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Resolana: Paving Paths Toward Transformation with Incarcerated Women

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to elicit the experiences of women who participated in a gender-responsive program in jail. Results indicate the holistic programming and learning environment was an emancipatory container where transformation could occur through interpersonal and intrapersonal engagement. Findings have implications for the education of incarcerated women.

In the past three decades the number of women who are incarcerated in the U.S. has increased dramatically. The rates of incarcerated women continue to climb at a steady pace and have been increasing at a rate 50 percent higher than men since 1980 (The Sentencing Project, 2013). Researchers note that women's pathways to prison often include histories of victimization including incest, rape, intimate partner abuse, and drug abuse and/or addiction (Bloom, 2003; McDaniels-Wilson & Belknap 2008). Poor women of color who are mothers of minor children face greater risk of incarceration due to the interlocking oppressive forces of racism, classism, and sexism (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Crenshaw, 2012).

Given the historical focus on male offenders in criminology, there are limited offerings of gender-responsive educational programming (GRP) for women inmates and this lack of appropriate intervention may negatively impact women's recovery from histories of mental and physical abuse and addiction, which oftentimes leads to recidivism (Belknap, 2007; Wright, Van Voorhis, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2012). The few studies concerning gender responsive programming for incarcerated women have shown that women who participate are less likely to be incarcerated after being released and GRPs significantly helped women reduce their drug use over time (Messina, Grella, Cartier & Torres, 2010; White, 2012). Resolana is one of the few programs for women that offered holistic, gender-responsive programming to women in a county jail.

Gender responsive programming has the potential to foster transformative learning. Transformative learning occurs when individuals experience a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 22) that ultimately causes a change in worldview, which is a common experience for many women inmates. There are few researchers who have evaluated gender-responsive programming for incarcerated women and the women's experiences have not been explored. Transformative learning has been analyzed in other contexts such as support groups (Hoagland, 2000); however, the fostering of transformative learning in a jail context has received little attention. An investigation into how transformative learning is cultivated in this context could expand the extant literature on this topic.

Given the lack of analysis of women's experiences with gender-responsive programming in jails, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of women who attended Resolana. Specifically we wanted to know: (1) How does the program foster transformative learning? (2) What effect does the program have on participants' thinking, feeling, and behavior?

Literature Review

Gender-responsive programming recognizes women's common pathways to incarceration, including the influences of systemic race, class, and gender oppression on their

lives and within the legal system (Covington & Bloom, 2006). To address the unique needs of incarcerated women, researchers recommend programming that incorporates cognitive behavioral, as well as relational techniques (Wright et al., 2012). While there is greater awareness of the need for gender-responsive programming, there is little empirical evidence of the effectiveness of this type of programming. However, existing studies suggest that these types of programs reduce recidivism and drug use (Messina, Grella, Cartier & Torres, 2010).

It appears that GRP has the potential to foster transformative learning and life-altering changes in thinking and behavior. Transformative learning is learning that fundamentally changes individuals' worldviews (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Regarding the fostering of transformative learning, research has concerned the role of arts-based activities in various settings (e.g. Lawrence, 2008). Authenticity, a quality that includes self-understanding, a sensitivity to recognizing students and colleagues as part of the teaching/learning transaction, and teachers' engagement in critical self-reflection has also been included in the literature (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). A last area of research concerns how transformative learning is nurtured in various settings including classrooms. In a program for abused women, Hoagland (2000) found that creating a safe space to talk, encouraging critical reflection and using expressive intuitive ways of knowing supported transformative learning. Taylor (2000) reviewed 23 empirical studies that examined fostering transformative learning in educational settings using Mezirow's transformative learning framework and uncovered six themes:

(a) fostering group ownership and individual agency, (b) providing intense shared experiential activities (c) developing an awareness of personal and social contextual influences, (d) promoting value laden course content, recognizing the interrelationship of critical reflection and affective learning and (f) the need for time (para 20).

Taylor (2000) stated that a group setting was an ideal place to foster transformative learning, intense shared experiential activities triggered transformative learning, and value-laden course content in certain subject areas was more likely to cause critical reflection. Additionally, emotions often provided the fodder for deep reflection. Finally, learners' previous experiences combined with a conducive classroom environment fostered transformative learning.

Methodology

Semi-structured life history interviews were conducted with 13 women ranging in age from 19-46. The first author did field observations when she volunteered for each Resolana class for one week to more deeply understand the program. These women were currently incarcerated in a jail in a metropolitan area in the southern United States, in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, or were formerly incarcerated. They represented a cross section of race and ethnicity. Their education levels ranged from the completion of 9th grade through a bachelor's degree.

Atlas.ti was used to create and apply codes using grounded theory guidelines (Charmaz, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis focused on themes of meaning making and change. Trustworthiness and consistency of the data were ensured through use of an audit trail and the triangulation of data included class observations, and interviews with volunteers and staff.

Findings

Several common elements fostered transformative learning in Resolana. In addition, there were several changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors for the women as the result of participating in the program.

Programmatic Elements that Fostered Transformative Learning

The first element that fostered transformative learning was a learning environment that was safe, nurturing, non-judgmental, and fun. Women felt valued, safe, and respected in the learning environment. This safe space provided the foundation for critical reflection and learning. Also, volunteers' care and respect for participants were common themes. Taylor's comment was representative of others:

Every time we had a Resolana meeting, all these women, complete strangers, 'We love you. We're here because we love you. We're here because we want to support you.' And they would just treat us like humans. They were the only people in the jail that treat us like humans.

Second, the program promoted critical reflection on self and connection with others through activities that engaged the mind, body, and spirit (holistic programming). Creativity classes including music, dance, visual arts, and creative writing helped the women get in touch with themselves and express emotions related to their traumatic pasts. Discussion-based groups encouraged women to open up with others, learn from each other, recognize their similarities, and empathize. Additionally, interpersonal interactions such as difficult discussions with others, provided an opportunity for women to practice the skills they learned in groups such as anger management. Women also learned the importance setting boundaries and recognized that caring for the self is an important first step in healing relationships with others. Through Seeking Safety, one of the discussion-based psycho-educational courses, five women recognized they had Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) related to sexual abuse and violence. Most of the women also came to understand how their addictions and other self-harming behaviors were connected to these traumatic experiences.

Examples of the results of critical reflection include Alma recognizing that she has a problem with anger; Carla realizing that she is a "control freak" which contributed to the bad decisions she made; and Karen understanding she has "worn that jacket of incest for a long, long time...and it's just, it's really done a number on me, ya know, and um...it's just really broken me down." While all the women shared painful memories of past trauma, the opportunity to critically reflect on and make meaning of their circumstances and choices seemed to contribute to a sense of relief, the ability to imagine new possibilities for their lives, and in many cases their will and ability to make positive changes.

Changes in Thoughts, Feelings, and Behaviors

Critical reflection helped the women make changes in their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors including self-expression, self-care, empathizing, and giving back. Changes in themselves led to changes in behavior with others.

Examples of significant changes in behavior were participants' ability to express themselves through the creativity classes including art class. Paula shared the benefits of self-expression through art where there was little verbal processing but women made meaning of their experiences at a deeper level:

Look, more art classes, because seriously, we need more. The more ways to express, like, there's so many [women] in here, that are to themselves. They don't know how to express themselves. . . . If you open this room and say, "Okay, get your pencils and erasers and q-tips," and say, 'Go.' ...To focus in on that one thing takes you away from here for that one minute, and you don't have to think about that.

Women also learned to express themselves using words. Twelve of the 13 women stated that Resolana encouraged them to open up. Lynn's remark was representative of others:

And it helped me to open up, 'bout me being molested, 'bout me being raped, 'bout me going through domestic violence, and helped me identify—I really truly feel the information I have now, that I won't be repeating this vicious cycle of doin' drugs, goin' back to prison.

A third change in participants' thoughts, feelings and behaviors included women's newly discovered attention to self-care. Carla stated, "I know it sounds selfish, but now it's like I have the attitude, well it's about me and what I need to do." The ability to empathize was also a change in behavior for many of the respondents. Being able to see themselves in the other women was both empowering and humbling. Taylor's addiction to money and spending helped her connect with women who suffered from other addictions. She explained:

You know, that's one of the reasons I never judge the prostitute, the drug addict. You know, and it could be because also 'cause I had to deal with these women so many months, but at the same time I understand. And they 'How could they smoke crack and be pregnant?' You know what I'm saying? You don't...with an addict, you don't think about *anybody* but yourself.

Nine of 13 women wanted to give back to society by returning to the jail as a Resolana volunteer or helping formerly incarcerated women outside of jail. Hearing other women's stories while in jail inspired Carla to become a Resolana volunteer and work toward a degree in criminology so she could help incarcerated women. She explained:

I still had stuff to go back to, but there's people when they get out they literally have nothing. They have just the clothes on their back. . .they get back into like whether it's prostitution or this and that, it's so easy. . .to make that money. . .Because if you try to get a regular job or something. . .You have to wait a couple weeks to get your first paycheck. You need clothes so I think a lot of people fall back into that routine so fast.

Giving back seems to serve as a redemption function that allows the women to see their incarceration as having a positive purpose.

Discussion, Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study suggest that the Resolana program fostered transformative learning in a variety of ways. The findings confirm the value of expressive ways of knowing in fostering transformative learning (Yorks & Kasl, 2006). Expressive ways of knowing help learners open themselves to learning by bridging the outside world with learners' internal mental and emotional states (Yorks & Kasl). Resolana's holistic orientation and opportunities to engage both affective and cognitive domains of learning contributed to transformative learning through art, dance, and yoga, which exemplifies the use of "symbol, image, and emotional expression" to make meaning (Lawrence, 2012, p. 472) of their experiences. Resolana's programming also confirmed the findings of Taylor's (2000) literature review regarding how educational programming fostered transformative learning. Namely, Resolana provided "intense shared experiential activities" (para 20) through their creativity classes and psychoeducational groups. Through these experiences, the women were able to "develop an awareness of personal and social contextual influences," (para 20) in their lives. Additionally, Resolana provided "value laden course content" with ample opportunity for critical reflection and affective learning within a group setting (Taylor, 2000, (para 20). Last, Taylor (2000) suggests the need for time to foster

transformative learning and this was also the case with individuals in the Resolana program. Longer program participation resulted in greater changes in thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

The findings suggest that participants experienced transformative learning and the changes were largely incremental as opposed to epochal (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Specifically, this study is an example of Cranton's (2006) emancipatory transformative learning where the teaching/learning transaction is done in "an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, authenticity and a sense of enthusiasm and interest in others as well as challenge of others' points of view" (p. 107).

This study contributes to the literature on transformative learning of women in jail. Gender is often overlooked positionality in much research in adult education (English & Irving, 2012). Also overlooked are women's experiences in the penal system and it is clear that these women's experiences in the Resolana program benefited them in many ways. Emancipatory transformative learning can, and did, occur behind bars. To foster transformative learning in a jail context requires an understanding of the ways in which women's paths to incarceration are unique. It is imperative that adult educators working in this context understand the common histories of trauma, abuse, and addiction among many women who are incarcerated as well as how these histories can affect their transformation in jail or prison. For many of these women, incarceration is often a re-traumatizing event, which can impact their interest and/or ability to learn in this context. Without this knowledge, some of their behaviors that served as a means of self-protection and self-preservation on the streets might be misunderstood and used against them in jail. For example, an attitude of hostility in class might impede participation in learning in GRP classes. With patience, care, and compassion, and an understanding acceptance of those initial attitudes by staff, volunteers, and other women in the program, many of the women changed.

The findings from this study have implications for jail and prison programming. First, providing women enough time to participate in GRP is imperative to their success. Regarding the intensity of GRPs such as Resolana, researchers who evaluate such programs in a prison setting recommend that the program occupy 40-70% of the offenders' time in prison (Gendreau & Ross, 1987) and that the participants remain in the program for 5-7 months (Lipton, Pearson, Cleland, & Yee, 2003). While this time span is generally not possible in a jail setting, the recommendation for intense and longer treatment should be noted.

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