Global Adult Education, Justice and Spirituality

Leona English, EdD
St. Francis Xavier University

Abstract: This paper reports on life history research with 13 female adult educators who work in international development contexts. The research examines the intersection of justice and spirituality in their lives. Two areas are explored: (a) the background factors and experiences that influenced these adult educators to undertake their justice work, and (b) how these international adult educators make spiritual sense of their lives. Several themes are identified and discussed: conflict with organized religion, spirituality lived in the everyday, significant relationships, spirituality as contributing to the common good, and connections of work to meaning-making and spirituality.

Introduction

This paper reports on a study of the intersection of justice, education and spirituality in the lives of adult educators who work with global civil society organizations (Hall, 1993). The primary goal of the research was to inquire critically into the life histories of 13 female adult educators whose lives exemplify a commitment to justice and spirituality. The research is situated at the intersection of the personal/spiritual and the public lives of those adult educators who are concerned with justice in the global sphere. This life history research, which assumed a joint production between the narrator and the researcher, had several objectives: (a) to develop understanding of the values, knowledge, experiences of international adult educators; (b) to develop the limited knowledge base of the intersection of spirituality, global justice, and adult education in the lives of international adult educators; and (c) to contribute this knowledge to the field of adult education as a way to reclaim a focus on the common good. The data analysis provides adult education practitioners and researchers with insight into how they might develop a global justice orientation for their field. This is an orientation that is often tied to spirituality and one that is intricately tied to the early vision of the field of adult education. The data analysis can assist adult educators in their quest to reclaim their field’s roots in global justice, education, and spirituality.
Theoretical Framework

Early adult educators embodied and promoted a vision of education for social justice (Coady, 1939), a broad international mandate (Kidd, 1973), and a commitment to the common good (Lindeman, 1926). For many of them, spirituality was the inspiration and guiding force in their work (Yeaxlee, 1925). Although the current creeping professionalism and a technorationalist vision in adult education have caused angst in the field (e.g., Welton, 1995), examples of how to reclaim a justice vision for adult education are elusive. Even though the issue of spirituality has recently been explored by researchers in adult education and related areas (e.g., Heron, 1996; Hunt, 1998; Fenwick & Lange, 1998; Reason, 1993), the relationship of spirituality to adult education and justice has not been well explored, with few exceptions (e.g., Tisdell, 2000). Yet, adult education leaders in the 20th century (e.g., Freire, 1970) evidenced strong spiritual motivations for their work. To know more about and understand these webs of relationship, we need to talk to international adult educators who frequently exhibit the ability to integrate spiritual and justice dimensions into their lives and work. For the purposes of this study, spirituality is theorized to include: a strong sense of who one is; care, concern and outreach to the other; and the continuous construction of meaning and knowledge (English, 2000). This is a “secular,” not necessarily religious (Van Ness, 1996), and “public,” or action oriented” (Berry, 1988) spirituality, which is lived out in the everyday world of human experience and is oriented to global justice.

Although many adult educators have begun writing about spirituality and justice and their relationship to the field (e.g., Apps, 1996; English, Fenwick, & Parsons, in press; Hunt, 1998; Weibust & Thomas, 1994; Westrup, 1998), little empirical research has been done. An exception is Tisdell’s (2000) research, which was primarily with women in higher education who grew up in religious traditions. The intersections of spirituality, justice, and adult education need to be explored further, on a more global scale, with men and women, and with an openness to more secular (not necessarily religious) types of spirituality. This study provided an opportunity to see how one group of adult educators has managed to integrate spirituality and justice into their educational work. This study provided an opportunity to operationalize the broad, inclusive definition of spirituality given above to determine how it intersects with the experience of those who educate internationally for justice.

Research Design

The research was qualitative in nature and employed a life history approach (Goodson, 1992; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). The life history method was well-suited to this study by making it possible to explore the highly personal and uniquely contextualized nature of each international adult educator’s spirituality and justice orientation, and its relationship to their commitments to the common good. In-depth interviews were carried out with 13 female adult educators who have worked globally (9 were from North America and 4 were from Asia and Africa). The criteria for selection were that the women had worked internationally and that they were willing to talk about the intersection of spirituality and justice in their work. These women were available through their association (not necessarily employment) with the Coady International Institute in Nova Scotia.

The 90-minute interviews were used to surface accounts of the background factors that
influenced their choice of international adult education work, the nature and extent of their international experiences, and the motivations and supports for their practice. This approach allowed the researcher to gather data on how the narrators define spirituality and justice, and how these elements intersect with their educational practice. The life history approach was used to prepare individual accounts of each person’s experiences and learning processes as an international adult educator. Then thematic analysis across the cases, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), was used to compare participants’ experiences in different social-political contexts. These interviews allowed collective critical reflection on experience and facilitated the uncovering of insights and perspectives into their experience and knowledge construction (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995).

**Themes in the Research**

To highlight the particularities of this research I present the major themes that arose from the interviews. My interview interest was in the adult educators’ commitment to social issues, the background factors and experiences that influenced and supported that commitment, and the relationship (if any) of spirituality to their work.

**Conflict With Organized Religion**

All 13 of the women interviewed identified themselves as having been raised in a religious tradition. However, only the 3 women from the South spoke of religion as an integral part of their current lives, though several of the women still attended church services. Three of the white Canadians, in particular, spoke of the difficulty of being committed to justice and at the same time being part of a church that gave lip-service but little tangible support to social action. As they became more involved with international work, they became increasingly uncomfortable with their church's inattention to social justice concerns. Mary, a white Canadian who lives for part of the year in Central America doing research and accompanying refugees home from Canada, spoke of the difficulty in finding like-minded people in her church. For many years, she was an activist and was "having trouble relating it to her faith." Because she is not "interested in activism for activism’s sake," but rather in it as an outgrowth from her religious beliefs, she has had to work hard to find people who share her values and concerns. Many of these people are not connected to churches.

**Living Spirituality in the Everyday**

The women’s description of their own spirituality consisted of an overall mix of elements including organized religion, personal development interests, and nature mysticism. Common among these women was a profound sense of the Transcendent (named variously as "God," "a higher power," and a "creator") working in their lives. Nancy, a white Canadian, now working with adults with disabilities, described her international work in the Caribbean as the point when she really became overwhelmed by the "beauty of God in creation." She noted that she had never seen such abundance in nature and that "she would sit in the woods and go ‘ooh’." This awareness of something greater than herself sustained her international work and continues to sustain her social service work since returning to Canada 10 years ago.

For other women in the study, defining spirituality consisted of a negation of organized
religion because it had not been supportive of their quest for meaning. Although all 12 were raised within a religious tradition (mainly Christianity), their current involvement was nil or marginal. One participant, Selma, a black community development worker and national of Ghana, identified herself as a practising Muslim who followed only those elements of her religion that made sense to her: a focus on community development work and a commitment to justice. Other than these, she ignored the traditional taboos around women, and the aspects of her religion that limited her. Selma saw her community development work as an opportunity to live her beliefs. She felt it important to embrace only those dimensions of religion that affirmed her as a woman, that helped her live her life with integrity, and that nurtured her family and community relationships, all of which were essential to her spirituality.

Many of the women identified daily rituals or disciplines that sustained them. Reena, a community-based adult educator and organizer in India, discussed the importance of meditation and Bible reading in her life. Although she does not rigidly adhere to the practice of rituals, she says they help her nurture her spirituality and inform her work in justice for women. Jane, a white Canadian, who now teaches international students and who has spent many years volunteering overseas, discussed her need to walk on the beach and to commune with nature as important in challenging times. Shelly, who was born into an affluent, white Canadian household, has abandoned mainstream Roman Catholicism and now practises a mixture of Rastafarianism, Catholicism, and Buddhism. She writes in her journal and practises meditation every day; as a result, she has become stronger and describes herself now as very "happy." Despite parental pressure to return home to Canada she has held firm to her commitment to literacy education work with West Indian women and plans to "stay there, be happy, and practise the art of being."

**Significant Relationships**

In each case, mentors were enormous influences on the women’s life work. Jane, a white Canadian who now teaches international development workers who come to Canada for instruction, spoke of her parents’ lifelong involvement in community and international development. Her father had done field work in Asia and Africa with an international development agency overseas, and her mother had been very active in local community development initiatives. Consequently, Jane grew up believing that she wanted to contribute to the "common good" (Daloz et al. 1996) in some way. She became active in a variety of development, international, and justice organizations and committed herself to a lifetime of international adult education, serving for 10 years in Africa as a nurse, and now as a teacher of international students and consultant for international agencies. The Roman Catholic nuns she saw every day of her youth were a significant influence on Jane’s life choices. These nuns had worked internationally and, to her, their lives seemed dedicated to doing "the right thing." As a little girl, Jane thought she wanted to do the kind of work that the nuns and her parents did.

In addition to formative influences, in many cases the women had large networks of peers who supported them in their work. Reena, a community development worker, for example, was born and raised in India and has become part of a team working to support women’s development. The team consists of legal, medical, and community development experts. Reena has a master’s degree in sociology and identifies herself as a professional social worker. Away from home for a 6-month sabbatical in Canada, she admitted she missed the team. Reena believes
that her "spirituality is lived out in her relationship with people and [her] genuine conviction that they collectively can be part of the solution to India’s challenges." She believes teams are essential for the growth of the members and of herself.

**Spirituality as Contributing to the Common Good**

The women I interviewed embody a spirituality that is characterized by a thirst for justice, for equitable economic and social order. The interviews yielded rich detail about how the adult educators saw their work contributing to the common good. Shelly, a white Canadian, for instance, saw her international women’s literacy work as an opportunity to "give something back for all that she has been given" as her spiritual purpose. She also notes that she values the opportunities to be with other committed ex-patriots who hold similar values. She stresses that she needs to work on herself, her inner person, in order to be useful to others. Living and working for justice among women in the Global South gave her the opportunity to make spiritual sense of an affluent suburban upbringing and her life choices that cause conflict with her parents. Shelly took a long time to come to the realization that affluence is not something to feel bad about—it is part of giving to others.

Kate, a white community development worker, described her experience of growing up in the politically-charged United Kingdom in the sixties and seventies, with former colonies gaining independence. She felt that international work provided an opportunity to give something back. All of the women interviewed wanted to be part of passing on what they had received.

**Connections of Work to Meaning-Making and Spirituality**

The women in this study not only talk about how they help others—in every case they report the richness they receive as a result of their involvement with international adult education. For many of the women, spirituality is connected to justice and a concern for right order in political, economic, and social spheres. Reena, a native of India, discussed her work of providing training for women in areas such as political literacy, which she has been doing for 9 years. She described the moment she knew she had chosen the "right work for me." One morning she awoke to hear that following the gang rape of a local woman, some 200 women organized themselves and protested, without the help of the NGO that had been training them. When Reena heard this story she knew then that her 9 years of educational work in the region were worthwhile. A commitment to working for justice helped her make sense of poverty and inequity in her country.

In order to derive meaning from their work, these women not only needed to see it as activity, but activity that had a purpose and meaning. The women were involved because the ability to work collaboratively to educate others gave their lives purpose and meaning. More importantly, the work connected them to a larger project, justice for all. This collective sense and the notion that they were contributing to the larger whole was a strong motivator and part of their integrated spirituality.

**Summary**

The stories that the women told seemingly came easily to them. Adult educators can learn from the fact that these women welcomed the opportunity to discuss their spirituality. In each case, the women told freely of their experiences, often citing spirituality as the core of their being,
their raison d’être, and as the aspect of themselves that they spend the most time fostering. Far from shying away from spirituality, or keeping a hands-off approach, these female adult educators seemed only too glad to discuss spirituality. The issues and ideas generated by a discussion of spirituality are integral to their wholeness as persons.

The need to address spirituality and provide opportunities to discuss it with other adult educators is very important. Jane pointed out that going overseas is very difficult, and it can "bring up a lot of things in one’s life." Because the differences in culture and class in the new country are often considerable, having an opportunity to talk about the "journey" makes sense. The intensity of international experiences is known to those who have been overseas. As Jane also noted, dealing openly with spirituality can "help you when you are there." The fact that spirituality is not factored into and is not an integral component of international adult education training or on-site education is problematic. Given the intensity of overseas work, this situation is different from adult education in a familiar context and requires more careful attention and responsiveness to the needs of adult educators. The distinction between religion and spirituality makes it possible for adult educators to focus on spirituality, and avoid the controversy and negativity that some of these women articulated about religious traditions.

Further interviews are required to explore some of the issues that did arise such as the differences between the Canadian born and those born in the Global South, as well as racial and class differences. None of the women discussed how their race affected their work or their interactions with others. All 12 women were middle-class, though only one identified class as a motivating factor in her choice of international development work. Further research is necessary to explicate the differences and how they affected work and the spirituality for women working in an international adult education context.

References


