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Learning for Food System Justice: Exploring Action Research and Knowledge Production in the Local Food Movement

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Abstract: I explore how adult educators can contribute to food system justice through the lens of action research. The Appalachian Foodshed Project provides a contemporary illustration of action research focusing on community food security. Implications emphasize food system movements as legitimate spaces for adult educational inquiry.

Introduction

Adult education is a collaborative praxis often described as a participatory-based experience where learners and adult educators negotiate socially-constructed knowledge, ideologies, and practices (Cevaro & Wilson, 2001). While the concept of participation might be seen as an overused cliché in the education of adults, educators have historically utilized popular education and critical pedagogy as powerful means for transformative action within development agendas for the purpose of engendering cultural and social equity (Freire, 1970). Participatory adult education takes on an explicitly critical position that is focused on the nature of social action, on the way knowledge is produced and controlled, and the ways in which social actors learn for or about social resistance and change. According to Campbell and Burnaby (2001), adult learners and educators are seen as equal participants with educators resigning and learners assuming positions of power and control. In community development circles, this process has been variously partnered with such discourses as participatory learning (Rogers, 2004) and action research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Although these discourses may represent different traditions, the common thread across each is the ways in which educational practices are tied to democratic processes of social change and justice.

Food System Justice and Action Research

The tradition of participatory adult education has been a major contributor to formation of food system discourses worldwide (Pretty, 1995; Röling & Wagemakers, 1998). Publically and privately funded initiatives have burgeoned since the 1990s to address the complex issues of food access and availability with/in limited resource and marginalized communities under the umbrella of sustainable agriculture and community food security (Allen, 2004). Following the emergence of the local food movement in North America, we specifically see how action research and participatory learning frameworks are starting to serve as a seedbed for place-based social action and food system justice associated with sustainability and community food systems (Feenstra, 2002; Hassanein, 2003; Porter et al., 2012). These initiatives often comprise stakeholder groups that not only reflect a wide range of professional disciplines and social agendas but emphasize a diversity of racial, gender, and economic relationships that illustrate the complexity of food system politics that stretch across time and space.

The Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP) is recent multi-site action research project that aims to address issues of community food security in West Virginia and the Appalachian regions of North Carolina and Virginia. Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 2011, the AFP creatively works with communities, farmers, policymakers, non-profits, and institutions to better understand the food system and implement changes that have long term benefits for all people in the region. At the heart of this project is the development of a regional coalition to guide and implement strategies to enhance community food security—a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice (Hamm & Bellows, 2003).

Implications for adult education theory/practice

Given the elaborate knowledge and power dynamics within the AFP, food system action research surfaces pertinent questions that bring the purview of the adult educator to the forefront. For example, how are food system actors developing and using place-based, participatory learning approaches and action research models? What do these models look like in practice? How are adult and community-based educators engendering these experiences? How can we ensure social justice outcomes have long-term and collective impact (Kania, & Kramer, 2011) across food system? What conceptual orientations are needed to assess these outcomes and impacts? Drawing upon these and other questions, I aim to generate dialogue about the ways in which adult educators can contribute to food system justice through the lens of action research. Theoretical and programmatic perspectives are both warranted. Such dialogue emphasizes food system movements as legitimate spaces for adult educational inquiry.

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