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Being an educated woman: A phenomenological exploration

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

From

University of Wollongong

By

Vinathe Sharma-Brymer

B.A., P.G. Dip Env. Planning, M.A. (psych), M.Ed. (Hons)

Faculty of Education 2007

Thesis Certification

I, Vinathe Sharma-Brymer, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at another institution.

Vinathe Sharma-Brymer

March 26, 2007

Abstract

This study explores ten Indian women's experience of 'being an educated woman.' These ten women have a bachelor's degree and hail from Bangalore city in India. The social phenomenon of being an educated person is a positive notion in postcolonial, Indian society. Girls' and women's education is regarded as important for their family and for the nation's progress. Academic research on asking educated women what do they think of themselves as being educated is hardly evident.

The value of this thesis lies in its explorative phenomenological framework used to document the participants' narratives of their experience. It also highlights the researcher's lived experience, using insider/outsider perspective. Applying a broad interpretive phenomenological approach this study provides an alternative framework of reflection, interpretation and analysis of the space in their lived experience. It also draws from educational theory, human development models and feminist research for a richer understanding of women, education and development area.

Data sources of this study include in-depth interviews, academic and non-academic literature and stories. The stages of interpreting the data included immediate reflections following the interviews, identification from the transcripts of thematic layers, and three layers of interpretation. In this three-stage process the participants' texts were analysed in depth through active listening, repeated reading of the transcripts, researcher's bracketed reflections, and layers of thematic interpretation – to illuminate the complexity of 'going back to the things themselves.'

Layers of interpretation revealed a 'torn-between' experience, an experience of tensions, conflict and contradiction both in the public and private spheres of life. It was an interplay on the continuum of an educated woman becoming a 'confident ideal' as well as living as a 'social ideal.' The contradiction illuminated a site of desire and threat related to change and action.

Through the analysis of this experience the thesis builds a theoretical construct to describe the space that can be created in educated women's lives, one which they are required to negotiate constantly. This construct is the Actionable Space (AS), which locates educated women's lived experience in the 'third space' between awareness of self-efficacy and awareness of social conformity leading to their tensions and conflicts. This critical space creates hope and the beginnings of a new direction in understanding the experience of being an educated woman. This research provides the personal practical and collective knowledge of the experience for the public. It is essential that teachers' training workshops, and parent and community education incorporates this knowledge to initiate a positive change in girls' and women's education. It needs to be included in all situations where female agency is discussed.

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I have used a few photographs in the thesis to provide a suitable background. The individuals in the photographs are not related to the thesis in any way. Nevertheless, I thank these anonymous individuals who permitted me to photograph them. *Thank you* also to Dr. Eric Brymer, Asare and Aralu organisations for permitting me to use photograph/s from their collection.

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