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Crossing Over, Moving Over: Personal Narratives of Caribbean Adult College Women's Struggles and Strategies

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Abstract: This research study documented the personal narratives of Caribbean immigrant college women's struggles and strategies as they adjusted to life in the United States. The main purpose of the study was to examine the extent to which the concurrent work, family and community settings impact their personal and cognitive development.

Introduction

It is now known, not only in the Caribbean, but also throughout the world, that most college campus communities are filled with people from multicultural environments. Unique perspectives that guide their lives, as well as the burdens they carry, guide them in their search for personal growth. Many of these people are women, who according to the psychologists are at various stages of adulthood. Many of these women bring diverse experiences to the learning environment as they pursue studies at the college level. Despite their experiences and interactions at college, they manage home, work and study. Even though many of these women experience financial, social, physical, and psychological constraints, they do well and continue to perform at very high levels.

Despite the many dilemmas and struggles that women face, they are often drawn to various kinds of adult education programs. The assertion that some of these women have been excluded or alienated from knowledge production is met with denial, indifference, and hostility from those who profit the most from the structural power relations in society that maintain the status quo. Gatekeepers have been instructed to let in women, people of color, the physically challenged, the non-heterosexual and immigrants. Yet, individuals from these groups are marginalized and have been pushed to the edges of vast educational enterprises; they are faced with the very difficult task of pushing back to the center against considerable institutional forces. Payeur (1994) noted, "However, adult education does have the potential to be different. Its rhetoric about flexibility, personal growth and non-hierarchical structures is eminently suited to the characteristics of the women's movement and its associated educational activities" (pp.114-115).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which the concurrent work, family, and community settings impact the personal and cognitive development of a group of Caribbean immigrant adult college women. More specifically, I wanted to understand the lives of these immigrant college women and make meaning of all the things that are impacting them as they adjust to life in the U.S.A. I sought answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent do their life-world environments hinder or help their personal development?
2. What kinds of constraints or obstacles do they have to overcome in their quest for further academic studies?

3. Do their out-of-college daily interactions support them in their return to further academic studies?
4. What roles does their family or community play in their educational experiences?
5. Do any of their support systems help them to rethink the meaning of learning for their personal development?

Migration

In the study, some attention was paid to migration, but I was specifically interested in how the concurrent work, family, and community settings impacted their personal and cognitive development. The differences in age, socialization and level of education have yielded knowledge that is of specific relevance to their status as immigrants.

Many different ways of looking at women are needed. Since all participants are immigrant women, it made sense to understand and include them in the research process and to develop specific methodologies that can help to understand them better as learners and as individuals. Feminist adult educator Payeur (1994) commented that “adult education is a personal process of liberation and has necessarily a political impact on our society” (p. 24). This is an essential value for the twenty-first century. Thus, narrative inquiry needs broader exposure and consideration if it is to gain wider acceptance in all of adult education.

In an effort to include the many voices of people in this CEP, the literature review began with relevant aspects of the migration process as a frame of reference for Caribbean immigrants. In the history of Caribbean immigration to New York City, West Indians constituted the largest group of immigrants from the Western Hemisphere. They were part of the general population movement toward America, and New York in particular, where they shared residential community with black Americans. They had a determination to succeed and the ability to use the opportunities that existed in New York. The available literature in this area was very limited, consisting of published and unpublished papers that focused on women as independent persons who were motivated to migrate in search of better opportunities.

Clarke (2002), in her study of the social mobility of West Indians in New York, explained the phenomenon as follows:

...The influx of immigrants, fleeing from their native countries, has renewed scholarly interest in the phenomenon of immigration and the controversy of their cultural, demographic, economic, and social impact on the host country. (p. 50)

Alfred (2003), in her research on Anglophone Caribbean immigrant women in U.S. postsecondary education, expressed the fact that the women’s worldviews and ways of knowing helped to shape the cultures of their communities. She stated, that one must understand that as these immigrants navigate foreign cultures, they bring a view of the world that has been shaped by British colonialism, early socialization, and prior learning experiences. As they cross cultural and national boundaries, they are forced to negotiate these early learning and socialization experiences to participate in the activities of new cultures and meet new cultural expectations.

It is for these reasons that this study used the personal narratives of Caribbean immigrant college women, who were born and had worked in the West Indies and Guyana, and had migrated and lived for ten or more years in New York City. In their own voices, they tell of their personal development and adaptation to a new society.

Adult Development and the Learning Experience

Psychological changes in adulthood have been chartered by a number of researchers, and much has already been done in the area of adult development and learning from various perspectives. In the developmental literature, a greater emphasis and recognition is now being placed on how social and cultural factors influence development in adulthood.

In his essay on adult development and social theory, it is stated that Dannefer (1984) offered the clearest description of adult development as a socially organized and produced phenomenon. He outlined three major principles that define a sociological stance on development: seeing human beings as open and unfinished and thus able to be influenced by the environment; accepting the complexity and diversity of the social environment organized by levels and classes; and understanding the symbolic nature of the social environment, such as the taken-for-granted ideas about “normal development,” including age-linked stereotypes (as cited in Merriam & Cafarella, 1991, pp.110-111). These principles are all defined by society as a whole and by the smaller groups in which individuals interact. In conclusion, Dannefer proposed that development in adulthood might be affected at least as much, in some way, by sociological factors as by innate psychological forces. These two areas of learning experience were borne in mind when conducting my research with the group of Caribbean adult college women. In summary, the literature offered evidence of the stage and phase models of development that have long dominated adult education’s views of learning and change in adulthood. It is also clear that the interconnectedness of narratives influence the meanings and the narrative forms that are instruments of both cultural and individual meaning. In addition, we are reminded that Caribbean women’s struggles and strategies were shaped by their socialization and early schooling experiences in their home countries, where academic success is viewed as an aspect of personal development and education is a vehicle for social mobility.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research study in which use is made of the narrative inquiry approach. I have chosen the characteristics of Bogdan and Biklen (2003) as the foundational aspects of my CEP, because one of their purposes was to provide a background for understanding the uses of qualitative research in education. Researchers who use this approach are interested in how different people make sense of their lives. In other words, qualitative researchers are concerned with what are called “participant perspectives” (pg. 4-7).

Throughout this study, I was guided by the model of narrative inquiry developed by Clandinin and Connelly (1994), who wrote from within their interest in personal experience methods in social science and developed a case study of narrative as a mode of inquiry. This model offers a means to bring previously silenced voices to the “listening” range of dominant discourse, by representing the narrative of the “other” in a way that helps to ensure that its meaning is understood.

As an analytical tool, the purpose of narrative inquiry is to produce a depth of understanding about a particular topic or existence. It emphasizes the multiple perspectives of respondents, the ethical obligations of the researcher or his or her respondents, and the techniques required to meet standards of quality.

In describing the methodological issues of narrative inquiry, Connelly and Clandinin (2000) also explained the process as involving both the researchers and practitioners in telling stories of the research relationship. In this way, there is the possibility of their stories being those

of empowerment. Therefore, in the beginning of the process, it is important that all participants have a voice in the relationship.

Narrative inquiry allowed me to mutually construct the relationship whereby the college women and I have had a voice with which to tell our stories and create research texts. These texts are grounded in the stories that the college women told me, in the relationships that made it possible for me to hear them, as well as in the reflective process through which I sought to understand them.

Participants

A total of six (6) immigrant adult college women were selected from the eight who volunteered to be a part of the study. Two participants were from Jamaica, two were from Trinidad, one was from Grenada, and one was from Guyana. They were all Afro-Caribbean women whose ages ranged from 27 years to 48 years, and they have been living in New York for the past 10 to 26 years. All the women are unmarried except for one woman who is a widow. All but two of the women have children. Five of them are pursuing undergraduate studies and one is studying for a second degree. Three of them are teachers.

Selected participants were interviewed individually and confidentiality of the study was maintained with only pseudonyms being used in the written report. An open-ended interview schedule was constructed to guide a conversational face-to-face interview. It addressed such topics as a) personal and cognitive development experiences in the Caribbean and Guyana; b) migration and adjustment in the U.S.A.; c) living, working and going to school in the U.S.A.; and d) present personal and cognitive development.

Interviews lasted for one to two hours, and three follow-up interviews were arranged to give me an opportunity to clarify and elaborate on certain points made by the participants in the first interview. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken before and after the formal interview session.

Data analysis was an ongoing process that began early in the data collection with the transcriptions of the women's stories. A detailed analysis of verbatim transcripts was done from the interviews. In retelling their stories, I created poems based on the stories that I was told. I then gave each participant a copy of the transcribed interview story and the poem for her review, clarification, and suggestions. The women clarified all the information that was stated therein and verified the truth of both the stories and poems that I had written from the composed field texts which included field notes of shared experiences, conversations, and other life experiences.

Findings

In the personal narratives of these immigrant Caribbean women, whatever the circumstances of their migration, their willingness indicated some sense of personal achievement. The accounts of their dilemmas, their struggles, and their sacrifices opened my eyes to the reality of what I had in common with them. Their personal narratives were reported using poetry and prose forms.

When all my data were organized and analyzed, four themes emerged: a) self-determination, b) motivations, c) parental vs. self-support, and d) learning experiences. Hence, I noted that most of the women were using their own strategies to ensure that their personal development was enhanced. They told powerful stories that recounted their life experiences as immigrants engaged in adult learning activities. Their stories reflected an active engagement in constructing meaning from both their college classrooms and the broader social contexts of their

lives. The specific situations, the small details, and the vivid images of their personal narratives provided the entryway into their personal growth and change. They were prepared for their new roles as immigrants very early in their development and learning in their home countries.

The analysis of their personal narratives showed that they have accepted the fact that their development is intertwined with learning from their life experiences, given the historical and social contexts in which they now live.

Each woman talked about the different coping mechanisms that she used in seeking an opportunity for a better lifestyle. Examples include having a disciplined approach to their work and study, and networking with other Caribbean college immigrants and families for emotional support. They gave varied accounts of their circumstances as they described their ability to improve their own personal development. The theme of “self-determination” was the foremost underlying factor in their struggles and strategies.

When the college women “externalized” their own stories, they were better able to locate and assess their own stories within their familial or cultural life-world environments. Therefore, just like education, their stories have drawn them out and led them beyond themselves. Thus, the narratives can function as a powerful form of learning and development. As Hopkins (1994) has said, “Our narratives are the means through which we imagine ourselves into the persons we become” (p. xvii). Indeed, the personal narratives of the college women in this study showed clearly the kinds of persons they have become, as they related their adjustment experiences as immigrants.

I conclude that narrative inquiry in its many forms functions as a powerful medium of learning, development, and transformation. Personal narratives serve as an excellent means for understanding how people see their own experiences, their own lives, and their interactions with others. Each personal narrative that we read or hear tells us that the more we share our stories, the closer we become, and that no person makes it through life alone.

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