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Developing Anti-Racist Scholars: The Role of Adult Education Graduate Programs

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper and this roundtable is to explore the role of adult education graduate programs in preparing anti-racist scholars. In dialogue with others, we seek to understand the broad roles that programs have and the specific responsibilities that adult education graduate students, faculty members, and program administrators may undertake toward this end.

Introduction

A search of the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) Proceedings from 1993-2008 revealed that the issue of racism was addressed at every conference held during this period of time. However, none of the papers, symposiums, or roundtables focused on the role of adult education graduate programs in preparing anti-racist scholars.

As developing scholars undertaking doctoral studies in adult education, we are on personal journeys to explore our respective positionalities as a White female and Black male and the impact that our positionalities have on our research. As we individually and jointly strive to understand: what constitutes anti-racist scholarship, what it means to be an anti-racist researcher, and how one becomes an anti-racist scholar, we recognize the importance of learning from and with others. We see a role for adult education graduate programs in fostering and supporting such learning. Therefore, the purpose of this paper and this roundtable is to begin a dialogue with other adult education graduate students, faculty members, administrators, and practitioners on the role of adult education graduate programs in developing anti-racist scholars.

Anti-Racist Research

Anti-racist research assumes that there is institutional racism in mainstream social science research. This is evident in the topics of study; the concepts and methodologies that are privileged; who is allowed, legitimated, and validated to research what and how; and how existing power structures allow for the production and dissemination of certain knowledges (Dei, 2005; Deschler, & Grudens-Schuck, 2000).

The purpose of anti-racist research is to further the understanding of how social oppression both constructs and constrains racial identity. Anti-racist research, therefore, must place “the minoritized at the center of analysis by focusing on their lived experience” (Dei, 2005, p. 2). It is not about the researcher becoming situated in another person’s lived experience; rather, it is about the researcher critically engaging her or his own lived experience in the pursuit of new knowledge. It is also about questioning the social structures that oppress people of various races and ethnicities and using the knowledge gained to break down these structures; i.e. to affect social change (Dei, 2005).

Preparing Anti-Racist Scholars

Racism is difficult to discuss. Issues of power, oppression, and privilege are challenging to explore. “Because ethnicity and especially race are emotion-laden issues; these are difficult matters for scholars to confront honestly, because scholarly reflection cannot force most

Americans and other Westerners to engage willingly in introspection about these topics” (Stansfield II, 1993, p. 6). Yet, to become an anti-racist scholar one must engage in introspection on these thorny and complicated issues.

Given that adult education graduate programs are the primary vehicle through which the next generation of adult education researchers is trained, it would seem self-evident that these programs should play a key role in fostering the development of anti-racist scholars. However, some have criticized that as the disciplinary field of adult education has professionalized, it has lost its historical social change focus (Cunningham, 1996). While today’s adult education graduate programs have a clear focus on the preparation of technically competent scholars, do these programs also have an intentional and explicit focus on preparing scholars who are critically competent; i.e. to conduct research from a critical perspective?

Our overarching question is “What is the role of adult education programs in preparing anti-racist scholars?” This question raises a broad range of related questions that include: (a) “What responsibilities do programs have in developing anti-racist scholars?”; (b) “What are the potential roles of adult education administrators, faculty members, and students in this regard?”; (c) “What efforts are programs currently undertaking toward this end?”; and (d) “How can efforts to develop anti-racist scholars be tied to broader issues related to research and Other marginalized people?”

Desired Outcomes

Given the broad scope of this topic, the complex issues involved, the page limit for this paper, and the short amount of time for the roundtable dialogue, our desired outcomes are modest. We will feel successful if we have brought attention to this important issue and have created an environment where people of diverse positionalities, with various roles in adult education graduate programs, and who have different opinions on this topic are made to feel welcomed and to have their voices heard.

Additional outcomes sought include the identification of: (a) others that are engaged in preparing anti-racists scholars or are interested in this issue, (b) literature that would inform this topic, (c) evidence-based or promising practices designed to prepare anti-racist scholars, and (d) broad research areas and specific research questions related to this issue.

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