



# “We are similar but at the same time different.” Building connections and community with the ‘other’ through an adult education project in Canada

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**Abstract** This article contributes to the relational and dialogical aspects of adult education and how this direction in scholarship and practice can support addressing migration-related challenges in adult and continuing education. The research reported explores the possibility for fostering solidarity in learning with and across differences between international migrants in Canada. Nine women from different countries, who were new to Canada, attended twelve non-formal community adult education sessions which followed an innovative relational and dialogical approach. A multi-dimensional theoretical framework consisting of intersectionality, diaspora space theory and situated solidarities is utilized to explore issues of diversity in learning and to understand how learners who are different from one another can come together and learn. A key finding from this research concerns participants’ learning to appreciate that solidarity is not homogeneous. Simultaneous recognition of similarities and differences among participants has a profound impact on creating connection, challenging assumptions, and enriching relational awareness and learning. The implications of this research have significance for research and practice by demonstrating the intra-actions and perspectives in adult learning spaces that can support co-existence of multiple different knowledges.

**Keywords** Migration · Adult education · Community learning · Gender · Intersectionality · Solidarity

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## „Wir sind uns ähnlich, aber gleichzeitig auch unterschiedlich.“ Aufbau von Beziehung und Gemeinschaft mit dem Anderen in einem Erwachsenenbildungsprojekt in Kanada

**Zusammenfassung** Der Artikel befasst sich mit den relationalen und dialogischen Aspekten der Erwachsenenbildung und damit, wie diese in Wissenschaft und Praxis dazu beitragen können, migrationsbezogene Herausforderungen in der Erwachsenen- und Weiterbildung anzugehen. Die Studie untersucht die Möglichkeit, Solidarität beim Lernen mit und über Unterschiede hinweg zwischen internationalen Migrantinnen und Migranten in Kanada zu fördern. Neun Frauen aus verschiedenen Ländern, die neu in Kanada waren, nahmen an zwölf informellen Erwachsenenbildungskursen teil, die einem innovativen relationalen und dialogischen Ansatz folgten. Es wurde ein mehrdimensionaler theoretischer Rahmen verwendet, der sich aus Intersektionalität, Diaspora-Raumtheorie und situativer Solidarität zusammensetzte, um Fragen der Vielfalt beim Lernen zu untersuchen und zu verstehen, wie Lernende, die sich voneinander unterscheiden, zusammenkommen und lernen können. Eine wichtige Erkenntnis aus dieser Forschung betrifft das Lernen der Teilnehmerinnen, zu erkennen, dass Solidarität nicht homogen ist. Die gleichzeitige Anerkennung von Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschieden unter den Teilnehmenden hatte einen tiefgreifenden Einfluss auf die Schaffung von Verbindungen, die Hinterfragung von Annahmen und die Bereicherung des Beziehungsbewusstseins und des Lernens. Die Ergebnisse dieser Studie sind für Forschung und Praxis der Erwachsenenbildung von Bedeutung, da sie die Interaktionen und Perspektiven in Erwachsenenbildungsräumen aufzeigen, die das Nebeneinanderbestehen verschiedener Wissensformen fördern können.

**Schlüsselwörter** Migration · Erwachsenenbildung · Community Learning · Gender · Intersektionalität · Solidarität

### 1 Introduction

Around the world, global migration is a topic of increasing proportion with significant challenges that deserve consideration from adult education scholars (De Haas et al. 2019; Morrice et al. 2017; Jurkova and Guo 2021). Complex issues arising from countries becoming more ethnoculturally diverse, which some have termed ‘superdiversity’, have presented new dimensions for consideration in adult learning spaces (Bélanger et al. 2019; Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2018; Guo 2010). Policies and practices of adult education and lifelong learning are linked to global migration and implicated in the integration of migrants into their new countries, although migrants’ diverse perspectives have hitherto not been taken into consideration in the shaping of these policies and practices that determine their future (Chan 2012; Gravani et al. 2021; Webb et al. 2014). These approaches which are linked to dominant national discourses and deficit-based education programming, often considered examples of assimilation, creating exclusions based on different factors present social justice concerns when considered through an intersectional

lens (Lange and Abidi 2015; McHolme 2024; Morrice 2019; Tanaka 2022). The challenges of difference are becoming more and more apparent and thus a shift in scholarship and practices is required. Not only do we need to understand the issues and implications of increasing diversity and what it means for adult education, but we also need to conceptualize solutions to more equitably and sustainably address those issues, which underlies my approach in this article. Sprung (2013) notes that “to analyse the consequences of migration, we always have to do so according to a specific geopolitical context” (p. 83) and so I will be attentive predominantly to how these issues have manifested in the particular situation of Canada. While the perspective I share comes from the Canadian context, I speak to issues that have relevance for adult education at an international level.

Canada has a reputation for being a welcoming nation for immigrants (Karibo and Díaz 2020; Villegas et al. 2020). However, the country’s beneficent international exterior when internally interpreted through an intersectional lens reveals an ingeniously obfuscated array of social and educational justice concerns stemming from the selectivity of preferential ethnocentric, racist immigration and education policies and practices (Guo and Liu 2021; Jurkova and Guo 2021; Young 2024) and citizen regimes (Forcier and Dufour 2016), that are rooted in colonial logics and border imperialisms (Walia 2013, 2021). Changes are needed in adult immigrant education spaces, both in Canada and internationally, to increase appreciation of differences for more equitable and just futures.

My main argument in this article is on the importance of acknowledging and embracing diversity in adult education for migrants. I discuss current understandings of adult education and immigration with a focus on the Canadian context and present an example of building community and connection with immigrant women in Canada. I also highlight the value of adult education in non-formal learning spaces, which are spaces of learning often overlooked in educational studies in comparison to formal learning institutions and pathways. The value for improving learning across differences and mechanisms for action and change comes from the dialogical and relational approaches to adult education which underlie this research.

This article contributes to the relational and dialogical aspects of adult education and how this direction in scholarship and practice can support addressing migration-related challenges in adult and continuing education. The relational aspects and approaches of adult education recognize multiple interactions and the material and spatial dimensions, including relations of power (Fenwick et al. 2015; Gulson and Symes 2007; Maksimovic 2024; Seddon 2018). Relational theories are particularly relevant for their propensity to illuminate “the effects of boundary politics that are anchored by specific material conditions and social relations of domination-subordination” (Seddon 2018, p. 118). Dialogical spaces have been well established in the forefront adult education theorists (e.g., Freire 1970) to advance emancipatory agendas and encourage social justice (Rule 2004). Merrill (2005) identifies dialogical feminism as an approach to creating spaces for dialogue where the voices of ‘other women’ who have been ignored by the academy can be heard, a move that is important for encouraging social transformation.

Research into more relational and dialogical ways of learning are critical in the contemporary moment to help adults learn to appreciate and consider the interplay

of categories of difference. Moreover, the voices and perspectives of adult migrant learners are often overwritten by the prerogatives of the state, which again makes relational and dialogical approaches worthy of consideration for identifying ways in which adult education can support migrants. In this article, I explore the potential for learning across difference and building community amongst migrant adult learners through the example of a non-formal adult learning research project in Canada. I take an in-depth look at the intra-actions in the learning space that produced the results and explore implications for migration and adult education.

## 2 Literature review

This brief review of the literature does two things. First, it provides insight into the migration-related challenges in adult and continuing education in Canada. Second, it establishes the scholarship and work that has been done in Canada related to these challenges which informed the direction of scholarship to which this article contributes. In this literature review, I focus particularly on findings from the Canadian context. However, given the relational and dialogical ethos followed in this research I acknowledge that Canada is connected to global systems and relations of power influencing migration and that it should not be considered in isolation. In fact, given that Canada is a settler-colonial nation, it is critical for researchers to approach the Canadian immigration landscape with the awareness that the practices and processes of immigration rest upon border imperialisms and colonial logics of assimilation and elimination of Indigenous peoples, knowledges and ways of being through white supremacy and nationalism (Cowen 2020; Sharma 2016; Tanaka 2022; Walia 2013, 2021).

Adult education is provided to migrants when they arrive in receiving countries to help them prepare to enter the labour market (Fejes et al. 2020; Maitra 2015). As such, it follows that a substantive amount of the research on the educational experiences of adult immigrant learners comes from the area of workplace learning. As a Western nation, the neoliberal ideology of lifelong learning as a continuous process of upgrading to advance economic productivity and skill has been rampant in the education and training offered to immigrants in Canada (Ng and Shan 2010). Although this ideology has become common place, Maitra (2015) identifies the increasing concerns in critical scholarship on the implications of labour market policy and practices, especially for racialized immigrant learners. This observation aligns with the often-cited debates in adult immigrant education pertaining to deficit discourses, deskilling and reskilling. The processes of deskilling and reskilling relate to the “upgrading thesis” which as Mojab (2000) explains: “presumes that the postindustrial economy is dependent on highly skilled labor, is one of the underlying assumptions of government policy in Canada” (p. 26). As a result, immigrant learners encounter multiple barriers because the value of their knowledge and skills is not considered adequate in the Canadian labour market (Guo 2010; Shan 2020). The challenges that immigrants face in education and community building go beyond the workplace and processes of ‘reskilling’ and connect to underlying beliefs rooted

in deficit and colonial assumptions of ‘the other’, which is an egregious problem affecting not only Canada.

In a key article written for the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, Guo (2010) levels an important critique on contemporary lifelong learning in the age of transnational migration as a process of assimilation. In response to the limited approaches and harmful effects of the market-driven and assimilative tactics in lifelong learning, Guo (2010) encourages adult education researchers to consider an alternative trajectory towards recognitive justice, which is a process that would necessitate encouraging respect for different social and cultural groups with opportunities for self-expression, self-development and decision making. Shan (2015) adds to the importance of recognizing difference through her work on ‘distributed pedagogies of difference’ as part of the “imperative for adult educators to rethink existing pedagogical practices and reimagine ways to make productive use of differences in teaching” (p. 10). Thus, discourses on the need for changes in adult education and lifelong learning for immigrants founded upon the importance of recognizing difference in learners should be a key direction for research and scholarship in adult education and migration.

Alternative trajectories need not only be developed and tested within formal learning environments. In fact, there is value in considering approaches that come from different learning contexts beyond formal learning spaces. Adult education scholars in Canada have conducted research on the impacts of community-based and action-oriented research which has provided important examples of interventions to strengthen immigrant communities in the struggle against gendered, racialized and class-based discrimination and address marginalization (Butterwick et al. 2021; Guo and Liu 2021). For example, Perry (2018) developed a collective theatre project with migrant farm workers in the province of Ontario, which resulted in a more critical perspective and consciousness raising through the development of a collective voice to challenge the subjugated position of migrant laborers in the Canadian context.

Underlying structures that perpetuate discrimination and seek to eliminate difference, whether in formal non-formal learning spaces, are related through their shared roots in the imperial system that has structured Canadian educational experiences, society and ways of living (Barker 2009). The research reported in this article provides insight from the non-formal learning context, which has been less recognized and addressed in contemporary adult education scholarship on migration.

### 3 Theoretical frameworks

The theories included in the framework are intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Cho et al. 2013), diaspora space theory (Brah 1996, 2022) and situated solidarity building (Nagar 2014; Nagar and Geiger 2007; Routledge and Derickson 2015). Used in combination these theories are useful to explore issues of diversity in learning and to understand how learners who are different from one another can come together and learn in a relational and dialogical manner. While there are similarities between the three theoretical perspectives, each offers something unique in their approach to interpreting and making meaning of the interplay of different categories of difference.

Thus, I present an innovative theoretical approach for adult educational practice and research.

### 3.1 Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides an established theoretical foundation for critical social inquiry and understanding how multiple axes of power are interrelated and reinforce each other to produce inequalities and oppression for particular groups (Collins 2019; Collins and Bilge 2016; Hanson and Fletcher 2021; Merrill and Fejes 2018). Crenshaw (1989), as one of the earliest and most eminent scholars of intersectionality, identifies the issue of following a singular or essentialist approach which does not consider race and how such an approach with a “focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination” (p. 140). This has been taken up in Critical Race Theory which lends further support to addressing systemic racism by acknowledging how racism is present in society and that race is socially constructed and how different minority groups may be racialized (Delgado and Stefancic 2023). In adult education, intersectionality has been primarily used by feminist adult educators to explore issues pertaining to gender, race and class; however, recent scholarship in the field encourages moving beyond these three dimensions to consider more complex issues of diversity related to particular geographies, histories, representation and collective identities (Hanson and Fletcher 2021).

### 3.2 Diaspora space theory

Diaspora spaces were theorized by Avtar Brah (1996). Diaspora spaces provide an analytical framework for understanding and “addressing multiple, intersecting, axes of differentiation” (Brah 1996, p. 207). In this way, Brah’s theory helps make meaning of how people from different nations connect in diaspora spaces, which promotes understanding of multi-locality and troubling the use of labels such as “immigrant” and “ethnic” (Brah 2022; Joseph 2021). With increasing global mobilities, the notion of multi-locality and intersectional identities is theoretically useful for making meaning of differences and interrogating how these differences are configured, which is helpful for learning with and across differences. Brah (2022) draws upon decolonial feminist perspectives and intersectionality, but her theorizing of space and place through a diasporic lens is one of the distinguishing aspects of her contributions.

### 3.3 Situated solidarities

The concept of situated solidarity building first appeared in the work of Nagar and Geiger (2007) and originally arose as a critique to current approaches in feminist field work. Through their notion of situated solidarity building, Nagar and Geiger (2007) emphasize the importance of dismantling the homogenous category of *the Asian woman* constructed within colonial contexts similar to Mohanty’s (1984) early work

in critiquing the homogenous category of the Third World Woman. Thus, situated solidarities involve recognizing that solidarity is never complete or homogeneous (Routledge and Derickson 2015). Situated solidarity building encourages relational awareness and critical reflexivity, which involves confronting and identifying the interplay of power and privileges (Habiburahman and Alamgir 2023).

#### **4 “We are similar but at the same time different”—An empirical research example**

The following study that I discuss comes from a larger adult education research project and agenda concerned with reimagining the educational and community building experiences of immigrant women in Canada (Dobrich 2025). This research received ethical approval (Protocol # 44998) from the university through which it was conducted. The purpose of the research was to explore how immigrant women newly arrived in Canada from different countries could build a learning community to support each other. To explore the potential for learning with and across differences, I organized twelve adult education sessions. Learning in this project is defined as non-formal lifelong learning which refers to learning that takes place outside of formal learning contexts but still brings with it some structure and a purpose for human development (Johnson and Majewska 2024). The research prioritized a strengths-based learning approach (Shan 2015) to contest the deficit colonial logics that have been critiqued in Canadian adult immigrant education (Maitra and Guo 2019). Through this project, I explored how difference was understood, the impacts that difference had on the learners’ experiences of learning with ‘the other’, and how solidarity could be built across differences.

As a third-generation settler Canadian scholar, I recognize how my experiences of privilege and benefiting from colonialism needed to be interrogated as I engaged in this work. As such, reflexivity through an intersectional perspective was important throughout the project and for conducting the data analysis and the resulting conclusions. I therefore engaged in reflective journaling and inquiry throughout the analysis of findings and writing of the results.

##### **4.1 Methodological approach**

This research followed a feminist and decolonial methodology (Mohanty 2003; Tuhiwai Smith 2021). This methodological approach challenged dominant Western ways of doing research, which suppresses diverse perspectives and voices. The decolonial approach honoured the diversity of participant voices by appreciating that each learner came with different needs and had the right to self-determination (Tuhiwai Smith 2021). I was fortunate to be working with an Indigenous Thesis Supervisor and mentor, and for that reason, was able to use certain methods for community building and doing research in a relational way that come from Indigenous perspectives on conducting ethical, relational and respectful research with community (Wilson 2008). Layering in a feminist approach to do this research was important because the project concerned the experiences of immigrant women. The feminist

perspectives employed (Brah 1996, 2022; Mohanty 2003) took a critical and decolonial approach, rejecting the limited and essentialist Western liberal feminist agendas, to again encourage diversity in learning.

#### 4.1.1 *Participants*

Nine immigrant women from five different countries (Brazil, Colombia, Iran, the Phillipines, Trinidad and Tobago) and ethnic backgrounds, who were new to Canada, joined this adult educational research project. These women had been in Canada between 9 months and 3 years. Information about the project was shared with newcomer organizations in the community and participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods. Participants were between 27–42 years of age at the time of the research. Participants were motivated to join this project for the opportunity to learn more about the experiences that other immigrant learners were having, learn more about Canada, and take part in the physical activity and bonding experience. This sample size is consistent with Hennink and Kaiser's (2022) systematic literature review to determine saturation in qualitative research which found that in qualitative studies saturation can be achieved with 9 to 17 participants.

Prior to participating in the research, a screening interview took place to explain to potential participants the research purpose and what to expect in the sessions. Those who were interested in participating after learning about the project then met with me for the enrollment process.

Written informed consent and acknowledgement of the understanding of the publication of results in a thesis, books and journal articles were obtained from participants before their pre-project interview. In accordance with the dialogical and relational intention of the research, consent was understood as an ongoing process that could change at any point during the research. Participants were able to withdraw without consequence. For the purposes of confidentiality, all participants received a pseudonym of their choosing or had one assigned to them for the reporting of results.

#### 4.1.2 *Learning setting and interactions*

The research was conducted between September 2023 and December 2023 with the educational sessions taking place during the months of October 2023 and November 2023.

Participants attended twelve sessions that involved self-reflexive collective discussions as well as the learning and practicing of Muay Thai, a martial art from Thailand (Vail 2014). The sessions took place in a community setting, which was a local gym. This learning environment allowed for less restrictive and more dynamic interaction and engagement. This context and the activities make the project a highly unique and original contribution to the field of adult education.

Each session started with an opening sharing circle (Graveline 1998). There was time for personal reflection and journaling and rich dialogical engagement around critical issues at the end of sessions. This dialogical approach reflects very much



Freire’s popular education approach where “the recognition of the particular knowledges of the educatees as the starting point for education” (Streck and Moretti 2018, p. 445) and critical dialogue with aspects of emancipation and awareness raising. As such, in every circle discussion participants were encouraged to speak from their situated perspectives. This created a rich dialogical environment for sharing knowledge and experiences and supported a relational learning process.

This research provides insights into the value of using alternative concepts and methods in adult education spaces, which after conducting this research I consider important for promoting the acceptance of difference. While I was the facilitator for each of the sessions, providing space for open and critical dialogue, reflection and discussion meant participants were involved in co-creation or co-generation of knowledge and the findings of the research. The encouragement to speak from participants’ situated perspectives also increased a relational awareness of difference.

#### 4.1.3 Data collection and analysis

Data for this research came from multiple sources, but for this article I draw upon the individual one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted between myself and each participant. There were two sets of interviews. The first interview was conducted before the adult education sessions began. The second interview took place within one month of the final adult education sessions. This first interview provided a baseline for comparison with the follow-up interviews to evaluate the impact of participating in the project. All interviews followed a feminist approach to interviewing that prioritized participants well-being and comfort and focused on rapport building through the interview process (Oakley 1981). Thus, data were co-generated by participants and the researcher through personal reflection, discussion and sharing.

The interviews were transcribed live using *Otterai* (Otterai 2025) then reviewed for accuracy. Data was analyzed using theoretical deductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021; Terry and Hayfield 2021). To do this, I manually reviewed and coded the written transcripts. Codes were grouped into themes. These themes that were identified in the data were analyzed and evaluated using the theories that informed the research.

## 5 Results

The thematic findings of this research contribute to our understanding of building connections and community with the ‘other’ through adult education. Overall, the project was very well received by all participants. From the very first sessions, a sense of community developed between these adult learners. One of the main findings from this research, which is the focus of this article, is that solidarity does not have to be homogeneous for there to be strong bonds of connection and community building. In other words, we can learn and build community with ‘others’ by sharing some similarities in perspective and agreement, but equally valuing, respecting and appreciating the parts of ourselves that make us different. In this

section, the empirical findings from participants' responses in post-project interviews which contain reflections on how they recognized 'difference' and this phenomenon are presented and linked to the theoretical concepts of the framework guiding this paper: intersectionality; diaspora space theory and situated solidarities.

### 5.1 Findings 1: intersectionality

During her post-project interview, Tainá, who was from Brazil, remarked that: "*It was amazing to have like different ages, different cultures, different bodies, different minds*".

Comments such as this were frequent among the participants in this project. These sentiments illustrate this recognition of the differences between participants and an indication of their awareness of intersectionality.

In this research project, there were ways in which participants were similar such as all participants identified as 'women', had a shared interest in learning about Canada and building new connections with other immigrant women. However, there were many clear differences between participants in terms of race, class and country of origin which participants observed. Intersectionality helps to understand how we are similar and how we are different. Despite the numerous differences in terms of language, race, ethnicity, culture, body size and nationality between participants, we formed close bonds, demonstrating the possibilities and impact of community building for migration and adult education. The findings and results of community building across difference can be attributed to the relational and dialogical adult education strategies employed in the research and supported by an intersectional awareness on the part of participants. Acknowledgement of intersectionality is evident and important as the first level of learning to build connection across difference.

### 5.2 Findings 2: the diasporic space

While it is not the intention of this article to stray into 'culturalism' and reify the cultural dimension, being able to share cultural knowledge, food and practices was of interest to participants and contributed to the creation of a diaspora space. The moments of sharing knowledge about cultural practices and food from their home countries were an opportunity for building connection.

Lani, one of the participants from the Philippines, remarked in her post-project interview that: "*You have different cultures, so I didn't expect ... that we're going to be so close. So, I learned to communicate with other people with other cultures ... [I] got to learn their culture*".

In this way, Lani recognizes the possibility for learning across difference and for building relationships despite coming from different cultures and backgrounds because of communication and sharing of cultural practices. The dialogical and relational educational environment was conducive to this sharing. Accordingly, having teaching and learning practices that encouraged dialogical and relational engagement contributed to the formation of the diaspora space through the sharing of cultural foods and practices which deepened and created support for building connections

and community across difference. This was a move towards appreciating, rather than merely acknowledging difference.

### 5.3 Findings 3: situated solidarities

The words of Elena, who was from Trinidad and Tobago, capture the notion of situated solidarity building when she said: “*We’re all similar in some aspect. It helped ... but you know, a little different*”. When participants recognized similarities and common ground amongst each other, it facilitated interpersonal relationship development, but there was a simultaneous respect and embracing of differences. This is the phenomenon which Routledge and Derickson (2015) refer to as an “agonistic relationship”, a term to describe relationships that embrace differences rather than seeking to eliminate or ignore differences. As Elena notes, recognizing similarities was helpful to some extent but it was accompanied by the simultaneous respecting, recognizing and affirming of the value of differences which is also prominent in her reflection. There were many comments from participants, said in different ways and using different words, but all saying the same thing: learning how to appreciate the simultaneous existence of similarities and differences was a defining feature of this community and helped build solidarity.

## 6 Discussion

After reviewing the results of the research on how community and connection was constructed across difference, there are several inferences to discuss which have significance for advancing the field of adult education and migration in theory and practice.

### 6.1 Moving beyond intersectionality

As Collins (2019) writes, intersectionality provides a particular way of critically thinking about power structures and how inequities are reproduced. Thinking more critically through an intersectional framework creates an awareness that offers a powerful motive to initiate change in the existing structures of adult education by unfolding the possibility for asking new questions (Butterwick et al. 2021). For immigrant women learners, intersectionality provides a means to identify how differences in terms of gender, race and class impact immigrant learners to produce intersecting barriers with power inequities (Zhu et al. 2023). Speaking more directly to my work in this adult education research project, using intersectionality I recognize how there were differences between myself and the participants and between the participants themselves. As a Canadian-born individual I occupied a position of power and privilege. Having this theoretical view of the need to address issues of power based on difference encouraged looking for ways to challenge and reduce hierarchies, which I attempted through a dialogical and relational teaching approach that gave voice and agency to participants.

As was shared in the results section, participants recognized differences in age, body shape, culture and ethnicity, which is another manifestation of the intersectional perspective. Our intersectional awareness of differences between us helped us to understand how we were different and appreciate the impact that successfully learning across our differences produced. Due to the strengths-based approach that was followed in this research, difference was not seen as hierarchical or limiting, but rather a source for strengths to contribute intersectional perspectives on issues and abilities that elevated collective learning. In this article, I took intersectionality as my starting point, but layered in diaspora space theory (Brah 1996) and situated solidarities (Nagar and Geiger 2007) to expand the notion of recognizing differences and taking action to dismantle the power differentials created through difference. The use of all these theories contributes to what Hanson and Jaffe (2020) refer to as *epistemic pluralism* which is valuable for decolonizing educational systems and structures and encouraging more diversity in knowledge and learning. Taking such action is important to challenge the limited instrumental, colonial and neoliberal economic prerogatives of the state and the market, which impose barriers that deny the legitimacy of immigrants' prior learning and reject different ways of learning and being (Baxter 2025; Mojab 2000). Such action aligns with Guo's (2010) encouragement for recognitive justice.

## 6.2 Developing relationships in the diaspora space

Conceptualizing this educational project through the analytical frame of diaspora space illuminates how difference impacts those from different backgrounds and involves the blending of those who have arrived and those who were already present (Brah 1996). Brah (1996) recognizes through her theoretical perspective that difference in terms of gender is "represented differently according to our differential location within the global relations of power" (p. 102).

The impacts of coming from different locations became very clear in this research, as participants came from five different countries and had different social backgrounds.

Diaspora space theory uses decolonial and intersectional perspectives but adds a new layer with increased emphasis on space, place, politics of location and multi-locality. Understanding the multi-locality amongst participants, promoted through the relational and dialogical aspects of the project, involved recognizing where we had come from and the identities and knowledges brought to the learning space, which enriched learning and acceptance of difference. Considering how this learning space was a diaspora space opens up thinking about difference and how it was created through space and place. This further emphasizes the benefit of relational ways of thinking in migration and adult education. The use of diaspora space theory, as employed in this research, presents possibilities to encourage resistance, and an important intervention to the hegemonic discourses used to assimilate immigrants into the normative Canadian identity (Guo 2010; Morrice 2019). Participants learned to celebrate where they had come from, while also considering and respecting the presence of others and the unique journeys that had brought us together. This again contributes to the relational direction in adult education theory and practice.

### 6.3 Situated solidarities for changing the notion of difference

The simultaneous discovery of similarities tempered with equal respect and appreciation for how participants were different was a valued and important aspect of this educational project. There is no binary of being either similar or different but rather both the coexistence of the similarities and the differences, and learning that had a consciousness raising effect. Participants recognized the value of maintaining an awareness of similarities and differences and this awareness challenged their assumptions about what it means to learn with ‘the other’. This kind of learning and comprehension aided relational awareness of how differences between learners exist.

According to Routledge and Derrickson’s (2015) theorization of situated solidarities, one of the practices of situated solidarity building is “challenging assumptions”. In this research, participants’ surprise in discovering our group could collaborate and connect, despite having different cultural and national backgrounds, is an example of ‘challenging assumptions’. This discovery also affirms the value of having multiple knowledges present and the process of knowledge co-creation for reducing biases and stereotypes about learners from different backgrounds. Recognition of different worldviews was important for developing respect and solidarity and strengthened the sense of community connection. This is the benefit of taking a relational perspective in adult learning. As such, this research affirms how situated solidarity building can proceed without absolute agreement. Moreover, it can be added that situated solidarity building provides a more flexible approach to building solidarity by allowing people to meet each other where they are and find more equitable solutions for working and learning across difference.

The relational and dialogical space created through this research was important for encouraging learning from different perspectives and hearing different voices. Adult education has hitherto been dominated by Western epistemologies and traditions, which is why learning to listen to different voices and perspectives is imperative for decolonizing knowledges (Hanson and Jaffe 2020; Tuhiwai Smith 2021). I acknowledge my choice of theories in this research, while aligned with the relational and dialogical aspects of adult education, are not established theories in the field of adult education. Hence, my research adds novelty to the field. Adult education and migration research is a complex terrain that can be supported through dialogical and relational approaches in theory and practice. The diversity of the field in itself is a strength to be promoted that will contribute to enhancing dialogue on how we approach difference amongst adult migrants in teaching and learning.

## 7 Conclusion

We are in what has been termed ‘the age of migration’ (Castles and Miller 2009; De Haas et al. 2019) which presents an increasing rate of issues pertaining to political tension and social justice issues. While there has been a hardening of national borders and a tremendous rise in anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetorics, migration is not going end, and unless change is made it will become increasingly dangerous and

precarious (Freeman 2020). Being able to construct more supportive and affirming learning experiences for adult migrant learners through relational and dialogical approaches to adult education is an important aspect of improving global migration journeys and outcomes. This is the broader vision and international issue with which this article and the related research project align.

A key finding from this research concerns participants' learning to appreciate that solidarity is not homogeneous and the simultaneous appreciation for similarities and differences between each other. This awareness aligns with and extends current findings on the possibilities of situated solidarity building for crossing borders and building connections that elevate the voices of those who have been historically marginalized (Nagar 2014; Nagar and Geiger 2007). Simultaneous recognition of similarities and differences in this research project had a profound impact on creating connection, challenging assumptions, and enriching intercultural awareness and learning. The article has taken a critical look at the intra-actions in the learning space that produced these results which provided insight and hope for adult education and migration research. Despite the challenges currently facing adult immigrant learners worldwide, there is possibility for change that can create more equitable learning spaces and opportunities for adult immigrant learners. Limitations of this research relate to the scale and temporal constraints of the project. This was an in-depth qualitative study for a specific and situated purpose. Scalability and replicability were not the purpose of this research. Rather, this study aimed to promote a paradigm shift in the way difference is approached in adult education and teaching and learning across differences. Regarding transferability, it is hoped that the research provides other adult educators and scholars with insight and inspiration for similar endeavours of their own, but not exact replication of the project. In terms of group composition, participants were self-identified voluntary migrants who all spoke English well, which eased communication in some ways. Had participants been able to express themselves in their own language it would have been better for them in terms of their self-expression. Nevertheless, the embodied nature of the interactions in the non-formal learning space made the connections forged much deeper than words alone could accomplish, which lessens any concern that this negatively affected connection.

While the group was culturally and linguistically diverse, it was not as diverse as it could have been. There were no forced migrants, asylum seekers or government assisted refugees in this study. Having these groups would have increased the diversity of the group. The project has some temporal constraints, given that it was only six weeks in length. This was reflected in participants' responses in post-project interviews as many wished that the project had been longer and that there had been more sessions. Greater connection and solidarity might have been produced had the project been longer in duration. However, the objective of the research was to see if and how relationships could be built through conscious engagement with difference, which was achieved. A longer study might have produced more insights, but what the research set out to do regarding establishing connection was achieved.

Future research, in Canada and internationally, needs to consider the role of place and space with the interplay of different perspectives and prerogatives. Challenging neoliberal and colonial structures and realities is of increasing importance if we hope

to build community and connection through and across our differences. More research into creating spaces outside the imperial system and exploring ways migrants can work in solidarity with those who are already established in place to resist the dominant discourses of assimilation is worthwhile. The research project discussed in this article constitutes one example. While the findings are encouraging, there is need for more empirical work in the field of adult education on how difference is conceptualized and utilized in practice as a strength for learning and social justice. Having more examples of the ways to honour the different perspectives and knowledges that migrant learners bring with them will do much to support future community building and connection with ‘the other’ in adult education and societies at large.

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