Learning to mother over coffee and cake: Naming our informal learning

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Abstract

This article is a feminist inquiry into the learning experiences of mothers in an informal parent support group and asks: What is quality education and how do we ensure we are identifying it appropriately? Drawing on feminist research and incorporating contributions from 16 women, this article highlights how a group of women identify their experiences as significant learning episodes. In doing this they reject other methods of learning in favour of informal, dialogical learning in convivial and supportive settings. Rather than relying on authorised knowledge (Letherby, 2003) they rely on the experiential knowledge of other mothers. Reminiscent of feminist community education this group enables the women to overcome oppression and isolation by collectively naming their world in order to understand it. The community education setting is in decline in Ireland but when we draw on quantitative methods to define, categorise and count educational groups we need to ensure we are naming, counting and including all forms of education. This paper argues that we are overlooking important groups who are engaging in quality informal community education.

Keywords: Informal learning, community education, 'really useful research', feminist research, defining quality

Introduction

This article seeks to explore what constitutes quality education and to inquire whether we are recognising quality education in all its forms. Drawing on my recent research uncovering the experiences of women in a parent support group I will provide an exploration of learning experiences in a non-traditional educational setting through convivial relationship and dialogue (Coss, 2016). The women in this support group rate their learning experiences very highly

yet prior to participating in my research they, like many others, might not have identified these experiences as quality educational incidents. Jarvis notes that everyday life is a strangely under researched subject, with adults often not recognising their changing and developing thoughts and behaviour as learning unless they are engaging in an active, formally acknowledged or accredited, conscious episode of learning (Jarvis, 2010, p. 63). My research explores how creating space for dialogical learning in a highly informal setting, a coffee morning, led to significant learning experiences for the women involved. My interest in this area began when participating in research for the Central Statistics Office. I was asked a series of questions designed to identify to what extent I had participated in Lifelong Learning in the preceding months (CSO, 2014). The pre-set categories included formal, non-formal and informal. My enthusiastic description of how I had learned as a mother attending a local parent support group – to my mind social, dialogical, experiential and transformative learning – didn't fit into any of the prescribed boxes. Statistically I had not in fact learned anything that could be quantified in any way except 'other'.

Overview

Murray discusses the attempt to define the field of education and learning as an attempt to control and dominate the discipline (2014, pp. 105-106). Despite this viewpoint, different learning environments are often defined as formal, non-formal and informal and these definitions are recognised and utilised in many settings, for example inclusion in quantitative research by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP, 2015) and the Central Statistics Office in Ireland (CSO, 2010). Jarvis states that when attempting to categorise these various types of learning into examples of formal, non-formal and informal there is an inherent prejudice displayed, since the terms informal and non-formal imply that all the important learning, the quality learning, is formal – structured, accredited, provided for in recognised institutions of education, and so on – whereas the remaining examples of learning which are not so orientated can be lumped together as 'informal' (Jarvis, 2010, p. 66). This categorisation has led to a hierarchical interpretation of what constitutes learning. For many, the concept of learning conjures up images of classrooms, training, teachers, textbooks, homework, and exercises, yet in reality learning is an integral part of our everyday lives, part of our participation in our communities and organisations (Wenger, 1999; Tough, 1971). For Wenger, 'the problem is not that we do not know this, but rather that we do not have very systematic ways of talking about this familiar experience' (1999, p. 8). Finnegan (2016, p. 52) also discusses this defining of learning, exploring what

he calls a 'narrowing educational imagination' and setting out his vision for a future where adult education is viewed as a set of practices across various social spaces encouraging democracy, participation and critical reflection. Sources of knowledge, the production of knowledge and the sites where knowledge are produced are common themes in writings on adult education. When people create their own knowledge and have their voices heard, narrow definitions of what is thought to be 'educated knowledge' and who it is that makes it are thrown into question (Tett, 2006).

Coffee and Cake: Methodology

The inclusion of 'Coffee and Cake' as part of my title is used to reflect the informal and relational nature of the setting and to examine the significance of these features in producing spaces conducive to learning. These conditions of informality were also crucial to my research approach. Leaning on the work of Letherby (2003) and Oakley (2000; 1999) I understood that issues of methodology and epistemology mattered. In keeping with my desire to conduct feminist research I drew on my experience of over 15 years working with adult and community groups. I used a series of open-ended activities and 'codes' (Freire, 1993) that aimed to produce the core conditions needed for us to explore this subject together putting my trust in the mantra 'the group can take care of itself' (Sheehy, 2001, p. 33). The unstructured nature of my activities provided qualitative depth by enabling respondents to talk about the subject within their own frames of reference, drawing upon meanings with which they were familiar and allowing those meanings of events and relationships be understood on their own terms (May, 2001). This research includes the contributions of 16 women in total, 17 including myself. Although I am a member of this parent support group and have attended coffee mornings in the past all findings included in this paper were generated from discussion and contributions voiced through three focus groups with a combined total of 13 respondents and a further 3 contributions by e-interview. The women range in age from their early 30s to their 50s and are at various stages in their parenting journey, with some having one child and others having two or more. These women adopt practices that are peripheral to mainstream culture in Irish society (Layte and McCrory, 2014), practices that are often ostracised, for example longer-term breastfeeding and co-sleeping, and in the focus groups more than one woman described themselves as a 'hippy mum' (Coss, 2016). This is where drawing on research brings useful information into focus, for example, in stark contrast to the dominant norm in Irish society, almost all the women in the study identified themselves as extended or 'full term' breast feeders (WHO, 2016; DOHC, 2005)

with many continuing to breastfeed their children to two years or beyond. There was also a far higher than national average of respondents who gave birth at home or with midwifery-led services despite the dominant model of birth in Ireland being hospital-based consultant-led care (Begley *et al.*, 2011). The research was co-constructed (Bryman, 2004; May, 2001) and the women who attended the focus groups were invited to comment on the transcript from which some did, giving insightful and thought-provoking responses.

Ways of Learning

Throughout my research it was clear that mothering in our society can be an isolating experience and that the women found their experiences of mothering challenging and difficult. Chodorow (1999, p. 7) maintained that mothering was socially constructed, that women were taught to be mothers and were trained for nurturance. If we uphold this socialisation of women as mothers we can see that the women in my research did not always feel adequately 'taught' or 'trained' for this task. One of the first pieces of information to emerge from the focus groups was the inadequacy of the knowledge about mothering these women considered themselves to have before they had their first child. There were many references in the research about the 'isolation', 'loneliness' and 'vulnerability' they felt and the occasions when they describe openly and honestly their feelings of being overwhelmed are very powerful. In order to learn new ways of facing these challenges they sought out and valued the emotional support and connection from other mothers. In contrast to Chodorow's concept of socially constructed mothering a number of the women in this research expressed thoughts and feelings about the natural, gendered virtues of motherhood, for example 'a mother is naturally nurturing'. Despite changes in Irish society, which have led to significantly more involvement from fathers and men in general, women predominantly populate this parent-support group. When men are involved it is most often to attend annual family orientated events or 'non-formal' events such as information talks rather than the informal weekly coffee mornings. In their review of the literature on social support and parenting Geens and Vandenbroek (2014) showed there is minimal attention given to the relational aspect of social support, yet they also present the widespread position in the literature that the informal network of parents is the first place parents turn to for support. This produces a complexity whereby regular attendance at informal coffee mornings creates conditions favourable to support and learning yet it is a setting where, for the most part, women undertake the parenting; men are not present or certainly are not visible. This absence compounds the perspective that informal networking in relation to parenting is something for mothers

to engage in. Crucially, this paper proposes that the proliferation of women in informal parent support groups is precisely the reason why these groups are not being named and counted as sites for learning. Whether the women in this research believe their mothering behaviour is innate, socially constructed or a complex combination of both, this research has comprehensively shown that for these women when it comes to mothering, traditional methods of learning do not always work for them. Throughout the focus groups there was a large amount of discussion about methods of learning to be a mother, including a shift from previous methods of learning and a move towards informal methods. I have included the following exchange between Denise, Niamh and Jenny in Focus Group Two as an example:

> **Denise:** I think you learn in a different way, I think how you've "learned to learn" is a different way of learning to how we're learning as mothers.

> **Niamh:** The 1 plus 1 doesn't equal 2.

> **Jenny:** Yeah, and it's not appreciated the same way because you can't measure it, you can't say she's doing a worse job than I am, or I got an A and you got a B minus.

Letting Go

Conversations about the nature of learning focused on examples of learning that were preferred, such as observation, using social media, and experiential learning. They also included discussions of methods of learning that didn't work, observed in comments such as:

> **Michelle:** It was learn, learn, learn, academic, academic, academic, and now it's much more...empirical. That? Ok, that didn't work, try something else. Ok that didn't work, try something else (laughter).

> **Denise:** All the information you get it really comes from this community of mothers you find…but it's other mothers rather than, sort of, outside of that, books or TV, you know?

An unexpected outcome for me was how forcefully this leaving behind of more traditional ways of learning was voiced, especially in relation to learning from books. Across the three focus groups all references to books as a means of learning were negative, yet respondents identified previous success when learning using this method. For example, Elaine and Michelle had these comments about book learning:

Elaine: It's the way I've always done everything, if I'm going on holiday I read the guide book. It's always been all about the books and the studying and if you do X you will get Y and you will plan, plan, plan...and now that's gone! You can't do that…your child is not in any book.

Michelle: At first I read everything. And now...I think it was clouding my gut reaction 'cos I was reading and going "oh that must be how I think". No! I actively stopped reading parenting books.

Intersectionality and Oppression

What is perhaps most interesting to note from the research is the evidence of intersectionality and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). For these women, the experience of being a patient in the Irish medical system – one with strong Catholic undertones – combines with their gender and their status as pregnant women or birthing women to create a particular form of oppression. There are clear stories in the research of women who occupy typically dominant positions in wider society (by virtue of their race, their age, their educational level, their occupation and their social status) being oppressed as expectant and/or birthing mothers, with striking use of language such as 'butchered', 'violated', 'traumatic', and 'silenced'. The women in Focus Group One teased out the homogenous nature of the group by discussing with each other the lack of diversity relating to age, religion and status, describing themselves as 'middle-class', 'well-educated' and 'in their mid-late 30s' (Coss, 2016, pp. 52-53). Using these frames of reference, the protective factors the women might have against certain forms of discrimination and oppression are eroded by the manner in which their experiences are structured by their gender and by the policies and practices they encountered (Crenshaw, 1991). Their position in society as mother includes many stories relating to oppression, perhaps more prevalent due to their alternative choices relating to parenting, birth and breastfeeding in particular. As noted above, the women in this focus group often mother in ways which deviate from the dominant norms, their choices intersect with already existing perceptions of mothering to further compound the feelings of marginality. These women possess different levels of power and marginality dependent on their roles, for example: doctor/birthing mother; engineer/stay-at-home mother; full-time business entrepreneur/full-time carer. As such, they would not often be the type of demographic we would expect to be described as 'silenced 'or 'other'. Their power or marginality is relational and their role or status in one arena does not necessarily transfer to the other (Ryan, 2001, pp. 37-38). Evidence of silencing, trivialising, sexualising and infantilising women

and traditionally women's lived experiences can be found in the focus groups including language used by the women and others to name the group, such as 'baby club' and 'booby group' with a further example given of a husband referring to 'tea parties on Fridays'. When reflecting on the importance of the coffee mornings Michelle noted:

> My husband would definitely have seen the value and been very supportive but I think he saw the value of the groups to me, I wonder would he see the value of the groups to society, probably not.

A large feature of discussion regarding the support that women received at the coffee mornings related to sharing similar experiences, experiences which they 'would never say in public' and the resultant feelings of 'being normal'.

> **Emma:** A lot of us feel the same things but we don't realise our feelings are normal, the fact that two people just open up and say "yeah, I've got that too", it's so liberating.

In summary, these women utilised new ways of learning to mother, which included more than just the traditional educational methods. The women in this research use groups such as this one in order to share and explore their subjective meanings with the hope that it will lead to a more secure understanding of their world. This understanding of their world and their new place within it leads to greater feelings of stability and greater feelings of connection. Sharing space, discussing generative themes that affect women's lives, exploring and understanding the structures and systems behind those themes provide us with an opportunity to understand and change our world. This can be achieved within informal education groups that uphold the principles of feminist community education (Moane and Quilty, 2012).

Discussion: Naming Our Informal Learning.

Belenkey *et al.* (1986, p. 13) describe how mothering has 'at its centre the teaching of the next generation' so as such, it is imperative that something so crucial should feature in the measurement of lifelong learning. Yet, as will be discussed here, the activities of certain informal groups are consistently overlooked and in doing so valuable sites of education are disregarded. Smith (2012) states that participation in local organisations has considerable educative power and AONTAS (2009) describe a women's support group as educative, maintaining that providing space to tell our stories teaches us to understand

our lives and cope with difficulties. The imagining of a parent support group as a site for education is clearly displayed in the responses of the women in this study when they outline the learning experiences and shifts in perspectives they have undergone while a member of this group. Despite the ability of this parent support group to provide spaces for meaningful learning, these forms of learning are more difficult to measure and quantify, they are by their nature non-accredited and are most often seen as having no value to the labour market. Traditionally, community education in Ireland provided a forum for voices of otherwise silenced people, it developed a process that valued their stories and it enabled the participants to interrogate their own words (CEFA, 2011; Connolly, 2003). Taking the lived experiences of the participants as its starting point, community education has evolved to include a combination of informal and non-formal education programmes, accredited and non-accredited, across a range of contexts, with particular attraction for women located in isolated, disadvantaged or socially excluded settings (Quilty *et al.*, 2016, p. 36; DES, 2000). It is well documented that there has been a decline in this form of women's community education (Fitzsimons, 2017; Connolly, 2014; Connolly 2013) most likely aligned with the move toward neo-liberal policies of community development and education (widely discussed in Murray, Grummell and Ryan, 2014; CEFA 2014). This decline becomes even more pronounced if we fail to recognise community education in all its guises.

Overlooking this arena of learning is a perfect example of where experiential and affective knowledge that is associated with the private sphere is disregarded in favour of the far more measurable political, economic and technical knowledge that dominate public spheres (Grummell, 2014). Moreover, the act of mothering is not just located in the private sphere; it is located in the private, feminised sphere. Carragher and Golding, in their discussions of the Men's Shed Movement (2016; 2015) discuss the aim for Ireland to 'achieve the 15 per cent EU benchmark for participation in lifelong learning by 2020' (Carragher and Golding, 2016, p. 60), but what are we counting as participation in lifelong learning? The Men's Shed movement, established in Ireland as recently as 2011 (IMSA, 2016) is surely being counted, but what of other informal groups? The parent support group at the centre of my research is just one branch of a national organisation established decades ago, it has high membership, is open to mothers, fathers, parents, grandparents, and is active in many communities in Ireland. Yet my experience, akin to those who took part in the research, is that relatively few people know its name. A discussion in Focus Group One addressed this issue, considering whether this was a branding failure or whether

it was in fact because nobody really cares. They concluded it was predominantly the latter (Coss, 2016, p. 74).

The experiences of the women (and men) who attend these coffee mornings and the subsequent knowledge created from these experiences have been subjugated by traditional education and the pursuit of more legitimate knowledge and learning experiences. Taking a feminist perspective the omission of the topic of parenting from official statistics on Lifelong Learning (CEDEFOP, 2015) could indicate that despite their educational worth these spaces for learning are not recognised or valued because parenting was traditionally seen as something that women do, individually and privately. Omitting these sites of learning leads to situations where the experiences described by these women remain silenced and 'other' (DeBeauvoir, 2009). In 1993 AONTAS produced a report, 'Liberating Learning', with the aim of identifying 'daytime groups' to compile accurate statistics and information. The main challenge named in this report was to find and contact these groups as many were run on such an informal level (Inglis *et al.*, 1993). This problem of identification of women's groups as spaces of learning continues in Ireland. The National Women's Council of Ireland, in its 2001 publication 'Framing the Future' which sought to examine the quantity and nature of women's community based groups, discounted certain groups stating that 'where women were not the main focus, such as in toddler groups or pre-school play groups, these were not included' (NWCI, 2001, p. 27) and the inclusion of breastfeeding groups and parenting groups are not explicitly named as a 'target group' or 'main focus' (NWCI, 2001, p. 30). Connolly makes the case that quantitative research has a place in 'really useful research' (2016, p.96). If these types of groups are not counted, if they are not seen, how can we begin to uncover what is taking place within them? When we begin to regard parent support groups as quality learning spaces we can then inquire about the nature of the learning taking place.

Sites of Learning

Community education recognises learning not just as the individual act of acquiring knowledge but also as a group process, with each group member bringing their gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and status with them (Connolly and Hussey, 2013). Community education reaches difficult to reach people and communities but not just that, it reaches difficult issues and trends. Connolly (2010) states that these difficult issues are not always located just at the local level, which is clearly shown by the ostensibly private issue of mothering, which in reality is politically and socially contested, including many different

perceptions of what it means to be a 'good mother' (Smart, 1996). This parent group is reminiscent of the wider grass-roots community education movement in Ireland where content and format were organised by the local community for the community, but takes this even further as all content is unprepared and spontaneous, it is by its nature self-directed. Many theories of informal education still point towards an 'educator' being present (Jeffs and Smith, 1997; 2005; 2011). Illich (1978) critiqued the role of institutions, professional educators and schools and the manner in which they reproduce the dominant hegemonic norms and create inequality. Instead, Illich put forward his vision for education where knowledge was accessible to everyone, at any time, through a sharing of knowledge in convivial peer relationships (Illich, 1978). Similarly, Illeris (2007; 2004) believes the terms of formal and informal to be very abstract and instead introduces the concept of different learning spaces. The central idea behind this concept is that since all learning is situated, different types of learning situations or learning spaces have different characteristics. For Illeris (2007; 2004) everyday learning takes place in daily life; it is mainly informal, multifarious, personal and related to the cultures and subcultures in which the person is integrated. This parent support group is a co-operative movement with minimal assigned roles. In the coffee mornings nobody is working overtly as an educator, informal or otherwise, and the setting is not a traditional site for education, reminiscent of Illich's vision. There are benefits to the truly informal act of learning through conversation, one where the input of group members into conversation is the only direction the learning can take, reminiscent of Freire's 'Culture Circle' (Freire, 1974, pp. 39-40). Yet even within this highly informal setting, one where the women themselves may not overtly recognise or name their activities as learning activities, a more fluid definition of education is useful. Within formal and non-formal settings we can seek to incorporate the more relational attributes of the informal settings; within informal settings there may be a place to incorporate a professional or para-professional adult educator (Percy, 1997). As an integral part of my methodology the transcript from the research was sent to all of the women and I invited a response from them. Like their conversation in the groups the women's responses were honest, visceral, eloquent and poignant; they spoke of the connection they felt during the focus groups and the importance of talking with and being with other women. Alongside these connections and relationships three of the women named in their responses the value of a facilitated space, one where 'discussion was guided but still let go where it needed to go' with one woman suggesting a need for facilitated evenings with a particular topic up for discussion (Coss,

2016, pp. 74-75). We can create and make visible more imaginative learning spaces if we further integrate our definitions of what constitutes formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Conclusion: Naming Our World

This group provides a space where women can share their cultural norms that often deviate from the dominant parenting norms, they can share their personal histories, they can share their perspectives, and in doing so feel more at ease with the construction of their own identities as women, as mothers and as members of their societies. This research shows, through a move away from more traditional ways of learning, that for these women certain types of knowledge are more highly valued than others in the area of parenting. These women describe relationships, support, and dialogue with other mothers as important to them when negotiating and learning through their transition to motherhood. They are largely relying on 'experiential knowledge' rather than 'authorised knowledge' (Letherby, 2003, p. 22). This is the 'really useful knowledge' (Thompson, 1996); this is the knowledge that these mothers trust. The learning episodes in these coffee mornings are a valid form of quality education but they are being overlooked due to the dominant imagining of sites and structures of education. Community education is regarded as being in decline in Ireland therefore we need to ensure that we are not missing quality community education simply because it doesn't fit with our delineated perceptions of what education looks like.

In conclusion, my research aimed to shine a light on the educative nature of the parent support group and the value it brings to its members and to wider society. Drawing on that research this paper seeks to further explore the nature of education and how we define it. The findings highlight the inadequacy of formal methods of learning to mother, with traditional methods of learning not preparing these women for the reality of being a mother. Instead, the women are involved in the collective process of naming their world and seeing that world reflected in the experiences of other mothers (Freire, 1993). Furthermore, for these women, this form of informal learning supersedes other forms of learning, exposing a reliance on experiential knowledge above authorised knowledge. Learning that takes place informally in non-traditional spaces, as described in this paper, should be recognised and counted as an important and effective means of learning, it is not something to be squeezed in between more validated formal and non-formal learning but has a distinct value and merit of its own.

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