

EDITORIAL

FEMINISMS IN ADULT EDUCATION: FOSTERING VISIBILITY AND CHANGE FOR WOMEN

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This Special Issue of *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* has been published to highlight the perspectives and priorities of women in the field of adult education. In particular, it is intended to support *scholarship* which emphasizes and advances the interests of women as adult education practitioners, theorists and adult learners.

Feminism can be viewed as a political movement for social change. Feminists from a variety of corrective theoretical positions attempt to redress gender inequity and hence we feel it is important to speak of **feminisms** rather than a monolithic feminism.

Is there really a need to devote an issue to feminisms in adult education? Since adult education is an historically community based discipline and has a longstanding tradition of emancipatory priorities, one would have thought that redressing the inequities of women would be well underway and a prevalent feature of the field. Regrettably, after more than 25 years since the report of Canada's *Royal Commission on the Status of Women*, this does not appear to be the case. If it were, we believe we would readily see the following: (1) contributions of women to the field of adult education fairly represented in the historical record; (2) conceptualizations of the field, with epistemological and research practices consistently acknowledging and including the realities and interests of women; (3) women equitably included as learners in adult education settings; and (4) women equitably included in their adult education work settings.

With respect to the first point, there is considerable evidence suggesting that the work of women practitioners and the realities of women are not fairly represented in the adult education literature. Hugo (1990) provides support for her assertion that adult education historians have not only consistently, but even more seriously, "increasingly marginalized women's historical roles in American adult education" (p. 2). She notes that the proportion of women active in American adult education exceeds the proportion recognized in the written histories of work in the field. Significantly, she points to the professionalization and institutionalization of adult education as a source of what she calls "amnesia" concerning women's considerable and indeed central role in the origins of adult education. More recently, Smith (1992) made similar observations and provides documentation for the same case in Canada. Also in Canada, Zinman (1988) cites the Pierson and Prentice (1982) use of the "amnesia" metaphor to describe an historical eclipse of women's contributions, stating that "there is a great urgency for women to recover or uncover their past" (p. 360). Yet, as Bonnie Burstow in this issue of the *Journal* observes, a history of the field in Canada published as recently as 1991 by Selman and Dampier under-represents women's contributions to the field. Specifically, in that history of 301 pages, two pages were devoted to Adelaide Hoodless and the Women's Institutes, one paragraph to the women's movement, and infrequent references to women such as Florence O'Neill and Women's Canadian Clubs. Mark Selman (1991) in the same Selman and Dampier

work made absolutely no mention of feminist perspectives in his overview of "philosophical approaches and issues which are relevant to the practice of adult education" (pp. 18-34).

Turning from representation of women and the citing of our contributions as women in the historical record to the adequacy of the treatment of women's experiences, we now can examine the perspectives and concerns in research and scholarship. Smith (1992) provides us with some documentation. With generous interpretation, she identified only 12% of the publications in prominent adult education scholarly journals and practitioner publications in Canada and the United States that mentioned women who published between 1987 and 1990; and 10% (9 out of 90) of the 1990 CASAE/RCÉEA meeting presentations represented women-related topics. Our review of the proceedings of the 1994 CASAE meeting presentations reveals only a slight proportional increase (12.8% or 10 out of 78). Furthermore, an examination of the same 1994 proceedings reveals that there is still a pervasively "gender blind" approach to the study of adult education and learning, often obscuring women's realities and needs. In her contribution to this issue of the *Journal*, "Problematizing adult education: A feminist perspective", Burstow draws our attention in detail to this phenomenon. There appears to be little recognition in the field of adult education of the mounting evidence that there are significant gender learning preferences and gender perspectives on learning (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; MacKeracher, 1994), gender differences in adult life change patterns (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Bardwick, 1971), and structural differences and barriers facing women in education (e.g., Briskin & Coulter, 1992; Litner, 1991).

Epistemological habits and prevailing discourses in our field display comparable research patterns which submerge women's realities. We refer readers to Burstow's analysis of some of the predominant writers in adult education. Joyce Stalker in her article in this *Journal*, "The adult learner/teacher relationship and sexual harassment: De-meaning traditions", illustrates how pervasive assumptions about learners' experiences of adult educators preclude even questions about the possibility of sexual harassment. The dominant adult education discourses do not address power relationships either within or outside the classroom in relationships between learners and adult educators. The absence of critique or concepts of power within these relationships leaves women and other marginalized persons who experience abuses of power further disadvantaged. For them, it is a steep climb up invisible stairs to seek representation much less redress.

Joyce Stalker's article simultaneously raises questions on the third point, the equitable inclusion of women as learners in adult education settings. In elucidating other aspects of disadvantage for women learners, Benson, Fretz, Jiao, and Kennett (1994) discuss their experiences as graduate students in an adult education classroom. They provide examples of ways in which the rules of discourse disadvantage women, especially non-Western women, and the prodigious difficulties facing members of such disadvantaged groups. In their article in this issue of the *Journal*, "Critical philosophy-in-action: Power and praxis", Sue Scott and Donna Chovanec provide a description of an alternative approach to teaching adults in university classrooms. The approach *does* attempt to consistently take into account dimensions of power in the classroom by problematization and critique of the power structures within the educational institution and the classroom. The professors in their study view power issues as content necessary for transformative change and as such the content centres on a critical analysis of the power relations of race, gender and sexuality.

Finally, on the topic of the equitable inclusion of women adult educators in adult education work settings, there appears to have been little published. Does this mean that women whose careers and employment are in adult education work settings have not experienced inequities or abuses of power such as sexual harassment? Or does this mean that raising such issues is enormously threatening to their well-being and possibilities for advancement in these settings? No news has not been good news in other professional settings. What is clear is that there has been silence in the adult education literature on the ethics of gendered educational and supervisory practices.

Claudie Solar in her article in this issue of the *Journal*, "Autoformation féministe", provides a perspective on the process through which we as women come to reformulate our self-understanding and analysis of our environments. She presents the stories of women who have struggled with disadvantage and have reoriented themselves in ways which have constructive consequences for themselves and others. Their experiences provoke us to think of our own, not only in the past, but perhaps in relation to the challenges ahead. Solar's contribution reminds us that there is far too little research or publication based in practice which contributes to understanding and the promotion of constructive and lasting change in the lives of adult women learners.

Two features of our own editorial perspective need to be made explicit. First, we are women who were initially attracted to the field of adult education because of its emphasis upon the improvement of the human condition and enhancement of the human experience. We continue to recognize the accomplishments of generations of adult educators in fostering wider participation in educational and democratic processes and institutions in this country and around the world. We consider that it is as debilitating and uncritical to disregard the strengths, resources and allies as it is to deny the weaknesses, deficiencies and oppressive practices within our field. As women, we have experienced and been discouraged by the discrepancies between the espoused values and the actual practice in the field, especially those concerning the participation and recognition of women. It is for those of us who have experienced these discrepancies to enter those truths into the public record and onto an agenda for action.

The process of giving voice to the experiences of women in adult education in its literature has begun (see Butterwick, 1987; Miles, 1989; Collard, 1990) and may be gathering momentum. However, we are at a point in time in 1994 when we are likely to be experiencing what could be called "problem overload". The initial efforts to deal with "women's issues" in all aspects of public life have been underway long enough to address the easy problems and to reveal ways in which the enormity and complexity of the issues have been underestimated. The creative beginnings and small successes now give way to the very hard work ahead. Additionally, the problems that women are facing are nested within and intricately connected to the experiences of members of other marginalized groups on the basis of age, sexual orientation, race, class, and disability. All these inequities are being presented in the context of a long and arduous period of economic strain in which most of us are overtaxed and bereft of adequate time for reflection. Experiencing inequities is enormously consuming for those who are attempting to articulate them, and demanding for those of us who are being challenged to review our practice. The urge for flight is predictable and understandable. Yet, paradoxically, it is often during these periods of strain that the greater burden is borne by those who are already disadvantaged. The cost of ignoring these issues, even now, is too high for those

who are marginalized and, we think, for the field of adult education. The emphasis on *practice* as a primary quality of adult education, means we are challenged to critically examine what is constructive and destructive about current realities expressly for the purpose of *changing them*. From this perspective, "bad news", discrepancies, and critique, are essential and constructive.

The second feature of our approach to this issue is to welcome different viewpoints. Practice is well served by considering a multiplicity of theoretical and ideological perspectives. Those of us, usually but not always women, who actively represent and support the interests of women are feminists. As with any other domain of human activity, there are differences in the way that we view and pursue these purposes. In an overview of feminist thought, it is common practice to divide the ideas along the traditional political lines of liberal, radical and socialist (Gaskell & McLaren, 1991).

Liberal feminists emphasize the provision of equal opportunities for women to participate in the social and economic institutions that exist. Research which supports equity studies and which provides data on how women are doing in relation to men or male standards would be examples of studies influenced by a liberal tradition. Both socialist and radical feminists are concerned with changing those institutions so that they create less gender inequality in power, status and income. **Radical** feminists locate the cause of gender oppression in patriarchy, that is, in male domination and the control of social, economic and ideological processes. For them, the answer is more space, power and attention to women's concerns or women's cultures. Research within this tradition is often rich in description. Tisdale (1993) suggests that research from this perspective in addressing feminist pedagogy focuses more on how to teach for women's personal empowerment as individuals rather than dealing directly with structured power relations or direct social action. *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule 1986) would be an example of such a work. **Socialist** feminists locate the causes of gender oppression in economic structures which benefit the few and want to transform the structures in their entirety. For example, Tisdale (1993) refers to a liberatory model which comes out of this feminist-materialist perspective. This model addresses the nature of structured power relationships and includes teaching strategies which aim to help alter the nature of those structured power relations based not only on gender but on social class and race as well (p. 205).

It is useful to keep these orientations in mind when reading the authors' work in this *Journal* for, as Gaskell and McLaren point out, doing so alerts us to the authors' assumptions and the implications of their ideas. However, the distinctions between these categories are not always clear for "changing opportunities for women means changing social structures; changing patriarchy means changing economic processes; and changing capitalism can involve challenging male power" (Gaskell & McLaren, 1991, p. 13). Few feminist authors can be placed easily into one category as distinct from another though we can generally identify a predominant perspective and the extent to which it is consistent with or challenging our own assumptions. Exchanges amongst feminist adult educators representing a range of different perspectives can be helpful in promoting action for women and in obviating debilitating divisions. We have welcomed a range of feminist perspectives in this issue.

As editors, it is our hope that this special issue contributes to fostering attention to women's contributions and concerns in the field, and that, in addition to the authors' work

offered here, further interest in research and publication will be generated to address the considerable gaps which currently persist.

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EDITORIAL

LES FÉMINISMES EN ÉDUCATION DES ADULTES: UNE INVITATION À LA VISIBILITÉ ET LA TRANSFORMATION POUR LES FEMMES

Dans ce numéro spécial, on vise à mettre en relief les intérêts des femmes en éducation des adultes, qu'elles soient théoriciennes, intervenantes ou étudiantes. Alors que dans la pratique de l'éducation des adultes sous l'inspiration des théoriciens humanistes, on a prétendu réaliser des objectifs libérateurs, il reste aujourd'hui encore pertinent de s'interroger sur l'intégration réelle, la juste place et représentation des femmes et de leurs besoins en éducation des adultes.

Selon Hugo (1990), le rôle historique des femmes y a été marginalisé aux États-Unis. Smith (1992) et Zinman (1988) corroborent ce fait et parlent d'"amnésie" à propos de l'apport des femmes éducatrices d'adultes au Canada. Burstow le démontre également dans l'article qui suit. Selon elle, les expériences, perceptions et préoccupations des femmes y sont pour une très large part ignorées.

La question d'un environnement approprié aux étudiantes adultes est examinée par Sue Scott et Donna Chovanec. Elles relèvent les stratégies mises de l'avant par des éducatrices féministes afin de développer chez leurs étudiantes la conscience critique face à l'inégale distribution du pouvoir qu'elles vivent en classe, tout comme dans leur vie personnelle et sociale. Joyce Stalker pour sa part aborde dans son article la question spécifique d'abus de pouvoir dans le cas de harcèlements sexuels dans la relation éducative au niveau des études avancées. Cette réalité reste vécue malheureusement sous silence le plus souvent et on peut espérer que cet article incite d'autres chercheuses et praticiennes à rendre visibles les contributions et préoccupations des femmes à ce propos.

Dans cet éditorial, loin de vouloir ignorer les forces, les ressources et les alliances bénéfiques dans la pratique humaniste de l'éducation des adultes, nous croyons qu'il est nécessaire d'examiner d'un oeil critique le fossé qui existe entre l'intention et l'action, entre les valeurs énoncées et la pratique sur le terrain.

D'une part, nous estimons qu'il est grand temps de dire ici l'expérience problématique des femmes en éducation des adultes. Il est nécessaire d'admettre et de révéler à quel point les difficultés des femmes en éducation des adultes ont été sous-estimées, liées qu'elles sont notamment à d'autres aspects de la discrimination. La refonte de nos pratiques n'est guère facilitée en période de contraintes économiques, nous le savons, et nous présentons la critique des erreurs et des échecs dans un but constructif.

D'autre part, nous offrons ici une place à l'expression de différents points de vue concernant la pratique éducative féministe auprès des adultes. Que l'on se rattache à tel ou tel courant (Harding, 1986), que l'on soit radicalement critique face à tout alliance du savoir et du pouvoir, il importe de percevoir nos propres biais. Ultiment, nous considérons que tout effort pour mettre au jour les préoccupations et les intérêts des femmes demeure important pour améliorer la pratique de l'éducation des adultes.

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