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Social Justice Adult Education: Comparative Perspectives from Poland and the United States

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Abstract: This paper examines and compares how social justice adult education currently is situated within two nation states: Poland and United States. Vocabulary, conceptual frameworks, and several themes are compared. The discussion broadens our understanding of how social justice education is positioned within two, complex socio-cultural contexts and suggests implications for practice.

Key words: Social justice, international education, Poland, United States

Social justice education facilitates practices to address inequality (Mayhew & De Luca Fernandez, 2007). The exploration and identification of themes within Poland and the United States (U.S.) can broaden our understanding of how social justice education is positioned within two, complex socio-cultural contexts. Within this paper, we provide comparisons of general approaches to social justice adult education in Polish and U.S. based literature. Specifically, we focus on vocabulary, several thematic areas as examples, conceptual frameworks, and a discussion with implications for practice.

Vocabulary

Within the U.S., the understanding of social justice education is grounded in multiple ways of meaning making, but can be understood within Bell’s work (2007), stating:

The goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (p. 2)

The intersectionalities of oppression, power, and privilege are central to lived experiences and inform roles of adult educators within social justice adult education projects (Stein, 2014).

Within the U.S., Bierema (2009) notes, the field often refers to social justice education as a focus of the field of adult education, but she asserts that examining practice in the field is still needed. In addition, further connections of local and global contexts within social justice education need to be explored (Butterwick & Egan, 2010). In general, Central and Eastern European perspectives have not been emphasized in recent adult education dialogue as evidenced by several works in the field such as Global Issues and Adult Education (Merriam, Courtenay, & Cervero, 2006) focusing solely on perspectives from Latin America, Southern Africa, and the United States and the most recent edition of the Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010) with Europe and North America considered one partner region response (Alfred & Nafukho, 2010). Comparing two U.S. based texts, Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007), do not list social justice as key words in the index; however, an entire section is devoted to social justice education within the Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010).
Within Polish literature, the absence of the terminology “social justice” may lead one to conclude that a critical approach is lacking; however, different vocabulary may be utilized. For example, expressions associated with social justice such as “emancipation” and “change” can be found (Frąckowiak, 2012, p. 145; Jurgiel-Aleksander & Jagiello-Rusiłowski, 2013, p. 70-71; Solarczyk-Szwec, 2013, p. 56-57; Tabor, 2011). What is characteristic, however, is that references to these terms are used to indicate a noticeable lack of their application in adult education practice in Poland. Solarczyk-Szwec (2013) critiques, “Formal adult education does not serve either emancipation or critical function which results in most adult people’s passivity in cases in which they face social changes (pp. 56-57).” Frąckowiak (2012) asserts that institutions of adult education teach how to adapt and subordinate to change and “there is no promotion of the learning adult as a creator of change” (p. 145). Some Polish authors describe the Western experiences, connected to U.S. social justice adult education, referring, for example, to Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed” (Kostyło, 2010), American tradition of social reconstructionism (Kostyło, 2009), or Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning (Pleskot-Makulska, 2007). In addition, critical gerontology (Malec-Rawinski, 2013) and the hidden curriculum perspective within higher education (Pryszmont-Cisielska, 2007) are presented.

**Thematic Areas**

Globalization and several areas of marginalization are foci in the literature. Globalization is a continuing phenomenon in which social justice education is situated worldwide (Holst, 2007). Within the U.S., the current situation is critiqued as one in which education is increasingly narrowly defined as learning solely to gain immediately applicable work skills (Ayers & Carlone, 2007), which resonates with Poland in the European Union lifelong learning discourse (A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning and White Paper on Education and Training). The Polish context is marked by the socio-political transformation in 1989, which brought forth independence and freedoms as well as the disappearance of state-guaranteed safety and the emergence of new areas of poverty and marginalization (Bogaj, 2007; Bogaj, 2010; Kawula, 2004). Social justice education needs to be considered within these interconnected realms of economic, social, and educational globalization as well as specific worldviews (Yelich Biniecki, 2008).

Contemporary Polish and U.S. literature examines multiple and intersecting areas of marginalization. For example, in the U.S. bullying based on race, sexual orientation, and gender is an emerging area of focus, highlighting this intersectionality with the area of concern highlighted as a “social issue” (Misawa & Rowland, 2015, p. 3) without explicitly referring to social justice. Within Poland, unemployment is highlighted as a particular point of marginalization (Hjertner-Thoren, 2007; Kruk, 2003; Maślanka, 2004; Religa & Ippavitz, 2011; Tomczyk, 2012), problems of rural areas (Kicior, 2007; Kupidura, 2007), disability (Dycht, 2009; Paczula, 2011; Zaorska 2013), and problems of the elderly (Skibińska, 2007; Malec, 2008; Dubas, 2013; Konieczna-Woźniak, 2013; Stochmiałek, 2010). Within the Polish literature, gender and interculturalism were less explored as factors generating social injustice and an analysis of U.S. literature suggests the lack of a deep examination of nation state power and privilege.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

Conceptual frameworks for social justice adult education within the U.S. are grounded in the recognition of historic patterns of oppression, power, and privilege such as class, race,
gender, national origin, sexual orientation, and others identities (Bell, 2007). Although the framework does not resonate with all U.S. educators, often Marxism conceptually is used to ground social justice education, frequently situated as emancipatory in binary opposition to capitalism (Brookfield & Holst, 2010). Because the term social justice is strongly associated with Marxism and the previous communist political system within Poland, scholars and practitioners may avoid using it. The communist system in the time of its duration was called the system of common social justice, which was an ideological principle obviously lacking such justice in many aspects of reality. In this application, the term “social justice” was deprived of its meaning. Moreover, the official rhetoric during communism tried to communicate that all people were equal and the state was homogenous; thus, there was rejection of existence of some social groups, for example, the homeless, the unemployed, and immigrants, which resulted in oppression and the lack of experience of working with such groups in adult education (Czerniawska, 2011). When the system collapsed, all the associated terms with Marxism, such as “social justice”, “power of the people”, “the oppressed classes of society”, and “class struggle”, were condemned to oblivion.

Another reason for the absence of the term social justice in Poland might be because of a strong focus on freedom, also in economical terms after the transformation of 1989. During the ongoing debate in Poland on these issues, Krol (2014) argued, “We were fighting for freedom, but we forgot about equality.” In addition, Poland’s European Union (EU) accession in 2004 subordinated Polish adult education policy to EU recommendations. Thus, adult education language and practice were dominated by the directives of the two European documents (A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning and White Paper on Education and Training) in which the adaptive role of education related to economic growth, competition, and employment is stressed and the need of a critical approach in education is not mentioned. The reflection of such language can be found several texts in the analyzed material (Frąckowiak, 2005; Muszyński, 2005; Pierścieniak, 2009). A critique of the purely neoliberal focus on education is present in a U.S. perspective as well (Ayers & Carlone, 2007).

Discussion and Implications for Practice

The literature suggests adult educators within Poland and the U.S. are working on social justice issues in “the margins” (Wise & Glowacki-Dudka, 2004) within a “society of risk” (Bogaj, 2007, pp. 14-15; Kawula, 2004, p. 22; Matlakiewicz, 2011, p. 68). Social justice adult educators within Poland and the U.S. have similar ways of defining marginalization; however, the socio-cultural contexts and conceptual frameworks for practically situating social justice education work may differ. We suggest that recognizing these similarities and differences may provide an opening for dialogue between adult educators internationally and challenge us to think about multiple frameworks in which we might position and communicate social justice education work. For example, within Polish literature, the term “social transparency” is used and could be understood as the aim of social justice education or “creating new social relations based on increased interest in preventing social marginalization and increasing social participation of people endangered with exclusion” (Radziewicz-Winnicki, 2004, p. 39).

Conceptual social justice education frameworks could be further developed and recognized cross-culturally so that scholars in Central and Eastern Europe can have their voices and perspectives incorporated in the discussion. If not, we argue those social justice education practitioners and scholars working within post-communist societies may be marginalized in the discussion as a grand narrative and vocabulary of social justice education may developed by
those who did not have lived experiences under communist systems. Solarczyk-Szwec (2013b) states:

Today it is necessary to invest in society with strong development capital that is characterized by openness towards others' attitudes, opinions and ideas, ability to cooperate – but also dynamic innovativeness and creativity. The way of developing such capital is improving competences, specially the ones of emancipation-critical character.

(p. 26)

Zwierzyski (2006) calls the space of negotiation in the areas of social justice and popular education “zones of engagement” (p. 19) in which the old meets the new and educators negotiate new ways of understanding, including language and “inclusion” (Brookfield & Holst, 2010, p. 14). The meeting of the Polish and U.S. contexts presents this zone of engagement in which we have the opportunity for new meaning making and creatively broadening conceptual frameworks for inclusive social justice adult education.

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