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Democratic Adult Education in United States

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Date of publication: February 23rd, 2012

To cite this article: Tellado, I. (2012). Democratic Adult Education in United States. *Social and Education History*, 1(1), 58-77. doi: 10.4471/hse.2012.03

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4471/hse.2012.03>

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Abstract

Democracy in adult education promotes an outstanding organizational practice for adult learning centers. Regularly, low literate, working-class people, and Black individuals were excluded of political decisions and learning opportunities of the adult learning organizations they attend. This paper focused on adult learners' participation in an adult school in the South of the United States, Highlander Folk School. Learners and educators are engaged in all the school decisions to overcome social inequalities. The involvement of learners in decision-making teams is essential to the success of shared governance and other participative structures and, is one of the aspects that explain the higher levels of participation in the school. The paper is centered on the strategies used within the community organization for the implementation of democratic adult educational practices and how those successful experiences help the overcoming of social exclusion.

Keywords: Democratic adult education, social change, participation, Highlander.

Educación Democrática de Personas Adultas en Estados Unidos

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Resumen

La democracia en la educación de personas adultas promueve una destacada práctica organizativa para los centros de educación de personas adultas. Regularmente, las personas analfabetas, de clase trabajadora y las personas negras estaban excluidas de las decisiones políticas y de las oportunidades de aprendizaje de las organizaciones a las que asistían. Este artículo se centra en la participación de estudiantes adultos en una escuela de adultos del sur de los Estados Unidos, Highlander Folk School. Participantes y educadores se entregan a las decisiones del centro para superar las desigualdades sociales. La participación de las personas que aprenden en los equipos de toma de decisiones es esencial para el éxito de una gestión compartida y de unas estructuras participativas, y es uno de los aspectos que explican los altos niveles de participación en el centro. Este artículo se centra en las estrategias utilizadas en la organización comunitaria para llevar a cabo educación democrática de personas adultas y como estas exitosas experiencias ayudan a superar la exclusión social.

Palabras clave: educación democrática de personas adultas, cambio social, participación, Highlander.

Introduction

Many were the rights that black people in United States did not have over a long period of time in history. In U.S. history many battles were fought to achieve equal treatment and equal rights. Laws were passed and orders promoted by Presidents and Committees. In recent history, discrimination still was a common fact, although:

In late 1946 President Harry Truman, appointed a Committee on Civil Rights, which recommended that the civil rights section of the Department of Justice be expanded, that there be a permanent Commission on Civil Rights, that Congress pass laws against lynching and to stop voting discrimination, and suggested new laws to end racial discrimination in job. (Zinn, 1980, p.449)

His interests for these actions were little the moral reason but the economic purpose since discrimination was costly to the country and mainly because of the new role that U. S. was taking in the world order.

Politically many actions could have been taken to implement the laws and orders that have been passed on democratic rights and against discrimination since the 19th century. The 14th and the 15th Amendments, plus other laws passed in the late 1860s and early 1870s, giving the President enough authority to wipe out racial discrimination (Zinn, 1980, p.449). For instance the 14th Amendment was ratified on 1868 and states among other issues that:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

The 15th Amendment was ratified in early 1870 and states that “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or

abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude”. None of the 15 Presidents of the United States, from Andrew Johnson to Harry Truman, nor the later used their power to terminate racial discrimination, they were Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James Garfield, Chester A. Arthur, Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt. For political reasons as stated before Truman issued an executive order asking that the armed forces institute policies of racial equality.

In 1954, the Court finally struck down the “separate but equal” doctrine that it had defended since the 1890s. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), a civil rights organization for ethnic minorities in the united States, brought a series of cases before the Court to challenge segregation in the public schools, for example *Brown vs. Board of Education*. “In 1965, ten years after the “all deliberate speed” guideline issued by the Court stating that segregated facilities should be integrated, more than 75% of the school districts in the South remained segregated” (Zinn, 1980, p.450).

In the early 1960s black people arose in rebellion all over the South. The south is a large distinctive area in the southeastern and south-central United States. The region is known for its distinct culture and history, having developed its own customs, literature, musical styles, and varied cuisines. The South owes its unique heritage to a variety of sources, including Native Americans, early European settlements of Spanish, English, French, Scots-Irish, Scottish, and German, and hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans. In late 1960s hundred of northern cities engage in the insurrection. The facts and the events came one after another. By the end of 1955 came the Montgomery Bus Boycott. These rebellions also included the Mississippi Freedom Summer, the March on Selma, Alabama, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott came three months after the arrest of Mrs. Rosa Parks, a forty-three-year-old seamstress whose name has been known around the globe for refusing to obey the law providing

for segregation on city buses, by sitting in the “white” section of the bus. Why she refused to give up her sit, and where did her strength to maintain her stand come from? These questions will be solved in this paper through the detailed study of the connections between social participation, social movements and adult education.

Democratic Adult education

Contemporary societies are diverse and changing. Societies have to confront the challenges of globalization, as well as the opening of the market, culture and education. Adult education must be responsive to those needs. Current social theories emphasize the importance of democracy and within it the creation of dialog conditions for living together (Castells, 2004; Flecha, Gómez, & Puigvert, 2001). These theories recommend the participation of all actors affected by and taking part in society. From these positions it may be posited that education is the key for social promotion, and that education can lead to equal opportunities for everyone.

The hierarchic organization of society, which is characteristic of the industrial society, is an obsolete organization in the contemporary information society. In addition, social and cultural developments are facilitating the organization of social movements. Social movements are being organized by means of strengthened egalitarian objectives, consensus processes, and the inclusion of voices of all stakeholders (Beck, 1999). Furthermore, Gelpi (1996) asserted that “working class movements, in their political and cultural trade union action, have developed adult education as an instrument of struggle and emancipation”(p.129). This assertion provides evidence that adult education has been linked to participation from grassroots proposals.

Several scholars explore the relationship between social participation, social movements and adult education; for example, communities that organize to provide literacy classes (Picon, 1991), and alternative models to formal education (Paulston & Letroy, 1982), such as popular education (La Belle, 1987, 2000). Research also demonstrates that engaging in Freirean education practices can induce social activism (Puigvert, 2001; Stromquist, 1994). Also, many studies

examined social movements that utilized education to pursue social justice such as the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. (Morris, 1984; Rachal, 2000).

Adult education and education in general can be fundamental to creating transformational possibilities. Societies around the world have inequalities to overcome. The idea of education underlying the aspiration to achieve important social purposes is not new (Welter, 1962). But in the context of the information-based global society education increasingly enables social mobility, thus explaining its centrality to movements pursuing social justice. The need to have a more inclusive and participatory civil society that involves cooperation among all stakeholders in education has been internationally acknowledged (UNESCO, 2004). Some recommendations for practitioners are, among others, to make citizenship and democracy central to the design of adult education programs.

Participation is one of the most widely studied areas in adult education (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Adult education responds to a model that guarantees participants the possibility of acquiring, updating, and completing knowledge as varied as, for example, basic education, work training or social and cultural activities. Following these possibilities, adult education must be based on an organized and methodical model which permits flexibility for the rhythm and learning times of adults, allowing different training itineraries to be acquired in response to the needs and demands of adults. Program planners must also consider the individual psycho-pedagogical characteristics and social situations of adults. In Adult Education there are different areas: Basic Education, Training for the labor market, Training in cultural or leisure activities, and Education for Citizenship. Adult Education must also ensure training in personal development, awareness of one's setting and active social participation.

The need to discuss those concepts and do research on democracy, social justice and citizenship with regards to participation in adult education is fundamental. There is plenty of literature on those issues (D'Amico, 1981; Selman, 1991; Vasta, 2000; Coare & Johnston, 2003; Banks, 2004). Contemporary society also needs adult educators who are determined in their pursuit of equality, justice, peace and education for all.

Scholars in political economy and the sociology of knowledge as well as in sociology of education have argued that public schools in complex industrial societies make available different types of educational experience and curriculum knowledge to students in different social classes. Bowles and Gintis (1976) for example, have argued that students in different social-class backgrounds are rewarded for classroom behaviors that correspond to personality traits allegedly rewarded in the different occupational class positions. Bernstein (1977) and Apple (1990) focusing on school knowledge, have argued that knowledge and skills leading to social power are made available to the advantaged social groups but do not operate for the working classes to whom a more "practical" curriculum is offered (manual skills, clerical knowledge).

Participation in adult education is defined as taking part in a learning process for adults. That is, "participation in adult education" is the engagement of the adult participant or learner in the process of making decisions, assessing, and defining goals in the organization where democratic adult education takes place. International organizations (such as UNESCO) proclaim that adult education (especially literacy) should be a gateway to fuller participation in social, cultural, political and economic life in all regions of the world (2004). Literacy enables individuals to function effectively in their societies and to fashion and shape them. In such a process, communities affect their own cultural and social transformations. Literacy must address the needs of both women and men, to enable them to understand the interconnections between personal, local and global realities.

Habermas describes it in the language of social Darwinism (as cited in Castells, Flecha, Freire, Giroux, Macedo, & Willis, 1999). The situation entails educational curriculum that has become a factor in the process of social dualization as the selection of the fittest. Flecha (1999) adds that as the educational gap increases, stable workers are those with a university degree, and the unemployed are those without an elementary level of education (p.66). For most people, formal education is a social good, a source of hope in the quest for individual improvement and social change (Stromquist, 1994).

On behalf of education, hooks (2003) agrees that “without ongoing movements for social justice in our nation, progressive education becomes all the more important since it may be the only location where individuals can experience support for acquiring a critical consciousness, for any commitment to end domination” (p.45). Previously she states that democratic educators have to work to find ways to teach and share knowledge in a manner that does not reinforce existing structures of domination such as those of race, gender, class, religion, culture or sexual orientation.

Freire (in Bell, Gaventa & Peters, 1990) poses several questions on behalf of the right of people to take history into their hands. He asks “Do the people have the right or not to participate in the process of producing the new knowledge?” (p.97). He declares that processes of social transformation imply change in the way of producing economically but also that “greater participation of the masses of the people in the process of power. Then it means to renew the understanding of power” (p.97). Participation has to be understood not as the institutionalization of the protest, but the elaboration of more efficient policies, based in the previous consultation and in the profiting of the acquired experience (ETGACE, 2002). Freire (1970) suggests that the educator must know in favor of whom and in favor of what he or she wants. That suggestion means educators need to know against whom and against what they are working as educators.

Many times the practice of adult education is developed in the unique form of schooling. Illich (as cited in Collins, 1998) critiques schooling and expresses the idea that learners should not be subjected to mandatory education. His scheme of lifelong education for the people by the people would be facilitated through skill exchanges, reference services, and peer-matching arrangements (p.16). According to Illich, schools get in the way of relevant learning which fosters personal competence and peoples’ capacities to develop genuine community. He adds, professional educators teach their students to become dependent on experts who, in turn reinforce the dependency (p.3).

The scholastic model is defined for a curriculum that is often indifferent to social needs and is often solely based in instrumental and

academic competencies. The scholastic model often stresses the classroom as the predominant location for learning, and may overlook the importance of preparing individuals for a social, work and educational life. For that reason, prior experiences are not taken into account or any other knowledge that can be learned at the same time in other contexts (Freire, 1970). Therefore, the scholastic model starts from the deficit and not from what people have learned in other contexts.

The scholastic model creates a vicious circle that harms vulnerable groups, and often ends up being compensatory and reproductive training for participants. In such programs, many educators believe that the learners have very little interest in participation. Moreover, in such programs the learners are relegated to merely receiving information because program planners do not take into account the capacity of the participants for critique. In such programs, minimal egalitarian dialog exists between educator and learner. The participants are relegated to receive information and attend courses implemented through master classes. In this kind of model the educator is an expert who fills participants' heads with information and data and attempts to compensate for their deficits (Freire, 1970). This kind of relationship between educator and learner results in negative power relations. Another characteristic of the scholastic model is the strict bureaucracy carried out in the educational process. This type of bureaucracy promotes learners to adapt their needs to the system instead of the system adapting to their demands and needs.

As an alternative to the scholastic model, the social model (Medina, 1997) is responsive to grassroots populations and is aligned with the characteristics of social movements. The intent of the social model is not to compensate but to address social and educational inequalities. The social model involves prior experiences of the participants, high expectations, active participation and egalitarian relations. This starting point allows the transformation process to emerge in an environment that promotes learning for all participants without discriminating against people because of their ethnic group, age, culture or social class.

The social model is premised on the belief that everybody can learn.

This model starts from a “pedagogy of maximum”, meaning that learning can occur in all contexts (Coare & Johnston, 2003). The learning process it is not a closed process that has to be based in a classroom. Furthermore, learning is not restricted to a one way transmission of information from the educator to the learner. Another characteristic of the social model is its focus on promoting solidarity and its support of the idea that everybody has to participate in transforming difficulties into possibilities (Freire, 1997). In such a process, participants and educators are collaborative learners.

A central characteristic of the social model is to give priority to the learners who have a higher risk of social exclusion. Participants get better results and higher participation when their active participation is promoted and their voices are taken into account. The higher expectations that are set for them influence their level of motivation. This phenomenon not only changes their lives but also affects those around them in their social setting (FACEPA, 2002). The social model takes into account key elements for social inclusion like access, selection and data processing. Therefore it promotes a learning that considers basic aspects of data selection and processing throughout people interactions (Ferrada, 2001).

In the social model, educators or facilitators provide their knowledge to participants by means of an egalitarian dialog, promoting participation and learning from participants. The participants contribute to the learning process by sharing their prior experiences and their cultural background, promoting an egalitarian relationship that improves the learning quality. An underlying premise of this model is that reflection through dialog is a basic element that defines society and individuality (Beck 1999).

Adult education in some locations is currently going through a process of democratization, following tendencies of society. Participants are organizing themselves and demanding to share with teachers and administrators the decision-making about their education. In this movement – called the Democratic Adult Education (DAE) Movement – they are reinventing popular education. The DAE movement follows the dialogic tendency of current society. However, it did not appear by chance, but as a result of many years of work within the field of adult education towards the democratization of

education and culture. Freire (1987) argues that literacy should be inscribed inside a democratic adult education approach in which the participants of the learning process have the space and the opportunity to speak up and name the word and the world. He promotes that adult education needs to recover its radical democratic basis by promoting experiences that overcome social exclusion by gender, race, culture and class. New channels and projects that foster the radicalization of democracy are emerging. As a result of many years of work within the field of adult education toward the democratization of education and culture the DAE movement appears to represent the interest of those people whose lack of academic studies, among other barriers, has excluded them from many positions in society.

Democratic Adult Education is carried out in a social model of adult education that consists of including the participant's voice in the decision-making places, in the management and the assessment processes. More and more, public decisions are carried out by means of deliberative processes where citizens affected by the decisions take part in them even if they are not experts on the subject (Habermas, 1984). In order to legitimize the decisions, it depends on the inclusion of all the voices in the dialog process. The future of adult education is being dreamed and reinvented by the organizations and learners. Those proposals point to the same place as deliberative democracy and democracy radicalization achieving a better education directed to the present society. For example, Prajuli (as cited in Collins, 1998) is an educator with experience of popular education among community-based groups in Nepal. For him popular education as counter-discourse calls for the practice of a "bottom up" approach in contrast to the "trickle down" approach which has provided the rationale for modernizing schemes according to conventional development theory (p. 142). Again, according to Freire (1987), learners are able to transform the world through their actions and to express the reality in a creative language. By interacting with other people in schools and communities, adult learners raise questions about already held interpretations and collectively create new meanings that redefine them.

This adult education has a dialogic approach which is characterized

by being an approach that arises from the dialog between participants and educators or researchers in several areas of social sciences. The idea of equality is a basic concept in this context that belongs both from the traditional popular adult education as well as from authors such as Freire, Habermas and Flecha among others. In fact, there is a democratic tradition in this educational and management approach. Dewey (1916), for example, elucidates that “in order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equal opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertaking and experiences” (p.84). And those are the kind of ideas present in this approach. Dewey’s vision of education connected to democracy argues a democratic society with high value to the relationship between individuals. He (1916) states:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own. (p.87)

Dewey’s vision of democracy challenge citizens to participate in spaces of decision-making. In fact, this author states that the more voices participating in the spaces of decision the more possibilities of finding the best solution for the group.

To illustrate this educational model there is an example in the U.S. context that requires detailed study. In addition it will also answer the refusal of Mrs. Parks to give up her sit and explain her strength to maintain her position. Her civil rights experiences as many of other black citizens and white citizens of U.S. came from the life experience and educational exchanges that had priory taken place in Highlander Folk School, a school for adults.

From Highlander Folk School to Highlander Research and Education Center

Crowther (2009) states that “The Highlander Folk School has an iconic status in radical adult education and was founded by Myles Horton,

along with others, in 1932 in Tennessee, USA.” Highlander Folk School original mission was to educate rural and industrial leaders for a new social order. From 1932 until the mid-1940s, Highlander worked together with woodcutters, coal miners, government relief workers, textile workers, and farmers in the region to build a progressive labor movement. Within the labor movement in the region Highlander conducted labor education programs with workers from 11 southern states, developing at that time a residential educational program designed to help build a broad-based, racially integrated, and politically active labor movement in the South (Highlander, 2012). Although the first black speaker at a workshop arrived in 1934, it was not until 1944 that the first integrated workshop at Highlander was held. As the history of Highlander (2012) states “these integrated workshops caused great controversy among segregationists and union leaders. Opposition leaders equated Highlander’s racial policies with communism and began a campaign to shut Highlander down that culminated in 1961”. Before the closing of Highlander at Monteagle, Tennessee, it had a great influence in another social level. In 1953, Highlander Folk School changed its focus from labor to Civil Rights Movement. This change of focus was due to, first, the believe of the staff in the fact of abolishing poverty and winning progressive change in the region by fighting prejudices of racism and segregation. Secondly this change was because the staff predicted that the imminent decision from the Supreme Court on the case of Brown vs. Board of Education would start important conflicts in the South. The work of Highlander in the Civil Rights Movement focused mainly on school desegregation and voter education/voting rights (Highlander, 2012). In addition, due to its ground-breaking efforts to conduct cross-race educational sessions, it also served as a key gathering place for civil rights activist, such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr, to name the most well-known.

Highlander citizenship schools were several initiatives to bring education on voter education and voting rights to the citizens. These schools (Highlander, 2012) “operated under the leadership of Esau Jenkins, Bernice Robinson and Septima Clark”. Its purpose was to help African Americans learn to read. This was not a solely purpose, the main aim was for the literate African Americans to be able to pass the

literacy test required at that time to become eligible voters in the South. The Citizenship Schools played a critical role in building the base for the Civil Rights Movement helping millions of African Americans to become literates. At that time in 8 southern states there was a 2 and half functional illiterates (Highlander, 2012).

In this context, Rosa Parks had been participating of the Highlander workshops and worked on voter registration and youth programs. By the time of her arrest (1955), she was a respected community leader. In 1943 she became secretary of the Montgomery NAACP chapter and tried to register for vote three times before doing so for the first time in 1945.

Highlander began by focusing on subjects to bring culture and education to rural areas, to later become in its commitment to social change into a key environment to promote social participation, social movements and education.

The successful work on promoting education and encouraging the Civil Rights Movement provoked a fierce reaction among southern segregationists. The angry reaction took the form of the publication of several pieces of propaganda against Highlander Folk School calling it a school for communist training under the attack from the press. In the U.S. context calling someone a communist is a major insult. These attacks were aimed at Myles Horton, director and one of the founders of Highlander, and others such as Martin Luther King Jr. who was one of the speakers at the event of the 25th anniversary workshop on Labor Day weekend, 1957. The campaign against Highlander ended in 1961 (Highlander, 2012) when the State of Tennessee canceled the contract of the Folk School and took away the land, buildings and other properties of Highlander Folk School. These facts took place “Despite the support of people such as Eleanor Roosevelt and United Nations Under-Secretary Ralph J. Bunche, the Tennessee Supreme Court was able to manipulate the law to shut down Highlander” (Highlander, 2012). At that moment, a The new Highlander relocated to Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1961 and remained there until 1971, when it moved to its current location, in New Market, Tennessee. At that moment Highlander name change to be Highlander Research and Education Center. Over that later period of time participants at Highlander also identified the need to shift its focus and started to look at struggles for

economic and social justice.

Over the 1980s and 1990s Highlander Research and Education Center supported local communities in the global context, developing workshops for democratic economic development, youth leaderships, environmental health programs. In that period of time Highlander played an active role in international adult education efforts, helping to host exchanges and education programs with community-based educators. After several meetings, in December 1987 Paulo Freire and Myles Horton held long conversations and dialog with Highlander staff and friends to finally create a “speaking book”. Angela Miles (1996) states that “in the opening section of their dialogue in the book *We Make the Road by Walking*, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990) share their common understanding, after years of practice, that effective adult education for social change must be grounded in social action”.

Highlander Research and Education Center continues today, in the early 21st century, connected to groups working on many different issues and providing a democratic gathering space for local organizations at the same time of supporting and educating for overcoming regional, national and international struggles, for instance, providing educational resources for social justice activists, language skills and rights education for migrants and young people.

Conclusions

Rosa Parks actions were not disconnected to the educational experiences she had had before December of 1955 in the bus. In fact her actions were consequence of many conversations, thoughts and teachings for democratic rights. She once stated to Myles Horton to the question “What was on your mind, Rosa?” about her decision that day, that she had been thinking at work “when, how would we ever determine our rights as human beings?”(Highlander, 2012).

The literature review showed that the study of the organization and functioning of the adult education centers is closely related with a great diversity of aspects. These aspects are democracy, participation, dialog, a critical review of the educator role inside and out of the classroom,

the ability of participants deciding what education they want, lifelong learning, power relations in the structures of decision-making inside the school, creating spaces of identity, and the impact of the social context in the functioning of the centers of adult education among others. All these issues are important because they have direct consequences on the participation of adult individuals in the center of adult education and outside of it. The literature review for this paper showed that the successful experiences in adult education are the ones in which there are routes and channels for the participants to share their points of view and where they feel respected.

In this case, Highlander is a good example of the social model of adult education and mainly an example of democratic education in U. S. connecting social movements and education with the focus of its curriculum changing and developing for the ideas and problems of society and from their participation. The participants at Highlander workshops are not merely spectators, by learning and doing each one of them become part of the action, an activist for social change and a contributor to a better society.

The success of Highlander Folk School and the Highlander Research and Educational Center was and still is the focus that the organization takes on current and real problems as well as the direct and true participation of citizens in the solution and actions for intervention. Highlander experiences and results support theories and practices that emphasize the value of learners' participation in the management of the adult school. The consequences of such participation affect not only the individual but the center, the people around the participant and the community, in short, the citizenship.

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