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A DIFFERENT WAY

REORIENTING ADULT EDUCATION TOWARD DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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The illustration of Polynesian seafarers pulling together to weather a storm was created by long-time Hawaii-based artist, Dietrich Varez.

Abstract

Within the United States and other countries, adult basic skills programs have attempted to help adult learners participate actively in democratic institutions and exercise their civil rights. Drawing on a literature review, this article traces the evolution of arguments for and models of such programs in the United States. It identifies strategies used by educators to help learners ***mitigate*** the impacts of social injustices, ***navigate*** around those impacts, ***eliminate*** unjust policies and social practices, and ***create*** alternative ways that support human rights.

The article concludes with recommendations for those interested in adapting a social justice perspective into adult basic skills programming. This reorientation of adult education is especially relevant now, as awareness and efforts grow in the United States—and other countries—vis-a-vis economic insecurity, racial and religious tensions, immigration-related conflict, voting insecurity, health inequities, criminal justice reform, environmental degradation, and other justice-related challenges.

Keywords: adult education, literacy, basic skills, immigrant integration, democracy, social justice, racial justice, Freire, civil rights, participatory

Foreword

I wrote most of this article in July and August of 2020, six months into the COVID-19 pandemic and during the economic, racial, environmental, and political upheavals the United States was undergoing. I wrote it with the hope that it could contribute to productive reflection, dialogue, and action to strengthen and expand adult basic skills development in the U.S. and possibly in other nations.

Fast-forward to mid-January 2021. In the intervening months, I had gotten involved in other work and hadn't found a partner willing or able to publish the document. And, in the meantime, our nation had gone into deeper turmoil: an out-of-control pandemic, a troubled presidential and congressional election, growing hunger and poverty, shuttered educational institutions, and—on January 6, 2021—a violent attack on the U.S. Congress and our democratic system.

Not wanting to wait any longer, I self-published and disseminated this article on January 20, 2021, two days after the Martin Luther King Day of Service and on Inauguration Day for a new national leadership. I sent it out electronically via formal and informal networks in the U.S. adult basic education field with the hope that information and ideas in the article will help us create a stronger, expanded system of adult learning opportunities that responds more effectively to more learners' work, family, community, and academic needs. This system would help adult learners (and their families and communities) while also helping our society transition to one that is more equitable, healthy, environmentally sustainable, productive, and together.

In the subsequent two months, I was pleased to see that others were thinking in similar ways. I was able to work with colleagues to make several conference presentations that drew on the article. And ProLiteracy—a leader in adult basic education in the United States—offered to publish the article as a White Paper, as this important national organization tackles the question of how to support equitable opportunities in our nation.

I look forward to continuing dialogue and action on this important question.

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Introduction

For decades, significant numbers of adult educators in the United States have seen adult basic education as a tool for supporting democracy and social justice. According to this view, (1) society is structured in ways that prevent adults with basic skills limitations from exercising their full civil rights, and (2) adult education can help those adults overcome barriers and protect their rights and those of their families and communities. With this perspective, education programs have been designed to help various populations (e.g., racial minorities, immigrants, lower-wage or unemployed workers, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, women, and individuals with disabilities) to address challenges such as racism, integration after immigration or incarceration, income and food insecurity, abuse, sexism, and limited education.

Drawing on a literature review, this article traces the evolution of arguments and programs supporting this approach. It identifies strategies used by educators to help learners ***mitigate*** the impacts of social injustices, ***navigate*** around those impacts, ***eliminate*** unjust policies and social practices, and ***create*** alternative ways of doing things that support social justice.

The article concludes with recommendations for those interested in adapting a social justice perspective into adult basic skills programming and especially for those who are concerned about the economic security of adult learners and their families and communities. This reorientation of adult education is especially relevant now, as awareness and efforts grow in the United States—and other countries—vis-a-vis economic insecurity, racial and religious tensions, immigration-related conflict, voting insecurity, health inequities, criminal justice reform, environmental degradation, and other justice-related challenges.

Arguments

Adult education writers have for decades worked in, researched, reflected on, and argued for an "adult education for social justice" perspective. Their arguments have multiple roots (e.g., the U.S. civil rights movement, popular education in developing countries, labor unions, the women's movement). They make the case for adult education as a tool to ensure equal opportunity for individuals and to maintain a democratic, just society. Promoters of this perspective come from diverse institutions (e.g., community-based organizations, universities, adult literacy resource centers, think tanks, labor unions) and points on the political continuum.

Supporters use overlapping and sometimes confusing terms when describing this type of education (e.g., social justice, social change, democracy, civil [or human] rights, equality, equity, opportunity, civic participation, empowerment, liberatory or emancipatory, popular, critical, Freirian, dialogical, community-based, community-oriented, learner-centered, problem-posing, or problem-solving).

A sampling of writers from the late 1970s to 2020 who have promoted adult education oriented to community needs is presented below, organized around three guidelines: (1) Focus on critical thinking and action related to learner and community needs, (2) Invest in an evidence-based, systems approach, and (3) Emphasize collaborations between adult education and other stakeholders.

Focus on Critical Thinking and Action Related to Learner and Community Needs.

From the 1970s through the mid-1990s, the Association for Community Based Education (ACBE) (1983) was a national network of about 60 community-based education programs. It stated: "Literacy for a broader social purpose is a major theme in community-based literacy education . . . it concentrate(s) on the whole learner . . . helping (learners) to develop 'human,' 'economic,' 'social,' and 'political' literacy, as well as the technical ability to encode and decode written language."

ACBE said that community-based programs provide other services such as a women's shelter, home construction training, health and parenting workshops, and a camp for disabled children. Many also are actively involved in advocacy around issues impacting their communities. "Literacy is typically neither a community-based program's ultimate goal, nor the only avenue to reach that goal" (pp. 11-12).

Supporting ACBE's view, the Business Council for Effective Literacy (1986) said community-based organizations are ". . . the agents most successful in reaching and teaching those most in need of help. . . . [They] bring about a larger change within individuals and the greater community. . . . A common thread [is] 'empowerment'. . . to equip individuals [with] more control over their own lives" (p.1).

Fingeret (1992) stated that ***community-oriented*** (in contrast to the more common ***individually oriented***) programs emphasize critical reflection and action. Curricula reflect . . . "community residents' concerns, such as jobs, housing, childcare, transportation, care for the elderly, and crime." In participatory activities . . . "students work as partners with literacy workers to . . . [tailor services] to their needs and . . . backgrounds" while supporting learners to also work "with their communities to

develop a better quality of life for everyone." Fingeret noted that "communities" can include "classroom," "geographical," or "cultural" communities (p. 13).

Nash (1999) wrote: "One of the primary purposes, historically, of adult education has been to prepare people for participation in a democracy" through, for example, "English and civics lessons for newcomers who wanted citizenship, or literacy for emancipated slaves who faced literacy requirements quickly erected to keep them from voting."

> We believe, however, that to really have a voice in the decisions that affect our lives, we need to go beyond voting to more direct forms of participation, such as community education, advocacy, and organizing. We also need, in a culture that celebrates the individual and the myth of the equal playing field, to recognize our interdependence, and to acknowledge and address our inequalities. Building community, in this way, is one aspect of civic participation (p. ix).

Soifer et al. (1989) said that, for many workplace education students, "years of working in a very directed, repetitive situation have only reinforced their low self-esteem and sense of powerlessness." To shift to a more positive frame of mind, learners must confront and eliminate that negativity. "We use the learners' language to initiate a process . . . to reconceptualize their views of themselves" (p. 66).

Teaching remedial English for working-class students in a run-down New York City community college in the 1970s, Shor (1980) developed "liberatory" instructional techniques to prepare students for their "history-making roles" as "their own agents of social change [and] creators of democratic culture" to "aid people in knowing what holds them back" (p. 48). Learners developed their language skills through "dialogue" and "co-investigation of reality" (p. xxv). Activities are built on learners' strengths, including their life experiences, interests, language abilities, and natural resistance to the dehumanizing effects of a mass culture reinforced by popular media and schools.

Invest in an Evidence-Based, Systems Approach.

In an update of their 1979 adult literacy report for the Ford Foundation, Hunter and Harman (1985) recommended:

- developing and funding "a network of community-based educators" who teach "reading, language skills, social analysis, and programs of general and specific information" contextualized to local community needs;
- using "democratic processes" to strengthen "linkages between . . . local initiatives and larger political movements;"
- "enact[ing] legislation that both affirms the legitimacy of these movements and provides fiscal support for making democratic educational renewal a national priority" (pp. xix-xxi).

Stein and Bingman (2001) described how the National Institute for Literacy's Equipped for the Future (EFF) systems reform initiative was built on "a broad, consensus-building process . . . to embed a skills-based approach to adult learning within a purpose-based framework grounded in how adults expect literacy [and] education to prepare them to fulfill their roles as parents and family members, citizens and community members, and workers" (p.10). Learners are equipped to

- gain access to information and resources to orient themselves in the world;
- give voice to ideas and opinions with confidence they will be heard;
- take independent action to solve problems and make decisions;
- keep learning to build a bridge to the future in a rapidly changing world (p.6).

In an example of how to prepare learners for the "citizen/community member" role, adult educators in Vermont helped welfare-to-work students inform legislators about how welfare requirements (e.g., having to perform low-paying jobs without appropriate training, having appointments at distant welfare offices despite lacking public transportation and childcare) made it nearly impossible to participate in education and qualify for family-sustaining employment (Stein, 2000, pp. 66-71).

Emphasize Collaborations Between Adult Education and Other Stakeholders.

Proponents of a social justice perspective have tended to emphasize that adult educators not work alone but in partnerships with other stakeholders who can provide supports to adult learners.

Gordon and Ramdeholl (2010) said:

> We don't expect adult literacy programs to be starting points for social change. [Sometimes] a particular program will play that role, but mostly the catalysts for social movements will be outside literacy programs—no matter how good they are.

The authors stressed that to contribute to those movements, adult educators need to be sensitive to what is happening in their communities.

> During the civil rights movement, the Citizenship Schools (in many ways, literacy programs) played a key role in bringing people into action by helping them acquire the tools to organize. In 2010, in the absence of such a broad popular movement, the potential for literacy programs to contribute to those social movements is undeniably more limited (p. 33).

Yankwitt (2020) wrote about the Literacy and Justice Initiative launched by the New York City Literacy Assistance Center in 2019:

> Aligning our programs with educational justice organizations and examining these issues in our classrooms can embolden students as agents of social change for their families and communities. This kind of collaboration can also create opportunities . . . [for] educational justice organizations . . . to potentially integrate adult literacy education into their agendas.

The Initiative assembled a broader coalition to expand educational opportunities for the city's 2.2 million adults with basic skills limitations. Partners included adult literacy programs, workers' and immigrant rights organizations, advocacy groups, and other grassroots organizations (p. 62).

Models

How Adult Education Can Help Learners Deal with Social Injustice: An Overview

Adult basic education can support social justice for adult learners by helping them to develop assets (e.g., skills, knowledge, attitudes, credentials, and connections to support systems) to address systemic barriers to success in work, family, civic, and academic roles. Adult educators—often in partnership with other stakeholders—provide various justice-related supports to diverse learner populations. These supports include contextualized instruction that incorporates social justice issues, counseling, leadership development, referrals to relevant support networks, and advocacy. Adult educators and other partners can strategically target these supports to help learners respond to, avoid, reduce, or eliminate injustices. To clarify options for planners of social justice-related efforts, these support strategies can be broken down as follows:

Strategies for Individual Change

The following two strategies (i.e., "Mitigate" and "Navigate") focus on helping individual learners respond to existing inequity-related challenges.

- **Strategy 1: Mitigate.** In a supportive environment, learners are helped to respond to short- and long-term effects of encounters with systemic inequities. They might learn how to register to vote, pass the citizenship exam, secure employment, deal with a health problem, advance in their education, deal with an act of discrimination, improve their digital access, or communicate with their children's teachers. These supports help the learner address immediate, relatively discrete needs and manage such needs in the future.
- **Strategy 2: Navigate.** Learners learn how to proactively beware of and avoid potential obstacles. They learn to know where potential hazards are; they then develop plans to, for example, find a job, secure housing, or manage a legal problem. In so doing, they avoid obstacles and take advantage of available resources.

Strategies for Social Change

The two strategies below (i.e., "Eliminate" and "Create") focus on helping learners work with others to change practices and policies that are at the root of social injustices.

- **Strategy 3: Eliminate:** Learners learn how to work—individually or collectively—with other stakeholders (e.g., a labor union, the human resources department in their workplace, a

community health center, a prisoner reentry advocacy group, an immigrant and refugee service provider) to remove current obstacles that hinder their progress and that of others. They might challenge and change existing systems to eliminate inequitable laws, policies, cultural and institutional practices and attitudes, and material limitations.

- **Strategy 4: Create.** As an alternative to "eliminating obstacles" in current systems, learners learn how to work—individually or collectively—with other stakeholders (like those listed under "Strategy 3: Eliminate" above) to create new, more supportive systems in which social inequities are less likely to occur. For example, learners might help to create a labor union at their workplace, form a food cooperative (to get access to better foods at more reasonable prices), advocate for new governmental policies and programs that create better job opportunities, create their own businesses, establish a "community watch" as an alternative to relying solely on the local police department, or establish a community-based support system for refugees or returning inmates.

This section presents examples of ways that adult education has responded to ten forms of social injustice, moving from the 1800s to the present. The program models vary in the learners and communities served, their goals, and the strategies used. (Other social justice themes might include discrimination based on disability, religion, gender diversity, or age; and unfair housing, education, or lending opportunities.)

Examples of Social-Justice-Oriented Adult Education

The 1800s: Slavery and Reconstruction

- **Access to Education**
  In the 1800s, literate African-Americans (both enslaved and emancipated) taught literacy skills to adults in Black communities. Prior to the Civil War, these efforts were illegal and done in secret. During the war, Black soldiers in the Union Army were taught to read and write during off-duty hours by literate African-Americans who travelled with them. After the war, "Freedmen's Schools" were established where emancipated adults and their children learned basic reading, writing, and math (Sticht, 2017).

The 1960s: Civil Rights Era

- **Voting Rights**
  In the 1960s, civil rights activists in southern states helped African-Americans with basic skills limitations to read the state constitution, a requirement to register to vote. These Citizenship Schools or Freedom Schools also helped learners develop more-general skills of cooperative problem solving. Black community members served as instructors and used meaningful vocabulary and literacy activities taken from learners' lives and interests. Materials included familiar songs, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the state constitution, letters to family in the military, money orders, newspapers, and shopping lists (Adams & Horton, 1975).

1970s–1990s: Growth of Community-Based and Worker-Centered Programs

In this period, there was a surge in social-justice-oriented adult education programs in the United States. Many were based in independent community-based organizations (See "Arguments.") and were influenced by the civil rights era literacy programs described above and/or by education-for-social-change efforts in countries emerging from colonialism. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (Horton & Freire, 1990) was a prominent voice articulating how basic education could help marginalized people understand and deal with oppressive forces.

- **Immigrant Integration**
  At Union Settlement House (USH) in East Harlem, the liberation theology of 1960s Latin America inspired a receptivity within the Latino community to the kind of social change proposed by advocates like Freire. By the 1980s, however, the climate in East Harlem was not very promising for those who hoped for community development through collective action. Staff explained that, in "a time of very little hope for poor people," residents nonetheless participated very actively in USH because they felt it provided them with something positive. (As one participant said: "I don't have to be down because I was born down.") (Jurmo, 1987, pp. 239-240).

  USH emphasized mutual respect, and students selected and discussed newspaper articles related to personal concerns. A teacher introduced what he called "toxic topics" into informal discussions and "learners discovered how they, through a group, can have a voice and claim their power" (p. 242). The teacher—himself from northwest Spain where using his Galician mother tongue was forbidden when he was a child—saw this education in the way described by Freire: "[as] a means of restoring 'the voice' to the many whose voices have been denied them by oppressive society" (p. 241).

- **Women's Rights**
  From its start in Philadelphia in the 1970s, the Lutheran Settlement House (LSH) Women's Program was designed to implement Paulo Freire's ideas in an American context (Jurmo, 1987). Staff hoped to enhance learner self-esteem and empowerment and involve the community in ways that were "non-racist and non-imperialistic" (p. 264).

  Staff balanced students' desire to achieve discrete goals such as "passing the GED" with other valuable activities like discussing or writing about important issues (e.g., work, family violence, oral histories, women's changing roles). The latter focus enabled students to express themselves "to the people in charge" (p. 269). Positive messages (like how some women have escaped from abusive situations) showed learners "what they can accomplish despite obstacles . . . society has erected in their path" (p.269). A teacher noted: "These are issues . . . [students] are thinking about anyway, so you might as well come out into the open about them" (p. 270). Reflecting on the program's mission, one staff member asked: "Are we developing community leaders—people who go from here to become active in their churches, communities, and community agencies—with better skills perhaps than before they came in?" (pp. 265-266).

Gordon and Ramdeholl (2010) described how the Open Book program (1985 to 2002) in New York City supported leadership by women:

> Most . . . students who played key leadership roles were women. . . . Many women in abusive relationships came to the Open Book. Many . . . wrote and talked about their experiences with domestic violence and the importance of the school as a source of support. . . . The school gained a reputation as a safe space and a resource for women struggling for autonomy and freedom in their lives (p.33).

- **Family Literacy**
  Auerbach (1992) advocated for an alternative kind of family/parent literacy than the common one focused on helping parents use school-based educational practices with their children. Her proposed participatory and collaborative model helped learners build on family strengths and investigate how they view and use literacy for positive change within the contexts they live in (pp. 8-9). In language experience activities, English language learners wrote about how they collaborated with their children to practice English and why (i.e., many household tasks) they didn't have time to do their homework (pp. 7-9). They developed family trees, described significant objects and photos, and mapped their neighborhoods to identify contexts where they needed English (pp. 43-44).

- **Worker-Centered Education**
  Advocates for a "worker-centered" approach to basic education for incumbent workers and job-seekers emphasized helping learners to both (a) contribute to building productive, safe, and healthy workplaces and (b) secure family-sustaining wages and benefits while protecting their rights as workers. Worker-centered programs incorporate those themes into instructional activities and also provide advocacy and legal protections (e.g., union contracts) to workers (Sarmiento & Kay, 1990).

  In the early 1980s, Añorve (1989, pp. 38-39) developed workplace literacy programs in Southern California. He worked with company managers to implement a "learner-centered" curriculum based on the knowledge participants already possessed, to strengthen workers' oral, reading, writing, analytical, and teamwork skills through active study of issues of direct concern to them. These included discrimination, labor laws, wages, union contracts, maternity leave, and promotions. Añorve used ethnographic methods (e.g., photographing the workplace environment, talking with supervisors, reviewing company documents) to clarify work processes and language uses. In class, workers identified themes and problems represented in the photos, developing critical thinking and communication skills while discussing both technical and social (e.g., racism, sexism) issues. He explained to managers that such discussions help clear the air about issues that can impact employee morale and performance. Añorve found that both managers and unions generally agreed on the value of this approach.

Mid-1990s to Early 2000s: Systematizing Civic Literacy

With support from the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) (See "Arguments."), National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), and other organizations at national, state, and local levels, adult educators tackled justice-related issues and shared their strategies via networks, demonstration projects, professional development, and publications.

- **Health Justice**
  Hohn (1997) described an "empowerment health education" model in which a Student Action Health Team, composed of adult immigrant students, used participatory action research to identify three health-related problems of lower-skilled immigrants: poor readability of health materials, the need for educational activities in addition to reading materials, and inability of health educators to communicate with basic-skills-limited adults. In response, the team identified health topics relevant to learners (e.g., cancer, HIV/AIDS, smoking, nutrition, substance abuse, and violence), developed a safe learning environment where learners' ideas and questions were respected, implemented a participatory curriculum, and analyzed workshop evaluations. This project-based learning helped both team members and other students to develop health-related knowledge and other skills (e.g., teamwork, facilitation, research, oral and written English).

- **Anti-Racism**
  Hofer (1998) described why and how she addressed issues of racism in her ABE/GED program in western Massachusetts, where most students were white. She wanted a classroom environment where all could feel welcomed and take ownership. Rather than just react to racist comments that arose, she wanted to proactively create an anti-racist environment. She also wanted to help students deal with "race" outside the classroom. "I don't feel that any of us can truly be effective workers, family and community members without addressing issues of racism and other 'isms.' Learning to work together across our differences is basic to our survival." (p. 16).

  Learning to work together across our differences is basic to our survival

  Hofer listed "classroom ideas" for addressing racism: acknowledging "race" isn't just a white-black issue; using racist comments as teachable moments; incorporating multicultural issues into the curriculum; affirming students'—including low-income whites'—histories and experiences; acknowledging the many forms of privilege; and drawing a community map showing higher- and lower-income neighborhoods. She proposed "program ideas" to create an anti-racist program (e.g., training staff on oppression and how to better serve minorities; including commitment to diversity as a criterion on performance reviews; hiring staff who represent the community's diversity; and asking students to state their race during intake, to

introduce the issue early on.)

- **Combatting Class Discrimination**
  King (2003) described how class discrimination manifested itself in a literacy program in North Carolina's mountains where all the volunteer teachers and most students were white. Though the teachers were "very benevolent and wanted to help," they were from a different class and "were not people who had experienced education as a barrier: a good education was part of their privilege." They had no personal experience of lacking education and could not understand how their learners had made it to adulthood without being able to read. These values were seen in how the teachers interacted with students around language use. "Often teachers would say the students 'talked country.' Instead of using the richness of the mountain language, the volunteers saw it as nonstandard and a deficit." To address this problem, King introduced a learner-centered curriculum that focused on social and economic issues. "The teachers had to put the lives, . . . experiences, . . . culture, . . . histories, and goals of the students in the center of the teaching and learning" (pp. 16-17).

- **Environmental Justice**
  Adult educators have created innovative strategies to help learners develop basic skills useful for learning about and taking action on environmental problems:

  - In forums in Maine adult education programs, students discussed perspectives on a proposed state referendum related to forest clear-cutting (Levinson, 1998).
  - In a participatory action research project in Tennessee, learners in mining communities researched environmental hazards and took legal action to improve waste disposal (Merrifield et al, 1994).
  - At-risk young adult learners in Vermont received training in agriculture and landscaping and then performed community service projects (e.g., school and community vegetable gardens, civic landscaping, a children's play area, food donations to needy residents) (Jurmo, 2019).

- **Criminal Justice Reform**
  Kerka (1995) wrote:

  > Successful prison literacy programs are learner-centered and participatory. They put literacy into meaningful contexts and motivate and sustain learner interest by providing engaging topics. Literacy programs should be tailored to the prison culture (p. 1).

  Garner (2005) described a Hawaiian prison education program that integrated traditional and current cultural practices and values with basic skills. Learners read stories about Hawaii written by a Hawai'ian author and learned traditional dances. They discussed how they used math in their current lives "on the streets" and could serve as better role models for their children. One teacher described how useful it was for her to have grown up in the same public

> housing that many of her students did, as it helped her understand where the learners were coming from and enhanced her credibility with them. She described how involving inmates in hula classes forced them to stretch themselves—their bodies and their minds —in new ways. "In my class I have the gangs. Knock on wood, I've never had a problem. When you're in my class you're a dancer, nobody but a dancer." She added: "Any culture can do what we do here. It's important for you to know who you are, so that others can understand you" (pp. 13-15).

Early 2000s to 2021: A Possible Rebirth

By the early 2000s, ACBE, NIFL, and other important resources (e.g., NCSALL) had closed. In the subsequent two decades, adult education has shifted to moving learners into college and career pathways—with mixed results. On one hand, promising models have emerged of contextualized basic education integrated with technical training and other supports. On the other, those programs require sustained funding along with employer involvement in designing and implementing programs and in hiring graduates at a living wage. These investments have often not been forthcoming. Exacerbating this have been the larger economic trends toward eliminating family-wage jobs and the labor unions that support those jobs.

Models that focus on job advancement and post-secondary educational attainment can also neglect the family and civic needs of participants. Learners might, for example, want to know how to manage personal finances, be informed voters, participate in community-building activities, or help their children stay healthy or succeed in school. For a variety of reasons (e.g., age, health, family responsibilities, limited job opportunities), not all adults who have basic skills limitations see getting a job or enrolling in higher education as their top priorities. From a purely economic standpoint, it can be argued that helping learners maintain their health, make sound financial decisions, avoid incarceration, and ensure their children's academic success are smart ways to achieve important social and economic goals, by building a strong workforce and taxpayer base and creating safe and healthy communities where people want to live, shop, invest, and work.

Models that focus on job advancement and post-secondary educational attainment can also neglect the family and civic needs of participants. Learners might, for example, want to know how to manage personal finances, be informed voters, participate in community-building activities, or help their children stay healthy or succeed in school.

Many adult educators have in recent years called for a broader focus for adult education (Jurmo, 2020; McHugh & Doxsee, 2018, Reder, 2020). However, recent events (e.g., COVID-19, racial violence, high unemployment, lack of digital access) have revealed a special set of learner needs: the many inequities that low-income people—especially racial minorities—face. (Those low-income people include

substantial numbers of white people who have been impacted by inadequate education, job loss, lack of health care, and other indicators of poverty and inequity.)

Since 2017, some adult educators have responded directly to these equity issues and promoted linking adult education more directly to democratic social change. For example, the Open Door Collective has since 2014 served as a national network of adult educators and other stakeholders to promote adult education as a tool to help adult learners strengthen their economic security and deal with issues such as health, immigration, criminal justice, digital access, employment, and environmental sustainability. Other examples include New York City's "Literacy and Justice Initiative" (See "Arguments.") and the Spring 2020 issue of ***Adult Literacy Education*** featuring articles calling for a rethinking of adult education. In summer and fall 2020, a number of organizations (e.g., Washington State's Basic Education for Adults program, Literacy Minnesota, the National Skills Coalition) issued statements supporting racial and economic justice. The 2020 and 2021 virtual conferences of the Coalition on Adult Basic Education featured social-justice-related workshops. The Fall 2020 issue of the ***COABE Journal*** issue focused on racial justice and immigrant integration. ***The Change Agent*** has continued its decades-long coverage of "adult education for social justice."

In early 2021, the National Coalition for Literacy and the Open Door Collective recommended that new federal policies support a more comprehensive vision of adult basic education. Discussions on online forums like the AAACE-NLA Group have focused on worker rights and other aspects of social justice. VALUEUSA has sustained its two decades of developing the leadership capacities of adult learners. ProLiteracy explored how it can better support equity and diversity at all levels of its national network. And local programs, state associations, literacy resource centers, and others have continued their day-to-day efforts to help adult learners deal with systemic inequities.

Where Now?

Adult basic education in the U.S. is now at a critical decision point. Do we continue on our current course or take one more responsive to the realities of more adult learners and their families and communities?

Outlined below are broad recommendations for those interested in creating new adult basic skills development systems that more fully respond to learners' work, family, civic, and lifelong learning needs. A key difference now is that these new systems would pay special attention to helping learners get a fair deal.

1. **Think Comprehensively About Challenges Learners Can Face.**

   Adult learners often face multiple barriers that, in turn, have complex, interwoven roots. Learners might, for example, be stuck in a cycle of low-wage jobs and unemployment due to not just limited basic skills and lack of educational or technical credentials but other variables. Those variables can include poor health (due to lack of access to quality health care or nutritious food, and/or environmental pollution), lack of childcare and eldercare (which prevents learners from

working outside the home), discriminatory hiring practices (based on gender, age, race, religion, criminal records, disability), financial problems (due to poor credit, predatory or discriminatory lending, or uninformed financial decisions), unavailability of family-sustaining jobs, and/or the decline in protections historically provided by labor unions. Adult educators need to recognize these potential challenges and work with other organizations that likewise recognize the "intersectionality" of such variables. Such partnerships can create more effective, collaborative strategies for helping adult learners participate in meaningful work, family, civic, and lifelong learning roles.

2. Use Effective Strategies for Planning, Implementing, Strengthening, and Expanding Education Oriented to Democracy and Social Justice.

Adapting strategies from collaborative adult education, organizational development, community organizing, and diverse social justice efforts, adult educators and other stakeholders can plan, implement, strengthen, and expand social-justice-oriented supports for adult learners as outlined below.

c. Build Planning Teams.

Creating, piloting, strengthening, expanding, and sustaining models of social-justice-oriented adult education will require well-organized leadership and teams at multiple levels. Teams should be composed of adult educators, adult learners, and other stakeholders—both veterans and newcomers—who have necessary motivation, technical expertise, collaboration skills, time, and material resources. The teams might initially be organized as task forces based in existing organizations at local, state, and national levels. They should focus on the particular learners and social justice challenges of the communities they hope to serve. Teams should emphasize active involvement of adult learners and people representing demographic groups particularly impacted by social and economic inequities.

These teams should build on prior models of programming and collaborative planning (like those described above), while also supporting new ways to respond to current populations and justice issues. (Adult educators working in the U.S. might adapt "whole government" models that our federal international development agencies have created to integrate basic education with workforce and economic development, democratization, public health, gender equity, and other development needs.)[1]

d. Plan Initial Rounds of Activities.

Program planning teams can begin by identifying:

1 See "U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education: Fiscal Years 2019-2023" at https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/USG-Education-Strategy_FY2019-2023_Final_Web.pdf

- the diverse learner populations who might benefit from social-justice-related activities and the particular social-justice-related needs to focus on;
- educational and other supports (See "Models" above.) that might be provided to help learners respond to those needs;
- other stakeholders (e.g., immigrant and refugee organizations, employers, labor unions, public health providers, criminal justice reform groups, environmental organizations, faith-based groups, disability services) who might be willing and able to support such activities;
- roles that those stakeholders might play in joint efforts.

Program-level teams can then do more in-depth planning for an initial round of activities. Stakeholders should be realistic about what they can achieve initially and over time. Teams might start with a modest number of activities, learn from them, and then expand to others if appropriate. They might, for example, focus initially on helping learners to "mitigate" and "navigate around" selected inequities, while figuring out how learners and the adult education program might work with other partners to eliminate those injustices. (See "Models" above for more about these various strategies.) A team might strengthen and expand an existing activity (e.g., a citizenship or health education class) or start a new one that adapts an existing model developed elsewhere. Once plans and resources are in place, the team can pilot the activity, monitor it, improve it, and document results and lessons learned to decide next steps.[2]

Similar collaborative planning can be done at community, state, and national levels. In those cases, partners can decide whether and how existing adult education institutions, funding and reporting requirements, and policies might be adjusted to support a more-comprehensive, justice-oriented system. For example, how can programs be helped to:

- develop new activities related to social justice issues and either integrate them into the program's standard curriculum or offer them as electives separate from that curriculum;
- develop new positions (e.g., Diversity Specialist, Civics Education Specialist) and professional development supports (e.g., training related to diversity, worker rights, or voting rights);
- develop new criteria to guide decisions about what stakeholders (e.g., foundations, labor unions, health agencies, universities, etc.) to work (or not work) with.

e. ***Prepare for Obstacles.***

Approach this work with a positive but realistic mindset. While embarking on a new collaboration can be energizing and rewarding for those involved, understand that it

2 See the "Can-Do Guides" of the Open Door Collective for examples of how various stakeholder groups (e.g., groups supporting public health or environmental sustainability, labor unions, prisoner re-entry organizations, forward-thinking employers, and universities) can work with adult education programs: https://www.opendoorcollective.org/workforce-basic-skills-resources.html

is a lot of work, requires juggling many (often unfamiliar) factors, and faces potential obstacles, which in this case might include:

- Conscious or unconscious (and overt or more subtle) resistance from (a) those in society who don't see much value in investing in the lives of adults with basic skills limitations; (b) bureaucratically oriented individuals who have been rewarded (with employment and status) for maintaining the current adult education model and might feel threatened by efforts to create a different one; and (c) individuals who have simply had little prior exposure to these kinds of ideas.
- Adult education budgets that are precarious in our current economic and political climate, and existing funding guidelines that might not support the types of programs proposed here.
- The tendency in our field to get distracted by "shiny objects" (e.g., a newly discovered or promoted concept, strategy, funding opportunity, technology) that—while possibly valuable—can divert our attention from other important work.
- The reality that the nation's adult education workforce (i.e., instructors, managers, policy makers) does not reflect the diversity of the communities we serve.
- The fact that developing a program customized to learner and community needs is not easy and requires time, patience, and expertise of those involved. (Reading the kinds of documents cited here can be an effective way to learn from good models already field tested.)
- The impacts of COVID-19 on learner availability and program access.
- The limited access and expertise many adult learners and adult education programs have vis-à-vis digital technologies that can support student learning and efficiency and reach of programs.
- The highly sensitive nature of many social justice issues, which can make constructive dialogue and action difficult.

Those who want to reform and expand adult education need to not be naïve about these realities, but instead be realistic without being cynical. They also need to invest in their own professional development to develop the various kinds of expertise that teams will require. Cross-training of staff from adult education and other partners can build valuable expertise, understanding, trust, and effective collaborations.

f. *Support Each Other.*

Teams should create mechanisms for sharing information, resources, ideas, questions, and successes. This is important for both the technical efficiency of these efforts and for the morale of those doing this important work. Avoid falling into the trap of unnecessary and self-defeating divisiveness. Be guided by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words: "We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now."

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