A journey of her own

Critical analysis of learning experiences among immigrant women: assessing transformative learning and women’s resilience in community-based education programs.

Julia Fursova,
MAdEd, St.FX University, NS, Canada
A few definitions

- Transformative Learning
- Transformative change or transformation
- Resilience
Goal of the study

- To describe what types of learning environment and aspects of training design in community setting help to facilitate transformative learning among immigrant women and what kind of learning experiences contribute to women’s resilience and well-being in this context.
Overview of methods:

- Qualitative study with criterion based selection of participants (purposeful sampling)
- Semi-structured interviews
- Art-based exercise “self-portrait projective technique” (Bagnoli, 2009).
Profile of participants

7 women, internationally trained Professionals

- 4 women immigrated from the countries of the former USSR
- 2 women from Israel
- 1 participant from Iran
Research Findings

- **Change** in perception of self
- **Helpful** Learning conditions
- **Not-helpful** Learning conditions
- **Transformative change**
Change in perception of self

- Loss of or change in professional identity and/or social status
- Increased assertiveness and independence
- Change in values
Helpful Learning conditions were described as those that support:

- Learning from others
- Interactive learning
- Learning how to identify individual skills and strengths

From peers
From programs’ instructors
Transformative change

- 5 participants described the change in their frame of references that constitute transformative learning.
- The depth of transformative learning varied for each participant.
- Several areas of transformation were identified and two participants experienced transformation in more than one area.
Areas of Transformation

- Transformation as developing acceptance of different cultural/social groups – described by 4 participants
- Transformation as developing recognition of systemic issues and oppression – described by 3 participants
- Transformation as reconsideration of one’s cultural believes/values in relation to gender roles – described by 1 participant
Voices of transformation

**Chorus**
I don’t know who I am.
In search of my place,
In search of myself,
Starting from scratch...
Getting wiser, loosing those rose
tinted glasses...
I don’t know who I am any more!
And yet I am getting wiser,
I am getting stronger.
I now can do it.
I know I can.
But I am not myself,
I am not myself anymore.
Yet I am getting wiser.
I am getting stronger.

**Voice of the 1st woman**
I realised as a woman
I have a voice.
I have a choice.
As a woman, I matter too.
Choice is important for everyone.
If I have a right to choose, 
The others should have this right too.

**Voice of the 2nd woman**
Very deep change in my views, 
I empathise with these people now... 
Homelessness is not a choice. 
People need lots of support. 
Somehow I can make their life better 
Even with the kind word...

**Voice of the 3rd woman**
She is a Muslim woman 
And she is also my friend. 
She is a wonderful woman! 
I met her here. 
I cannot imagine how 
Under other circumstances 
How I could be friends with her. 
Israel doesn’t have the best relationships 
with the Muslim world...
I don’t care, I see the person. 
She is a wonderful woman. 
She is a Muslim...She is my friend!

**Voice of the 4th woman**
African woman wanted to help. 
She was kind to me. 
I was prejudiced. 
And I asked myself a question – why? 
I saw her with different eyes, 
African American people, 
They can be friendly and open. 
African American people, 
They are very nice. 
When you acquire experience, 
You can get rid of the stereotypes...

**Voice of the 5th woman**
I am taking off my rose tinted glasses. 
Barriers are more or less the same. 
I am not alone with my problems. 
I understand, it’s not just me. 
The issue is not about us, 
This is the hardest thing... 
I came here as a skilled worker, 
I wanted to grow in the field where I 
feel an expert. 
This did not happen. 
I saw it with other immigrants too. 
It’s not just me. It hurts. 
The country ignores our experience. 
I could have been much more useful...
Voices of transformation cntnd.

Chorus
In search of my place.
In search of myself.
What is my mission?
What is my identity?
Starting from scratch.
Proud of being independent.
Going through transformation,
Feeling the pain of change.
Pathways of transformative learning

Learning about self

Diversity Learning

Intercultural learning

Learning about others
Factors that enabled transformative learning

- Women’s exposure to diversity of various kinds, including but not limited to intercultural diversity; and

- Meaningful interaction with diversity

- Reflection process in the context of individual interpretations and meaning making.
Transformation and resilience

- Women who have experienced transformation appear more resilient in resettlement because they demonstrate openness to alternatives and new experiences, are more likely to see mistakes as learning opportunities and have tolerance for ambiguity.

- Resilience may also be undermined while women go through transformation renegotiating their roles, values and patterns of behaviour related to traditional gender roles.
Transformative learning undoubtedly opens doors for women to more opportunities and may contribute to women’s resilience through developing assertiveness and self-reliance. However, academics and practitioners need to be cognisant of the risks that come along with the benefits of transformative learning for women renegociating their traditional gender roles.
Conclusions: Transformative learning as a better lens of understanding immigrant women's experiences

The abrupt changes in cultural, social and economic environment immigrant women go through, often cause women to revise and review their previous frame of reference in order to survive and integrate in unfamiliar cultural contexts. From this perspective transformative learning theory provides a better lens for understanding immigrant women’s learning.
Conclusions: supportive learning environment recognises existing knowledge and skills

- Immigrant women learn best in the learning environment where their strengths and wealth of expertise that they bring to the table is appreciated. Women valued learning conditions that supported their personal development and growth and it was extremely important for them to be involved in those practical activities that helped them to reaffirm their existing skills applying them in the new environment.
Conclusions: the deficient immigrant approach undermines resilience

- “The deficient immigrant” approach where women’s skills and experiences were dismissed as insufficient or irrelevant was extremely disempowering for women. In particular women described as “unhelpful” those trainings that provide general and basic information without taking into account the high level of expertise among internationally trained immigrants.
Conclusions: acknowledgement of systemic barriers is necessary

- In addition, disconnect between training content and the realities of life for immigrant women was also described as disempowering. Training programs that emphasize individual skills development while neglecting the impact of systemic barriers for successful immigrant settlement are insufficient in meeting needs of immigrant women.
Implications for the field

- This study has a potential to inform the development of learner oriented community based programs for immigrant women and encourages reflection on predominant assumptions about immigrant women challenging the “deficient immigrant” approach. It also encourages re-thinking the concept of women’s empowerment in relation to cultural contexts and gender-power dynamics that influence immigrant women’s resettlement and learning.
Recommendations

In response to the findings from this study I provide recommendations to practitioners working with immigrant women in community sector in four areas: recommendations on program design and development; program evaluation; advocacy efforts and adult educators’ professional development.
Program design and development

- Create opportunities for shared learning
- Provide opportunities for meaningful interactions with diversity
- Provide learners with experiences that challenge them to think of issues from other perspectives.
- Encourage women’s imagination through using wide variety of arts-based methods
- Engage learners in identifying gender belief systems that affects them as learners
- Create opportunities for women to connect and support each other beyond program hours
Program Evaluation

- Involve women in planning and carrying out evaluation activities
- Employ arts based evaluation methods
- Ensure long-term impact evaluation
- Ensure that evaluation captures the impact of systemic barriers
Advocacy efforts

- Address access issues
- Improve links between your agency/institution and other agencies
- Involve grassroots women’s groups
- Support immigrant women in becoming agents of change
Educator’s Professional development

- Challenge your own monoacculturation
- Be constantly aware of your positionality and privilege
- Develop your own authenticity in a social context
- Use gender, race and class as a lens for understanding the diversity of women’s experiences
The Tree

arts informed reflection on women’s transformation and resilience
Developing hard skin

- When discussing their transformative change women would often speak about how they learned to “become tougher”, I compare this to the tree developing hard bark during its maturation.
Maintaining connection with the roots

Like the tree, women have to stay connected to the roots, which make us who we are. Learning to recognise what in our heritage and traditional upbringing brings us strength and what impedes our growth, and learning to negotiate our choices based on that distinction, makes us stronger and resilient.
Bearing the fruit

Once we find true connection with our roots and soil and become able to filter out what impedes our development, we are able to bear fruit - there will be personal and professional accomplishments, we will blossom into our true selves.
The ability of the tree to transform the landscape while adapting to it and becoming an organic part of this landscape reflects the final stage of transformation – ability to act based on new meaning perspectives and frame of reference.
Women become mentors and allies, support other women, share their new understanding of the world with their immediate communities and in doing so they transform their social landscape at the same time staying part of it. The nurturing qualities of the Tree, such as giving shade and shelter, bearing fruit reflect the nurturing qualities of womanhood, women’s endless ability to share, stay connected, protect and support each other, at the same time being caregivers for the young and old.
Like the Tree we do not grow for our own sake, we grow in order to become the source of support, shade and shelter. And like the fallen tree when we finally have to go, our accomplishments, our gains will become the nurturing soil for the new young trees. Feminists of this generation thrive on the freedoms and opportunities that older generation have achieved for us, in the same way we must continue struggle and growth so that the women of the future will too have nurturing ground for their development.