Literacy, Learning and 'Participatory Parity'

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Abstract: This paper investigates if participation in literacy programs contributes to alleviating social injustice using the lens of 'participatory parity' (Fraser, 2008). It argues that using this lens enables a focus on how social structures operate to deny social justice to some and so challenges an individual deficit approach to learners.

Introduction

This paper uses Nancy Fraser's (2008) theoretical framework of 'participatory parity', which considers both economic and cultural forms of injustice, to investigate if involvement in literacy programs resulted in any increase in social justice in terms of redistribution of opportunities, increased respect for participants' perceived status as competent individuals, and increased participation in decision-making processes. Its focus is on the perceptions of participants in six literacy programs based in Scotland and examines their experiences of the impact of these three aspects of social justice.

Participatory parity and literacy learners

Fraser (2003) has argued that every injustice should be treated as both economic, requiring material redistribution, and cultural, requiring the recognition of people's identities and cultural diversity, which means that all issues must be assessed from both outlooks without reducing one to the other. Fraser's model views lack of recognition as a matter of social status, where '... patterns of disrespect and disesteem are institutionalized' (Fraser 1998, 25). She argues that some groups are subjected to both types of discrimination, particularly those from racial minorities, because they are 'discriminated against in the labor market [whilst simultaneously]... patterns of cultural value privilege some traits … [meaning that they] are constructed as deficient and inferior others who cannot be full members of society' (Fraser, 2003, 23). Later Fraser (2008, 17) added a third dimension of social justice that she named 'participatory parity', because it focuses on equality of participation in decision making, and argued that this concept 'sets the procedures for staging and resolving contests in both the economic and the cultural dimensions'. Its achievement requires that individuals participate on an equal footing in processes that give them a voice in public deliberations and democratic decision-making particularly when considering issues that directly affect them.

There is an extensive literature that demonstrates both how dominant discourses in society negatively position those that do not have the literacy skills that are regarded as 'normal' and also how these discourses are internalized by people so that they regard themselves as deficient (Feeley, 2012; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011; Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012). This means that those with low literacy skills are particularly likely to suffer the three types of injustices delineated by Fraser. The literature (Cieslik, 2006; Wojecki, 2007; Worthman, 2008) also shows that these injustices are often manifested at the individual level through the incorporation of a negative learning identity. However, education has been noted as a 'key site for the construction

of identity' (Britton & Baxter 1999, 179) for the adult student and participating in literacy programs has been shown to lead to positive changes in self-perception (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2007; Sfard and Prusak, 2005; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007).

Research also shows (e.g. Barton et al, 2007; Gallacher, Crossan, Field & Merrill, 2002) that people bring a set of conceptions, procedures, beliefs, and dispositions to their lives so learning is shaped by the diverse ways in which individuals elect to engage in activities and these in turn are mediated by individual's subjectivities. So learning is not only about acquiring new skills and practices but is also about changes in people's identity (Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Warriner, 2010). Drawing on this literature I will use Fraser's 'participatory parity' framework as a lens to examine issues of social justice but first I outline the research design.

Research design

Life-history interviews were conducted with learners participating in six literacy programs based in community settings (27 learners) as part of a research project conducted by the author and colleagues and reported on in Crowther, Maclachlan and Tett (2010). The interviews used an autobiographical approach so that, as Wedin (2008, p. 762) argues, it was possible to examine the 'perspectives and life conditions of the target groups [and] take local, everyday practices into consideration'. Learners were asked to talk about: their individual life histories; the influence of key support/learning organizations on their lives; the circumstances in which they were currently situated; their imagined futures. The interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within these interview data so they were first sorted chronologically to construct linear learning histories. Working from the histories, emergent analytic topics became evident. Next, the data were coded by these themes and a secondary analysis was completed and independently checked by two researchers. The categories that emerged from this process were the impact of school experiences and later traumas, how experiences of marginalization had affected learners' willingness to engage in literacy programs and the effect of participation in learning on their identities.

These data are now drawn on to answer three research questions. These are: is poor literacy the result of earlier injustices; if so does participation in literacy programs contribute to alleviating some forms of social injustice; what factors contribute to the achievement of participatory parity?

Literacy and social injustice

The data show clearly that the learners perceived they had been denied social justice through both maldistribution and misrecognition. In particular their experiences of growing up in poverty, having poor quality schooling and subsequent periods of unemployment had led them to internalize negative views of their ability to learn. For example, many described poor experiences of initial education. One learner remembered having difficulties at primary school. She was very slow at reading but did not feel that the teachers noticed and she thought that they were: 'more interested in the ones that could get on...They sort of just left me to one side... I tried to do my best, but I just felt that because I wasn't bright and I wasn't brainy that people just didn't want to know'. It appears that these low expectations of pupils became self-fulfilling prophecies leading to their neglect. In addition people recalled memories of bullying and harassment that affected their ability to learn because they felt alienated and unsafe. One said: 'the kids from my Catholic primary school bullied and persecuted me because they said I was a Protestant and all my Dad said was "stand up to them and learn to fight", but I wasn't strong

enough'.

These experiences led a number of learners to stop participating in their schools either by being physically absent or not paying any attention even if they were there. For example: 'I was bullied so much… I didn't take anything in - there were so many sniggering remarks and I basically used to sit and doodle all day'. Another learner's memory of education was dominated by the impact of bullying teachers: 'in …the classes if you got it wrong you got hit. So there was fear and no one would put up their hand unless they were 100% sure, and that marks you'.

Difficult experiences in educational environments were not the sole causes of problems at school, however. Some rejected schooling because they were raised in homes that were neglectful. One learner's story exemplifies the impact of these experiences:

> My mum left when I was six weeks old and my dad brought me up but he re- married and I wasn't treated well by my stepmother. I don't remember any happy times, birthdays, family times, or even ordinary cuddles. There was just no love there so I ended up going off the rails and rarely went to Secondary school.

All these stories of learners' experiences illustrate the importance of the affective dimension in contributing to the learning process (Feeley, 2012) and the way in which lack of care impacted on their self-esteem.

However, negative schooling experiences were not the only cause of literacy difficulties and for a few school had been a haven providing a chance to escape from 'the problems at home'. In addition a few learners said that their school days had been 'fun', 'happy', 'a chance to mess about with my mates' but many of this group had experienced difficulties in their adult lives. This had been mainly through the impact of alcohol and drugs that had had an effect on their skills and competencies. For example, one said: 'I lost all my skills, I lost everything [through the drugs]'. Another learner began drinking heavily when his company crashed and he then: 'went downhill very fast... I suffered from depression, my health was bad and I did nothing apart from vegetate. I didn't read a newspaper or add 2 + 2 in eight years and was brain dead'.

Clearly then the learners in these programs all experienced maldistribution in terms of their access to the material things of life as well as misrecognition because their skills and experiences were constructed as deficient and inferior. Their personal and social circumstances had been an obstacle to the achievement of their potential but did participation in literacy programs lead to changes in their lives?

Participation, recognition and redistribution

In general participation in programs did help the learners to become more positive about their abilities and to perceive that they were able to change some of the ways in which they had been socially excluded. This was especially the case in relation to feeling that they were now more likely to be full members of society. For example: 'here they build you up and help you to think positively so I feel much more confident about what I can do ' and 'now I know I can be educated it's made a difference to the way I feel about everything'. Others found being part of a group helped them: 'you're in with the group so you get involved… you have to work out tasks, you're communicating with each other and it's very satisfying'. For some it was the tutors that made an impact: 'it makes me feel motivated that the tutors are working so hard to help me'. Participants in these programs reported that they had changed their dispositions to learning and altered their learning practices partly because of these positive caring relationships. For example: 'It's safe here and that makes it easy to talk to the staff who understand how I feel and if you trust a person and they say try this [learning activity] then you do it'.

Others talked about the recognition that they now received. For example one said: 'in this place you're not just a disabled person, you're respected as an ordinary person, as a human being' and another pointed out: 'I don't think I'm a failure any more... It's boosting my self-esteem, giving me more confidence and helping me know I can get a job'. This respect was created through learners feeling that their issues, circumstances and concerns were both acknowledged and valued. For example: 'here you don't get judged, criticized, everybody does care about everybody else, even though we've got our own problems'. Another said that she 'used to just watch TV, now I'm out mixing and learning - I'm not isolated any more'. So most of the learners had worked through previous negative learning identities and were now much more engaged in learning so that, as one put it: 'now I can read OK I feel more acceptable, not an outcast' and another said 'I value education now and I'm going on to college to study computing and hope that it will lead to a better life for me'.

All the learners were unemployed at the time of the interviews but hoped that the skills that they had acquired and their increased self-confidence would lead to employment. The learners clearly saw the recognition of their experiences as a step towards greater redistribution because, for example, 'people are now responding to what I have to say so that makes me feel that I can ask for a job without falling on my ass' and 'I'm more confident in speaking to others so I'm not scared to go to interviews now'.

Achieving participatory parity?

At a global level literacy inequalities persist across societies and are located in the individuals and groups such as those living in poverty, migrants, racial minorities, that are treated with less value and importance than more powerful others (OECD, 2013). Moreover, research shows that proficiency in literacy skills is positively associated with important aspects of wellbeing, including health, beliefs about one's impact on the political process and trust in others (OECD, 2013) so this means that becoming more literate should contribute to some forms of social justice. This research has shown that learners had experienced changes in both the recognition and redistribution spheres of social justice but does becoming more literate also lead to participatory parity?

The data reported on above showed that the two spheres of maldistribution and misrecognition were intertwined and reinforced each other dialectically. Factors that contributed to greater social justice as a result of participation in the literacy projects included changes in the learners' and others' perceptions of their status, enhanced likelihood of obtaining employment and increased participation in decision-making about significant issues in their lives. Learners reported that: 'I'm more confident in speaking to the teachers in my children's school'. 'I speak out more at home if I think things are not fair'. 'I've learnt to trust others so I'm getting more involved in my local community'. The people that were most able to challenge the social injustices they had experienced were those that reported strong positive changes in their levels of personal agency and identities as learners. This was most likely to occur in those projects that critically engaged learners in reevaluating their experiences in ways that promoted social awareness and critiqued existing inequalities. In these projects learners commented that they saw their earlier experiences differently now. For example: 'I see how my school teachers tried to put me down so now I'm involved in a family literacy project so that I can help other parents'. Even so the decision-making was mainly restricted to the local family and community level and most were excluded from the political sphere, where the power imbalances and negative discourses they experienced could be most effectively challenged. However, one learner reported that action

was being taken at the local government level because: 'we have got a lot of strength from working together in this project and so we are challenging the Council about all the cuts they are making to our classes. It's hard work as they aren't very responsive but we are determined that we will just carry on until they agree to our demands'.   For this group then, action was happening that enabled them to start to resolve contests at the political level because they were challenging their marginalization by the Council on economic and cultural grounds.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an analysis of the cultural and economic injustices that impact on people that do not have strong literacy skills. It has shown that those without the privileged literacy skills experience misrecognition because they lack the dignities given to the privileged and they are also subject to maldistribution because their lack of educational credentials makes them less likely to get and keep jobs, which would contribute to their material prosperity (OECD, 2013). However, it has also demonstrated that participation in literacy programs that use an asset-based approach does contribute to both these aspects of social justice especially when learners' previous experiences of life are seen as positive resources for learning. The learners have also pointed out the importance of human connectedness and a caring atmosphere in the programs for developing their assets and the consequent impact on their identities.

There are a number of implications for adult education policy and practice arising from using the lens of 'participatory parity'. First it provides a way of conceptualizing the impact of participating in literacy programs that goes beyond the usual assessment method of measuring increases in literacy skills. This is because it demonstrates the importance of social justice as a positive outcome of participation. Second this perspective challenges the individual deficit view of literacy learners. Instead the focus is on the democratic assumption that people are equal in a variety of different ways but social structures operate to deny social justice to some whilst privileging powerful others. Third participation in democratic decision-making is foregrounded as an important outcome of learning and thus enables more active challenges to contests at both the economic and cultural levels leading to participatory parity. Although this latter outcome is very difficult to achieve learners' experiences of democratic decision-making processes as an integral part of literacy programs, can provide the first important steps on the road to social justice. For all these reasons the lens of 'participatory parity' does provide an important way of reconceptualizing the impact of participation in literacy programs.

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