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Inclusive Workforce Education: Towards a Feminist Pedagogy for Vocational Programs

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Abstract: Vocational education provides economic opportunity but often excludes women. The present literature review lays the foundation to develop relevant feminist perspectives and guide the inclusion efforts of community colleges.

Keywords: feminist pedagogy, vocational education, diversity and inclusion

Vocational education presents the best opportunity for many individuals to move from poverty to the middle class (Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006). Poverty is experienced largely by women (Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014), yet structural elements, such as the masculinization of many vocations or trades, inhibit women's inclusion in those fields and limit earning potential. Progressive adult education advocates democracy and social justice to build society, including the workforce (Kreber, 2015). Vocational education is rooted in progressive adult education, yet without change, vocational education is likely to continue to reinforce rather than challenge gender norms and expectations, undermining earning potential and women's workforce contributions worldwide (Sayman, 2007).

Vocational and technical education programs are a dominant source for degrees, certificates, and educational opportunities, and allow learners to develop a specific skillset to quickly enter the workforce. Vocational education, technical education, workforce education, continuing education, and continuing workforce education all serve similar purposes. Here, we use vocational education, workforce education, and trade education interchangeably.

Literature on vocational education is broad and research on diversity, and gender specifically, in workforce education is limited. This paper's purpose is to synthesize existing literature on diversity in vocational education programs worldwide. From this synthesis, more comprehensive views will be developed on inclusion in vocational education through feminist theory, and build support for a Vocational Feminist Pedagogy. The following research questions guided this study: (a) how and how well do existing vocational educational programs include women and diverse learners; (b) in what ways do vocational educational programs reinforce the status quo of a male-dominated vocational workforce; and (c) what practices or policies are currently or may be used in vocational education to recruit and retain women?

In response, the general context and practices in workforce and vocational education classrooms worldwide remained the focus. Certainly, practices and approaches vary among institutions and nations. As a first step towards a Vocational Feminist Pedagogy, we addressed the research questions broadly.

Gender in Vocational Education

Vocational education is essential for preparing people to work in high demand, skilled professions and industries. Gender segregation in many industries is common and accepted. Yet, when non-gender conforming individuals and/or women enter male-dominated fields, the status

quo is actively challenged and disrupted. Women in traditionally male dominated fields, and vice versa, meet resistance from colleagues, educators, and policy makers.

For the present study, diversity refers to differences between groups of people based upon, for example, race, class, religion, gender, sexuality, or some combination of those qualities (Adams, 2010). Inclusion and inclusivity is an individual's belief that they are an integrative part of a vocational education environment, through all aspects of the experience (Barak, 2000) and their individual experiences are integrated into and accepted as environmentally integral (Daya, 2014). Male-dominated industries historically have privileged, educated, and employed male workers (Collins, 2014).

Conceptual Framework

We applied feminist theory and pedagogy to analyze educational practices and programs embedded in vocational education. Feminism and feminist theory evolved through a development and critique of existing structures devaluing women and perpetuating barriers into previously male dominated territory (de Groot & Maynard, 1993). A critical examination through feminist theory is arguably overdue for vocational education.

The conceptual framework applied to this literature review emphasizes the inclusion of women in vocational education, the degree to which vocational education models reinforce traditional gender norms, and efforts being made to expand traditionally male dominated vocational education to women through care perspectives. Additionally, the framework includes intersectional and multicultural perspectives (Collins, 2014; Freire 2015; hooks, 1994; Lynch, Lyons & Cantillon, 2007).

Methodology

Using an integrative literature review methodology, we identified, selected, and made meaning of available literature (Torraco, 2005) through feminist theory and pedagogy. We searched specific online databases, utilizing a two-stage process to collect data, including a preliminary data exploration, followed by targeted data collection and selection. Through selected databases, various key terms were used to execute these searches. Targeted data collection examined the articles produced using terms related to the following four search categories: (a) gender, (b) workforce or vocational education, (c) workforce, and (d) diversity. All research team members screened full-text articles according to the inclusion criteria, and discussed difference in opinion to reach consensus. To be included, a publication must have met the following criteria: published in a peer-reviewed journal between 2006 and 2016; an empirical study presenting results and findings; in the context of post-secondary workforce or vocational education; and concerned with gender or diversity issues.

Search and subsequent screening resulted in 20 publications. To analyze data, we used a matrix method procedure, commonly applied to systematic literature reviews (Garrard, 2004). From each publication, extracted data included author(s), publication year, study location, type of study, population/participants, industry, research questions, findings and purpose. Two researchers verified extracted information from each publication to validate data. Of the 20 included publications, study locations included five from the United States, three from Australia, two from Taiwan, and one each from Canada, China, Finland, Germany, India, Palestine, Spain, Tanzania, Malawi, and one focused on the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

Findings

Publications were largely from outside the United States and there were no publications examining vocational education and gender in Latin America and the Caribbean. In the following sections, findings are summarized according to region. UNESCO regions are identified

according to cultural and sociological factors rather than strict geographical elements, creating better alignment for comparisons among programming goals.

Europe and North America

The Europe and North America region generated 10 publications. Gender disparity in vocational education and industry is damaging to both women and men (Chatigny, Niel, & Radon, 2012; Hodges, 2013). Traditional gender roles and expectations lead to barriers to change. Women tend to be bound to care work within society and within professions (Lahelma, Lppalainnen, Palmu, & Pehkonen, 2014).

Asia and the Pacific

Studies from the Asia and Pacific region support that educational policies among the seven studies generated in this region serve to uphold traditional gender roles (Butler & Ferrier, 2006). Gender roles and class contribute to social support and expectations of women in vocational education and their participation in male dominated vocations (Wang, Chao & Liao, 2010; Rodgers, Zveglich, &Wherry, 2006; Srivastava & Srivastava, 2010).

Africa

The data set included two relevant publications from Tanzania and Malawi. Despite career choice adhering to gender norms in this region, women students expressed interest in entrepreneurial endeavors (Olomi & Sinyamule, 2009). Interest however, resulted in women students suffering a larger financial and care burdens for attending training compared to male counterparts (Cho, Kalomba, Mobarak & Orozco, 2013).

Arab States

One publication from Palestine, aligned with our search criteria. Vocational education in Palestine is limited and not inclusive of women, although it is considered economically valuable. Palestinians are "facing multiple layers of restrictions that negatively affect their basic rights to education, health, food, adequate housing and citizenship" (Hilal, 2012, p. 68).

Discussion

To better understand women's experiences, each region, except for Latin America and the Caribbean, was considered in response to the original research questions regarding inclusion of women, reinforcement of the status quo, and applications to practice and policy. We then discuss implications for vocational feminist pedagogy.

Inclusion of Women and Reinforcement of the Status Quo

Social convention impedes women's vocational education efforts through various barriers to their education include testing, role modeling, social gender expectations, family responsibilities, and career stability. Guidance to and through education and employment makes a difference to women students in their belief in their ability to make it through an educational program or the belief about the social acceptability of their position.

Care responsibilities are considered the emotional and physical work of women. The lines separating the work also have economic implications for women because of the difference in pay for gendered work. Pay inequity persists in vocational and workforce industries (Hodges, 2013). If women are considered disposable to employers or perceived as secondary earners, educators and employers may diminish women's efforts for professional growth. Women are typically the first employees laid off or the first students to drop out (Cho, Kalomba, Mobarak & Orozco, 2013; Hodges, 2013). Women's subordinate status in communities is troubling.

To re-center women, training for instructors in feminist pedagogical practices can reframe career choice; reinforce care for female students while also embracing diversity and multiculturalism. Likewise, ensuring that female students have the support and resources that

they need while participating in a vocational or workforce educational program is equally important. Additionally, vocational education advisors play a significant role in helping female students identify their educational objectives and career goals, and assist students with identifying appropriate course sequences and enrollment. These efforts can aide in recruitment and retention practices for female students in traditionally male-dominate industries.

Inclusion and engagement can be achieved by ensuring local vocational and workforce centers offer required courses in areas of industry and prioritize resources to engage all students on campus (Jackson & Laanan, 2011) thus, leading to enhanced social opportunities. Students come together, outside of the classroom, and engage in shared topics for discussion relating to their coursework or industries of interest.

Gender and Career Choice, Care and Multiculturalism

Sincere and long lasting efforts are necessary to create diverse work environments where women are important and equally valuable in vocational education and the workplace (Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2015). Workforce change begins with shifting how students learn to be part of the workforce in vocational education. Women's integration into historically male-dominated industries not only brings about new perspectives and insights, but also addresses the need for social and equitable. Additionally, as the demands for workers in continue to increase, a vibrant and diverse workforce, reflective of society, is needed to ensure adequate resources are present.

A collective effort made through policy and community efforts to support female students in vocational education and expect more from men must also be present. Male students are also members of families, parents, siblings, and sons. Expecting men to care less about family and community has potentially long term negative consequences for economies. Vocational education that serves to equally support students and recognize and diminish barriers to education will serve as a stabilizing force in communities around the world.

Implications for Vocational Feminist Pedagogy

Vocational education lays the foundation for what students expect and emulate in the workplace, but workplaces have not evolved rapidly enough to include women at all organizational levels, nor have workplace policies developed to match the extent to which women are working. Gender impacts women's career choice, expectations of care, and experiences of diversity and multiculturalism in vocational education and the workforce. Certainly, human rights and safety are critical elements workforce education and vary greatly, but some qualities of feminist, inclusive programs may transcend these variations. It is critical that women have access to vocational education as well as to viable work upon completion of education or training. Figure 1 summarizes findings pertaining to feminist pedagogy.
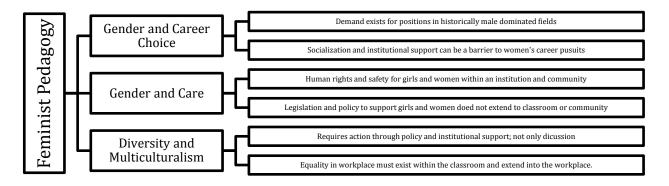

Figure 1. The connections among the study's findings and feminist pedagogy.

Feminist pedagogy embraces individual experiences and discusses them in the larger social context (Webber, 2006). Male and female students have divergent experiences and expectations about their futures. Many of these expectations begin in early education before an individual is faced with the choice of pursuing vocational education. Instructors' teaching practice impacts students' overall understanding and application of diversity in the classroom and in the chosen vocation (Eveline & Todd, 2002).

Recommendations and Conclusions

Key applications from this study to consider are women's similar experiences across all regions in vocational education. While the capacity for vocational education to support women's education and employment in leading and developing countries is great, there are universal barriers, including traditional gender role expectations and women shouldering care giving responsibilities. Addressing these barriers expands the opportunities for women in vocational education and previously male dominated vocations.

Additionally, legislation and policy are critical for women's access to equal opportunities for vocational training and job placement in certain regions. Training and employment in male-dominated industries should be made available to women and supported by governmental policy and practice. Further analysis is needed regarding the global economic impact of opportunities for women within industrial and vocational industries.

Certainly, previously described recommendations for trainings are ripe for Adult Education (AE) interventions, both in practice and research. Future research should include the study of ways in which AE practices and principles can be applied to workforce and vocational trainings, how well critical AE perspectives align with a possible vocational feminist pedagogy, and the connections among student experiences in training programs and future work behaviors for both women and men.

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