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Perpetuating Racism in the Adult Education Professoriate: A Liberatory Process for White European American Professors

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Abstract: *The purpose of this case study research was to identify attitudes and analyze the behaviors of White European American members of the Adult Education professoriate to determine how and in what ways racism is perpetuated in their profession and practice.*

Content of the Roundtable

The following questions will be addressed to promote discussion during the session: What are the schools of thought regarding the issue of racism in the professoriate? Describe the current discourse going on in the field regarding racism? How have you been involved in the discourse? In looking at the White Racial Identity Development process, what stage or phase resonates with you individually? Participants of the roundtable may be White European Americans who have an interest in examining attitudes and behaviors perpetuating racism and in developing a nonracist identity.

Background of the Problem

Covert and overt racism are realities in the United States just as in adult education graduate programs and organizations. Adult education prides itself on being sensitive to racial communities; papers are written, research is conducted, and sessions are presented at conferences regarding various ways professors can teach and interact more effectively with colleagues and students as indicated in the AERC 2003 Proceedings. Inclusive teaching, hegemony, oppression, racialization, and cultures were written about and discussed; racism perpetuated by White European American adult education professors was not.

“Yet, we believe that to infuse a refocusing of the discussion of racism onto its perpetrators is the first big step in the slaying of this giant” (Clark & O'Donnell, 1999, p. 9). If the academy does not discuss and write about the racism and privilege of White European American professors, how can change occur within the profession? Faculty and students of color continue to be negatively impacted by those practicing professionals who are not aware of their racist attitudes and behaviors. The White majority in education often do not acknowledge racism (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002, Winter). Change does not occur within an individual unless a critical self-evaluation process is part of their practice. “Instructors cannot transform their practice unless they have transformed themselves” (Alfred, 2002, Winter, p. 89).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to identify attitudes and analyze the behaviors of White European American members of the Adult Education professoriate to determine how and in what ways racism is perpetuated in the profession and practice of adult education. Attitudes and behaviors were examined as they related to inclusion of professors of color in the professional organization, curriculum and praxis. The discourse in the field of adult education regarding the current values and beliefs, attitudes and behaviors contributing to racism, and the impact of racism on our students and colleagues was also relevant to the study.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The basis for this research resided in the synthesis of critical theory and the philosophy of liberation (Kellner, 2004). Both described forces of domination and tactics for liberation. Both are critical and emancipatory theories which criticized Western Philosophy as a foundation of domination. An examination of racism within the adult education professoriate using only critical theory focuses on liberation from oppression using only an ethnocentric lens, a micro focus; while the philosophy of liberation provides a macro focus on systems of world domination. As articulated by Kellner (2004) synthesizing critical theory and the philosophy of liberation allows for the cause of liberation in both the dominate and the marginalized; articulating differences but also exploring commonalities

Research Design

The research study was qualitative in design and process. In-depth interviews were conducted to discover, understand, and gain insight into the participants lived experience as it related to the research topic. Case study was selected to describe and analyze the phenomenon of racism in the adult education professoriate. The data collection for this study used interviews and field notes to gain insight into the attitudes and behaviors perpetuating racism. Analysis of interview responses and field notes were codified to obtain a description of the identified attitudes and behaviors perpetuating racism in the adult education professoriate. White Racial Identity Development Models (Helms, 1995; Sue, 2003) were used to determine the relative developmental phase of each participant during the interview. Analysis was accomplished with the use of categories, recognition of phrases to isolate relevant themes and patterns.

Conclusions

Several themes emerged from the research involving the prominence and understanding of the literature in the field regarding racism; attitudes and behaviors perpetuating racism; and the current stage or phase of White Racial Identity Development of participants.

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