ABSTRACT

This research was part of a larger, mixed-methods study, funded by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, which examined the learning and change experiences of 41 learners in three ABE/ESOL programs. This paper examines a Polaroid diploma program with a focus on women workers, employing gender (relational) and constructive-developmental theory to frame their learning experiences. Data for this paper focuses on analysis of 224 qualitative interviews, focus groups, and developmental assessments. Three emergent themes regarding women’s motivation emerged: practical benefits, the importance of timing, and leadership aspirations. This paper presents how these women describe and understand their learning motivations from both a qualitative and developmental perspective. This investigation informs understanding of women’s motivations for learning, and suggests how individual ways of knowing inform such motivation.

Keywords: Adult Development, Adult Diploma Programs, Adult Learning, Adult Literacy, Constructive-Developmental Theory, English as a Second Language Learners, Motivation, Qualitative Research, Theory, Women

1. INTRODUCTION

My education [shows my children] that I am older than them, but I still try to learn. That way they have encouragement from me that education is very important for them to continue their education, to never quit learning, to never give up their dreams, because life is full of opportunity. They will learn this message from me because I don’t want them to think I didn’t go to school because I didn’t want to. I wanted them to think, Mommy worked very hard, she went to school at age 41, and she graduate at age 43 from high school. That makes me feel very proud, and I think they will feel proud too. (Rita, Adult Diploma Program Graduate, June 1999)

Rita’s words illuminate the importance of her children in her learning and motivations. Gender research has long acknowledged the centrality of relationship for women (Gilligan, 1982; Hayes, 2001; Jack, 1999; Miller 1986;
Surrey, 1991), and many argue that relationships inform women’s identities and conceptualizations of the world.

In the United States, more than 64 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 64 need improved language skills, a high school diploma, or enhanced basic skills to meet the demands of work, family, and community (Comings et al., 2001). ABE/ESOL (Adult Basic Education/English for Speakers of Other Languages) program goals range from work/citizenship preparation to personal empowerment and political engagement (Chappell, 1996; Comings, 2007; Ecclestone, 1997; Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998; Kerka, 1998; Murnane & Levy, 1996; Purcell-Gates, 1995). Regardless of orientation (e.g., basic skill acquisition or personal growth), however, programs must attend to women’s motivations and conceptualizations (Bingman & Stein, 2001; Gillespie, 2002; Porter, Cuban, & Comings, 2005). Hayes (2001), for example, explained that, while we have examined the distinctive characteristics of women-learners for centuries, “the nature of women’s learning remains controversial” (p. 36). What, then, motivates women to enroll in educational programs, and how do they experience learning?

The research presented in this paper stems from a larger study conducted by the Adult Development Team (Drago-Severson, 2004a; Kegan, Broderick, Drago-Severson, Helsing, Popp, & Portnow, 2001), which examined the developmental dimensions of transformational learning and change among 41 adult learners in three ABE/ESOL programs. Each program in the study was oriented toward English language fluency, content knowledge, and effectiveness as workers, parents, or students. The team’s purpose was to better understand how adults conceptualized program learning, and how, if at all, learning helped them change.

Here, I examine data with a focus on women who were shop floor workers in the sample. Guided by the centrality of relationship in women’s thinking (Gilligan, 1982; Hayes, 2001; Jack, 1999; Miller 1986, 1988; Pinto, 2002; Surrey, 1991), this paper focuses on women at a workplace site (i.e., Polaroid) enrolled in an Adult Diploma Program (ADP). My research question asks how relational and constructive-developmental perspectives, which both attend closely to adults as meaning-makers, illuminate how women’s developmental capacities influence their learning goals. My intention is not to emphasize gender differences, but rather to illustrate how these women experienced and conceptualized learning.

In this paper I examine how 8 women who completed an ADP articulated motivations for enrolling in the program. This analysis is intended to further the conversation on women’s learning and to illuminate the important relationship between gender and motivation.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK


Examining women’s motivations will help educators better understand learning in ABE/ESOL classrooms and provide new insights into teaching. The larger study (Kegan et al., 2001) focused on learners’ meanings as the point of departure by employing a constructive-developmental lens. The research team employed Robert Kegan’s (1982, 1994, 2000) constructive-developmental theory, informed by 40 years of research into adult development (Basseches, 1984, Belenky et al., 1986; Cranton, 1996; Daloz, 1986, 1999; Drago-Severson, 2012; Drago-Severson et al., 2013; Kohlberg,
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