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Adult Education for Social Change: Deconstructing Programs and Services for Adult Immigrants

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Abstract: *This research examines the role of adult education in bringing about social change through community development initiatives at SUCCESS, an immigrant community organization in Vancouver. It focuses on: the historical development of SUCCESS, the provision of programs and services, major changes in SUCCESS, and the social forces behind the changes.*

Purpose of the Study

The role of adult education for social change and community development has been addressed by a number of adult educators (Lindeman, 1926; Freire, 1970; Cunningham, 2000). However, in an immigrant country like Canada, the changing demographics in recent years have posed both challenges and new opportunities for further development in adult education. The 2001 Census of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003) reveals that as of May 15, 2001, 18.4 per cent of the total population were born outside the country, and that 13.4 per cent identified themselves as visible minorities. As new citizens to Canada, they need educational programs to help them navigate the complex paths that citizenship entails and to upgrade their language, knowledge and skills to fully participate in Canadian society. This research attempts to address the role of adult education programs in bringing about social change through community development initiatives at an immigrant community organization in Vancouver, Canada, called SUCCESS—United Chinese Community Enrichment Services Society. It focuses on: (i) the historical development of SUCCESS, (ii) the provision of programs and services for adult immigrants, (iii) major changes in SUCCESS, and (iv) the social forces behind the changes.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by three theoretical constructs: (i) adult education for community change, (ii) inclusive citizenship, and (iii) program planning as the negotiation of power and interests. As early as in the 1920s, Lindeman (Brookfield, 1987) deliberated on the social role of adult education. He viewed adult education as an agency of social progress and the most reliable instrument for social actionists. An early Canadian example of community development was the Antigonish Movement led by Moses Coady and Jimmy Tompkins (Welton, 2001). After Lindeman and Coady, critical adult educators such as Freire (1970) and Cunningham (2000) further advanced the role of adult education for social transformation and emancipatory learning. Freire (1970) argues that adult education is an important tool to raise people's critical consciousness through action and cultural reflection, or praxis. Cunningham (2000) regards social movements and social learning as a major source of alternative knowledge production. Community development is an important site where such learning can take place.

As part of its social role, adult education is also deemed an important forum for building inclusive citizenship. Citizenship can be defined as membership in a socio-political community which comprises four dimensions: legal status, rights, identity, and participation (Bloemraad, 2000). Traditional liberals advocate a culturally neutral state (Rawls, 1971). Critics of such a paradigm claim, however, that the ideal of a culturally neutral state embodies an oppressive illusion (Kymlicka, 1995; Young, 1995). It promotes a universal citizenship, which ignores differences and

perpetuates oppression and inequality. Consequently they propose “differentiated citizenship” as an alternative model. As to the best approach for promoting citizenship, Derwing (1992) suggests a community-based, learner-centred model in which members of cultural and linguistic communities are involved in every aspect of programs.

This call for a high level of learner involvement in programs—including the planning of programs—invokes the work of Cervero and Wilson (1994, 1996) who argue that program planning is fundamentally a process of negotiating power and interests among people who have varying degrees of influence over the shape and substance of programs because of asymmetrical power relations. Cervero and Wilson propose the ideal of “substantively democratic planning” as a means to “level the playing field” when planning actors—because of their social relations [and varying degrees of social capital]—are unlikely to have equal influence over important planning decisions.

We argue in this paper that in the case of SUCCESS, the development and character of the programs offered was determined not so much by the interactions of individuals in planning groups representing the interests of various stakeholders, but rather by the changing nature of Canada’s immigration policy, the shifting character of the immigrant population, and government funding.

Research Design

The central guiding question for this research was: How did a community-initiated voluntary organization such as SUCCESS respond to changing needs of an ethnic community in a multicultural society? Two major qualitative research methods were used to conduct this study: document analysis and personal interviewing. The selection of research methods derived from the nature of this research as an interpretive study, and its attempts to understand people’s lived experience with the organization. The document analysis included SUCCESS annual reports, newsletters, minutes of annual general meetings, important speeches, and program brochures. Twenty interviews were conducted with the Executive, Board members, and Program Directors. Time and resources did not permit interviews with clientele, so their views of this organization were not represented here. In addition to the two major methods, site visits and participant observation were used as complementary methods to help contextualize what was read and heard about the organization. A four-stage process of analysis was developed: (i) identifying main points, (ii) searching for salient themes and recurring patterns, (iii) grouping common themes and patterns into related categories, and (iv) comparing all major categories with reference to selected theoretical constructs to form new perspectives. This four-stage process assured frequent interplay between the data and theory.

Findings

To illustrate how SUCCESS emerged as a key adult education provider for new immigrants and how its programs and services evolved in response to changing circumstances, we focus on two areas: the circumstances of its founding and development, and how it remained responsive to a changing policy and immigration context.

A Brief History of SUCCESS

SUCCESS was founded in 1973 in response to the failure of government agencies and mainstream organizations to provide accessible social services and adult education programs for Chinese immigrants. The development of SUCCESS can be summarized in three stages (Guo, 2002). Stage One, from 1973-1979, saw the establishment of the Chinese Connection Project, a

demonstration project funded by Health and Welfare Canada to bridge the 'gap' between social service agencies and the needs of newly-arrived Chinese immigrants primarily from Hong Kong. During this stage, the organization mainly provided basic settlement services and language assistance. Specific services include, for example, ESL classes and information on Canada's education and health care system. This project also involved making direct referrals of immigrants to other service providers and providing translation services to help them navigate unfamiliar bureaucracies and organizations.

Stage Two, from 1979-1989, was a developing and maturing stage during which there was a large increase in Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong due to the Sino-British Agreement on the future of Hong Kong. This increased demand led to substantial increases both in the volume of services and budget. Another change that occurred during this period was that immigrants were settling in a broader geographic area beyond the Chinatown area (located in downtown Vancouver) and this led to establishing two branch offices outside Chinatown. During this maturing stage SUCCESS won a number of awards from the Chinese community and mainstream organizations in recognition of its contributions to community development. Another noteworthy development during this period was a growing advocacy role in response to instances of discrimination in national and local media. Two major racist incidents occurred when the Chinese were slighted in the media. In the first incident, a national TV news magazine erroneously portrayed second and third-generation Canadian citizens of Chinese descent as foreign students taking educational opportunities away from white Canadians at taxpayers' expense. In the second, CBC Radio broadcast the "Dim Sum Diaries," which satirized the accents of new Chinese immigrants and stereotypes of their behaviour. SUCCESS participated in a national campaign against the first and led a protest against the second resulting in apologies and withdrawal of programs.

Stage Three, from 1989-1998, was characterized by expansion and transformation. By the time it celebrated its 25th anniversary in 1998, SUCCESS had become a well-established multi-level service agency providing a wide range of programs and services to both Chinese and non-Chinese immigrants. During this period, the make-up of the immigrant population shifted with increasing numbers coming from other regions including Taiwan and Mainland China. The lead up to the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, produced a substantial influx of immigrants from Hong Kong. The changing composition of immigrants required SUCCESS to alter its program offerings to include, for example, more programs suited to professional and business immigrants and the growing numbers of Mandarin speaking immigrants.

From this brief summary, it can be seen that SUCCESS was constantly responding to changing needs and to the gaps left by government and mainstream organizations who were not developing programs for this group.

Major Changes in SUCCESS

SUCCESS experienced tremendous changes between 1973 and 1998. These changes were manifested in the growth of the organization, the expansion of programs and services, and changes in its mandate.

First, the fiscal growth of SUCCESS during its first 25 years was most evident. When it was founded in 1973, the organization only employed four full time professional social workers. By 1998, it had a professional team consisting of over 200 people. At its initial stage, it was funded by less than 100,000 dollars a year; when it reached its 25th anniversary, its annual budget has reached 8 million dollars. The number of clients receiving its programs and services skyrocketed from its initial 2,000 client contacts a year to over 200,000 by 1998. Physically, the organization has grown from the very beginning in a 300-square foot office in Chinatown to an organization with multiple

satellite offices in the Greater Vancouver area with headquarters in a 26,000-square foot Social Service Building of its own.

Other important changes were seen in its programs and services. In the 1970s, its lack of resources limited its provision to basic settlement services such as language interpretation and information services. By the 1990s, it was providing a whole range of programs including airport reception, settlement services, language training, counselling services, small business development and training, employment training and services, and group and community services. It was no longer just a single-focus organization providing only settlement services; it has become a well-established multi-service community organization. Some of these programs have remained constant throughout this 25-year period because the needs have remained more or less unchanged. For example, ESL programs within the Language Training and Settlement Services area have remained important for all non-English speaking immigrants to help them acquire the language skills necessary for full participation in society. Programs in the Business Development and Employment Training areas are responding to increases in the number of business and professional immigrants. Its holistic approach helps immigrants become competent, socially, culturally, linguistically, and economically.

Further changes which were not as noticeable as the former two were those in its mandate. SUCCESS was established in 1973 as a demonstration project, which was supposed to end in three years. Its mandate was mainly to help non-English speaking Chinese immigrants through providing basic immigrant settlement services with the assistance of bilingual social workers who could speak both English and Chinese. Its situation in 1998 demonstrated that SUCCESS had become a multicultural and multiethnic organization. Its clientele comprised immigrants from non-Chinese ethnic backgrounds, including those from mainstream society. To reflect the demographic changes of its clients, its professional team has also become ethno-culturally inclusive. Their programs and services were made available in many languages other than Cantonese and English.

This study has demonstrated that the changes which took place in SUCCESS touched many aspects of the organization. SUCCESS has grown exponentially and strong enough to be noticeable not just in the Chinese community but also in mainstream society. It played multiple roles with a three-pronged focus: providing professional services and adult education programs, advocating on behalf of immigrants, and facilitating citizenship education and community development. One of the most important contributions was that it helped build a community for adult immigrants where they felt they belonged.

Discussion

This study deconstructs the evolvement of SUCCESS by highlighting three major social forces that have contributed to the changes of SUCCESS, including changes in immigration policies, the changing profile and needs of immigrants; and government funding.

First, the profile of immigrants has changed owing to changes in Canadian immigration policies, such as the adoption of the 'immigration point system' in 1967, the introduction of the business immigrant category in the 1980s, and the opening of the immigration division in the Canadian Embassy in Beijing in the 1990s. One consequence of the most recent policy change was the increase of Mandarin-speaking immigrants from China.

The point system contributed to the formation of a cultural mosaic in Canada. In response to the growing linguistic and cultural diversity in Canada, the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau formalized an official policy on multiculturalism in 1971. The main goal of this policy was to encourage integration of immigrants into Canadian society without the loss of their cultural

identities and traditions. Rather than a “melting pot” in which people from various cultures are assimilated into the dominant culture, the image of multiculturalism in Canada was characterized by cultural pluralism and diversity. For immigrants, this meant that they were not expected to give up their cultural identity to become fully integrated into society. For immigrant service societies like SUCCESS, this meant that education was to be used to help with this integration while avoiding cultural homogenization. So for SUCCESS, the challenge became identifying strategies to assist with integration while creating and maintaining social spaces where immigrants felt “at home.”

Second, the needs of newly-arrived immigrants differed from their early counterparts and SUCCESS responded to meet these changing needs. For example, to make its programs and services more accessible to new immigrants, especially those from Taiwan and Mainland China, SUCCESS established Mandarin service centres and hired Mandarin-speaking staff members in each office. In the 1990s, many new arrivals were professional and business immigrants and SUCCESS introduced employment and small business training programs, in addition to its settlement services and language training programs. It is clear that the organization was sensitive and adaptive to changing community needs.

Another force that influenced the changes in SUCCESS was government funding. In Canada, the three levels of government that provide services are federal, provincial and municipal. Immigration policies are the jurisdiction of the federal government and, until recently, the federal government has been the primary funding source for immigrant services. But funding becomes more complicated when programs address needs that are typically in the provincial or municipal jurisdiction. For example, in Canada, education and health are both provincial responsibilities and municipal governments often cooperate with these two senior levels to provide local services. In recent years, the funding that has historically been provided for immigrant services by the federal government has been passed down to some provincial governments.

Government funding made it possible for SUCCESS to provide more services to help immigrants with their settlement and adaptation. At the same time, through the funding process the government was able to legitimize its policies and exercise a form of social control. For example, when the government granted funding to SUCCESS, it could stipulate what programs the Society should provide with that fund, where to provide them, and to which group(s). Since SUCCESS needed the funding to benefit its group members, it appears that the organization was able to overcome the negative part of this 'double-edged sword' process. Because a large proportion of SUCCESS's budget came from its fundraising, this made SUCCESS less dependent on government funding and more difficult for the government to exert political influence. This explained why SUCCESS was able simultaneously to continue and expand its partnerships with the government while successfully advocating for social change.

Implications for Adult Education

This study has several implications for adult education. First, it exemplifies the role of adult education in social transformation. Second, it demonstrates that communities are important sites for emancipatory learning and social action. Third, it shows the important role that voluntary organizations can play in building an inclusive citizenship organization where marginalized citizens feel they belong. In the context of SUCCESS, its role in citizenship education was two fold: building a facility where adult immigrants can acquire necessary skills and knowledge in order to become a participatory citizen and sensitizing mainstream organizations about their service approaches and changing public attitudes towards immigrants.

Cervero and Wilson (1994, 1996) have provided a new way of understanding the political dynamics of program planning. The case of SUCCESS provides a new challenge in employing their planning theory to better understand the complex interplay of needs with organizational structures, with funding patterns and priorities and macro political considerations. The cases of planning analyzed by Cervero and Wilson largely are of single programs with reasonably well defined temporal boundaries sponsored by single organizations. The experience of SUCCESS contextualized the complexities of program planning in a socially, culturally and politically diverse environment.

Now in its 32nd year, SUCCESS remains a growing, successful organization that enjoys substantial support in the community. But its success has also made it easy for governments to shift responsibility to the voluntary sector for providing responsive immigrant services. Although it is easy to conclude from this study that such an approach represents enlightened public policy in an age of budgetary restraint and downloading all manner of services, a more critical perspective is that forcing the voluntary sector to take on a larger and larger role in service provision is inconsistent with a national commitment to an equitable, multicultural society. SUCCESS has demonstrated that a voluntary association can be an extremely effective provider of immigrant services, but how transferable the SUCCESS model is remains an important unanswered question.

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