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Resistance through Connections, Communities and Friendships: Interrelational Possibilities of Educational Curriculum Design

La résistance par les connexions, les communautés et les amitiés : possibilités interrelationnelles dans la conception de programmes éducatifs

Abarna Selvarajah

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Article abstract

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Abarna Selvarajah

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

abarna.selvarajah@mail.utoronto.ca

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Resistance Through Connections, Communities, and Friendships: Interrelational Possibilities of Educational Curriculum Design

La résistance par les connexions, les communautés et les amitiés : possibilités interrelationnelles dans la conception de programmes éducatifs

Abarna Selvarajah, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

Abstract

This paper examines the transformational possibilities of educational curriculum design in fostering interrelational solidarities among mature migrant and diaspora women. It offers a brief introduction to an emerging doctoral project that engages with the educational experiences of mature migrant and diaspora women in Canada. Throughout a migrant woman's displacement and "settlement" journey, friendships emerge as a starting point through which some women start to construct their agentic selves within and outside their homes, partners, and diasporic community. These friendships allow for a transnational self to emerge, one that can move beyond identification as the primary location for struggle, and towards shared, but different, experiences of oppression. By resisting neoliberal and multicultural immigration policies that isolate mature immigrant women and reproduce violence, these connections, communities, and friendships push settlement education systems to reckon with complicated, yet symbiotic experiences of migrant and diaspora women.

Résumé

Cet article examine les possibilités transformationnelles dans la conception de programmes d'enseignement pour favoriser une solidarité interrelationnelle entre les femmes d'âge mûr immigrées et de diaspora. Il présente brièvement un projet de doctorat en cours d'élaboration qui porte sur les expériences d'éducation des femmes d'âge mûr immigrées et de diaspora au Canada. Tout au long du voyage de déplacement et d'"établissement à l'étranger" d'une femme migrante, les amitiés apparaissent comme point de départ par lequel certaines femmes commencent à construire leur moi agentique au sein de et en dehors de leur foyer, de leur couple et de leur communauté diasporique. Ces amitiés permettent l'émergence d'un moi transnational, capable d'aller au-delà de l'identification comme lieu principal de lutte et de la prise de conscience à des expériences d'oppression communes, mais différentes. En résistant aux politiques d'immigration néolibérales et multiculturelles qui isolent les femmes immigrées d'âge mûr et qui reproduisent la violence, ces liens, ces communautés et ces amitiés poussent les systèmes d'éducatifs basés sur les communautés immigrantes (*settlement-based education*) à tenir en compte les expériences compliquées mais symbiotiques des femmes migrantes et de diaspora.

Keywords: educational curriculum design, transnational feminism, settlement education, diaspora studies, migration

Mots clés : conception de programmes d'éducation, féminisme transnational, éducation basée sur les communautés immigrantes, études de la diaspora, migration

This paper offers a brief introduction to an emerging doctoral project that examines stories of community building present in the educational experiences of mature migrant and diaspora women “integrating” into Canada from 1975 to the present day. Despite interacting closely with settlement-based educational programs, migrant and diaspora women continue to face gendered and classed barriers to social integration within and outside their communities. This project revisits major concepts of migrant socialization developed in educational curriculum design, social work, ethnic studies, diaspora, and migration studies to ask: What is the role of educational curriculum design in creating a space to explore connection building, community, and friendships between migrant and diaspora women? This short paper is an adaption of a presentation delivered to the Comparative and International Education Society of Canada’s (CIESC) “Lightning Researcher” round for the congress held at York University in 2023. Since the study is still underway, results and conclusions will emerge as the data continues to be collected and analyzed. Interpretations of the study seek to contribute towards expanding the connections between interrelational politics and educational curriculum, rooted in the perspectives of mature migrant and diaspora women.

Emerging conceptualizations of critical curriculum studies employ Paulo Freire’s (2000) conceptualization of dialogue in the classroom as a point of entry into transformative learning in adult education spaces. Freire defines dialogue as an encounter between human beings who attempt to name the world as they are mediated by it. For this type of dialogue to form he argues that learners must enter the historical process as subjects. Inspiration for this project emerged from the interviews I conducted, for my master’s thesis, with 10 mature Tamil-Canadian women on their settlement and integration journeys. Many of the women interviewed shared complex feelings of isolation and abandonment several years into their settlement and integration journey. Tamil-Canadian women, men, and children fled genocide, war, and escalating violence in their home country, and participants described instances where their embodied trauma resurfaced as they aged through vivid memories. Social isolation is often an accepted reality for elders in the Tamil-Canadian community, especially when their trauma is compounded with Canadian legal narratives that construct the Tamil person as a “terrorist.” In her master’s thesis, Philipupillai describes the impact of these legal narratives that

mark the Tamil body as a figure of terror, as a threat to national security, racialize and demarcate this population as outside of the “Canadian public,” and therefore deserving of surveillance, targeting, detention, and deportation rather than protection, rights, and freedoms. (Philipupillai, 2013, p. 44)

In *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Cvetkovich describes how large-scale epidemics of depression in present times are intimately tied to “long-term histories of violence that have ongoing impacts at the level of everyday emotional experience” (2012, p. 7). By highlighting the “everyday-ness” of psychosocial trauma tied to migration, this doctoral project will employ a comparative and interdisciplinary framework to explore how adult education spaces and curriculum can address trauma, violence, genocide, displacement, migration, and lasting memories. In doing so, it seeks to deconstruct the conditions under which isolation and mental duress are produced in mature migrant and diaspora women and to locate the possibilities of care-centred coalitions.

Adult education spaces are understood to span across several formal and informal environments, including government-funded skills training, community-led workshops and programs, and informal gatherings or alternative spaces led by migrant and diaspora women in the home. In the formal adult education context, official curriculum is shaped by Canadian employment and immigration policies grounded in multiculturalist frameworks that reproduce

barriers to meaningful social inclusion. Thobani argues that decades of multiculturalist policy emboldened the Canadian state to become “a communalizing power; that is, a power which constitutes communities as discrete, racial, ethnic, and cultural groups existing within its territorial borders, yet outside the symbolic bounds of the nation” (2007, p. 149). Rather than reflecting cultural difference, multiculturalist policymaking actively builds cultural difference to be the most significant aspect of an immigrant’s political identity. This intentional fragmentation of a migrant and diaspora women’s identity into singular cultural categories work to produce “inequality instead of functioning as a framework for inclusion” (Ndhlovu, 2016, p. 29). Multiculturalist policy frameworks separate the national subject and the multicultural “Other,” by reproducing the diaspora subject as a timeless figure—one who is stripped of any meaningful movement. Published literature (Thobani, 2007; Simpson et al., 2011; St. Denis, 2011) examining the “myth of multiculturalism” explore how this ideology poses unique gendered consequences and helped stabilize White supremacy by contributing to the reification of immigrants and refugees as cultural outsiders.

Razack writes about the “culturalization of race” evident in Canadian multiculturalist policy, whereby racial hierarchies are organized through the discourse of cultural and national difference, and not through biological inferiority (1998). She argues that through the reorganization of racial classifications within a politics of cultural diversity, the struggles of people of colour are dismissed or misidentified as “cultural” problems stemming from their communities. Framing of the community as an entity that exists on its own and outside of the state stands in contrast to multiculturalism’s power to systematically rank difference and create the cultural “Other.” (Razack, 1998; Thobani, 2007). By placing rigid bounds around the immigrant “Other” through racialized multiculturalist values, Canadian educational policy effectively facilitates both a material inclusion of an increased number of immigrants and refugees within the population and their simultaneous exclusion from the nation.

Within these critiques of multiculturalism, there emerges a need to address the complex and specific lived experiences of mature migrant and diaspora women. Migration policy evaluation tools depict Canada as the leading nation in settlement education policy around the world. The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX, 2020) measures national migrant integration policies in countries across six continents, and Canada ranks at the top. Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada’s (IRCC) 2021 highlights report referenced MIPEX’s recent evaluation, noting that Canada “leads the developed world in promoting rapid labour market integration, non-discrimination and a sense of belonging” (IRCC, 2021, p. 6). Jensen argues that in a critical classroom, pedagogues must abandon these “master narratives of the official curriculum” to engage with the “people there, the bodies in the classroom, who carry knowledge within themselves that must be engaged, interrupted, and transformed” (2009, p. 258). While the MIPEX report may indicate comparative success of Canadian integration programs, it does not define or assess the specifics of a newcomers’ long-term integration journey, especially beyond the first 5 to 10 years post-arrival. Moreover, it fails to address the unique gendered and aged experiences of mature migrant and diaspora women who lack access to supports several years into their arrival and seek-out alternative spaces to feel a sense of belonging.

Adult education specifically directed at immigrant, refugee, and diaspora communities is delivered through both formal and informal settlement services, and it is here where we can imagine the transformative possibility of curating meaningful supports for migrant and diaspora women. In her 2015 piece, Shan traces the history of Canadian settlement services to identify how they differ from other countries, specifically due to the emergence of participatory-based modes

of governance. She explains how the settlement service sector entrenches vulnerability in immigrant women navigating the labour market through the purposeful de-skilling and channeling of applicants into low-paying jobs, regardless of their interests and qualifications (Shan, 2015). At the same time, Shan argues for a repositioning of the service sector as a unique space to exercise participatory governance, by offering migrant and diaspora women the space to renegotiate their identities and forge new conceptions of communities. Community-centred projects can support the integration of these coalition-building processes in adult immigrant curriculum.

When an immigrant or refugee interacts with settlement services, their emotional, spiritual, and embodied knowings are either ignored or selectively enhanced for economic or social benefit. Migrant mothers often report experiencing a gendered readjustment perpetuated by both community members and state representatives (Zhu, 2016). The capacity for mature migrant and diaspora women to fully express themselves, without being met with violence or abandonment, is intimately tied to their historical and present-day relationships to nation-building projects. Nationalistic portrayals of women burden them “with the task of maintaining the nation’s (read men’s) honor and integrity... [as] they are accorded the title ‘mothers of the nation,’ an assigned designation that surreptitiously further justifies controlling women’s sexuality” (Alexander, p. 373). In light of this intense restructuring, analysis from my master’s thesis found that mature and diaspora women resist the fragmentation and other-ing of their lived experiences by seeking out relationships and friendships where they can feel supported. One of the most persistent themes were the participants’ strong desire to build alternative spaces where they could feel free to express a full sense of belonging, as opposed to the isolation some women felt in homes, community spaces, or the classroom. These alternative spaces may look like gardening clubs, intimate friendships or walking buddies, and provide a unique context to explore the application and reconstruction of adult education curriculum.

Alternative spaces differed among women, as one shared her experiences cultivating community gardens with her neighbours to commemorate their shared histories of farming, another discussed engaging in difficult conversations about displacement with her children. Building spaces to grow, play, learn, struggle, and exist are necessary actions of resistance in the presence of a state or community that furthers the isolation of migrant and diaspora women. Shan and Walter (2015) describe the community garden as a pedagogical site, “for learning not only about gardening and local ecological conditions, but also about sustainability, environmental consciousness, the politics of space, collective organization, social entrepreneurship, decolonization of place, and participatory democracy” (Shan & Walter, 2015, p. 22). This powerful and detailed explanation of the community garden caught my attention, as it pushed the physical boundaries of adult immigrant education from the classroom to a limitless outdoors. It also highlights the multiple political and social uses of building spaces for collective learning, conceptualized and implemented by the migrant and diaspora learners themselves.

Educational curriculum that does not account for the unique experiences of mature migrant and diaspora women harms them by making them ineligible for services and supports, and thus further scripting their lives on the fringes of their communities. As a researcher, I am in the continuous process of learning how to write scholarship that does not essentialize or romanticize the narratives of research participants and community members as continuous historical victims. By exploring the friendships forged between migrant and diaspora women, educational curriculum can be transformed to centre and sustain these transformative, agentic, and often life-saving relationships. It is in this regard that my emerging scholarship seeks to evaluate existing educational programming and map out the possibility of cultivating curriculum and policy that

centres the relational lives, politics, and modes of feminism that migrant and diaspora women practise across a variety of differences.

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Abarna Selvarajah is a PhD student in Social Justice Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education located in the University of Toronto. She is a student-researcher, facilitator, and activist whose community-based research examines the intersections of gender, immigration, and displacement. She can be reached at abarna.selvarajah@mail.utoronto.ca.