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Educators' Reflections on Empowerment in a Gender Responsive Program for Women Offenders

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Abstract: We explore women educators' experiences teaching in a gender-responsive program for women who are incarcerated. Themes including fostering empowerment, motivations for teaching, and tensions teaching emancipatory content in jail.

Keywords: educators, jail, gender-responsive programs, emancipatory learning, Freire

Between 1980 and 2014, women in jails, and state or federal prisons in the United States increased 700% (Carson, 2015). The imprisonment rate for African American women was 2 times that of White women in 2014 and Hispanic women were imprisoned at a rate 1.2 times that of White women (Sentencing Project, 2015).

Gender responsive programming (GRP) addresses women's unique pathways to prison by providing trauma-informed therapeutic support for women grappling with mental health issues and chemical dependency (Wright, Van Voorhis, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2012). They also focus on increasing self-esteem (Van Voorhis, Braswell, & Lester, 2009). Participants in GRPs report increased empowerment due to higher self-efficacy (Sandoval, Baumgartner & Clark, 2016).

While there are studies exploring the experiences of incarcerated women in GRPs (Sandoval et al., 2016), the realities of women educators teaching in a GRP for women offenders in jail have rarely been explored. This study investigates the experiences of staff and volunteers in a GRP, Resolana, offered at a jail in the southwestern United States. We wanted to know: (1) how do educators foster empowerment in their classes, (2) what are educators' motivations for working with women in a GRP, and (3) what tensions exist for educators using emancipatory adult education practices in a jail? Findings may have theoretical implications for adult learning theory and practical implications for educators in a prison or jail setting.

Literature Review

Educators who foster empowerment in the classroom sometimes ground their methods in the Freirean concepts of respect, validation, ownership, and choice (Huff & Johnson, 1998). Power cannot be "given" to others but facilitators can create conditions where learners see themselves as human, recognize they are part of a community, critically reflect on their world, and empower themselves (Freire, 2007). The use of empowering techniques such as using learning contracts, formative evaluations of the course, and narrative evaluations of students in a graduate social work classroom improved student-teacher relations (Huff & Johnson, 1998).

Advocates of these techniques in prison education argue that "democratic forums that encourage dialogue, equalize power relations, and provide conditions where prisoners learn about democracy by practicing democracy" (Costelloe, 2014, p. 33). This can lead to new meaning making and deeper change. Educating prisoners for democracy provides them with tools they need to assert their rights as citizens (Costelloe, 2014). In addition to promoting critical thinking and empowerment, Freire discusses teaching with love and compassion and

connecting material to students' cultures (Freire, 1998). Educators of juvenile boys in a detention center reported using these techniques (Flores, 2010). Teachers showed compassion and understanding toward students and mutual respect developed (Flores, 2010). Additionally, culturally appropriate instruction and materials aided in students' comprehension (Flores, 2010).

Tensions Between Jail Setting and Emancipatory Teaching

The penal system is a culture where control, not democracy, is emphasized. Questioning authority is unacceptable and those in the system may find themselves treated as less than human and may lose hope and meaning. By comparison, education in general, and particularly emancipatory teaching practices, encourage critical thinking and the questioning of authority (Costelloe, 2014; McCarthy, 2006). Prison wardens allow educational programs to exist and program personnel understand this dynamic (McCarthy, 2006). Individuals who are incarcerated live a very regulated culture where inmates are subjected to security checks and lockdowns. This is in sharp contrast to the classroom where they are encouraged to think critically, write about their experiences and emotions, and where they see themselves as students (McCarthy, 2006).

Motivations for Working in Prison/Jail Education

While individuals who are incarcerated encounter challenges, so do educators working in prison or jails. Prison personnel may see educators as too caring. They may see education for those who are incarcerated as an unjust reward (Bouchard & Kunze, 2003; Crawley, 2004) and they may harass students and teachers (Flores, 2010). Other challenges include building trust with students who may view authority figures with distrust and teaching students with different abilities in the same classroom, (Flores, 2010). Despite the challenges, educators are motivated to teach because students want to learn, they ask good questions and make connections from the material to their lives (McCarthy, 2006). Students try new things, such as reading plays, and succeed and their success is gratifying for the teacher (Flores, 2010). Teachers report that using new techniques such as kinesthetic learning methods to teach math is worthwhile (Flores, 2010). Some teachers come to understand that racism, sexism, and classism contribute to who gets incarcerated and view prison education as activism (Cantrell, 2013).

Method

A feminist qualitative methodology was used for this study because we wanted to know how educators made sense of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven educators who volunteered to teach courses in Resolana. Participants ranged in age between 29 and 71. Six of seven described themselves as White or Caucasian and one educator indicated she was Black and White. They taught courses in the program including life skills, creative writing, art, domestic violence, and incest recovery. Their involvement in Resolana ranged from one year to the inception of the program six years prior.

Atlas. Ti was used to create and apply codes using grounded theory guidelines (Charmaz, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The analysis focused on themes of empowerment and tensions of teaching for empowerment in a jail setting. Interviews were coded through Freire's (2000) conceptualization of education for emancipation. Trustworthiness and consistency were ensured through use of an audit trail, field notes, and participation as a volunteer in each of the classes that were offered.

Findings

Educators fostered empowerment through relationship building, collaborative teaching, and affirming dignity and self-worth. Educators' motivations for working with women in a GRP included: (1) the need for change in the criminal justice system; (2) a desire to give back; and (3) self-interest. Last, there were tensions between the emancipatory practices of Resolana and the jail setting including issues of trust and agency.

Fostering Empowerment

Fostering empowerment begins by building authentic relationships through mutual respect, trust, and genuine concern for each other. Compassion, authenticity, flexibility, and the sharing of power are key to achieving this. When Terri taught, she emphasized that "we are all learning together" and the importance of "being a presence to each other." She explained that they (the inmates) know better than anyone the experience of being incarcerated and the paths that led them there. Terri discussed the paradox of the women being able to experience healing as result of their relationships with each other, when most of the women in the program have been harmed by their relationships. "The women centered programming that we do is that we build on relationships."

The use of reflection and practice are core teaching strategies that are used to foster empowerment. In some classes, learners took the lead by taking turns teaching each other. Finally, educators talked about the power of teaching and learning through the sharing of personal stories. Nancy explained, "I think it is empowering for the women to hear each other's stories, and so, to encourage that personal dialogue and to hear that understanding that they are not alone." For Diane, fostering empowering, in part, was about "giving a voice." She said, "You know, it's about giving these women the opportunity to speak their own truth and to not be afraid to say what they think about things and to maybe talk about things they've never talked about before because they've been afraid. I mean there's a hell of a lot of fear, you know."

Finally, empowerment was cultivated by eliciting, affirming, and appreciating the strengths and self-worth of the women. Terri shared a story of driving around with a purple pinwheel that one the of the Resolana participants made in an art class. The participant was so proud of her creation because it was first project she had ever completed and it was a reminder to Terri of the trauma many of the participants survived. Terri explained:

I used to drive around with that purple pinwheel in my car, all the time, because it reminded me what it's [Resolana] about. But I mean nobody ever loved her. Nobody ever cared if she had a childhood. Nobody thought about why she was selling her body or takin' drugs. And who of us in that situation wouldn't do the same? I mean, you survive. In some ways, she was a better survivor than any of us. I mean, given the challenges of what her life must be and she couldn't recognize any of that in herself, but it was there.

Discussing the systemic oppression the women face in the "free world," Terri highlighted the importance of constant reminders of self-worth because, "what the world's telling them out there is, is contradicting every self-valuing piece of themselves."

Volunteers' Motivations for Working in Resolana

While staff and volunteers focused on empowering learners, they also had personal motivations for working in Resolana. First, they realized they needed to do something different

from “warehousing” and “throwing away” women who, for the most part, were incarcerated for non-violent crimes. Diane said, “The prison industrial complex is a blight on this country. And I hear one of those patriotic songs with the line ‘home of the brave, land of the free,’ and I just think I can’t sing those songs. Diane was also drawn to working with incarcerated women because of what she had learned about the criminal justice system. She remarked, “There’s some sort of really negative things about what we do within our criminal justice system. Of what the premises are about human nature and about how you treat other human beings and what value they might have. We throw away people. We warehouse people. We put them behind bars and we throw away the key and they’re invisible.”

Recognizing their own privilege as well as commonalities between their lives and the lives of women in jail, fueled a desire to give back. Terri explained the connection she felt with the women:

“I may not have totally all the same issues, but I have enough in my background that I know what it is like to be told “you’re not acceptable,” or “you’re not what I would wish you to be” from my caretakers. I have been through what we would call abuse. I’ve been through a time when I actually could have been charged with and convicted with stealing something...But we’re all searching for the self-confidence, that sense of self that will allow us to flourish and to share, and to feel like we’re of value.”

Staff and volunteers were motivated by self-interest and the benefits they received from working with Resolana, such as being able to apply their professional skills toward something important, making a difference in others’ lives, and receiving gratitude from the Resolana participants. Angela was grateful to be part of the women’s transformations. “And interestingly, you know, they’re a part of mine,” she said. Ellyn never imagined herself working with incarcerated women but after her first time volunteering, she was excited to go back. “And like so many community service kind of outreach things, you start off thinking, ‘oh I’m going to help these people. And then you realize that they’ve helped me SO much more than anything I could ever do for them.”

Tensions Between Emancipatory Practices and Setting

As staff and volunteers attempted to reinforce self-worth and value in participants, jail processes such as solitary confinement could be re-traumatizing and dehumanizing. Establishing trust was challenging on two fronts: 1) inmates were treated by jail staff as untrustworthy, and 2) for women who were victimized outside of jail, trusting others often resulted in harmful consequences; thus, in jail trust was resisted for self-protection. Attempts to reinforce practices of agency through the curriculum competed with the jail’s rigid rules that governed the women’s lives where choice was non-existent. To counter this, class facilitators incorporated elements of choice in the activities wherever they could. Ellyn who led dance classes believed that while there are expectations for full participation in the classes, women should have a choice of how and to what degree they participate based on their comfort level. Staff also built flexibility into the program. An example of this was checking in with women who had exceeded the allowable absences in classes rather than automatically kicking them out. Nancy remarked that the women were surprised by this practice. Nancy continued, “It was so apparent to me that their world was so black and white, good and bad, that they hadn’t really had anyone say, ‘We can adjust what we are doing. Is there something we can do differently? We are really invested in YOU.”

Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

Empowerment is fostered through use of Freireian concepts. For example, educators taught with love, situated learning in learners' experiences and recognized the importance of dialogue. Instructors provided opportunities for critical reflection, applied skills learned, and gave learners the opportunity "name their world" (Freire, 2007, p. 88).

Not only did Resolana educators foster empowerment in others but their own empowerment increased. Social learning theory posits that individuals learn by observing others and modeling their behavior. Thus, learning involves cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1986). Educators gained skills by observing class interactions and student/teacher interactions and then they taught classes themselves.

While all educators learned through social learning theory, each possessed different motivations for working with women who were incarcerated. These reasons ranged from fulfilling their own self-interest to recognizing each of us as part of humanity. Some educators wanted to feel good about helping others. A few educators who volunteered recognized that we all make mistakes and are fallible. Others learned lessons from Resolana participants.

Last, Resolana educators created a counter-hegemony to the hegemony of "prison pedagogy" which is centered on discipline, punishment and rules that dehumanize learners (Darder, 2002, p. 185). Instead, Resolana's counter-hegemony concerned care, dialogue, and critical thinking. Despite the challenges of an emancipatory approach to education in a jail setting, adult educators see evidence of empowerment through this approach. Educators can navigate through the physical, emotional, and relational confines that characterize life in jail. Both educators and learners reap the benefits of teaching and learning from a practice grounded in care, love, mutual regard, and authenticity.

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