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The myth of the universal adult educator: A literature review.

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Abstract: This paper critically evaluates the adult education literature with respect to how it deals with the race and the gender of the teacher as a factor in the teaching-learning environment. The mainstream literature perpetuates the myth of the universal teacher while the narratives of African American women transcend the myth.

Problem and Purpose

Although there exists a bounty of literature on teaching adults in the mainstream adult education literature there is a conspicuous absence of discussion of how the race and gender of the teacher effects the teach-learning environment. This absence perpetuates the myth of the universal adult educator, one void of race and gender. The myth of the universal adult educator proposes that all teachers would encounter the same things within the classroom and could therefore produce the same results as any other teacher if they follow the prescriptive practices outlined in books on teaching and facilitating adult learners. The problem is that teachers are affected by institutional and classroom environments along with both political and societal factors. Teacher's interpretation of their experiences are influenced by their cultural background and their own sense of personal agency (Dilworth, 1990; Foster, 1993; Tisdell, 1993). Moreover, Dilworth (1990) and Lappan and Briars (1995), advocate that teachers have beliefs about teaching and the teaching-learning process that stem from their own experiences and influence their teaching practices. These attitudes according to Carl (1995) inevitably affect student achievement more than any other classroom factor. Additionally, Gollnick (1992), Irvine (1989) and Rakow (1991) support the belief that the teaching-learning environment is influenced by the teacher's personal characteristics.

The purpose of this literature review is to critically evaluate the adult education literature with respect to how it deals with the race and the gender of the teacher as a factor in the teaching-learning environment. This seems especially appropriate considering that Sandler (1991) proposes that "men and women, teaching in the same classroom, teaching the same subject to the same students, have very different experiences" (p. 12). Rakow (1991) and Tisdell (1992) found that those privileged by their White race or male gender wield more power in the classroom than minorities.

Methodology

An ERIC search revealed numerous books and chapters on teaching and facilitating adult learning (Apps, 1989; 1991; Barer-Stein & Draper, 1993; Brookfield, 1986; 1990; 1995; Cross, 1981; Daloz, 1986; Dickenson, 1973; Draines, Draines, & Graham, 1993; Draves, 1988; Frasier, 1938; Galbraith, 1991, Jones, 1986; Knowles, 1980; 1986; Knox, 1980; Lenz, 1982; Lewis, 1986; Lindhorst, 1951; Miller, 1977; Reese, 1978; Renner, 1994; Rogers, 1986; Seaman & Fellenz, 1989; Westmeyer, 1988; Wilson, 1983). In addition to this mainstream literature the narratives of actual African American women adult educators were analyzed. Included in these narratives are Septima Clark (1962), who was instrumental in her work at Highlander, Dorothy Robinson (1978), Mamie Fields (1983) contemporary adult educator bell hooks (1994). Additionally, the narratives of the African American women researched by Casey (1993), Etter-Lewis (1993), and Foster (1990, 1991) were analyzed.

Findings

Several prescriptive practices occur often in the mainstream literature. This literature evaluates all teachers as one and the same. They present prescriptive practices that suggest that all teachers enter into the classroom on equal levels and construct a positive teaching-learning environment by following prescribed practices. The bulk of adult education literature includes research that does not consider either the race or gender of the teacher or learner. Several examples of this can be seen in the following foundational research studies: Apps, 1989; 1991; Barer-Stein & Draper, 1993; Knowles, 1980; 1986; Knox, 1980; Lenz, 1982; and Seaman & Fellenz, 1989. These works center around prescriptive practices with the major categories being 1) climate setting; 2) techniques for teaching; and 3) learner involvement. Consequently, an examination of the mainstream adult education literature reveals that the discussion of how the race and gender of the adult educator might affect the learning environment is absent.

In addition, the adult education literature routinely broaches the subject of the social settings that involve the student and the teacher, but neglects to delve into the intricacies of their social context. Furthermore the specific race and/or gender with its resulting impact is not considered but merely mentioned. Examples of such, includes research studies that are the infrastructure of adult education: Brookfield (1986, 1990, 1995), Knowles (1980), Galbraith (1991), Knox (1980, 1986), Lenz (1982), Apps (1989, 1991), Seaman and Fellenz (1989), and Barer-Stein and Draper (1993). Even though some of these authors mention the race and gender of the learner, these discussions negate race and gender of the teacher by neglecting to closely examine either.

For instance Brookfield (1986; 1990) acknowledges that the classroom is affected by political and societal changes and that adult learners may scrutinize the actions of the adult educators in light of recent politics but none of his examples address the race or gender of the teacher. Furthermore, Brookfield argues that competency and credibility are characteristics which effective adult educators must have. However he fails to acknowledge how the race and gender of the teacher might impact upon how others acknowledge their competency and credibility and how teachers because of their nondominant race and/or gender may have trouble establishing

their credibility in the classroom. Nonetheless, Brookfield (1990) like Galbraith (1990) does insert into his discussion of power in the classroom how the race and gender of the learner influence the environment but fails to mention the race and gender of the teacher. Brookfield and Galbraith acknowledges that the diversity of the learner affects the teaching-learning environment but they imply or assume that the race and gender of the teacher does not affect the teaching-learning environment.

Similarly, Knowles (1980) asserts that learning is influenced by the quality and amount of interaction between the learners and their environment but does not mention how the power dynamics caused by the race or gender of the teacher affects the environment. Additionally, Knowles states that a climate conducive to learning should be one "which causes adults to feel accepted, respected, and supported; in which there exists a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers; in which there is a freedom of expression without fear of punishment or ridicule" (1980, p. 47). Knowles' stance on creating the right psychological climate involves giving generic generalizations to adult educators. Knowles does not address the issue of how the race and gender of the teacher might influence these conditions. Yet one could argue that these conditions can be affected by this fact because it is logical that societal relations outside the classroom also impact the classroom climate. His comments assume that the adult educator is universal and neutral. One could propose, also that the teacher's perception of their race and gender might influence the classroom interaction.

Accordingly, Seaman and Fellenz (1989) acknowledge that a discussion of a learning environment must include the people involved and how their characteristics affect the learning environment but again they do not involve themselves in a discussion on the race and gender of the teacher. They do however, say that adult educators may have barriers, obstacles or problems that prevent them from conducting an ideal climate in the learning environment. Seaman and Fellenz do not delineate the barriers or obstacles. Although not stated by the authors these barriers or obstacles could pertain to the race and gender of the adult educator.

Also, Knox suggests the teacher's personal characteristics affect the learning environment although he does not specially mention the race or gender of the teacher. Similarly, Lenz (1982) argues that the teacher as an authority figure can subtly or openly influence students toward a particular doctrine or system of principles even though she neglects to mention how the teacher's race or gender might inform her or his doctrine. Moreover, she stresses that adult educators should place special emphasis on the teacher-learner relationship because this logistical factor contributes significantly to the teaching-learning environment. Lenz fails to acknowledge how the race and gender of the teacher may influence establishing relationships with their students.

Furthermore, Apps (1991) and Barer-Stein and Draper (1994) argue that culture is always present in human interaction between students and teachers but they do not address specifically the race and gender of the teacher. Although Apps says that adult educators must "engage their entire personality, how they think, what they know, and how they know it, and how they feel and why they feel that way" in the teaching process (1991, p. 1), he fails to give evidence to support an argument that the race and gender of the adult educator would most definitely impact upon the teaching-learning environment. Apps even goes on to say that "each of us, whether we are always aware of it or not, has a set of values formed by the communities in which we grew up, as

well as by our religion, social status, and ethnic background" (1991, p. 113). Yet, Apps does not address specifics pertaining to how these culturally influenced values might influence ethical classroom decisions. He does however discuss the fact that the teacher needs to strive to take a neutral or fair position in presenting diverse sides of questions. It would seem appropriate for Apps to speak to the race and gender of the teacher and its effect on the learning environment as logical progression of his position. He does not.

In Barer-Stein and Draper's discussion of culture they explain that there is no such thing as neutral adult education. They proclaim that "education that does not seek to change conditions reinforces the existing system" (1994, p. 173). Barer-Stein and Draper believe that adult educators need to have an understanding of the implications of culture on themselves, as well as the learning environment. Nonetheless, they still lean toward universal ways to address cultural diversity and do not discuss how the adult educator's own race and gender might impact her or his praxis strategy.

Nevertheless, even though the mainstream adult educators do not discuss the impact of race and gender on the teaching-learning environment, a discussion of how race and gender influence the teaching-learning environment is present in their narratives of actual African American women educators. These narratives of actual educators are not considered to be a part of the mainstream adult education literature. These narratives show that race and gender were always a part of the teach-learning environment. All of these African American women, while combatting challenges to their competency and philosophies because of their race and gender, also battled institutional constraints on their lives, careers, and practices (Casey, 1993; Clarke & Blythe, 1962; Fields & Fields, 1983; Foster, 1990; hooks, 1994; Robinson, 1978).

A theme that emerged from the literature is that these African American women teachers believed that their teaching philosophy, competency, and teaching practices were questioned by those persons who considered themselves more powerful (Bey, 1995; Casey, 1993; Clarke & Blythe, 1962; Delaney, Delaney, & Hearsh, 1993; Fields & Fields, 1983; Foster, 1987; 1990; 1991; hooks, 1994; King, 1991; Phelps, 1995; Robinson, 1978). Robinson stated that, "there were some Whites who felt that Black teachers, by virtue of cultural traits and limited professional training facilities just had to be inferior" (1978, p. 110). As a result of this, these African American women teachers often felt alone, isolated, and not involved in positive relationships with those individuals. bell hooks, who has taught from 1976 to the present in only integrated settings, told of her experiences with similar issues. She first talked about the white women professors in the Women's Studies department. Even though hooks started teaching a course on Black women writers from a feminist perspective in her undergraduate and graduate years, White women professors who were developing women's studies departments did not nurture her interests. In fact, her class was not considered a part of the Women's Studies Department but a part of the Black Studies Department. hooks further recalled that her work was not accepted by these White women feminists because it challenged their privileged way of thinking (hooks, 1994).

Through their narratives these African American women teachers support the idea that it is hard to teach only content. For example, hooks reiterated the notion that the majority of the students that she teaches have never been taught by a Black woman professor before entering her class.

She states, "I know from experience that this unfamiliarity can overtly determine what takes place in the classroom (1994, p. 86). The following words of hooks succinctly summarize the sentiments of the African American women whose narratives were reviewed,

Many professors are disturbed by our [African American women] overt discussion of political standpoints. A White male professor in an English department who teaches only works by "great White men" is making a political decision. We [African American women] had to work consistently against and through the overwhelming will on the part of folks to deny the politics of racism, sexism, and so forth that inform how and what we teach (hooks, 1994, p. 370).

Not only did teachers question the philosophy and methods of teaching that these African American women teachers practiced, but so did administrators. By the same token these African American women teachers also spoke of other persons who questioned their work. Fields said "we (Black teachers) worked hard, knowing all the time that in the eyes of the powers to be, the Negro teachers really didn't amount to much" (Fields & Fields, 1983, p. 130). The colleagues of bell hooks challenged her work for use by students in their classes. hooks recalled them telling students that her work was not scholarly enough. According to her this resulted in students having a low expectation of her work and students not acknowledging her credibility.

Consequently, their narratives displayed the following: 1) a redefinition of the career of teaching as they reflected on and built on their own past experiences (Casey, 1993; Clarke & Blythe, 1962; Fields & Fields, 1983; Foster, 1990; 1991; hooks, 1994; Robinson, 1978) and 2) a display of progressive teaching philosophies, by engaging in creative, responsive teaching practices while building relationships with their students and communities in the pursuit of uplifting their race (Casey, 1993; Clarke & Blythe, 1962; Fields & Fields, 1983; Foster, 1995; hooks, 1994; Robinson, 1978), all of which were influenced by their race and gender. These narratives give evidence to support the position that adult educators need to go beyond merely proposing prescriptive practices and generalizations about teaching adults to address the issue of how the race and gender of the teacher influences the teaching-learning environment.

Significance

"The notion that African American women are an invisible group on the sidelines and that they can be easily combined with other groups is a convenient fiction that conceals their power and importance" (Etter-Lewis, 1993, p. xvii). There are various power disparities in society between women and men and between and within races. Furthermore, these power disparities which exist in society are often maintained in the classroom (Johnson-Bailey, 1994; Tisdell, 1992). Adult educators making new contributions to the literature on teaching adults by including information about the race and gender of the teacher in the teaching-learning environment will empower those teachers who are not privileged by male gender or White race. Additionally, this literature review should generate interest in conducting further studies focusing on how the race and

gender of the teacher influences the teaching-learning process. The implication resulting from this literature review is that adult educators need to consider the gender and race of the teacher in all of its writings about classroom climate, delivery, and praxis. Furthermore, adult educators should also examine how their own race and gender influences their classroom practices and climate.

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