

## Feature Articles

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# *Adult Education as Federal Policy: The Search for a Literacy Agenda*

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Unlike other Western, industrialized countries, the United States has long recognized the failure of its educational systems and the problem of illiteracy among its native-born population. Yet, for all of the discussion of the issue, the exact nature of the problem, and hence the appropriate policy to remedy it, have eluded politicians, legislators, and, indeed, educators themselves. Instead, illiteracy has remained a political football and a rhetorical weapon in both the national debate over school failure and American decline and the general instrumental role of education in national development. This paper will begin a necessarily brief examination of national policy toward illiteracy, especially as it has been embodied in the various incarnations of the Adult Education Act. In particular, it will analyze some of the early perceptions of the problem of illiteracy and how this problem was couched in manpower terms almost from the very beginning.

### Background

Although literacy was a concern from colonial times, certainly no one in the United States saw it as a federal concern until the twentieth century. This was mostly due to the decentralized nature of American education and the lack of federal jurisdiction over education in general. Initially, the issue of literacy was framed in terms of religious instrumentality and was deemed the responsibility of the family and the local community.

Until about 1800 there was little distinction between literacy education for children and adults. Evening schools for adults closely paralleled those for children during the day. The initial impetus for these schools was undoubtedly religious, consistent with the pervasive Protestant belief that each individual should be able to read the Bible in order to achieve salvation. Thus, literacy was viewed as an instrument for salvation. Yet, even by the eighteenth century, when indenture contracts stipulated the

provision of evening school education, basic literacy was considered a key element in commercial success (Rose, 1992; Seybolt, 1925).

By the end of the eighteenth century, views of literacy had shifted from the presumption of religious instrumentality to a close identification between literacy and both community membership and economic mobility. This transformation to literacy as a “civic virtue” was completed in the nineteenth century. During this period, when literacy for white males became almost universal, literacy was no longer a means of achieving salvation but an end in itself which would signal community coherence and consensus. By this means literacy became a virtue, which by itself would confer status on its possessor. This also meant that much of the effort to teach adults to read was aimed at African Americans in the North. The antebellum period saw the development of laws forbidding any kind of education for slaves and immigrants in the South. Literacy efforts, although private and philanthropic, were consciously aimed at promoting common views and values (Kaestle, 1985; Soltow & Stevens, 1981).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century these two earlier views of literacy had merged to provide a rationale for literacy in the new industrial age. No longer was literacy a virtue; it was instead a cultural imperative and an essential aspect to successful functioning in modern life. While literacy was still an individual virtue, it also indicated the well-being of the entire community. No longer was literacy a means for advancement; rather, illiteracy was a disability, not just for the individual, but for the country as well. Those who lacked literacy were now outsiders. In fact, illiteracy became one of many factors interwoven with poverty to explain “social maladjustment.” The inability to read and write no longer simply signified the lack of a specific skill, but it stood rather at the center of a nexus of social pathologies to be eradicated.

Thus, the twentieth century policies that have dealt with adult illiteracy have viewed it through this lens of pathology, disability, and alienation. However, such disability, by itself, would not be reason for federal intervention into adult education because education is traditionally a local and state prerogative. This view of literacy as an individual disability was reinforced by the view of loss of valuable resources and production.

### **Discovery of the Problem in the Post-World War II Period**

Despite the rhetoric on the problems of adult illiteracy, adult education is a decidedly marginal activity within the American educational framework. In the twentieth century the two World Wars focused attention on

the problem of illiteracy and national defense. During World War I many native-born, white draftees were found to be illiterate, creating a national scandal. During World War II, in an attempt to obviate the problems of illiterates within the ranks, initial policy found illiterates unfit for service. But manpower demands soon forced the armed services to change this approach and to offer literacy training programs within the service. This endeavor had remarkable success. The teaching of these basic skills was one of several approaches to what Franklin Roosevelt termed the "wit-sharpening process."

Whereas the applicability of this program for civilian use was questionable, the issue raised consciousness about the problem of illiteracy and heightened concern over the cost to the nation. Thus, by the mid-1950s, the illiterate was perceived as a threat to American economic growth and national security. Calls for the elimination of illiteracy as a drain on the economy were coupled with new concerns over manpower training and the loss of human resources. Ambrose Caliver, head of the Office of Adult Education and later president of the Adult Education Association, was a leader in this fight. Caliver equated human resource development with national defense, realizing that both peace and war demanded higher levels of skill and were predicated on basic literacy. Caliver saw illiteracy as one of the most important issues facing postwar America (Caliver, 1951).

This growing concern with human resources was coincident with a growing interest among adult educators to raise the status of adult education and create a state bureaucracy equal to that governing children's education. The National Association of Public School Adult Educators (NAPSAE) spearheaded this effort. NAPSAE concentrated its initial efforts in trying to persuade states to hire directors of adult education. The Fund for Adult Education (FAE), underwritten by the Ford Foundation, funded small grants to states to pay for state directors. It was hoped that with these directors in place, the states would be better able to set priorities, oversee programs, and ensure some state allocation for adult education. Yet, by the later 1950s, when funding ceased, it was clear that the states were not picking up the previously funded positions. Thus, seeing the route to state support of adult education blocked, NAPSAE began to turn its attention to the federal government.

Several different groups were looking to the federal government to deal with adult education. While those concerned with the conservation of human resources provided the potential of a crisis as the rationale for federal involvement, NAPSAE was also seeking federal funding as a way of circumventing the limits of state governments. Ultimately, these

interests came together in the poverty program of the 1960s.

### **The Kennedy and Johnson Years**

The first version of the Adult Education Act was introduced by Representative Carl Perkins of Kentucky in 1962 following President Kennedy's February 6 message on education. In this speech Kennedy decried the "twin tragedies of illiteracy and dependence" passed "from generation to generation." Although part of the administration's education package, literacy legislation received little overt backing from the administration; in fact, all of the bills, with a few noncontroversial exceptions, were defeated. The Perkins bill was reintroduced in 1963 and again defeated.

In 1964, as the Economic Opportunity Act was being considered, supporters of literacy legislation saw an opportunity to add adult education legislation to the poverty program being considered. The Economic Opportunity Act represented the first comprehensive poverty program developed at the federal level. It included sections on community action and development and on job training and education. The principal aim was to alleviate the problem of poverty in prosperous times. Seeing the poor as those lacking skills as well as voice in government, the aim of the act was to develop a federal program which would bypass state bureaucracies and address the specific needs of the poor. It mandated local and community control of programs and was committed to the development of skills, but not to the creation of jobs.

The Adult Education Program was one small piece of this legislation, placed there by supporters searching for ways of bringing about passage in an expedient fashion. The placement of the program here, while logical to a certain extent, created inherent contradictions with other aspects of the legislation. From the educators' point of view, the purpose of the program was to provide seed money to states for the development of their programs. In particular, the strongest supports, such as NAPSAE, wanted to develop a state bureaucracy. The result was that the program as finally passed reflected NAPSAE's concerns as filtered through the political process. The Act provided federal grants to states to develop pilot programs, to help local agencies develop instructional programs for adults, and to help localities acquire information about materials and teaching methods. The funds were also to be used to help the state education agencies develop supervisory roles in adult education. The purpose of the Act was

to encourage and expand basic educational programs for adults to

enable them to overcome English language limitations, to improve their basic education in preparation for occupational training and more profitable employment, and to become more productive and responsible citizens. (National Advisory Council on Adult Education, 1980, p. 14)

The target population was those individuals, eighteen or older, “whose inability to read or write the English language constitutes a substantial impairment of their ability to obtain or retain employment” (p. 14).

From the very beginning the adult education legislation was framed in terms of employment rather than as a basic human right. The language of the Act and of the arguments about the proposed legislation was all couched in terms of manpower issues and national well-being. Indeed, the terms of discussion had been supplied by Kennedy in his initial speech:

The economic result of this lack of schooling is often chronic unemployment, dependency, or delinquency, with all the consequences this entails for these individuals, their families, their communities, and the nation. (Quoted in U.S. House of Representatives, February, 1962, p. 7)

In 1966 the Adult Education Program (along with the rest of the poverty program) was scheduled for renewal. Adult education efforts focused on moving the entire program over to the Office of Education. In November, 1966, Lyndon Johnson signed the Amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 which included Title II or the Adult Education Act of 1966. This Act effectively moved adult education out of the poverty program and under the aegis of the Office of Education, which had been administering the program previously.

There were several issues pushing the effort to move the program. In the first place, NAPSAE’s goal of educational parity could not be reached while adult education was part of the poverty program. Furthermore, there was a constant tension between the goals of the poverty program and those of educators who had a broader vision for adult education. Yet those advocating a less manpower-driven approach were frustrated because of the clear need to establish a federal mandate before intervening in educational issues. After all, the right to education was a local matter, and federal aid needed to demonstrate a crisis situation which the states could not handle.

### Amendments and Changes

In its almost thirty years of existence, the federal adult education program has widened its scope while adhering to its primary goals. The development of the program has not been without contention, particularly in the areas of defining the target population and the role of the federal government.

The issue of who should be served by adult education programs has been a consistent theme since the first bill was introduced in 1962. Although the emphasis has always been on those lacking basic education and literacy, the law was amended in 1970 to allow funding of high school completion or equivalency programs (National Advisory Council on Adult Education, 1980). The minimum age was lowered from 18 to 16, or legal age of school leaving, in order to extend the use of the program to as wide of a population as possible without setting up what would be, in effect, an alternative track for high school completion (National Advisory Council on Adult Education, 1985). Although the data is not all in, anecdotal evidence points to a failure in this effort. Also, during the 1970s different designated groups were categorized as needing special attention. These included particular groups of immigrants, the elderly, and Native Americans (National Advisory Council on Adult Education, 1980). For the most part, these categories were written out of the Adult Education Act under the revisions of the 1980s (National Advisory Council on Adult Education, 1985).

Perhaps the greatest area of change was the shift from a focus on grade levels to a competency-based approach. This moved the definition of the target population away from those with a specified number of school years completed to a broader definition of who could benefit from basic education (National Advisory Council on Adult Education, 1980). In addition, revisions of the Act called for greater community input into programs and allowed for cooperation between local educational agencies and non-profit groups. In its latest incarnation, workplace literacy grants have gone to private, for-profit groups as well.

The 1966 Act called for the establishment of an Advisory Committee (amended in 1970 to a Council) to advise the Commissioner of Education in the preparation of regulations, the development of policies, and the coordination of programs. While initially active, particularly in working on the target population, the Council faded to obscurity in the 1980s and was eliminated in the amendments of 1988 (DeSanctis, 1979; U.S. House of Representatives, 1991).

Also beginning in 1966, the Act provided that the federal government set aside a fixed percentage of discretionary funds for demonstration projects, research projects, and teacher training. Initially, the money was disbursed directly by the Office of Education. Later, because of state and local disgruntlement, this money was given to the states to distribute (Radwin, 1984). In the early 1980s the discretion for disbursing this money was returned to the federal government, but no funds were allocated until 1988. This source was particularly important in setting up early training programs, many of which led to the development of graduate programs in adult education. It was also instrumental in pursuing basic research in adult education (Leahy, 1991).

In sum, the Adult Education Act was successful in establishing a state bureaucratic structure in adult education, although it in no way matched that of the primary and secondary school bureaucracies. The principal issues surrounding the Act and its amendments dealt with the definition of the target population, how to reach this group, and how much money to allocate and to whom it would be disbursed (Rose, 1991).

### **Towards a Literacy Policy**

In the 1980s there was a concerted effort to deal with illiteracy (Beder, 1991). Due to a heightened concern with national productivity, the always implicit link between literacy and economic development was made explicit and once again seen as a primary aim of any adult education legislation. While initial attempts were volunteer-driven, the concern generated eventually led to the National Literacy Act of 1991. This Act was a broad effort to develop cooperation among the different branches of government as well as state agencies, providers, and business and industry.

Beginning with the 1984 Amendments to the Adult Education Act, the Reagan administration indicated its concern for this issue. The legislation reflected this preoccupation through its renewed interest in literacy (but with reduced reliance on federal support), its emphasis on the use of the volunteers, its measures for cost-cutting, and its concomitant encouragement of private enterprise's entrance in areas formally reserved for the public or private, non-profit sector. The early years of the Reagan administration were the only times that the appropriations for adult education did not increase (Rose, 1991).

As the result of the passage of the National Literacy Act a focal agency for coordinating literacy efforts was created. This National Institute for Literacy was to act as "a central repository of information and expertise for

federal programs, agencies and also for Congress, the states, program providers, [and] business and industry” (U.S. Department of Education, 1991, p. 1). The five major areas of operation of the Institute were to be: basic and applied research; program assistance, technical assistance and training; policy analysis and evaluation; dissemination of information about best practices of instruction; and assistance to federal agencies in implementing the Act and finding ways to achieve uniform reporting requirements, develop performance measures, and develop standards of program effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 1991, p. 2).

In addition, the Act established a national Workforce Literacy Assistance Collaborative to provide small and medium businesses with technical assistance in developing and implementing literacy programs. A grant program also would “develop, test, and evaluate replicable large-scale national strategies based on local, regional, statewide and industry-wide partnerships between the public and private sectors” (U.S. Department of Education, 1991, p. 3).

The persistent efforts to reach wider audiences have been written into the Act in terms of mandating greater community participation, cooperation with business and industry, the funding of community programs, and the use of volunteers. In the 1980s the perception of a crisis in literacy emerged as the central rationale of adult education legislation (Limage, 1986). The National Literacy Act of 1991 was the realization of the concerns of the 1980s, but the very emphasis of the Act on workplace literacy and economic productivity points up the central issue of Adult Education legislation from its inception.

### **Conclusion: A New Agenda?**

Chisman (1990) saw the emphasis on literacy in the 1980s as a change in purpose from previous legislation on adult education. It is a mistake, however, to see a stark shift in focus of adult education legislation in the 1980s. In fact, this human capital thrust was built into the legislation from the earliest time and was a central tenet of those considering legislative initiatives in the 1950s.

This focus has skewed the discussion about adult education and its role both in educational bureaucracy and in manpower training and development. Adult education has provided the rhetorical means for providing assistance to those in need while maintaining the rationale that this was only a temporary expedient which ultimately would fade away. Although never dealing with broader economic issues, the federal role in



adult education could be justified only in terms of a crisis threatening the national welfare. This has led to a neglect of the other aspect of manpower training and development, that is, the planning for jobs and structural unemployment (Limage, 1986; Mucciaroni, 1987).

Although this approach has achieved some of the original aims of the adult educators who were pushing for federal legislation, it also has left a vacuum in terms of a long-term, deeper rationale for support of adult basic education. The disparate aims of professional adult educators, legislators, and federal and state bureaucrats has produced a literacy policy which, while instrumental, has yet to develop a coherent, inclusive approach to the issues surrounding adult literacy.

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