

***Review of Changing Lives: Women, Inclusion and the PhD by Barbara Ann Cole and Helen Gunter, Eds., Trentham Books, UK, 2010***

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As a stay-at-home mom turned doctoral student, I am interested in why women who have led lives as stay-at-home moms go back to school. What is it about a PhD that entices women to “go back to school?” Is it the PhD itself or something completely different? As found in *Changing Lives: women, inclusion and the PhD*, the decision to return to school may not be as much a planned adventure as it is the serendipity of life. One thing leads to another and women find themselves engrossed in the research, study, and thrill of the PhD. As a doctoral student engrossed in the many tasks of obtaining a PhD, I sometimes wonder why anyone would knowingly put themselves through this journey. As a wife and mother in the same pursuit, I read in amazement as the six women highlighted in this book faced the same predicaments similar to my own. Searching for answers, defining self, and advocating for change all led these six women to their lives in academia. This book speaks not only to moms, but people in all circumstances and stages of life in their pursuit of a terminal degree.

At first glance *Changing Lives: Women, Inclusion, and the PhD* seems as though it will be about women getting through a PhD and how this changes their lives. While this is particularly true, the experiences in this book delve far deeper than simple change into the worlds of six women fraught with very personal trials, adversity, and stereotypes to overcome. It reads in a simple narrative style that allows readers to see into the private lives of the authors as it highlights the experiences of six ordinary women who achieved extraordinary accomplishments in the face of challenge. Despite those hardships, while showing some similarities, these vastly different women trudged on to achieve and bring about change. These women share their stories of transformation, inclusion, and obtaining a PhD in a very personal way. They describe the reasons for embarking on the ever-demanding journey to the PhD, and ultimately completing their challenging doctoral studies. To the reader, they insert an unmistakable honesty into the rigors of doctoral studies. This honesty is one aspect of the book that will draw any reader at any stage of education, or life, into its pages.

Each of these women found herself entrenched in the social activism of the day. Gender equality, feminism, social activism, racism, colonialism, and classism were just some of the issues surrounding them during their studies. In furthering their education, it was not the first priority of these women to put an end to all forms of sexism. However, as they became more deeply entrenched in their education, they realized that they were swimming against the tide, were fish out of water, so to speak. This spurred each to begin a journey of feminism.

Although each woman felt the sting of the issues stated above, they turned to their doctoral work in order to address the negative aspects. Amid wanting to give something back, building and forwarding skills, opening the way for the next generation, and forging purposes and practices for scrutiny, they all awaken within themselves a voice where silence once slept. Through Penny Jane Burke’s traumatic experience that landed her in a woman’s aid refuge, she gains an understanding, and thus a voice, of social justice on her road to “give back.” Barbara Ann Cole has a son marginalized in the school system. This incident catapulted her into a study of the policy surrounding education inclusion. Racial identity, stemming from being a direct descendent of enslaved Africans, brought Gloria Gordon to make the object and focus of her thesis a commitment to an improved legacy for future generations. As she embraces social activism in regards to class distinction and gender equality, Helen M. Gunter uses her position in her academic field to advocate for change in this regard. Social activism was the avenue Jennifer Lavia also took as she embraced the chance to develop her skills as a teacher and trade union leader in her home land of Trinidad. Lastly, the reader witnesses Heidi Safia Mirza’s work with the divisions of class, race, and gender and how each is discriminated against within institutions.

As each of the women transform, they reveal issues of feminism, gender identity, social activism and equality, Marxist based theory, oppression and racism, as well as not fitting in and vulnerability.

Included in their experiences are differing ways of taking and creating opportunities, and how to deal or not deal with adversity. These women were all outsiders who overcame a sense of inferiority that helped them to understand more fully who they really are. Although it may seem that obtaining their PhD had landed them in the center of things, in actuality they still felt and experienced “peripheral marginality” (Cole & Gunter, 2010, p. 140).

Having someone walk a mile in your shoes improves the outlook of both walkers. For the one walking where another has already trod, this allows a certain ability to understand the other’s experience more fully. Additionally, walking where someone already has made a path gives a sense of efficacy. Moreover, viewing those coming up in your shoes; the rising generation, breeds an empathy and desire to lend a hand as we see quite eloquently portrayed in the narrative style of writing, opening a porthole into the souls of these six ordinary, yet extraordinary, women.