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Collective Impact in/for Adult Education: A Framework for Collective Action to Address Community Complexity and Resilience

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Abstract: We explore how adult educators may (re)position their praxis to focus on the social action goals of adult education by envisioning the possibilities of Collective Impact (CI) and evaluation capacity building. Implications emphasize the potential of achieving collective impact outcomes to address community complexity, resiliency, and systems-level change.

Introduction

Adult education has historically focused on catalyzing groups for collective learning and social action as a central mission (e.g., Brookfield & Holst, 2011; Cunningham, 1992; Foley, 1999). The scale and complexity of today's social and environmental problems demands lifelong, relational, and integrated learning processes and frameworks to engender aims of social justice and community resilience. Drawing upon the theoretical underpinnings of situated, network, and activity perspectives of learning (e.g., Edwards, Biesta, & Thorpe, 2009; Sawchuk, Duarte, & Elhammoumi, 2006), we can begin to more fully see the complexity that frames systems-based and networked approaches to social action in adult education. One such framework is Collective Impact (CI), an emerging theory of social change put forth by Kania and Kramer (2011, 2013). In practice, CI illustrates a commitment of a group of actors from different social sectors to a common agenda for solving a complex issue. CI is well suited for issues that are systemic rather than linear or technical in nature. CI initiatives are currently being used to address a wide variety of societal issues that fall within the purview of adult education, including healthcare, poverty, food security, and environmental sustainability.

Collective Impact Possibilities

The approach of CI is placed in contrast to "isolated impact," where groups primarily work alone to solve social problems. According to Kania and Kramer (2011, 2013), there are five conditions that, together, lead to meaningful results from CI. First, the group requires a "common agenda" where cross-sector participants have a shared vision for change including a collective understanding of the problem and a united approach to solving it through educational and organizational actions. Second, CI requires "shared measures" for collecting data and evaluating results consistently in the collaborative, ensuring that efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable for the action. Third, CI requires mutually reinforcing activities where differentiated participant efforts are coordinated through a reciprocal action plan for learning. Fourth, "continuous communication" is required to build trust and reassure mutual objectives among stakeholders. Lastly, a "backbone organization" must support and coordinate the entire initiative.

We suggest that the theory base of CI can be used to explore the potential of achieving collective impact outcomes in adult education. Specially, we suggest that there are linkages with action research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007) and participatory and evaluation capacity building

(ECB) frameworks (Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013; Preskill & Boyle, 2008). Both action research and ECB approaches attempt to democratize and share knowledge generation processes. In these approaches, the expert researcher and/or evaluator are no longer uniquely at the helm (though she does still play an important role). The explicit emphasis of CI on collective learning and shared measures is another manifestation of this tendency. The field of evaluation has long struggled with the apparent tension between measurement options that are both standardized across a whole system (so as to allow for aggregation of data on common indicators and outcomes among multiple sites), and also contextualized (so as to address local realities and nuances) (Perrin, 1998). CI, augmented by approaches from action research and ECB, has the potential to work productively with this tension, while also offering new ways to conceptualize a praxis of community education for social change.

Implications for Praxis

Adult and community educators are often embedded in conditions of complexity. We suggest exploring the possibilities of CI to help us “see” within this complexity to enact new and creative spaces of action for resilient outcomes. This relies on our ability to embrace the power of evaluative thinking and critical intentionality, with the unpredictability of emergence in a way that enables communities to create new realities for themselves. Thus, we offer a number of questions to begin this dialogue in adult education, including: *what do CI initiatives look like? How are educators facilitating these systems-level learning experiences? How can participatory and evaluation capacity building inform CI?* It is this intersection of collective impact and collective action that we aim to address as critical, adult education praxis.

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