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Talking Across the Table: A Dialogue on Women, Welfare, and Adult Education

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The Issue

Welfare reform is a current societal issue of tremendous significance in the United States. The popular discourses surrounding welfare reform are extremely complex and lead to frequently volatile discussions, for welfare reform itself is not a single issue, but relates to multiple underlying issues concerning the origins and solutions of poverty and unemployment, the subordination of women and women's roles in society, competing discourses of work and family, the intersections of racism and poverty, and the role of adult education in social change. Welfare reform as a societal issue affects us all as citizens and participants in the U.S. economic and political system. But more specifically, as adult educators, we have a potentially vital role to play as these issues are debated and translated into policy and practice. New policies are having a tremendous impact on the nature of adult education programs for the economically disenfranchised. Further, welfare reform has stimulated nonformal learning and popular education in connection with the work of social action groups, such as the Welfare Warriors, organizing in reaction to reform initiatives. Perhaps most importantly, welfare reform puts forward in a compelling manner the question of adult educators' responsibility to take a proactive role in social change efforts (Cunningham, 1989).

The purpose of this symposium is to clarify multiple and competing perspectives on welfare reform and their implications for adult education research and practice. By juxtaposing these perspectives, we intend to illuminate their differences as well as potential common ground. Based on this discussion, we hope to stimulate greater interest in and more informed action on the part of adult educators concerning issues of welfare reform in the USA. More broadly, we hope that the symposium will provoke further dialogue, reflection, and action related to adult educators' social responsibility in a time of increasing political conservatism.

Competing Perspectives

Four ideological/political perspectives will be represented by the symposium participants. These include the moderate/liberal, the leftist/progressive, the radical feminist, and the Africentric feminist. While we have categorized perspectives in this way for the sake of the discussion, we

stress that in reality such perspectives are complex, overlapping, and constantly evolving. The participants' knowledge of the perspectives that they represent is based on a combination of literature review and personal experience with issues of welfare reform and adult education. Each participant has conducted research involving welfare recipients. While each individual has agreed to represent a particular perspective, these are not necessarily the perspectives that they personally hold.

In planning the format for our symposium, we have chosen to avoid a traditional formal paper presentation style in favor of a more interactive, dialogue-oriented format. Accordingly, we plan to conduct the symposium in a kitchen-table@ format. The presenters will engage in a dialogue around key questions central to understanding the assumptions underlying each perspective as well as their implications for adult education research and practice. Following the presenters' dialogue, we will raise further questions as a starting point for an open discussion involving the audience.

Implications for Action and Policy

The primary purpose of this symposium is to provide insight, to stimulate reflection and dialogue, rather than to advocate for or develop a particular agenda for policy or practice. However, we do hope that the symposium will prompt the audience as individuals to consider more direct action concerning these issues in their own work. We also hope that the session will lead to further joint efforts on the part of adult education researchers to address welfare reform and other social issues in a more informed, proactive manner.

A Liberal/Moderate Perspective: Stressing Work and Responsibility Catherine Hansman

Central to a liberal/moderate view of welfare is the idea that the old welfare system has failed not only American society but also welfare recipients because it has not enabled them to get jobs and become contributing members of society. Liberal/moderates, however, do not take the conservative position of the 104th Congress, who wanted to "put poor children in orphanages and take away all help from mothers simply because they were poor, young and unmarried" (Clinton, 1996 p. 41). In contrast, a liberal/moderate view is more represented in the bipartisan welfare reform act of 1996, which "will finally put an end to America's failed welfare system by stressing work and responsibility...(it) enhances the enforcement of child support laws and provides billions of dollars for child care to help mothers on welfare become working mothers" (Clinton, 1996, p. 42).

From a liberal/moderate perspective, then, it is clear that women have the right, privilege, and obligation to work outside the home to support their families, just as men do. Single mothers of small children can and should be gainfully employed in order to stay off of public assistance To help single parents with barriers such as child care and

transportation, the government will issue vouchers to cover these expenses (Mandell, 1996). Thus the social responsibility of government assistance is replaced by emphasizing family and individual responsibility: absent parents must pay child support (Clinton, 1996), AFDC recipients must change destructive behavior (Albelda & Tilly, 1997), and single mothers should be encouraged to find husbands or marry the fathers of their children (Rector, 1996). To assure that no one will receive public assistance indefinitely, regulations will limit the amount of time, usually to five years, that people may receive public assistance.

The Welfare-Reform act encourages collaboration between government and individual businesses to develop better strategies to support disadvantaged people in obtaining and maintaining stable employment. Welfare reform will allow the economy, with some governmental help, to create enough jobs so that everyone can join the workforce. Liberal/moderates believe that the government will need to provide some support for disadvantaged populations as they enter the workforce, but with the right incentives, all people should be capable of achieving economic self-sufficiency within a few years. Businesses should create hiring programs to employ former welfare recipients and adopt a tolerant attitude as they adjust to the workforce (Clinton, 1996).

Education and training are essential to enable people to move from welfare into increasingly more highly skilled positions and to earn higher incomes. While education should be made available to all people, particularly those with lower skills, it should not be considered an alternative for employment. Governmental agencies can provide some education to welfare recipients, but individual businesses should provide the specialized education and training opportunities needed by their employees in order to perform competently in the workforce. Adult education is obviously an important component of successful welfare reform through collaborative programs with employers to provide training that will support employees in adjusting to the workplace and in turn, performing successfully on the job. Adult educators might also develop programs to help people manage their family lives and responsibilities (Kaplan & Saltiel, 1997) so that these obligations do not interfere with workplace responsibilities.

**Economic Injustice Through Welfare Reform:
A Progressive View of the New Social Policy
Barbara Sparks**

Progressive or leftist perspectives regarding the reform of the welfare system have broadened the issues beyond those of self sufficiency and even beyond those of poverty to include issues of economic justice, health care and taxes. Those most directly affected by the welfare reform movement are primarily poor people of color, women, and the poorest of the poor. While there are serious problems that must be dealt with to alleviate the stresses of poverty, such as family-supporting jobs, high quality child care, reliable shelter and regular meals, welfare is not the central concern of most progressive thought.

Rather, it is larger system structures such as the class-based economy that require attention, that require restructuring and reform if justice is to be served. According to Dujon and Withorn (1996, p. 387), with the growing world economy "it is important to understand the >necessities= of structural reductions in the workforce, the limits and social outcomes of a service economy, the isolation of computerized off-site workplaces, and a global decline in wages" in exposing and rectifying the increasing disparity of wealth distribution, the world economy, and economic injustice.

The multiple economic, social, and political crises of the United States are indicators that the system is not working; the need to "end welfare as we know it" as stated by Clinton is but another indication of this failure. These system crises are being managed by the capitalist state through interventions which blur the lines between the public and the private spheres of life. The management of welfare reform is one example of this new level of systems management (Habermas, 1975).

There is a change in the relationship between the state and its citizens. The state is gaining controlling interest in more of the private sector decisions such as families, home values, and individual job choice. Such interventions have created the new social client, the welfare recipient (Fraser, 1989), regulated by the state through inner colonization as she becomes the citizen mother/citizen worker (Polakov, 1994). Triple public demands of mother, worker, and now, student trainee are imposed by the state thus stripping recipients of their capacities to determine their own needs, undermining their desires, and leaving them with destabilized identities. Yet in the face of these demands the state has abdicated its responsibility and dumped everything from food to shelter to volunteer work experience opportunities onto charities and local communities. Employability, a key concept of welfare reform, is determined by the state. Recipients are determined to be employable if they have marketable skills, regardless of whether or not they have the skills needed in the local marketplace or if those skills will command a family-supporting job. This results in the tracking of recipients into low-skilled, low-paying female-typed occupations, creating a new supply of cheap labor and not allowing women beyond what is perceived to be their position. Fraser (1989) explains the dismantling of welfare as the emergence of a new social movement "at the seam of system and lifework."

From a progressive viewpoint, what role can adult education play? In an interview with Ehrenreich (1997), Piven calls for a program of documentation, monitoring how the states are regulating the lives of the new social client, i.e., the women and families on welfare, and publicizing what is happening to the poor. Adult educators must also agitate for changing social structures as they seek to expose the multiple economic, social, and political crises as indications that the system is not working.

Welfare Reform: Making Invisible Work Visible and Invisible Again
A Perspective Related to Radical Feminism
Mechthild Hart

Contemporary attacks on women have blended historical strains of racism, misogyny, and class bias into an unusually potent brew. Aimed particularly at black women, single women, and poor women on welfare, the attacks have handily condensed all three categories into the encompassing figure of 'the' black single mother on welfare.

Patricia Williams, *The Rooster's Egg* (1995, p. 4)

On the surface, the history of welfare laws and policies is full of contradictions, all of them pivoting around different kinds of relationships between jobs and the unpaid work of raising children. In the past, white full-time mothers who were married to property-owning husbands were seen as the arbiters of good mothering. Today, upper-class women are praised for leaving their corporate jobs in order to become full-time mothers. In the past, wage earning was pitted against motherhood, and income-earning working class women were viewed with hostility by maternalist reformers. Today, this hostility is manifested in the relative absence of good child care facilities, or in wages which are too small to pay for decent child care. In the past, immigrant women were seen as culturally deficient but reformable mothers. Today they are mainly part of the profitable working poor. The history of Black mothers illustrates how economic exploitation is fully interlaced with racism. During slavery Black people were extremely cheap laborers, and Black mothers were doubly profitable by producing more slaves. Later, Black mothers were excluded from early welfare programs, but when they became eligible--due to tremendous political struggles--the myth of cultural deficiency flourished anew.

Although having children is still considered a woman's true calling, poor, single, and especially Black women are vilified for having them. Once the work of raising children goes public by requiring public assistance because private resources are not available, the welfare mother's private life becomes open to public eyes--in a controlling, surveilling way. Mandating the insertion of Norplant, or enforcing a "family cap" (Roberts 1997) are just some of the ways the political public is intruding in these women's lives.

Moreover, the fate of the children already born is irrelevant because they are not really needed as future wage laborers. While they are part of a growing surplus population their mothers become desperate, cheap laborers who therefore greatly benefit the bottom line. Today business and government are joining hands in forcing women off welfare in order to take any lousy job. This is how immoral mothers can reform themselves, thereby living up to the true meaning of "welfare reform."

What kind of educational processes could help us and the people we come in contact with to look at the work of raising children in its own right? How can education contribute to learning to think about the future in a way which is not submerged in the toxic stream of racist and sexist bottom-line thinking? Clearly, these processes would have to be extremely complex as they would force us to invent a new way of thinking, develop a new language for naming our opposition to the system, and take small but concrete steps towards thinking, feeling and acting in the world in a different ways.

Welfare Reform: Who is Deserving? An Africentric Perspective

Vanessa Sheared

There are approximately 5 million families with an estimated 9.5 million children that receive aid to families with dependent children. The welfare system in the United States was established under the Social Security Act of 1935. It began as a way to provide women and children with aid as a result of their husband=s and father=s death. It initially began as a way to provide cash assistance to needy families. The public assistance program was seen as a stop-gap measure until a woman either got married or her children left home. While this gesture was intended to assist families in need, the primary focus of these funds were intended for white women and their children. From an Africentric perspective, part of the tension concerning who receives welfare is entangled not only in gender, but also in race and class. Moreover, a larger issue in the debate on welfare reform, (one which often is ignored) is the question concerning who deserves to receive welfare assistance? This is a question that the earlier legislators had a difficult time with as they established laws concerning welfare assistance, and one which remains with us today.

As early as the 1940s, southern legislators as well as some northerners pondered the question of who should receive public assistance. Suitable home, substitute parent, and seasonal employment laws were passed to decrease the number of women, African Americans and nonwhites in particular, that could receive assistance. These laws had a significantly adverse effect on African American women as well as other non-white families. Moreover they began to have what many considered an adverse effect on whether families remained intact (father, mother, and children), as many men began to leave their homes in hopes of giving their families an opportunity to obtain financial assistance. During the 1940s and 1950s issues concerning race, morality, and eligibility became the focal points of discussions for legislators as they grappled with ways to limit the number of people receiving aid and at the same time continued to provide for needy families.

From the 1960s onward legislative measures were passed to aid entire families in order to keep families together, and at the same time education and training was offered to help these families become self-sufficient. While these measures have had some positive effects, they continue to be criticized and considered failures as the numbers of welfare recipients have increased rather than decreased.

Recent welfare reform initiatives have taken a very high profile in the media as well as the larger society. It is ironic that many of the images projected in the media are ones of black women and children, while very little emphasis is given to white women and children. Often in news accounts we see black women and children whenever there is any discussion on the misuse and abuse of the welfare system. In many ways this is just a different tactic used to suggest to the larger public that the people receiving public assistance, in this case black women and children are non-deserving.

While the question about who deserves welfare, might seem unimportant to adult educators in general, it is one that adult basic and vocational educators need to recognize. Unless this question is addressed, women on welfare and African American women in

particular will continue to contend with models and programs that only in part address their needs and issues. Even though these programs provide services that address basic and employment skills for these women, they often do so with a "blaming the victim" mentality. If these women are going to obtain economic, as well as political parity, adult educators must address issues of race, class, and gender. Adult education programs that focus on these connecting realities as well as politics and economics, can begin to offer policy makers with ways to end welfare as we know it. To do so will also require that adult educators, as well as others address the larger issue of how do we - or when should we - or what type of economic support should we provide for all?

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