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Immigrant Civic Participation and Leadership Development in Citizenship Schools: A Research Study Using Appreciative Inquiry

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Abstract: *This study investigates the experiences of immigrant participants and staff of citizenship schools who are developing civic participation and leadership programs in immigrant communities. This action research study provides a look at what works within community-based citizenship schools through the lens of democratic social change, social constructivism and Appreciative Inquiry.*

Purpose

The Reverent Al Sharpton said, during the 2004 Democratic Convention, “life is not where you start, but where you are going.” When people tell stories about their successes, about the things that they have done that energizes, motivates and “feeds” them, they begin to create a vision of the future based on these positive experiences rather than reproducing and recreating the problems of the past.

Manuel, a volunteer leader at a grassroots organization, said, “When a person appreciates, or if I can say it like this, loves what he does...then he is ready to give all that he has, of his talent and even more of his time in order to move the project, the work forward.” Manuel sees his community-based organization like a “seed that has been planted in fertile ground.” The seed metaphor is very poignant because the project he refers to is the grassroots activities of immigrant rights organizations that, in his eyes, will grow into a movement. He is looking at a tree that is growing millions of fruit.

The main purpose of this study is to inquire into the experiences of immigrant participants and staff in citizenship schools that are developing civic participation and leadership programs in immigrant communities. The initial idea for the study arose from my own experience as a community organizer and immigrant. I wanted to find out how to develop the capacity and skills to inspire enduring organizations that contributes to people’s participation, to individual and collective identity and to the democratic process.

Instead of asking what was wrong or what problems the participants and staff of these organizations encountered, I decided to shift the nature of the questions in this study by inquiring about experiences that were positive and energizing. I wanted to replicate civic participation and leadership programs among immigrant communities and establish a learning center promoting popular education, social justice and participatory development activities in Northern California as a pragmatic outcome of this study. The result is the *Institute for Community Learning*. Its mission is to provide an informational and creative space for the development of civic participation and leadership programs and to bring many voices together to envision a future grounded in democratic social change. The Institute’s website will make this study as well as other educational resources available to community groups searching for best practices in community development and leadership programs.

Conceptual Perspective

Historically, adult education began as a call to citizen participation in this country’s democratic ideals of full participation, and shared leadership and decision-making. In the early part of the Twentieth Century, Eduard Lindeman and John Dewey were laying the foundation by

arguing that adult education needed to be linked to democratic values. According to Heaney (1996, p. 2), adult education and democracy are interdependent, and “it’s absence leaves critical decisions in the hands of an educated elite, promotes the cult of experts, and erodes democratic social order.” The learner becomes a passive customer of knowledge rather than an active creator of knowledge. This link between adult education and democracy is evident in community organizations and learning centers outside of the traditional educational system. Since the 1930s, the Highlander Center, founded by Myles Horton, has been an example of progressive education institutions in the South that “nurtured a vision of political and economic democracy through reflection and action” (Heaney, 1993, p. 1). Highlander exemplifies Lindeman’s view of adult education grounded in social action. Adult education was the soil where an awareness of political and social reality would be nurtured and grown.

This nurturing vision is evident in popular education efforts in Latin America. Freire has been influential in promoting education through dialogue where the learner’s experiences and culture becomes part of the learning process. Mayo (1999, p. 63) states, “through a pedagogy of the question rather than a prescriptive pedagogy, the educator enables the learner to reflect on the codified version of their reality (their own world of action) in a process of praxis.”

Brookfield (1987, p. 22) points out, Eduard Lindeman along with Freire espoused a “critical theory of adult learning in which the task of adult education is seen as prompting in adults a historicity and of the culturally constructed nature of their environment.” Lindeman was aware that the expression of people’s own stories and experiences was of primary importance as a critically reflective process for analyzing their current conditions. This awareness would activate, through informed dialogue and small group interaction, a collective readjustment to new situations. (Brookfield, 1987).

What does democratic social change and action methodologies such as AI have in common in the formation of leadership programs? They conspire to shift the social reality by applying a democratic process including dialogue, stories with an action agenda. Political conscientization and an analysis of power serve to unveil the cultural contradictions of a social reality that perpetuates the status quo. Democratic social change gives agency to adult education and learning, and in the environment of citizenship schools the practice of civic participation is amplified by the quality of dialogue and the collective mobilization of forces for some larger good.

Can democratic social change result from the kind of questions asked? According to Cooperrider (2003), a social constructivist would emphatically say yes. Organizations are living human constructions therefore changeable. The change possibilities are infinite and are only limited by our imagination, the questions that we ask and organizational readiness. Myles Horton said that a dialogue includes asking questions (Jacobs, 2003). Citizenship schools and immigrant-centered organizations are already living within a separate cultural construction of reality from mainstream society and self-organize depending on the needs of the community they serve.

Citizenship schools provide a setting for critical reflection and experiential learning not available in formal schools situations. The goal of learning in community settings goes beyond the individual, but involves all participants in a democratic learning process that results in some type of social action. Radical educators such as Freire and Horton’s have influenced adult education as a way to increase civic participation and encourage the development of democratic learning spaces for learners to discuss, plan and reflect and act for social change.

Research Design

The qualitative research design used for this study is action research. Action research is pragmatic in that it is not concerned with universal theories of learning but it is purposely inquiring into ways to take action to impact the social landscape of communities or organizations involved in the research. The central aspect that frames action research lies in the subsequent series of action cycles on the part of the participants, as well as the researcher, to improve, solve, reflect, develop and identify an issue important to those involved in the research.

The call to action by the participants and researcher that results from the knowledge gained by the research validates the reason to do the research in the first place. Participants are central in the action research process as knowledge creators and as experts in their own geography, in the context and places where they live. Their stories mirror their local knowledge. Their peak experiences have research significance because their voices have been located at the center of meaning making rather than at the margins.

AI, as an action research methodology, was used as the main model of inquiry for this research. According to Cooperrider (2003, p. 3), "AI is based on the simple assumption that every organization has something that works well and these strengths can be the starting point for creating positive change." Inquiry is the process of asking questions as a way to understand the stories that are 'life-giving' within the organization or system. Because AI is grounded in a social constructivist paradigm, its practitioners believe that "human beings and organizations move in the direction of what they inquire about" (Watkins and Mohr, 2001, p. 39).

AI has four concrete phases, the 4-D cycle, as its positive core: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. The discovery phase asks, what gives life? What is? The Dream phase focuses on what might be? The Design and Destiny phases inquire about how can it be? And what will be? This interview protocol used the Discovery phase and it is divided into the following categories: History of participant in the organization, best experiences, values, personal contributions, learning from missed opportunities, and a vision of the future of their organization or their work. In order to be included in this research, the citizenship project had to provide opportunities for its members to be engaged in civic participation activities through established programs or as a direct outcome of their citizenship classes. Some of the civic engagement activities included community organizing, ESL classes, popular education and civic participation, voter mobilization, and public actions with local officials.

Since most of the interviews were conducted in Spanish. A Spanish translation of the interview questions was provided for the majority of the research participants. Three organizations participated. Eight person-to-person interviews were conducted. These semi-structured interviews were then transcribed, analyzed and coded. Themes were extracted from the stories. Observation and journal notes were used to triangulate the data.

This action research model is appropriate for this study because the outcome can be readily used by the participants to improve their programs, and as a real time reflective mirror of what works in their organization and how this knowledge can be used to further the learning of other citizenship organizations. AI is a generative process that can lead to other discoveries, ideas, and metaphors as the group engages in dialogue and action.

Selected Findings

Three major themes were evident in the work of participants as they organized for civic participation. These themes were infused with a sense of courage to dream and act for social

justice, a strong commitment to community service, and a vision in building democratic institutions where everyone could participate fully.

Collective Strength: People Power

The participant's stories were very clear to point out that leadership development and civic participation is not a process relegated to the individual, but it is a complex, dynamic and integrative process that includes an entire community in motion. The participants of this research identify themselves as an integral thread in the weaving of the struggle for social change. Their commitment comes out of love and the hope that their work will improve oppressive social conditions for immigrants.

During an interview, Roberta, a volunteer at a citizenship school said that what she appreciated the most was her community, "mi gente," mi people. She continued, "The people are my motivation. When I see them arrive one day and tell me that they want to learn, and then later they come back to tell me, maestra (teacher), I've become a citizen. That's the payback. That has no price. It's invaluable. I never, during the years I've worked in this country, have had that satisfaction and joy that I've had here." To be able to help others reach the goal of becoming a citizen has been one of Roberta's main motivators to become involved as a no-nonsense leader who is accountable and able to ring some else's bell to wake them up into action.

Manuel, a volunteer leader in an urban neighborhood center, said that he benefited from the center by "cultivating friendships" that "gave me the strength to fight against the loneliness that engulfs every immigrant when they leave their country." He continues, "to be united and fight together against our problems like if we were one person against one problem is what gives us strength." For him, identity and a sense of cultural roots is a spiritual force that gives him strength. He says, to lose your culture is "like a leaf falling from a tree. The wind can take you anywhere. If we remain close to our culture, and close to our people, I think that's the way we can fight back." For Manuel, personal relationships are formed in social action, and are strengthened by gaining knowledge and wisdom through mutual experiences.

Experiential Learning: Learn by Doing

There are many opportunities for civic participation among non-citizens besides voting. They can volunteer for a community organization, participate in a march or rally, contribute money to local causes and candidates that may help their current situation. The ability to vote is a powerful enough incentive to be naturalized, but a non-citizen whether documented or undocumented is still affected by laws and political decisions. By becoming involved, they avoid being pushed farther away from the margins of mainstream society. They exist in a different paradigm than white middle class American culture. Resilient, relational, family-centered, and communal nature are some of the characteristics of immigrant communities that provide cohesion and mutual support.

The participant's stories are filled with struggle and victories, and helping others in their neighborhood feeds an urge to move forward and do more. Roberta's vision of the future is "to keep smiling, to keep moving forward." She wants her community, and youth in particular, to see themselves as brothers and "to not distinguish our color, to forget those prejudices." Her political conscientization came about when she met César Chavez of the United Farmworkers Union. They won a three-year fight for living wages and medical coverage at a nursery business. The contract benefited 500 workers. Roberta learned how to be an organizer. She is an instructor at her citizenship school. She says, "I have that role without having a formal school education.

Simply, it comes from my heart, to be able to share that I can go learn at a school and bring it back to them. That's how we pass the ball." Roberta's story was full of energy and enthusiasm for learning and teaching others.

Growing the Movement: Despertar Conciencia

Maria, a staff organizer for a neighborhood center, mentioned four ways that social change happens in her group: education, organizing participants, making connections with other groups, and growing the movement. She continues, "the way we have found (to educate) is through popular education. Our community doesn't have time to go to a school. The (leadership) institute is in a small, informal classroom. She says to me, "yo siento ahorita la necesidad de despertar conciencia." I feel the need to awaken consciousness. She wants to find anyway to educate people.

The organizations that participated in this research are part of a larger coalition dedicated to immigrant rights and civic participation in and near the San Francisco Bay area. They form a community of practice guided by the Partnership for Immigrant Leadership and Action (PILA), an organization providing capacity building and leadership training for grassroots immigrant groups. This cooperative network helps replicate practices and share resources among diverse immigrant community organizations.

Implications for adult education theory and practice

This inquiry has been a discovery process for both the researcher and the participant about what ought to be done to instill purpose and involvement that can result in democratic social change, not from analyzing the problems the participants encounter, but from inquiring and emphasizing what has been successful. These organizations and individuals are engaging in an emancipatory learning process that focuses on collaboration, mutual support, mentorship and spiritual strength that serves as a solid base, primarily against the fear and powerlessness experienced by some immigrant communities.

Citizens and non-citizens will find ways to participate within and outside of the voting and the political system. Community associations, hometown networks, ESL classes, and naturalization classes are locations where immigrants can increase their civic skills and build connections with others. Citizenship schools provide the same opportunities for building social capital among immigrants (Barreto and Muñoz, 2003). At the organizations that I observed, Women played a very important role as educators, leaders and community builders. Immigrant women have made a major contribution in building community by bringing men and children together and by creating the family links needed for a strong community (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). A greater effort needs to be made to include immigrant women in leadership training.

According to the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and Immigrant Legal Resource Center (Anon., 2003), a successful program builds relationships among participants, provides experiential, hand-on activities, coaches and mentors immigrant leaders and staff, builds networks between organizations so people feel part of a larger movement, and remains flexible to the needs of each community. The organizations that participated in this study reflected most, if not all of these success elements including a sense of openness, support from higher-ups in the parent organization, and a clear sense of their commitment for their community.

The inquiry into the best practices among citizenship schools must be an on going effort. As educators, community organizers and immigrant rights advocates, we need to know more

about what works in organizations, what energizes people to take action so that we begin to shift and construct a reality that produces more creative solutions than problems. The Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1940, p. 158) reminds us, "Al andar se hace camino." We make the road by walking.

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