Reflections

Looking at Notions of Adult Education and Social Justice Over Thirty Years: A Personal Narrative

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When I completed a my doctoral program in adult education in the mid 1980s, I, like many entering the field in that era, saw adult education as providing a 'second chance" at educational opportunity for individuals whose needs were not well served by the existing K-12 systems—offering the possibility of equity, deferred though it might be. Yet, my own awareness of social justice as a framework for understanding and addressing the inequities that stirred my interest in the field was at the time quite limited. Accustomed to the psychological orientations toward adult learning and education dominant at that time, I was optimistic that expanding adult educators' understandings of cultural contexts—their own and those of their students—would go far in improving classroom and program environments for those who were *underrepresented*. In this reflection, it is my hope that sharing selected "screen shots" from my own 30-year evolution toward understanding the critical, if imperfect, relationship between adult education and social justice may offer some insight. I will focus primarily on two dimensions of social justice that have been central to my own work and which continue to hold an important place in discussions of social justice today—race and disability.

Having entered the field with a primary interest in adult learning disability, my early writing in this area included references to learning strategies, individual empowerment and self-determination. Yet, these were overshadowed by discussions of learning disability framed in a medicalized model that emphasized the role of instructors in identifying interventions appropriate to each individual's *specific learning disability/ies*, presumed to be neurological in origin (Ross-Gordon, 1989). Later, through exposure to the work of others examining adult learning and disability through a sociocultural lens (Alfred, 2002), I would come to analyze the roles that culture and identity play in determining whether particular learning styles and behaviors are interpreted as part of *normal* human variance, identified as a learning disability, or regarded as part of a more general intellectual disability (Ross-Gordon, 1996; 2002). Over time, with substantial credit to the contributions of colleagues such as Tonette Rocco (2005; 2011) and Mavis Clark (Clark, 2006; Rocco, 2005; 2011), my understanding of disability has become more closely aligned with a social model of disability that calls to question the degree to which barriers traditionally ascribed to the impairments of individuals are in large measure socially constructed (Ross-Gordon, 2015; Roultsone, Thomas & Watson, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2015; Shakespeare, 2013).

My early work related to race and adult education began with an interest in expanding awareness of participation of adults of color in adult education as learners and professionals, beyond the bleak picture painted by reports of rates of participation in formal adult education by racial/ethnic category (Briscoe & Ross, 1989; Ross, 1986). At the time, few publications within the field, with exceptions including Cassera (1990) and Neufeldt and McGee (1990), described the involvement of adults of color in adult education, often outside the systems that historically excluded their involvement. Notably, several sources have subsequently addressed these omissions including edited works by Peterson (1996) and by Sheared and Sissel (2001). A parallel focus in my early work, along with collaborators, Diane Buck Briscoe and Larry Martin, was

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encouraging instructors and program developers to design more culturally responsive programs (Ross, Martin, & Briscoe; 1990). Similarly, a multicultural perspective was reflected in my 1991 *AEQ* article reviewing current research on the involvement of racial and ethnic minorities in adult education and suggesting areas and approaches for future research.

I have selected three publications spanning 20 years between 1994 and 2014 to illustrate my own transformation toward considering the relationship between race, adult education, and social justice through a more critically informed lens. First, in a 1994 Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) conference paper titled *Toward a Critical Multicultural Pedagogy for Adult Education*, I attempted to integrate multicultural (Cassera, 1990), critical, (Shor & Freire, 1987), Afrocentric (Asante, 1991), critical feminist (hooks, 1989), and anti-racist (Colin & Preciphs, 1991) perspectives--developing a composite list of "principles for teaching and learning suggested by these critical pedagogies" (Ross-Gordon, 1994, p. 316). The ten principles included (a) power shared with learners, (b) developing a critical intellect challenging all forms of oppression, (c) placing the culture of the student in a central rather than a marginal position, (d) assisting students to understand the processes of knowledge production and to act as knowledge creators, and (e) an emphasis on teacher re-education, whether through preparatory or staff development programs.

Fast forward to 2005 when, I presented an AERC paper with Texas State students and my colleague, Ann Brooks, (Ross-Gordon, Brooks, Clunis, Muñoz, Parsells, & Parker, 2005) on the results of a review of literature related to race or ethnicity published between 1995 and 2005. We analyzed 58 data-based studies and 13 literature reviews, identifying distinct and common themes for each of three domains of work-related learning: Continuing Professional Education, Human Resource Development and Workforce Development. While the theoretical perspectives informing the various studies were diverse, Critical Race Theory was by this time prominent as a lens, and effects of institutionalized racism surfaced as a key theme identified across all three domains of work-related learning.

Fast forward again to 2014 when, along with Geleana Alston, I authored a chapter on Moranda Smith as part of an anthology edited by Gretchen Bersch and Susan Imel on women adult educators who made significant contributions between 1925 and 1950 (Ross-Gordon & Alston, 2014). A key reason we selected Smith, a local union educator who went on to become the first Black regional director for an international union in the south, was to bring to light the contributions of this firebrand for social justice. She made her mark fighting for the rights of workers, from the moment she joined other Black women in a work stoppage at Reynolds Tobacco in 1943 in response to inhumane treatment of a fellow worker, until her untimely death in 1950 while speaking to fellow union members. She ended a fiery speech to a national convention of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1947 with a call to action:

When the civil liberties of Negroes in the South are interfered with [and] you do nothing about it, I say to you, you are untrue to the traditions of America. You have got to get up and do something in action, as I have said before and not by mere words (Smith, 1947, p.10).

Notably, in their chapter focused on social justice in adult and continuing education in the most recent *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education,* Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, and Bowles (2010) both point to evidence of a commitment to social justice in the early writings of the field dating to the 1920s, and highlight the growing amount of literature in the field published since 2000 evidencing a yearning for social justice. Yet, they also point to the continued frustration within the field with *actualizing* the goals for social justice espoused in this literature.

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Fortunately, the perspectives toward race and disability reflected in the writing of the field, including my own, have evolved since when I entered the field 30 years ago. Just as fortunately, this journal is being launched as a vehicle not only for the expanded sharing of theory and research reflecting social justice perspectives, but also as a vehicle for sharing the voices of those active on the front lines of social movements seeking to actualize social justice. I think Moranda Smith would be encouraged by this development.

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Biography

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Her research interests center on diversity and equity within adult education and adult/higher education, particularly as related to race, gender, and disability.