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A Field in Search of Theory and Respect: AE in the Mid-20th Century

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the development of adult education professoriate and programs in the 1950s and 1960s, examining the development of AERC to advance theoretical knowledge related to the field.

Key words: history, research

In April 1961, Glenn Jensen, then Executive Director of the Adult Education Association (AEA) in the United States, released what he termed as “A Thoughtful Report” highlighting the achievements of the AEA since it began in 1950 as well as the roadblocks encountered by the organization and the field of Adult Education. Some of the roadblocks discussed by Jensen included the “lip service” given to adult education programs by public school and university administrations, who in his view, failed to give them the kind of support and recognition given to similar programs in other countries around the world, resulting in the lack of “a national perception or image of adult education” (Jensen, 1961, p. 1). He further contended that the AEA had failed to unite programs with a common goal or cause. Similarly, Burton Clark (1956) contended that adult education lacked a coherent mission for its practice.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the development and growth of an adult education discipline in the 1950s and 1960s as well as to examine the development of the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) in the 1960’s as a means for the academic field of adult education to advance and enhance theoretical knowledge related to the field. This is an historical study utilized archival materials as well as contemporary printed documents, including previous *Handbooks of Adult Education*; articles from the various journals; and archival materials Syracuse University. In addition, on-line archival materials available from Columbia University, Stanford University, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Chicago were consulted. As we examine the history of the academic study of education, we are consciously identifying the politicization of the field as well its consistent marginality, and the ways that decisions were made concerning adult education in higher education, the theory building research conference (AERC), and the resulting reverberations felt within the field. Because we are examining issues of power, we are mindful that these decisions were and are not always made in a vacuum, but are rather always made in a state of flux.

Adult education began its movement into the university in the 1920s, although programs and degrees in adult education did not begin until the 1930s. By the 1950s, there were 29 programs and by then end of 1960 at least 250 adult education doctoral degrees had been awarded (Houle, 1961). Our findings indicate that in the 1950s and 1960s, efforts to develop within the university led to significant changes in the approaches to research and to views of the roles of adult education in society.

The Adult Educational Association of the U.S.A. (AEA) was founded in 1951 as a merger between the American Association for Adult Education (A3E) and the Department of Adult Education of the National Education Association (NEA). This merger (and consequent

dissolution) were the first in a series between the differing iterations of these organizations. Their initial focus was on activities “geared to the changing needs of the social scene and the emerging professional needs of its membership” (AEA Press Release, Jan. 16, 1951). The actual work of this new organization was to focus on consulting, field services, in-service education and publications. At this time, the new organization did not have a separate research division. However, it did have a Social Philosophy Committee, headed by noted labor educator Eleanor Coit and Eduard Lindeman.

During the 1950’s and 1960’s, several steps were taken to professionalize the academic profession of adult education. Many researchers point to the 1964 publication of the so-called “Black Book” (Jensen, Liveright & Hallenbeck) as part of the general efforts to enhance graduate study and research. However, they overlook two of the most important events, which were the founding of the CPAE and of what came to be the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC). The CPAE was founded to provide a space for the small group of professors to meet and discuss the issues specific to teaching in doctoral programs. For this reason, membership was limited to those who taught or researched (at least half time) in institutions that offered doctoral programs. In the 1966, this was amended to graduate programs so that those teaching and researching in master’s only programs could apply for membership.

By the mid-sixties CPAE produced a proposal for a seminar in theory building in adult education research. This seminar was needed because of “mediocre research, conceptually and methodologically” that was also “redundant, deals with small scale studies, and lacks generalizability.” They noted the “Lack of theoretical frameworks which could guide the development of meaningful research problems and designs”. A loose group of adult education professors and graduate students met specifically to discuss research, and by 1965, Griffith, Litchfield and Schroder wrote a draft proposal to formalize a research seminar “in theory building and application in adult education research” (Committee on Seminar for Theory Building and Application in Adult Education, November 13, 1967). The first Research Seminar was held at the University of Chicago in October 1968. Eventually subsequent research seminars were held and became what we now know as the annual Adult Education Research Conference.

This study is significant because the issues and struggles raised are still evident today in decisions made about adult education graduate programs and policies. Writers today (e.g. Grace, 1999) write about the hegemonic influence of the scientific method, but other factors seem to have also been at work. The primary shift described in this paper was to a concern about the academic profession and away from close connections to the workers in the field.

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