manifest in unique ways (hooks, 1993). This does not preclude the development of community or diminish the need for collective support, but it suggests a range of routes towards transformation must be nurtured (hooks, 1993; Horsman, 2004).

For the majority of women in WREAD, the group was a place where paths leading to education and personal growth intersected, and where re-visioning and support could occur. Sue struggled with emphasizing where she had gone “off the path,” and she acknowledged feeling overwhelmed at times by the anxiety and shame that not having a high school diploma generated. The group became a space where her feelings could both be validated and reexamined. Similarly, while reflecting on how the group helped her, Assi noted: “[I] learned a lot and how I was able to overcome my fear… [I] really, really went through something…the encouragement, feeling, how they embraced it was really thoughtful.” For her, the support was uplifting. However, Tamara, in the post-group interview, expressed feeling that at times, the “sadness” in the room – as they read about histories of exploitation or talked about current experiences of abuse – felt “confining.” While the holding and accommodating nature of the space left Sue and Assi feeling safe and connected, Tamara acknowledged a sense of disengagement and constriction. Her experience is a reminder that group dynamics can be complicated and that checking in and dialogue are an important part of the group process.

**Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

WREAD provides support for an adult literacy/education instructional framework that explicitly acknowledges how collective and personal traumas shape the experiences of women of color. By creating opportunities for community-building, and engagement with texts that motivate learners to build content knowledge and theorize from experience, a distinctive vision of adult education linking critical literacy and social change practices can be cultivated. As learners engage in reading and dialogue, the insights they develop will allow them to become better at problem posing and identifying strategies for personal, collective and political transformation (Freire, 1970/1993; Morrish, 2002). Adult education as a liberatory exercise has at its core a vision that is both inclusive and responsive to the cultural and sociopolitical contexts that have an effect on learning (Darder. 2015; Mojab & McDonald, 2001). WREAD’s emphasis
on incorporating the realities of culturally diverse women of color, means marginalized communities and their collective responses to oppression are given voice (Morrish, 2002; Sheared, 1999). Emotionally responsive spaces like WREAD facilitate the creation of deeply meaningful support networks as well. Describing her experience, Assi remarked: “[The other women] took me through my journey as if they were part of my family” - this image of encouragement, appreciation, and communal care should be a possibility for all learners as they navigate their paths in life.

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