Women and learning: women’s perspectives on the impact of their involvement in adult and community education.

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Roundtable discussion presented at the 39th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 7-9 July 2009, University of Cambridge

This roundtable will explore some of the issues that underpin a recently undertaken research project which focuses on women’s learning experiences in the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The research will focus on the meaning of ACE in women’s lives and through this identify how involvement in ACE may impact on their lives and those of their children. The project aims to provide “really useful research” (Conference theme 5) which may inform practice and policy (Conference theme 4) and the development and enhancement of community learning environments for women. It is hoped that results from the research will challenge educators to reflect on what constitutes effective learning environments for adults in community settings and raise issues about women’s participation in educational programmes.

The women whose perspectives I aim to explore are those who do not appear to have benefited from previous formal learning, but who have been involved in adult and community education (ACE) in the context of a prison and/or community setting. ACE is a useful vehicle for this exploration as ACE in Aotearoa New Zealand focuses on the personal and social development of the learner, rather than on accredited or vocational outcomes. I have tutored women in prison and learnt alongside women in parent seminars based in schools and noticed their increased interest in challenging their prior understanding and questioning long-held assumptions. Anecdotally, I have seen women develop a more critical view of their world by participating in ACE courses and I wish to explore this and the connection with women’s approaches to their learning.

Currently in Aotearoa New Zealand, ACE is recognised by government as a specific and important sub-sector of tertiary education, which makes a contribution to encouraging social cohesion and sustaining civil society. ACE also focuses on enabling adults, particularly those whose earlier education has not been successful, to participate in education. There are over 200,000 enrolments each year in adult and community education classes and the ACE sector is charged by the government’s Tertiary Education Commission with being responsive to community learning needs, including the needs of women whose lives have been disrupted by negative past experiences (eg. by offending, substance abuse and family difficulties.) ACE programmes tend to appeal to
women as they are easily accessible (culturally, geographically and financially) and they offer opportunities for learners to participate in positive, interactive and experiential learning, without the pressure of accreditation.

The research I plan to undertake will focus on women from a range of ACE settings from a mix of social backgrounds. These are women who have recently been released from prison, women who are attending learning sessions at their children’s primary school, women attending their local secondary school-based ACE programmes and women at a local Women’s Centre. I plan to explore the impact on women of their participation in ACE and how these women perceive their own learning as impacting on their children. I am also keen to identify features of successful learning environments and to use the understanding gained from the project to continue working to influence adult education policy and practice (Theme four).

The research design for the project is influenced by feminist methodologies and seeks, through a qualitative approach, to understand women’s own perspectives on adult and community education involvement in different community settings. Drawing on Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) notion of naturalistic inquiry, the research design will evolve within a broad framework that responds to women’s views about being researched and about the issues which are important to them to explore.

Two issues have arisen at the start of this research around which I would value discussion in this roundtable session. The first is the need to consider how this research aligns with similar research in other countries, and yet clearly highlights the unique differences between Aotearoa/New Zealand (A/NZ) and some other English-speaking countries. Foremost amongst these differences is the fact that Aotearoa New Zealand is a country with an indigenous (Maori) population, a settler population (from the colonial era) and a new settler population. In particular, it is often suggested that the foci for Maori, Pakeha and Pasifika are different: that for Maori the focus is on whanau/iwi (family/community); that for learners of Pacific Island heritage it is on family/church and that for the European/Pakeha learners the approach to ACE is focused on individual development and, sometimes, on civic engagement. All these potential perspectives require consideration within the research and therefore discussion of how the research can take into account differing worldviews and perspectives will be valuable.

The second issue is that of researching "other women". In Barbara Merrill’s (2005) research Puigvert’s term “other women” refers to women who do not have academic qualifications. Merrill adds that these are often women who are marginalised and who lack social, political and economic power (Merrill, 2005, Pg. 44). Some of the women who will be interviewed for the research fit the description of “other women” in relation to myself as a qualified teacher and researcher. I am concerned that I enable the women involved in the research
process to represent their unique views, rather than comparing “differences”. I am therefore challenged to ensure that I construct research that is reciprocal, and that takes into account the research participants’ perspectives and worldviews, which may be different from, and challenge, my own. I welcome discussion of the issues involved in researching reciprocally and sharing knowledge and experience between researcher and researched.

References

This document was added to the Education-Line database on 25 June 2009