Who Were the Women? An In-depth Analysis of Some Additional Early Women Adult Educators

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Abstract: The roundtable reports the ongoing research that addresses the gap related to a lack of analysis of early women contributors to the literature of adult education. The contributions of four women are highlighted: Eve Chappell, Mae C. Hawes, Ruth Kotinsky, and Bonaro Wilkinson Overstreet.

In the early years of the field of adult education in the United States, women were prominent contributors to the growth of the field, particularly to the literature base. Previous publications provide some explanation for why women moved from the center to the margins as contributors to the field’s literature base after the early period, but no extended analysis of the early women contributors has been conducted. The initial phase of the project, reported during a 2008 AERC Roundtable, examined the roles of women in developing the literature base from 1926-1941, the types of literature produced, and the connections or networks that may have fostered their efforts. The initial work investigated the Journal of Adult Education; and the series Studies in the Social Significance of Adult Education in the United States, both published by the American Adult Education Association (AAEA). It also identified some of the connections among many of the women.

The current phase of the study focuses on a more in-depth analysis of some of the women identified in the first phase of the project. A 2009 AERC Roundtable reported on four women who were selected for further investigation during this phase: Lucy Wilcox Adams, Jesse Charters, Mary L. Ely, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher. The contributions of these women were assessed based on findings from a number of sources. An in-depth analysis of four additional women is being reported in the 2011 Roundtable.

Eve Chappell

Eve Chappell was the most frequent woman contributor to the Journal of Adult Education, authoring a total of nine articles between 1929 and 1941. She also co-authored Women in Two Worlds with Mary Ely and two of her articles were reprinted in Adult Education in Action. In the initial JAE articles, she was identified as a free lance writer, who had been a reporter for the Rocky Mountain News; a 1935 article described her as a “newspaper woman, trained observer and recorder of observations” and in 1940, she was identified as a “frequent contributor to the journal; writes of many things but her chief interest is people.” Eve was born in 1874 and her 1924 passport application listed her as a widow living in New York City. It is unclear how she started writing for JAE but it appears that she and Mary Ely were friends. Her articles were descriptive in nature and covered a myriad of topics, including adult education for blacks in Harlem and the School for Adult Jewish Education.
Mae C. Hawes

AAEA funded two projects for African Americans from 1931 to 1934. Mae C. Hawes, on the Auburn library staff, directed the one in Atlanta. She was clearly a collaborator, working with a committee, black and white, of college presidents, librarians, and business people. Under her direction, the project provided literacy program support, discussion groups for school/college teachers and churchwomen, a mobile book fair, classes in citizenship, and useful home skills. Miss Hawes went on to contribute years of leadership and teaching at Atlanta University School of Social Work, as Dean of Women at Cheyney State College, at Tennessee State as math instructor and department head, and as a YWCA field secretary. In 1968 at age 81, she was still working as the oldest VISTA volunteer, living on a minimal stipend at the Henry Street Settlement House in New York City’s Lower East Side, teaching immigrants and illiterate adults. In her teaching, she used practical and experiential methods to teach reading and math, including religious songs, soul food recipes, and street signs.

Ruth Kotinsky

Born in 1903, Ruth was a younger colleague in the newly established adult education field. She worked for the YMCA in Manhattan and earned her Ph.D. at Columbia in 1933. She turned her dissertation into Adult Education and the Social Scene. Like others, she believed that adult education was a key to fostering democracy and that education was lifelong long. She advocated planning and action by learners themselves. Ruth contributed a chapter about the YMCA to the 1936 Adult Education in Action, edited Adventures in Adult Education, and authored Adult Education Councils (1940). She worked for the National Council of Parent Education, and was their journal editor. She assisted with Reorganizing Secondary Education (1940), and authored Elementary Education of Adults: A Critical Interpretation (1941). She worked as a field representative, editor and research director for AAEA and wrote a chapter on intercultural education in the 1948 Handbook of Adult Education in the US. In 1955, she became director of research for Family Services Association of America.

Bonaro Wilkinson Overstreet

Bonaro Wilkinson Overstreet was also a frequent contributor to the JAE, writing eight articles between 1929 and 1941. In 1929, when she was a participant in the residential summer program for California adult education leaders and teachers, she met Harry Overstreet, who was the program’s director. They married in 1932 and became partners in many aspects of their professional lives. They co-authored Leaders for Adult Education (1941) and Town Meeting Comes to Town (1938) and also lectured together using a give and take method that Harry had developed. Bonaro also wrote a number of other books that were not directly related to adult education and was a published poet. Her JAE articles were descriptive, as were most articles that appeared in that publication. She was a research associate for the American Association of Adult Education and taught courses at various universities. When she died in 1985 at the age of 82, an obituary in the New York Times described her as “an author, poet and psychologist.”