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Researching Adult Literacy Learners' Lives: Journeys of Trauma Toward Transformation

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Abstract: This qualitative study used autobiographies and self-report inventories to explore ten adult literacy learners' motivation for returning to school, their experiences at school, and the barriers that most interfered with their ability to complete their studies. Another key aim of the study was to investigate the characteristics of teachers, curriculum preferences, and teaching and learning strategies that either hindered or enhanced individuals' ability to learn

Background and Theoretical Perspectives

The growth of adult learning centres as "schools of second chance" presume to provide adults with essential personal, social, academic, and technical skills that will help them gain entry into college and other post secondary programs. Though adult literacy centres are becoming increasingly popular and deemed necessary to adults are to acquire skills for the "new economy," further research is needed to investigate the experiences that literacy learners encounter when they return to classes for secondary school completion. Drop out is high in many adult literacy programs and the factors that explain why some adults persist while others withdraw suggest a complex interaction of personal, social, educational, and occupational factors (Beder, 1991; Harmon and Edelsky, 1990; Malicky, Norton, Norman, 1997; Horsman, 1998; Quigley, 1997). Quigley (1997) asserts that "we have too often ignored the reality of the learners. Among other things, they have agency-free will, free choice, and the capacity to grow and change."(p.176). Quigley further notes that a key challenge in overcoming retention problems is the ability to balance learner needs, objectives, and strengths with teacher needs, objectives, and strengths in an enriching environment.

Most adult decisions to return to school are triggered by key changes and transitions in their lives. While cognitive and emotional factors may influence the strength of the learner's intent and perseverance to continue, academic performance and external factors (e.g. financial, family, work) may influence the outcome of the learners' intentions. One student in this study wrote: "The decision to return to school has been positive. Burn out from family problems, financial stresses, "dead end" jobs, and the hope of improving my prospects triggered my decision to return to school." The present study also attempted to explore the familiar "institutional, situational, and personality" barriers to learning outlined by Cross (1981) in a more in-depth way.

Theoretical perspectives that helped gain insight into the literacy learners' experiences were found in Freire's (1997) critical literacy theory and Mezirow's (1981) transformative learning. For Mezirow (1991), learning does not only include the addition of new information; rather, the way we understand and interpret our world can be transformed through a process of critical reflection and action. Mezirow asserts that transformative learning can be seen as "an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one's beliefs and feelings, a critique of their assumptions and particular premises, and an assessment of alternative perspectives"(1991 p.161). Transformative learning experiences are complete when a decision is made to adopt a new perspective and carry out actions that are congruent with it. McFarlane et al (2001) note that Mezirow's theory is appealing because it is not age, stage, gender, or culturally dependent; in addition, it involves cognitive, emotional, social, and professional growth (also see Cranton,1994;Grabove, 1997; Taylor, 2000). Literacy education, for Freire(1997), should go beyond teaching functional skills and toward helping individuals gain critical awareness of the

systems that may undervalue or oppress them. “The teacher’s conviction that they can learn from their students’ experience is an important cornerstone in understanding Freire’s “problem posing” process of critical education” (Magro, 2001, p. 88). From the perspective of both Freire and Mezirow, the teacher’s role is associated more with a co-learner, facilitator, and challenge (Magro, 2003). Dei (2002) further notes that in order to foster transformative learning in classrooms, “it is importance for teachers to ground the learner in a sense of place, history, culture, and identify. Identification with the social and natural environments in which teaching and learning occurs must be seen as key to spiritual and emotional self-development” (p. 127). Course content should be anchored in individuals’ aspirations, concerns and needs.

The Autobiography as Methodology

This study was carried out over an academic term (February-June, 2003). Ten adult learners registered in Grade 12 Psychology and English classes at a major literacy centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba participated. Some of the students were new Canadians who had fled war torn countries such as Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, and Viet Nam. Other students were First Nations learners who were living in the inner city or had moved to Winnipeg from isolated northern communities. Many were single parents. The learners came from diverse cultural backgrounds and the average age of the participant was 25. Part of the research study involved the learners writing autobiographies highlighting “marker events” in their lives.

The use of autobiography as a vehicle for transformative learning has been studied by researchers such as Karpiak (2000);Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, 1998; Nelson (1994); and Richmond (2002). Nelson (1994) notes that “the use of autobiographical accounts, telling the story of stability and change can be a promising source for research in adult learning. As literary texts, they make the investigation of imaginative forms such as metaphor, image, and symbol both possible and warranted”(p. 389). Nelson further notes that in autobiographical writing, the person can develop a sense of personal autonomy and authority; this awareness reflects how their values, feelings, and ideas have changed and perhaps transformed. “Autobiographical learning, which presupposes reflection and critical thinking, is enabled by imagination, which leads to a transformation in the person’s perspective and practice.” (p. 390). These personal narratives reflect the individuals’ social and personal identity. The researcher becomes a co-learner and a co-collaborator in this interpretive process.

The self-report inventories and surveys asked learners to rank the “top five” barriers that most interfered with their learning or ability to complete their program of studies. Some of these barriers included: financial difficulties, family problems, fear and anxiety, prior negative experiences in schools, conflict with teachers, health problems, etc. The questionnaire asked the learners to describe their reasons for returning to school and their subsequent experiences. They were also asked to comment on the courses and characteristics of teachers that they found most and least helpful to their learning. Once the data had been collected, follow up interviews lasting 1-2 hours were recorded and transcribed.

Key Findings

The present study found that adult literacy learners have much to say about their motivation for returning to schools and the barriers that were most likely to impede their progress and continuation. The central barriers to learning that the students in this study identified included: financial difficulties, problems balancing parenting and school responsibilities, anxiety, stress, and other emotional problems; too little time at home to complete assignments, and a lack of study skills. The themes that emerged from many of the autobiographies and questionnaires reflected crisis and trauma. Traumatic events, as Herman

(1999) notes, “overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning”(p.33).Poverty, violence, fragmentation in families, health and emotional problems, personal insecurities, and drug and alcohol addiction were among the themes that surfaced. Many of the learners in this study described feelings of depression, insecurity, and loss.

One young woman who is now a student teacher focused her essay on “marker events” around the depression and suicide on northern First Nations reserves. She wove theoretical perspectives on depression with her own experiences growing up on a northern reserve. She described the “case studies” of three cousins and a brother who had committed suicide. Referring to adult learning among Indigenous communities, Shilling (2002) emphasizes that “new and creative ways” are needed “to work through the existing pain and collective consciousness”(p. 153). He further states that “Indigenous peoples often experience a high level of collective stress in their daily lives. The constant energy of poverty, violence, sadness, family breakdown, abuse, death, assaults, accidents, suicide, chronic illnesses, unemployment, and intergenerational trauma paralyzes a community in a state where crisis is more likely than progress.” (p. 154).

Individuals who fled war torn countries describe feelings of stress and depression as a result of their experiences. Their stories also reveal the frustration of “having to start life all over” again in a new country. One man who was an accountant in the Sudan describes being detained and tortured before escaping to Kenya. Another young woman escaped a prison in Liberia and found her way to Canada after a harrowing journey. She describes the death of her father, a high school principal, and member of a political party that opposed the current governments leaders in Liberia. Another man from Viet Nam lost his immediate family and came to Canada with nothing, except a Vietnamese- French dictionary. Alem, a student from Ethiopia, described the chaos and violence that was part of his life growing up in the 1970s and 1980s:

I was six when my father was killed by the new government forces in Ethiopia. We used to be a well to do family but our properties were confiscated by the so called Marxist revolutionaries after they took over the government from emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. We were considered the enemy of the revolution and our Christian values were challenged. My mother who had no source of livelihood by her own was left with four children to raise. Poverty became the ruler of our life and it was at this time that I began school.

The democratic movements were crushed, and hundreds and thousands of people were killed, tortured, and imprisoned mercilessly and inhumanely. There was a reign of fear in my country and I saw high school and college students get killed on the streets of Bahirdar. I was 12 or 13 years old at the time.

Alem’s mother managed to create a successful business and the family worked together to survive. This student did well in school and managed to complete a degree in Political Science. He fled to Italy and lived in Rome for five years before coming to Canada.

Horsman (1998) notes that themes of violence and post traumatic stress are not adequately addressed in many literacy programs. She emphasizes that there is often “not a lot of space” for emotions and that it is the responsibility of literacy workers, funders, and others in the field to recognize that all literacy learning must be carried out in recognition of the needs of survivors of trauma. She also noted that the trauma experienced by the learners can also adversely impact the literacy teachers. This “vicarious trauma” can result in the literacy teacher feeling a sense of helplessness. “Literacy workers have little control over when they will hear

stories and have fewer boundaries to control how much they will hear or what to expect” (p. 16). Similarly, Robertson (1996) emphasizes that the “the field (adult education) neither adequately prepares nor supports adult educators to manage the dynamics of helping relationships or the dynamics of transformative learning within the context of these relationships” (pp. 43-44).

One of the teachers that I spoke with encouraged her students to write poems, short stories, and other forms of creative writing to describe their personal experiences. Almost always, she noted, students were willing to “disclose a lot of fascinating but terrifying detail.” While the autobiographies that I read reflected tragedy and trauma, they also reflected courage, inner strength, and a determination to succeed in life. Despite the set backs, these students had optimism and were willing to see the past as a learning experience that brought inner strength. While many of the students in this study cite numerous reasons for returning to school, a prevalent factor involved being “a good role model” for their children and creating a “good life” that had eluded them. For some, school is viewed as a “safe haven” where their dreams and goals can be realized. A number of the learners in this study described turning points in their lives that triggered a decision to return to school and activate positive change:

Up to the age of fourteen, I had spent my life under the totalitarian rule of my mentally and physically abusive alcoholic father. When he died, I felt so free and yet so lost. This confusion led to ten years of drug and alcohol addiction. These addictions had a hold of my sisters as well. This destruction behavior continued until I was 24 and became pregnant with my son Zak. After finding out, I went cold turkey, as the cold reality of being responsible for someone other than myself harshly and quickly set in. I did not want to harm my child...Having a child totally changed my life. I wanted to be his role model. I wanted to be the parent that I felt I should have had. I wanted everything to be the opposite of the negativity that was my childhood...

I grew up in a Hutterite colony and education was not encouraged for girls and women at that time. The comfort and security of colony life is very addictive and breaking away can be the hardest decision of a Hutterite’s life. On my 15th birthday I was told that I did not need to continue school and that I was to go to work now. The elders in the colony were strict, and if you showed signs of disrespect, you would be isolated. So on the colony, I worked at gardening, canning, cooking, and everything else you do on the farm. At the age of 17 I ran away from home and came to Winnipeg. I found jobs that didn’t require a Grade 12 education. I worked as a nanny, waitress, and so on. It wasn’t until I was divorced with four children that I realized that I couldn’t support my children and myself on minimum wage.

I was seventeen when I started to smoke crack cocaine. From the moment I took my first hit, I was addicted. I was also able to keep my addictions a secret from my family. By the time I had already been living with my boyfriend for about a year. We cut ourselves off completely from the world. I sat awake at night not even noticing the sunrise. I wouldn’t eat for days and my appearance had changed dramatically. Physically I was dying. Emotionally I was already dead.

It’s difficult for me to look back at the person who I was, but then I look at the person who I have become. I am a confident person with dreams and goals. I have strong values. I want to set a good example for my daughter. I hope that my own experiences

and knowledge can help prevent this from happening to my children. I would also like to help people who are going through addictions.

These excerpts suggest that many adult learners return to school to gain a sense of self-worth and dignity that eluded them in the past. The learners' personal narratives also reflect courage, perseverance, and insight.

The Role of the Literacy Educator

The adult learners in this study also described the characteristics of teachers who were most helpful to their learning. Personal qualities such as empathy, kindness, passion, and enthusiasm were frequently cited as characteristics that made returning to school less intimidating.

Teachers who were willing to talk to students and go "beyond the textbook" in helping them understanding concepts and ideas were cited as important qualities. The teaching attributes that the learners in this study described as being helpful to their learning parallel the research of "best practices" in adult education cited by researchers such as Lowman (1995) who emphasizes that "master teachers" who are able to integrate clarity of communication, mastery and accuracy of content with interpersonal skills such as sensitivity, encouragement, and warmth. They also valued teachers who didn't treat them as children or teenagers but rather respected their experience and who could set challenging tasks with choice. One student wrote: "As adults returning to school with so many responsibilities, we don't need to be treated like high school children. Sensitivity, patience, and support are the keys to guiding adult learners." Teaching and learning strategies that were most engaging according to the learners in this study involved collaborative learning and group discussions, independent research papers and feedback that was frequent and constructive. .

The characteristics that the students in this study found least conducive to their learning were: insensitivity, abruptness, and "being too strict." They criticized teachers who trivialized their comments or who were poorly organized and difficult to understand. In emphasizing the importance of a holistic education that integrates cognitive, spiritual, and emotional dimensions, Miller (2002) asserts that "in the presence of a compassionate teacher, the student feels psychologically safe and thus is able to take risks and learn...The student feels accepted at a deeper level and this can go beyond learning that is merely performance, that tries to impress the teacher" (p. 100).

A Transformative Curriculum

The learners in this study found that subjects such as Psychology, Native Studies, World Issues, and English helped them most in understanding themselves and others. This observation echoes Taylor's (1997) observation that "value laden courses" could foster creativity, critical reflection and transformative learning. The students that I spoke with emphasized the value of a curriculum that address their own concerns, needs, and values while at the same time providing an opportunity to learn new ideas and broaden their world perspectives. In the psychology classes, students wrote research papers that were most meaningful to them: parenting skills, children with ADHD, depression and stress, the psychological impact of residential schools, and coping with stress. In the process they are connecting the information to their own lives; in addition they are broadening their own cultural, spiritual, and social awareness. The students in this study also spoke about the need to have more time in class to conduct research and complete homework—time constraints and the difficulty in balancing parental and school responsibilities were ranked high on the list of barriers that would prevent them from doing well in school. Students registered in Native Studies classes took an interest in learning more about Aboriginal

culture and the impact that racism and colonization had. The teacher who taught these courses encouraged discussion and research by introducing books, articles, and plays dealing with Aboriginal themes (see Shilling, 2002).

Implications for Future Studies

This study suggests that further research is needed to explore the impact that stress, poverty, emotional illness and drug and alcohol addiction may have on literacy learners' lives and upon the literacy teachers who work with them. Horsman (1998) states that "without acknowledgment of the impacts of trauma on learning, learners and teachers alike may become frustrated and despairing over the lack of possibilities for real change"(p.2). An educational climate and innovative curricula that emphasize "connection, and meaning" are central to fostering "deeper level" or transformative types of learning. This study also suggests that learners who persist with their studies may have a certain degree of resilience; they have survived difficult circumstances and see a return to school as an opportunity to initiate a positive change. Further research into the intra and interpersonal dynamics of the teaching-learning dynamic would enable researchers to understand how factors such as personality, motivation, and culture influence learning directions.

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