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Susan Imel

Gretchen Bersch

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Unsung Heroines: Early Women Contributors to Adult Education

Susan Imel
The Ohio State University (Retired)

Gretchen Bersch
University of Alaska-Anchorage

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Abstract: The lives of 26 women, who contributed to adult education sometime during the period 1925 to 1950, were analyzed for common themes. Themes included the role of the Carnegie Foundation, leadership, advocacy, and discussion-based adult education.

Adult education in North America can be traced as far back as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Stubblefield & Keane 1994). In the U.S., the organization of the field is generally considered to have taken place during the 1920s under the auspices of the Carnegie Foundation with the founding of the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE). In Canada, adult education was also organizing during this same period, with the first association, also funded by Carnegie, being formed in 1929 in the province of Newfoundland. According to Selman & Draper (1991) the years between 1915 and 1939, “witnessed a conscious adult education movement in Canada” (p. 65).

In the U.S., women were active contributors and played a prominent role in the development of the field’s literature during the early years (e.g., 1925 to 1950). In the 1930s, “women were an integral part of the adult education fabric: as planners and innovators, as thinkers, and especially as writers and editors of the scores of articles, books, and handbooks that characterized the period” (Hilton, 1982, p. 12). Mary L. Ely co-edited or edited the *Journal of Adult Education* from 1929 until its close in 1941, the key activity of the new Association and its voice nationally and internationally, according to AAAE director Morse Cartwright (1931). Many of the early adult education books were also written by women. The first AAAE handbooks, considered to be primary publications in the field, were edited by women and many women practitioners wrote chapters for those handbooks. In addition to Dorothy Rowden and Mary Ely, editors of the handbooks produced between 1934 and 1948, names such as Bonaro Wilkinson Overstreet, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Ruth Kotinsky, and Jesse Charters are associated with the field’s early development. Between 1948 when the handbook was edited by Mary Ely and 1990, when Sharan Merriam and Phyllis Cunningham edited the handbook, the presence of women in the handbook series was marginalized, with most chapters being written by white males (Cervero & Merriam, 2007). Beyond the journal and the handbooks, women’s presence in the field was nearly invisible during this period as well, particularly as reflected in the field’s histories of adult education in the United States (Hugo, 1990; Thompson & Schied, 1996).

Although the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE) was founded in 1935, the Canadian literature base in adult education developed later. In 1991, Selman and Draper characterized it as being in “its infancy” but stated that in the past two decades (e.g., 1970s and

1980s) it had increased greatly (p. 291), largely due to the development of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education in 1981 as the scholarly counterpart for the CAAE (Plumb, 2009). In Canada, women were also making contributions to the field but similar to the situation in the U.S., their presence was invisible. Some of the only places they appeared in print were in the minutes of association meetings, study club booklets, and newspapers (e.g., *The Maritime Cooperator*, connected to the Antigonish Movement) and as editors and contributors to the practice-based journal *Food for Thought*, published by CAAE from 1940-1961.

No extended analysis of the early women, their contributions, and any of their writing has been conducted. Furthermore, the women whose names are usually associated with the field's early development are white so a need exists to learn about women from other racial or ethnic groups who were active in the field's development. Welton (2010) sums up the situation regarding the status of women in the field when he succinctly states "adult education history in Canada and the U.S. has been (and still is) White, male, and middle class in sensibility" (p. 85). Women's contributions should be acknowledged and included in the field's histories. But, these efforts need to do more than just restore women to their rightful place; they also need to include a critical examination of previous assumptions based on gender (Hugo, 1990) as well as begin to celebrate more than so-called scholarly writing.

One of the major purposes of this research is to document the contributions of North American women who were active in the field of adult education sometime during the period 1925-1950. Much has been written about this period of the field, but little information exists on the efforts of women during the era. The research is designed to address this gap and restore women to their rightful place in the history of adult education in North America. The 26 women selected for inclusion achieved a range of accomplishments. Some were primarily editors and writers, while others were practitioners but all contributed to the field's growth and development. (See Table 1 for information on the 26 women included in the book.)

Since most of the women whose names are identified with the field's early years were white, an effort was made to identify women of other races and cultures for inclusion in the book. Of the women profiled, 18 were white, four were African-American, two were Hispanic, two were Native American (Delaware and Tlingit). In an era when marriage and child bearing was an expectation for women, ten were single; one was divorced and three were widowed and none of the divorced and widowed women remarried. Only seven of the 16 women who were (or had been married) had children. For the era, the women were a remarkably well-educated group; all but three of the 25 for which information about education is available had at least some college. Four had a Ph.D., and several had advanced degrees.

The research used a number of bodies of literature as sources on the lives of the women. These included written materials by and about the women, archival materials, personal communication (e.g., interviews), dissertations, and historical sources from the field of adult education. In some cases, family members provided materials such as photographs and unpublished manuscripts.

Table 1. Information on Women Included in Book

NAME	DOB/DOD	BRIEF DESCRIPTION
Lucy Wilcox Adams	1898/1996	CA AAE; discussion-based adult education; forums
Nora Bateson	1896/1956	Librarian/social activist; headed library systems
Nannie Helen Burroughs	1876/1961	Women's Industrial Club, Women's Convention, Nat'l Training School for Women & Girls
Fabiola Cabeza de Baca (Gilbert)	1894/1991	First Spanish-speaking extension agent in NM; writer
Olive Dame Campbell	1882/1954	Co-Founded John C. Campbell Folk School
Jessie A. Charters	1880/1971	First woman professor of adult ed; Ohio State U.
Jean Carter (Ogden)	1897/1974	Workers' education; community development in VA
Eve Chappell	1874/1949?	Writer/editor; co-author of <i>Women in Two Worlds</i>
Mary L. Ely	1881/1950	Editor of <i>Journal of Adult Educ</i> ; author & editor
Dorothy C. Fisher	1879/1958	Author <i>Why Stop Learning</i> , AAAE president
Mary Parker Follett	1868/1933	Philosopher, business & organizational theory
Mae C. Hawes	1886/1979	Teacher, Atlanta AAAE project director
Maria L. Hernández	1896/1986	Mexican American activist & educator, radio & TV
Dorothy Hewitt	1897/1987	Founder of Boston Center for Adult Education
Virginia Estelle Randolph	1874/1958	Teacher trainer, Jeanes Teachers leader & community educator in Black communities
Ruth Kotinsky	1903/1955	Author of adult ed books, research associate
Roberta C. Lawson	1878/1940	President General Federation of Women's Clubs
Florence O'Neill	1905/1990	Adult education director, Newfoundland
Bonaro Overstreet	1903/1985	Prolific author, poet, forums & colloquy facilitator
Elizabeth Peratrovich	1911/1958	Instrumental in winning AK Native civil rights, president of Ak Native Sisterhood
Harriett Rouillard	1898/1987	Editor, CAAE's <i>Food for Thought</i>
Amy Paddon Row	1884/1977	Prison educator and arts teacher
Dorothy Rowden	1901/2000	Editor, 1934 & 1936 handbooks, AAAE staff.
Hilda W. Smith	1888/1984	Leader in women's worker education
Moranda Smith	1915/1950	Union educator and leader for workers' rights
Isabel Wilson	1904/1983	Developed discussion guides for CAAE's radio program, <i>Citizen's Forum</i> ; writer/editor

Common Themes

Some common themes emerged from an analysis across the collected “stories” of the women included in the study. As shown in Table 1, the lives of the women included in the study encompassed both World Wars and the Great Depression. These historical events may have had an impact on what they accomplished since it was a time of changing roles for women. Gender is the common denominator across the lives of the women featured in this book; however using only gender as an organizing factor can mask “greater recognition and appreciation of differences among women” (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 19). In describing some of the

common themes, it is not our intent to diminish the diversity of the lives of the women. Rather it is an effort to pull together some of the common factors across their stories.

The Role of the Carnegie Foundation

All roads lead to Carnegie. Carnegie funded the AAAE. This was especially critical through the Depression years, funding the *Journal of Adult Education* and paying salaries of women as writers, researchers and staff. Carnegie funding published books by Eve Chappell, Mary Ely, Dorothy C. Fisher, Ruth Kotinsky, Dorothy Rowden, Jean Carter Ogden, Bonaro Overstreet, and Hilda W. Smith. Six of the women were on the AAAE staff as research or field representatives, directors of projects, or working in other roles including Eve Chappell, Mary Ely, Mae Hawes, Ruth Kotinsky, Dorothy Rowden, and Jean Carter Ogden. Four worked in projects or institutes outside of the AAAE that were funded by Carnegie- Lucy W. Adams, Nora Bateson, Olive Campbell and Jessie Charters. Lucy W. Adams and Dorothy Rowden worked with Carnegie funded radio projects. Carnegie funding also assisted in the formation of the CAAE and Harriet Rouillard and Isabel Wilson were active in the Canadian association's publication program.

Discussion as a Delivery Method and Adult Education for Democracy

Discussion-based programming for adults as a delivery method was woven throughout several of the women's stories. Preparing adults to be more effective citizens in a democratic society was the goal of much of this discussion, a goal that was consistent with the Carnegie Foundation's beliefs about adult education. AAAE was founded during a period following World War I that included economic unrest and the rise of totalitarian governments in Europe. Frederick Keppel, who headed the Carnegie Foundation, felt that adult education could be a vehicle for promoting democracy (Imel, 2012). Women associated with the discussion method included Lucy Adams, Jessie Charters, Mary Ely, Dorothy Hewitt, and Bonaro Overstreet. Adams, Charters, Hewitt, and Overstreet planned and carried out discussion-based adult education activities. Ely traveled all over the country to visit forums and assess their effectiveness and wrote "Why Forums." Carnegie funding provided support for the work of Adams, Charters, and Ely.

Advocacy

The nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution giving women the right to vote was ratified in 1920, just six years before the AAAE was organized, so it was a time of great change for women in North America as they continued to work for civil rights and social justice. Olive Dame Campbell was a social activist and community organizer in Appalachia; Isabel Wilson worked, especially through radio, for social justice and rights for women across Canada. Women of color worked for civil rights, including African Americans Nannie Helen Burroughs and Mae C. Hawes; Hispanic and Mexican-American rights, Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert and Maria L. Hernández; and Alaska Native rights, Elizabeth Peratrovich, and Native American rights, Roberta Campbell. Three others advocated for workers rights- Hilda W. Smith and Jean Carter; Moranda Smith, a Black union activist.

Leadership

Most of the women profiled in the book demonstrated leadership, some of it in tandem with their advocacy work. As shown in Table 1, many founded and/or led existing organizations, including national organizations. Some were involved in leadership in government and education, including universities, cooperative extension, and provincial governments. They were central figures in the adult education movement during the period.

Building the Knowledge Base

Many of the women in the study were involved in editing books and journals, and writing books and articles that formed an important part of the literature base of the field during the years 1925-1950. Women played a significant role in the publications program of AAAE and also CAAE. By 1941, shortly before AAAE lost its Carnegie funding, women were in charge of all aspects of the association's publication program (Rose, forthcoming). In addition to association-sponsored publications, the women wrote books that were published by mainline presses and produced other types of materials that were used by adult learners. The work of these women in producing publications and contributing to the literature base was not insignificant but much of it has been lost to the field because it is unavailable—even in most university collections.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Some of the implications for the development of adult education theory and practice from the study include the following:

- Greater attention should be focused on the field's history, for the women's stories include information that is relevant for contemporary adult education programs and practices. For example, many of the women were engaged in adult education programs that advocated critical thinking, discussion, listening and reflection, all practices advocated by contemporary adult learning theory.
- The research and writing of the women included in the study should be reexamined for its potential contribution to the field's theory base.
- The written histories of the field should be critically examined to uncover assumptions based on gender and rewritten to include the contributions of women. This examination might also highlight the reasons women were excluded earlier.
- Although women are mostly overlooked in the field's histories, those who are included are white and predominately middle class; the research highlighted stories of women of color and these need to be made more central in the history of adult education.
- An analysis of how societal forces influenced adult education during the period 1925-1950 could provide lessons for current day programs.
- An examination of the role Carnegie Foundation and institutions such as Columbia University played in the development of both the AAAE and CAAE could give insight into issues such as how women were encouraged or discouraged by this support.

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