



Reflections

The Future of Social Justice in Adult Education: A Gateway to Evolutionary Change A Reflective Essay

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Social justice is a difficult term to define and practice partly due to its overall complexity. In general terms, social justice is a set of beliefs and behaviors concerned with liberty, individual and collective rights, and social, economic and political opportunities (Broido & Reason, 2005). Adult educators who view themselves as proponents of social justice understand that it is a long-term journey and pursuit that is ever evolving rather than a finite project (Broido & Reason, 2005). This journey is not one that has been newly embarked upon as a field; rather, it has historically been central to the field of adult education. Building upon those early efforts presents an opportunity for evolutionary change in and throughout adult education. It is the blueprint for the future of the field especially given the swiftly changing social, economic, and political conditions of contemporary society. Adult educators who embrace social justice and its complexity stand poised to contribute to a more just and equitable future for more rather than the few.

According to Miranda, Radliff, Cooper, and Eschenbrenner (2014), “a social justice framework must incorporate a broad foundation of training to address the complexity of issues that face students that are the most challenged in our society” (p. 350). From an adult education advocate’s point of view, these students include nontraditional students, underrepresented students, as well marginalized students, who desire to participate across various educational settings: formal, informal, non-formal. The political, social, and economic influences that affect opportunities for adult learning add to the complexity of social justice practice.

Adult education pioneer, Paulo Freire, regarded this complexity as the counter-hegemonic struggle of movements (Crowther, 2013). To advance such struggles, adult education

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practitioners must clearly understand “what social justice means, the context in which struggles for it emerge, and the interrelationship between who it involves” (Crowther, 2013, p. 1). The who, what and why are important considerations for adult educators trying to make a difference in a world fraught with oppression, degradation, and prejudice. The continuation of the field’s legacy as a torchbearer for social justice will be dependent on the field collectively embracing a shared understanding of who, what and why.

According to Lindeman (1961), “For many adult educators, action to change and sculpt social conditions is the point – the redeeming social purpose that inspired the adult education movement in the United States” (p. 70). A common understanding of the beliefs and behaviors inherent in social justice and a careful study of the historical and contemporary social conditions position adult educators to provide a foundation for setting policy and planning programs under the adult education umbrella which could in turn create an indelible imprint on the lives of the students and in the communities in which they live and work. Therefore, adult educators must encourage the field’s exploration and pursuit of social justice in the face of conflicting values, changing demographics, and shifting national priorities. Appreciating the contextual fluidity of the application of social justice practice while remaining wedded to its central tenets allows adult education to be adaptable and relevant in the practice and pursuit of social justice. Being open to consider other avenues of thinking contextually about social justice in terms of who benefits, who does not, and how policies shape experiences and life choices provides a basis for how adult educators can work collectively toward social justice without abandoning personal core values.

This ability to reflect upon the subject of social justice is not only critical to understanding the scope of social justice but is equally critical in bringing about change. Preskill and Brookfield (2000) recognized that, in a broad sense, critical reflection was a process in which people think about the practices involving self. They further expand the concept by stating, “In the broad sense of the phrase, critical reflection is largely technical concerned with scrutinizing the accuracy of the assumptions underlying our decisions, actions and judgments” (p. 41). Scrutinizing one’s assumptions requires listening to the voices of the “other” and actively seeking diverse opinions to better inform one’s own and to direct one’s actions. In keeping with Kwapong’s (2009) well-grounded reminder, the minority voice must be part of the social justice conversation. Critical reflection must be part of any social justice action.

The future for social justice in adult education remains uncharted. There is a wide range of literature which continues to address elements or parts of the social justice landscape including a broad range of social issues such as race, gender, gender identity, socio-economic status and other issues found in a large complex society. Emerging is a call for continuing evolutionary change. This call should express the tenants of social justice in terms of

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value to the society, not simply change because it is the “right thing to do.” Social justice based change should occur within an education system which recognizes social justice as an integrated part of the learning process, not a separate area of study and activity. This call for change can become a lasting part of an evolutionary society. When the tenants of social justice are recognized as valuable to the individual and group members of a society, then and only then, will true social justice be attainable.

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