

Forum

Multicultural Issues in Adult Education: Where We've Come from, Where We Are Now, Where We're Going

Jovita M. Ross-Gordon

Where We've Come From

If you will accompany me on a brief personal tour of the landscape of multicultural adult education as it relates to racial and ethnic minorities during the last five years or so, I think you will be impressed, as I am, with the change that is underway. You also may sense, as I do, that we still have a long way to go.

In 1987, as a participant in the Kellogg Faculty Development program sponsored by University of Wisconsin, I arrived eager to plan a research project focusing on faculty attitudes toward adult students in higher education. That topic fit one of my two major research interests, provided for an extension of work begun through my dissertation, and followed up a recently completed research project. It was also the kind of topic I perceived as reasonably "safe" for a minority woman on tenure track. Instead, after discussions with two colleagues there, Diane Briscoe and Larry Martin, I turned the thrust of my interests to a different course. As I talked with Diane about the research interest on underrepresentation of minority adults in formal education programs that she brought to the seminar, I realized that concerns I had carried at a latent level of consciousness since beginning graduate school several years earlier were indeed important concerns—and important concerns not only for those with a personal investment through our membership in that rare group of professors of adult education who are also people of color, but concerns that should be critical to the field.

Shortly after the seminar, the call for proposals went out for authors to contribute to the *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*. Recalling a recent lunch-on-the-run discussion with a mentor about the

importance of doing research that really matters to you, I called Diane Briscoe and suggested we submit a proposal to write a chapter on minorities. After all, some of the earliest handbooks had chapters devoted to the adult education of African-Americans. It seemed about time for some attention to these issues again. Sensing that the time and the editors were right, Diane and I submitted a proposal for a chapter to be titled "Racial and Ethnic Minorities." I recall both elation that the chapter proposal was accepted and surprise that I was accepted as an author for this topic to which Diane and I were novice authors and not for either of two other proposed topics in which I had already established my mark.

While doing the research for that book chapter and developing simultaneously a syllabus for a "special topics" course on Women and Minorities in Adult Education, I was struck by several thoughts: 1) How little information there was in adult education literature about the contributions and programs of adult education developed by and for people of color; 2) How much relevant information existed, particularly regarding African-Americans, in literature from related fields including education, history, and the social sciences, as well as in unpublished sources such as ERIC and newsletters; 3) How essential it was to examine rich traditions of nonformal education which often arose in spite of, rather than due to, efforts of those involved with formal adult education; 4) How difficult it became to maintain strict lines of separation between adult education and education of youth in considering these issues; and 5) How challenging it was to find information on racial/ethnic groups other than African-Americans, perhaps in part because of my own limited knowledge of the trails to such information.

I remember feeling a bit imposed upon and particularly challenged as we were encouraged by our editor to be more inclusive and work harder to find examples not specific to African American adult education. This encouragement led me to the realization that information was scarce—we found a scant bit of information in the underground literature trenches about Latino and Native American adult education efforts. It also fostered a transformation in my thinking about cultural diversity as related to race and ethnicity in American society and in adult education within that social context. Despite my self-proclaimed identity with other persons of color, I knew little about groups other than my own. My educational experience, mono-cultural or, at best, bi-cultural professional networks, and ingrained habits of "good" scholarship perpetuated in me the same ignorance I criticized in others.

This is the lens through which I observe and interpret the multicultural adult education landscape. I hope you will read farther as I discuss some of the changes I have observed over the past five years. As someone deeply committed to multicultural adult education, I am heartened by what I see today when I assess our progress in several areas. At the same time, I think our journey has only just begun.

A literature review in 1988 revealed a small number of articles related to diverse populations appearing in mainstream journals such as *Adult Education Quarterly* (formerly *Adult Education*) and *Lifelong Learning* (formerly *Adult Leadership*) during the preceding decade. Notable among these were Pai's (1984) discussion of cultural diversity and multicultural education, Korzenny's (1983) discussion of intercultural communication training for adult educators, and several articles focusing on African-American adult education (Heisel, 1985; Heisel & Larson, 1984; McGee, 1984; Muraskin, 1976; Spaights, Dixon, & Bridges, 1985). To find out more about minority adult education one had to search beyond these mainstream adult education publications. For instance, in the *Journal of American Indian Education* one could find Brod and McQuiston's (1983) report of a national survey on Indian adult education; in the *Sociology of Education*, Darkenwald's (1975) research on effects of teacher race on the retention of Black students; in the *Western Journal of Black Studies*, Hayden and Dubois' (1977) tribute to Alain Locke, "A Drum Major for Black Adult Education"; and in the *Journal of Negro Education* Neverdon-Morton's (1982) description of self-help programs as educative activities of Black women. Books on the subject were few, but notable from within the field was McGee and Neufeldt's (1985) annotated bibliography, *Education of the Black Adult in the United States*, and, from beyond the field, Franklin's (1979) *Education of Black Philadelphia: The Social and Educational History of a Minority Community*.

Where We Are

Progress can be seen in the burgeoning literature on minorities. Three edited books on topics related to adult education of racial/ethnic minorities were published in 1990 alone and bring a wide variety of knowledge and viewpoints to the fore. These included Cassara's (1990) *Adult Education in a Multicultural Society*; Ross-Gordon, Martin, and Briscoe's (1990) *Serving Culturally Diverse Populations*; and Neufeldt and McGee's (1990) *Education of the African American Adult*. Given the nearly complete lack

in our field of the voices of minority groups other than African-American, Cassara's book was particularly useful for bringing us contributions on and by Asian-Americans, American Indians, and Hispanic-Americans.

At around the same time, the attention of the continuing higher education community to minorities was heightened with articles by Moe (1989) and O'Brien (1991), and *Adult Education Quarterly* published my recent call for an expanded research program to focus on cultural diversity (Ross-Gordon, 1991). In addition, AAACE has provided support through its Publications Standing Service Unit for a book, *Freedom Road*, focusing on histories of African-American adult educators who have operated both within and outside the mainstream field of adult education.

Within the state of Pennsylvania, this issue of the *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning* shows the recognition of the emerging importance of the topic of diversity, as did an article in a recent issue of *What's the Buzz?* (Manzo 1991), questioning the limits of cultural pluralism in American society.

This tour of the literature landscape from 1989 to 1991 suggests that Adult Education has moved into the present with its recognition that diversity is an issue here to stay in American society at the turn of the 21st century.

Where We're Going

We still have some distance to go in 1) documenting the adult education histories of marginalized racial/ethnic groups, 2) conducting and publishing research that is inclusive rather than exclusive, 3) understanding the meaning of race and ethnicity in American society and their influence on educational equity, 4) assessing adult education's historical role in preserving or challenging status relationships rooted inextricably in race and class, 5) examining cross-group relationships in an increasingly diverse society, 6) studying participation and retention of "minorities" in a variety of adult education contexts, and 7) increasing intercultural understanding and resolving cross-cultural conflict. These deficits are especially noticeable if we examine texts not devoted to some aspect of cultural diversity. In "Needed: A Multicultural Perspective for Adult Education Research" (1991), I have outlined a number of possible areas for research, so I will not review them here. However, I would stress the urgency of becoming dedicated to the tripartite tasks of conducting research in this area, publishing research in mainstream adult education

outlets, and utilizing the findings of such research.

We must begin to ask a number of general questions as we examine the research and literature that emerges in this area. Some questions relate to the sources and inclusiveness of our knowledge: Who speaks and who remains silent in the discourse? To what extent are we disadvantaged as a field when it comes to producing knowledge regarding some racial/ethnic groups due to the absence of adult education scholars representing those groups? While broadening opportunities for members of underrepresented groups to engage in graduate education and research careers in adult education is vital, what can we do to incorporate the knowledge generated by professionals and students who hold first-hand experience as minority individuals? Can participatory research enable us to overcome some of our limitations in this regard?

Another set of questions applies to our need for group-specific knowledge and the need to interpret knowledge about groups in light of our awareness of individual difference. Mixing all underrepresented racial/ethnic groups into some category like "minorities" has limited value except for bureaucratic convenience. While many groups share in the subordinate social status and selective discrimination that "minorities" often implies, each cultural group has its own history, values, and customs. Ogbu (1988) has already pointed to important differences that may exist between immigrant minorities and nonimmigrant minorities who have come to be a part of a society through a history of conquest, slavery, or colonialism. He notes that school failure is more common for the latter, even when the same ethnic group's performance is examined in two different contexts. This would suggest that long-existing minority groups in the United States., including Native Americans, African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexican-Americans, have a set of experiences and expectations that is different from those of more recent, voluntary immigrants.

We must be aware also of differences within groups often thought of as homogeneous. While Hispanic or Latino are terms of convenience used to refer to many groups of Spanish-speaking peoples, important cultural and educational differences exist among these groups. The Puerto Rican experience of U.S. citizens engaged in fluid migration back and forth from the island to cities on the mainland is quite different from the experience of first-generation Mexicans who may have entered as illegal immigrants, for instance, or first-generation Salvadorians who entered as political exiles. Similarly, we see obvious differences in the culture and experi-

ences of Hmong refugees from those of third-generation Japanese-Americans. It is important to avoid monolithic categorization of diverse groups, like Black groups that include slave-descended African-Americans, first-generation African immigrants from many different countries, and Blacks who have migrated from the Caribbean Islands. As we look more carefully at the full range of peoples, we see that the only thing of which we can be certain is difference.

Other questions we must ask include: To what extent does the discourse on diversity inform actual adult education practice? Does the emerging knowledge make any difference where “the rubber meets the road,” in the day-to-day interactions of instructors with students or in program administrators’ strategic program development choices? How do we stimulate change in practice, especially when deeply ingrained and unexamined ethnocentric attitudes provide the basis for behavior—when overt discrimination is not the culprit? To what extent does our failure to stimulate such change within our programs contribute to continuing inequities in participation and retention of culturally diverse groups? How do we overcome disincentives to change, including the less lucrative nature of programs aimed at underrepresented groups who are disproportionately unable to pay their own tuition fees?

As we struggle to answer these difficult questions, we will move on to the next phase in our progress as adult educators equipped for a multicultural society. Given the history of intergroup relations in the United States over the past several centuries, change will not come quickly or easily. Yet changing social relations are made necessary by the changing complexion of American society, as is clearly demonstrated in states like California, Florida, and Texas. Adult education as a field of practice can either be pulled passively into the 21st century or contribute to these changes in a proactive way. We can replay the early 20th century Americanization movement (Carlson, 1987), or we can help speed up the broadening of the consensus regarding what constitutes American social values.

References

- Brod, R.L., & McQuiston, J.M. (1983). American Indian adult education and literacy: The first national survey. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 22(2), 1-16.
- Carlson, R. (1987). *The Americanization syndrome: A quest for con-*

- formity*. London: Croom Helm.
- Cassara, B.B. (Ed.). (1990). *Adult education in a multicultural society*. New York: Routledge.
- Darkenwald, G. (1975). Some effects of the "Obvious Variable": Teacher's race and holding power with Black adult students. *Sociology of Education*, 48, 420-431.
- Franklin, V.P. (1979). *Education of Black Philadelphia: The social and educational history of a minority community*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Hayden, R.R., & Dubois, E.E. (1977). A drum major for Black adult education: Alain L. Locke. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 1, 293-296.
- Heisel, M.A. (1985). Assessment of learning activity in a group of Black aged. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 36, 1-14.
- Heisel, M. A., & Larson, G. (1984). Literacy and social milieu: Reading behavior of the Black elderly. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 34, 63-70.
- Korzenny, B.A. (1983). Intercultural communication training for adult educators. *Lifelong Learning*, 7(2), 10-11.
- Manzo, D. (1991). Adult education and multiculturalism. *What's the Buzz*, 11(1), 5.
- McGee, L. (1984). Booker T. Washington and G.W. Carver: A tandem of adult educators at Tuskegee. *Lifelong Learning*, 8(2), 16-18.
- McGee, L., & Neufeldt, H.G. (1985). *Education of the Black adult in the United States*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Moe, J.F. (1989). The dream deferred: Minority adult participation in higher education in the United States. *Continuing Higher Education Review*, 53(1), 35-49.
- Muraskin, W. (1976). The hidden role of fraternal organizations in the education of Black adults: Prince Hall Freemasonry as a case study. *Adult Education*, 26(4), 235-252.
- Neverdon-Morton, C. (1982). Self-help programs as educative activity of Black women in the South, 1895-1925: Focus on four key areas. *Journal of Negro Education*, 51(3), 207-220.
- Neufeldt, H.G., & McGee, L. (1990). *Education of the African American adult: An historical overview*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- O'Brien, E.M. (1990, March 1). Continuing education programs not reaching minority populations, officials admit. *Black Issues in Higher Education*, pp. 6-8.
- Ogbu, J.U. (1988). Variability in minority responses to schooling:

- Nonimmigrants versus immigrants. In G. Spindler & L. Spindler (Eds.), *Interpretive ethnography of education: At home and abroad*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Pai, Y. (1984). Cultural diversity and multicultural education. *Lifelong Learning*, 7(4), 7-9, 27.
- Ross-Gordon, J.M. (1991). Needed: A multicultural perspective for adult education research. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 42, 1-16.
- Ross-Gordon, J.M., Martin, L.G., & Briscoe, D.B. (Eds.). (1990). *Serving culturally diverse populations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Spaights, E., Dixon, H.E., & Bridges, E. (1985). Leon Howard Sullivan: A man of vision. *Lifelong Learning*, 9(2), 8-11.