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Learning within a social movement: The Chicago African-American experience.

Phyllis Cunningham and Regina Curry

Abstract: A study of the Empowerment Zone in which over one thousand poor residents mobilized to learn, create knowledge, and formulate a plan to reinvent government and alleviate poverty.

Introduction

Urban arenas have become theaters where major conflicts around class, race, ethnicity are performed. Haymes (1995) has argued that reclaiming cities through gentrification provides an urban battleground for disenfranchising African Americans and their cultural contributions and ownership of the city. Haymes' cultural critique suggests a "pedagogy of place" for Black urban struggle as one way for urban restructuring. On the other hand, Krumholz and Clavel, (1994) while recognizing class, race and ethnicity as factors, present a highly rational plan for "reinventing cities." Haymes' analysis is based on a Black collective cultural struggle for "place" while Krumholz and Clavel see the lead being taken by professional urban equity planners. The research objective was to look for empirical evidence that poor persons, many with limited formal education, could educate themselves to the task of reinventing the city. A secondary question was to document how the education of adults occurs within a social movement.

We chose to investigate the social movement that had occurred most recently in Chicago. Chicago was chosen because:

1. The civil rights movement chose Chicago for its first northern campaign under Martin Luther King; 2. It is a major U.S. metropolis in which a Black mayor was elected from a third party platform, The Harold Washington Party; and 3.) Chicago has over the last 40 years developed a rich tapestry of community based organizations. Thus the Empowerment Zone (EZ) precipitated a grass roots movement among primarily Blacks and Latinos in a kind of organic uprising of the poor along with progressive organizations located in the base. We begin by describing the development of the Chicago EZ, we then analyze interviews of the learning of 15 African Americans within social movements; finally, we draw some conclusions.

Methodology

We used a case study approach in our research. We had access to all documents and minutes of meetings leading up to the establishment of the EZ and direct access to CBO's participating in the EZ. We chose residents to interview who had been active in the EZ process.

Our questions included: How did these grassroots' people bond together to accomplish their goal? How could they put aside their own organization's needs to develop a collaborative representing all of their interests? How did they learn to find needed data sources, and examine and interpret census tract data? And how did they learn to manage the politicians, the speculators, the consultants? How could Blacks and Latinos learn political solidarity within this historical context?

Those interviewed had the following demographic characteristics: All were African Americans between 35 and 60 years of age (mean=43). One-third had not graduated from high school; one-third had some college; and the final third were divided into college graduates (3) or masters completed (2). Ten(66%) earned between \$9,000 and \$20,000; 3 earned between \$20,000 and \$35,000, and 2 earned about \$40,000. Thirteen (87%) had stayed in the community and two came back into the community. All but one had children with 9 being a single head of household.

Empowerment Zone

The Clinton-Gore Empowerment Zone strategy was contained in the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act that was passed into law in July 1993 with implementation slated for January, 1994. However, in December, 1993 a HUD African American speaker at the city wide attended annual banquet of the Chicago Workshop on Economic Development (CWED) gave Chicago community based organizations (CBO's) a jump start by 1) giving them the guidelines early and 2) challenging them as a community to develop a bottom up proposal for sustainable development of their communities.

CWED, a CBO of 45 community organizations, had developed out of the political activity of Chicago's social movements. In particular, the 1983 successful organizing of the Black and Latino community to elect Harold Washington, a stunning upset to the Chicago Democratic Party, meant that an increasingly sophisticated group of leaders and CBO's were active and in place.

Phase I. In the next 100 days with CWED in the lead, there was a mass mobilization of Blacks and Latinos around such initiatives as youth, education, economic development, health, human services, affordable housing and human capacity building. In the community we studied, over 30 meetings were held in this phase. And in communities all over the south and west side of the city, the same thing was occurring. Literally hundreds of meetings occurred in this first 100 days. They met in churches, block clubs, field houses, schools, community centers, businesses, and in the philanthropic community. The CWED director alone attended 150 meetings.

Phase II. By March 1994, the Communities moved into the collaborative stage. The EZ proposal required bottom up community partnerships so at this time from 4 to 30 communities came

together in various collaboratives. Again, dozens of meetings were held with up to 200 at a meeting. Here, competing ideas developed in the various communities were debated and a reoccurring concern that Black and Latinos must find solidarity was discussed. At this time, Mayor Richard Daley appointed an ad hoc committee from the community, and business to select from the community's proposals those to be designated. Three clusters were developed out of the strongest of the 33 proposals presented by the collaboratives at a meeting attended by over 300 community members. Four days later, three other viable collaboratives, with less developed plans, were designated as Enterprising Communities (EC) and added to the EZ because of their poverty level and the political pressure exerted by those who had not made the final cut.

Phase III. This phase brought the three clusters and the three ECs together city-wide to form one Chicago proposal and six strategic plans, one for each entity. Six city wide meetings were held with from 200 to 600 in attendance to hammer out the final community proposal.

It was at this time that the CWED led groups discovered that the City had its own EZ plan already written naming the Urban Land Institute, the former Model Cities, and the city's endorsed CBO's as the recipients of the EZ money. When CWED asked for a copy of the plan they were refused but invited to come to City Hall and examine it there. Armed with a scanner and connected electronically to CWED, the pages were scanned out. As the pages emerged, communities were telephoned to see if required participation of all CBO's had been met. In the end CWED documented the non-involvement of the majority of CBO's and compelled the City Planners to negotiate their proposals. At this time a 30 member EZ/EC coordinating council, equally divided between city and community appointees, was charged with developing the final plan and spelling out its governance. The plan of the community to have an elected committee of 30 equally divided between the community and the city was subsequently turned down by the City Council with the defection of a majority of black alderpersons from the 12 wards involved. In the end, a 21 member board with two community members selected and appointed by the alder-persons was put in place. Chicago became one of six cities with an approved EZ/EC.

The Anatomy of Learning in Community

Interview data were collected by asking the persons to tell us about themselves and how they became committed to the community. Most interviews flowed without interruption except for an occasional clarifying question. Interviews averaged about two hours and were both audio and video taped. Audio tapes were transcribed; the data were then analyzed for themes.

Four themes emerged from the interview data: A defining movement, creating knowledge and self reliance, communities and culture, and learning from one another.

A defining moment. All of the interviewees described an event which committed them to actively struggle for social change and to collective struggle. LH (p3) described her transformation from a personal to a social goal.

"It was like something wouldn't let me walk away. It would not let me rehab the building, rent it out, walk away. It was just something that wouldn't let me do that. It was and still is an emotional experience."

Or MB (p2) who, as a young mother, learned that fires were being set in her neighborhood by persons hired by slum landlords. The goal was to get insurance on buildings that had been allowed to deteriorate ...

"I was a young mom who lived in this community who was doing my thing---. I lived two doors away from the last building went down with fire in our community and 13 babies got burned up. It started me to ask some questions about what's going on in the neighborhood. Why are we having these fires. Though I didn't know I was doing research then but I guess I was researching. Only to find out that people had a lot of knowledge about what they perceived be happening to the community and why. And that I was the one that was uneducated about what was going on. -- I mean you know, you know, young girl, walking around in the community raising my kids --- but really not living in the community. In the community but not in the community."

Or GB (p3) who experienced a cultural transformation when as an adult he was taken to the DuSable Museum.

"It was set up in her house. There were spears all over. The first thing that came in my mind was Tarzan in Africa. But she began to make a presentation about the art works and the value of it and how the relation of it - to African culture, how it relates to us. The music, the math. And you know my mind just began to expand. I just wanted more . I just needed to know more about myself and about my race and about my people. You know all this stuff was new to me and it was hitting me too fast. It was hitting all of us too fast."

These defining moments were labeled as turning points in the persons' life.

Creating Knowledge and Self-reliance. It was poor people who began to see housing and transportation issues in a different way than city planners:

"You're doing housing development, you're not doing organizing. I said "Takes organizing to do the kind of development that we're doing. -- we wasn't doing just pure bricks and mortar. People were learning to control their environment. How to look at things differently. How to turn negative forces into positive forces so that

they can use that as a resource to turn their lives around." MB (p11).

We went in and said,

"Well we will help you, but we are not going to do this for you. 'Cause we ain't got the time to do it for you. And if you don't want to do that, then we outta here. You have got to take a front row seat on this. You've got to walk side by side with the technical people we bring here. You've got to learn how to talk and articulate with HUD. You got to learn the regulations and the rules. We have to do this as a collective or we're not doing it. -- What they failed to see was, what is now on the horizon as sexy and new, and that is the holistic approach. Not to physical land development as community development. But human capacity development --- building the capacity for servicing the human being." MB (p10).

This person summarized her work as a new model by saying:

"Now, I can articulate this now, I didn't know what the hell we were doing then, I mean, you know. I can't tell you what we were doing. If you had asked me to say it like I'm saying it now, I would not be able to say it that way. Because we were doing work and we were creating, if you will, what was happening at that moment. We were teaching each other through our creation, what this model would produce." MB (p6)

One person became a border crosser when she as a black teamed up with a Mexican community in a creative act of self-reliance. This type of creativity was reported by several interviewees.

"We had an opportunity to employ a hundred people from our community at a place called Morrison-Knudson. I convinced Olive Harvey (a local community college) to do the training if we could find money. Mexican Community Committee had training dollars, so I agreed to give them some of our slots if they gave me their money so we could train everybody so they all could get the jobs." LH (p.6)

Community and Culture. Among those interviewed we found no "lone rangers." The emphasis was on community and African-American culture.

What was the community articulation, as a collective, and people tried to always separate me from my community by saying, "oh, Mattie, you're different."

"Oh no. I live right next door to Regina. How am I different. And Regina lives right next door to Irene, and right across the street from us is Mr. Chaney. Now how are we different? I don't get it. What separates me from my neighbors when we're talking about the same issues? What impacts the house next to me or across from me? What impacts their children? What impacts their seniors, their mothers? What impacts their wives and their daughters is the same thing that impacts me. So how am I different? I don't get it." MB (p12).

MB did not see herself as different and she had expectations of others as well.

"We helped them buy the building. We helped them finance the building. We walked them through the whole redevelopment of the property and the minute the last redevelopment, the payout was paid out the lawyers turned it over and we walked away. That building, I think, was one of things that we shouldn't have done. We should not have walked away that soon. Because they got the property. They still have the property. They're still managing to live there. But they have not used the resources at their control to empower other people in their community. And that was one of our, that was one of the commitments that they made when they started this project. That they would help someone else to do what they had done. And they haven't done that. A little pissed off with 'em about that."

Learning from each other. How did residents learn. Some used self directed study.

"But we come home late at night and do research. Do our studying on the law. Every one of us had a chore to do. Every one of us mothers, after we put our kids to bed, had to go through these documents and read these legal documents so that when we got back to court --- we could stand toe to toe to them and tell them we knew what our rights were and how we, as not only community residents and people who lived in that building were collective in our movement to get something done." MB (p3).

E and T described Phase I.

"We're doing, we're doing a lot of the work. I know as I sit in the different EZ meetings. there is a lot of work going on and these meetings start at about 6 and they more than likely will go to about ten, eleven o'clock at night. So people are really working hard to try to get the base ready to try to build you know jobs, businesses, schools, cause we have a day care program in the works in this. And it's all grass roots. All these people---" EC (p9).

These four themes appeared over and over in the interviews. The energy, activity and emotion brought about through collective problem solving, and the changes this activity made in the interviewees' lives gives us a small glimpse into the potential of learning at the edge of social movements.

Conclusions

The EZ was a mechanism to mobilize the community to learn for self-reliance. Bottom up leadership is possible when the conditions are right. The Chicago base community had been developing through social movements over the last three decades. These data support Haymes' view that poor people can reinvent cities by building solidarity among cultural groups and by reappropriating their place in the city. Poor people construct their learning by taking advantage of their own cultural tools. Sophisticated organic intellectuals committed to their class produced and disseminated their own knowledge gained from a critical examination of their experience.

In this Chicago experience, the hundreds of pages of strategic plan developed by over a thousand poor residents suffered a major set back by the limited vision of a handful of their own Black alderpersons. The lesson here is that reinventing government takes place both on the ground by mobilizing ordinary people as well as the demanding of accountability of elected officials in the political arena.

There are several implications for adult educators. First the deficit discourse used by educators to describe the poor denies us access to utilize community assets (Kretzmann and McKnight) as a basis for education. We would be more successful if we would either go out into the community, or bring the community into our classrooms. Second, institutional segmented adult education is not as robust for poor persons as problem centered non-formal approaches. Third, contexts and process appear to be as important for learning as content within a social movement.

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