

Storytelling in Adult Literacy Programs: Affirming Black Mother Learners' Identities

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In the 1960s, my maternal grandmother left Jamaica and joined two of her sisters in Canada. My young children and I are captivated by my grandmother's stories of her early experiences in the country. She reminisces about dancing to Jamaican ska with her sisters in their two-bedroom flat overlooking Toronto's downtown core. She remembers arranging her wet laundry across hot radiators to dry and haggling the butchers on Spadina Avenue for a lower price on oxtail. She describes scouring the aisles of Honest Ed's for special deals on winter coats, bed linens, and cooking pots. She also recalls working as a cleaner at a hotel and sending money to the sister in Jamaica who cared for the three children she left behind.

My grandmother prides her ability to tell a good story, despite her struggles with reading and writing. In a society where Black women's maternal identities are disparaged, storytelling affirms my grandmother's position as a knowledge bearer. As with some of her sisters, my grandmother's experiences of low literacy skills continue to shape the ways in which she cares for her family and receives literacy instruction.

Adult literacy learners hold multiple and layered identities. Learners' identities and experiences impact their engagement with education institutions and society at-large. Learners' lived experiences are also informed by intersecting oppressions. My grandmother and other adult learners recount traumas wrought by racism, gender-based oppression, and economic and political marginalization. For many adult learners, their identities are also a source of pride, joy, and resistance. My grandmother and other adult learners, especially those who are Black mothers, use storytelling traditions to deepen and share who they are with the world.

Storytelling is a pedagogical strategy that upholds

learners' lived experiences and identities. In this paper, I present the use of Black feminist storytelling traditions as one way to connect classroom learning to the identities of Black mother learners. I begin this paper with an overview of Black feminist storytelling noting its lead thinkers and connections to Black learners' identities. The paper continues by situating adult literacy within the Canadian context. Afterwards, the paper presents educators with a framework and accompanying reflection questions to guide their use of Black feminist storytelling in their adult education programs. The paper concludes by calling on adult literacy educators to further support the centering of all learners' identities through Black feminist storytelling.

Black Feminist Storytelling

Black communities worldwide engage in storytelling traditions. Black mothers use stories to order, make sense of, and give significance to the past, present, and future (Baker-Bell, 2017; Sampson, 2019; Smitherman, 1977; Toliver, 2020). We continue the tradition of using stories as sites to nurture psychic self-preservation (Rodriguez, 2006) and reimagine futures. Recognizing the importance of this literary practice, I call on educators to uphold the storied lives of adult learners, especially Black mother learners, attending their institutions.

A burgeoning body of scholarship emphasizes the importance of storytelling in Black communities. Black people have long used stories to articulate our hopes, fears, and dreams (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Klingler, 1997). Black feminist storytelling is a rhetorical strategy used by Black women to convey broad, theoretical observations about Black life through concrete stories (Smitherman, 1977; Toliver, 2020). Our stories, comprising personal/self stories, cultural stories and metanarratives, allow us to ask and answer epistemological and ontological questions in our own voices. Black feminist storytelling involves collecting, sharing, analyzing, and theorizing Black women's stories (Baker-Bell, 2017; Haddix, 2016; Toliver, 2020). As Toliver (2022) explains, our stories emerge "from the lived experiences of Black people and communities that use Black knowledge/s as a tool to extend and author oneself beyond the conditions of anti-Blackness" (p. 4). Ultimately, Black feminist storytelling places our varied identities, such as race, gender, class, and citizenship, in conversation with one another (Baker-Bell, 2017).

My grandmother and other Black mother learners use stories to help plot, map, remember, and interpret the archives of the everyday Black

experience. Our maternal stories demand us, as well as others, to bear witness to our collective resistance against the oppressions levied against our children, families, and communities. We engage in the art of storytelling to reaffirm our humanity, especially within contexts that attempt to diminish Black maternal life. According to Black mother learners attending Canadian adult education programs (Fearon, 2023), our stories are sites where we nurture joy, healing, remembrance, and usher social change. Black feminist storytelling is a strategy that Black mother learners use to make space for other ways of thinking, knowing, interpreting, and representing their identities and experiences within and beyond formal learning spaces (Fearon, 2023). Indeed, Black mother learners leverage the artistic tradition of Black feminist storytelling not only to affirm their identities, but also to challenge dominant narratives of subjugation, create new realities, and extend understandings of literacy.

Context: Adult Literacy in Canada

In Canada, by the 1980s, literacy was no longer perceived as a binary construct of literate versus illiterate. Instead, Canadian policymakers, researchers, and practitioners conceptualize literacy as a contextual social practice existing on a continuum (Elfert & Walker, 2020). Canadian adult literacy advocates maintain that literacy skills are necessary for adults to thrive within a dynamic society (Elfert & Walker, 2020). In fact, Canadian scholars advance socio-cultural understandings of literacy emphasizing that it is a plural and dynamic social and cultural practice (Elfert & Walker, 2020). Such thinkers stress the importance of acknowledging different literacies according to the different domains of life and defined by the individual and community (Addey, 2018). Further, scholars assert that the experiences

of adult literacy learners, especially Black mother learners, are informed by varying and intersecting oppressions that help shape their engagement with the world (Brookfield, 2003; Darder, 2015; Fearon, 2023; hooks, 1994; Jones, 2019).

Affirming Adult Learners through Black Feminist Storytelling

Black feminist storytelling affords Black mother learners with opportunities to engage in literacy development in ways that align with individual and wider community goals and cultural practices. It champions Black mothers' words and narratives as sources of legitimate knowledge. Through storytelling, learners reassert themselves, their ideas, and dreams within the learning space. The following sections offer educators critical insights into the ways Black feminist storytelling can be leveraged in adult learning spaces.

Setting the Conditions for Black Feminist Storytelling

Scholarship centering the educational lives of Black learners call for creation of educational sites that uphold Black communities' agency and experiences (hooks, 1994). Black feminist storytelling encourages learners to use narratives to explore their relationships, identities, and ideas with others (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Toliver, 2020). When preparing to engage learners in Black feminist storytelling traditions, educators must deepen their relationships with themselves, learners, and the communities in which they serve. To facilitate such a building of critical consciousness, I encourage educators to use the following questions to inform their work:

- How will I engage in critical self-reflection around my own beliefs about storytelling and literacy?

- What steps will I take to foster positive relationships with learners?
- How will I deepen my knowledge on the histories and current realities of learners, including Black mother learners?
- What professional learning must I engage in to further understand the social and educational inequities existing within my learning institution and society at-large?

Preparing Learners to Engage in Black Feminist Storytelling

In her groundbreaking text *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, Geneva Smitherman (1977) positions Black storytelling as spiritual and cultural labor. The art of storytelling allows learners to investigate and reveal their layered identities and literacy experiences. Such an exploration requires learners to be vulnerable and secure within the educational space. Black feminist storytelling prioritizes the act of listening, creating, and communicating from one's cultural standpoint (Evans-Winters, 2019). Accordingly, educators must partner with learners to co-construct a learning environment conducive to story listening and telling. The following questions help guide educators as they prepare to engage learners in the art of storytelling:

- How do learners conceptualize storytelling?
- What commitments must all those in the learning space make to facilitate the sharing of stories, experiences, and identities?
- How is leadership amongst learners nurtured within the educational space?
- How will I select and use materials that affirm learners' diverse knowledge systems and experiences (e.g., digital tools, texts, audio-visual resources)?

Engaging Learners in Black Feminist Storytelling

Black feminist storytelling honors the connections between the story, storyteller, and story listener. The telling of the story, Smitherman (1977) explained, “recreates the spiritual reality for others who at the moment vicariously experience what the storyteller has gone through” (p. 150). By sharing their lives through stories, learners, such as Black mother learners, reaffirm their humanity and agency to themselves and those listening. These guiding questions support educators as they engage learners in Black feminist storytelling:

- How might I leverage learners’ identities and experiences to authentically engage them in a wide range of storytelling practices (e.g., oral storytelling, visual storytelling, digital storytelling, written stories, etc.)?
- How might I support the social, emotional, and intellectual well-being of learners throughout the storytelling process?
- How might institutionally marginalized narratives be centred in the learning space?
- How might I leverage learners’ personal and cultural stories to inform curriculum, policies, and professional development?

Conclusion

I began this short paper by recounting my grandmother’s emigration journey from Jamaica and reading experiences in Toronto. My grandmother, now in her late 80s, continues to encounter some reading challenges. My grandmother, as with many other Black mother learners, doubts the ability of any formal learning site to affirm their storied lives and identities.

In Canada, ongoing concerns around adult literacy learning have resulted in the repositioning of literacy as a set of essential skills for the workplace. This shift of learning toward employability skills has resulted in adult learning experiences that are detached from an analysis of learners’ identities, cultural experiences, and diverse passions (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Fearon, 2023; Jones, 2019). I challenge educators and those in leadership to reimagine supports offered to adult learners on their literacy journeys. I urge educators to adopt approaches in the classroom that affirm learners’ identities and diverse experiences with literacy. Embedding storytelling in adult education programs is a way for educators and learners to come together and deepen their understandings about literacy, identity, and power. This process fosters a dialogue that encourages the collective reimagining of adult literacy programs in ways that authentically center learners’ experiences.

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