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Quiet Noise: Adult Education's Silence on Disabilities

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Abstract: This paper identifies gaps in adult education literature on disability, examines the presence of persons with disabilities in adult education settings, and argues for their inclusion in the discourse. A search of titles, keywords and abstracts of journal articles from 2010 through 2016 documented a failure to address disability as a social justice concern in adult education.

Introduction

Given the social justice orientation of adult education and the presence in adult education settings of persons with disabilities (PWD) who have particular needs, the invisibility of PWD in adult education discourse is problematic. Equal access is frequently discussed in adult education, yet lifelong learning options for PWD are rarely addressed with specificity. Adult education can provide opportunities for PWD to participate more fully in society, and acknowledging their marginalization as a social justice concern provides a way for researchers and educators to include them in adult education scholarship and practice.

Disability, Intersectionality, and Social Justice

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities" (US Department of Justice, 2017, para. 2). Disability theory explains the evolution of how PWD have been viewed through the lens of the deficit model, the medical model, the social model, and the human rights model. A shift toward recognizing a difference in disability and impairment has occurred; disability is a socially created state of oppression that PWD experience, and impairment is the limiting physical or psychological characteristics individuals have (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002). While the circumstances of PWD have been described as "divine punishment, karma or moral failing, and ...biological deficit, the disability movement has focused attention onto social oppression, cultural discourse and environmental barriers" (Shakespeare, 2013, p. 214).

An important transformation in the perception of disability resulted from the work of Paul Hunt and Vic Finkelstein through the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). They believed it was "society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of [their] impairments, by the way [they] are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society" (UPIAS, 1975, p.4). UPIAS emphasized the importance of recognizing that disability is socially created. By examining adult education structures rather than focusing solely on individual student needs, adult educators and researchers can address the exclusion of PWD from lifelong learning opportunities.

It is imperative for adult educators to see that "[w]hat is and what is not an impairment is historically, culturally, and socially variable" (Barnes, 2012, p. 16); if disability is determined by society, and "neither ideology nor culture is politically neutral" (Barnes, 2012, p. 16), then there are underlying issues of social justice in the education of PWD. If adult education is true to its principles, the field will begin to reorient itself in relation to disability studies and PWD. As with other movements of marginalized groups, liberation from oppression is part of the disability movement. Based on the emphasis on social justice in the writings of adult education,

intersectionality is useful as the concept that joins the social model of disability and social justice, "giv[ing] impetus to initiate . . . [an] agenda challenging simultaneous forms of discrimination experienced by disabled students . . . on the grounds of their class, racial, cultural, sexual, etc. characteristics" (Liasidou, 2014, p. 125).

While the prevalence of the medical model sees disability as the fault of PWD who need to be fixed or accommodated, adult education's treatment of disability can instead be viewed in terms of commonality with issues of race, gender, class, and other marginalizing factors. Differences do not have to separate individuals or groups. It is important to look at the connections between various identity markers because they can compound the marginality of individuals who represent multiple oppressed groups. These are significant relationships that can be communicated in the discourse of adult education. For example, if adult education aims to address issues of race and gender, as evidenced by the presence of articles on these topics in the literature, it cannot ignore disability; "[d]isabled people, women, children, queer people, people of colour and poor people share an Other space to that of the dominant same that is founded upon ableist, heteronormative, adult, white European and North American, high-income nation's values" (Goodley, 2013, p. 637).

When Goodley (2013) talked about the "increasingly complicated entanglement of disability, gender, sexuality, nation, ethnicity, age and class" (p. 641), he was describing opportunities for adult education scholarship to "develop[e] theories that are in concert with contemporary lives, the complexities of alienation and rich hopes of resistance" (p. 641). These entanglements are significant as the prevalence of marginalized groups in adult education offers scholars in this field a unique way to analyze that intersectionality.

Membership in one group may also lead to membership in another. For example, people with disabilities are also often poor as their economic opportunities are limited; class and disability are linked. Identity development, equity in educational environments, access to educational opportunities, inclusion in all aspects of education, what and how adult education is taught, and how assessment is determined are all significant areas of concern for adult educators and researchers that are also essential to disability studies.

Recognizing the Exclusion of Disability in Adult Education Literature

In all areas of adult education, there are learners of different races, genders, classes, sexual orientations, ethnicities, religions, ages, and disabilities. Yet the voices of some of these groups are heard more fully and loudly than others. The perceptions of PWD affect their ability to participate and contribute to society, and their views are important to include in discussions.

Methodology

A word search of titles, keywords, and abstracts for 696 articles in six prominent adult education journals was completed using 44 terms related to disability, including variations of the word, related terms and laws, and specific disabilities. The search covered articles published in *Adult Education Quarterly, Adult Learning, Journal of Adult and Continuing Education, The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* and *Studies in the Education of Adults* from 2010 through 2016. The index of the 2010 edition of *The Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* was also examined.

Findings

There were 19 articles related to disability published during the 7-year period, and 10 of those were in the Winter 2011 special issue of *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. Of the other 9 articles, 6 focused on topics related to PWD including PWD's

educational experiences and perspectives, study strategies for PWD with traumatic brain injury, collaboration between caregivers and tutors to increase literacy in PWD, the transition to adulthood for PWD, knowledge acquisition and problem-solving in the educational experiences of PWD, and social movement learning that can increase dialogue on disability issues. In the remaining three articles, PWD were not the central focus.

In the special edition of *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Rocco (2011) argued that "there is no issue of diversity, privilege, or human rights in the field of adult education that has been given less attention than disability" (p. 1), documenting the lack of disability literature since the 1980s. This issue included articles on critical disability theory, the context of ableism, the limits of using the traditional medical model of disability, depression, alterity, parent adaptation after a child's diagnosis, disabled veterans transitioning to the workplace, learning disabilities and literacy, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the oppression that results from socially constructed disability, reflecting a range of topics connecting disability and adult education. Yet despite Rocco's goal of highlighting disability in adult education, "help[ing] the field broaden its view of disability from a medical or economic concern to a social justice concern" (p. 1), there were only 6 articles on disability in succeeding years. Significantly, without the special issue only 6 articles out of 686 published in journals over 7 years focused precisely on the education of PWD, reflecting .87% of the examined literature. Despite the fact that "15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability" (WHO, 2017, para. 1), persons with disabilities are still virtually invisible in adult education discourse.

The 2010 edition of *The Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* contains one chapter on disability. A review of the index reveals 49 specific references to this chapter, one reference to inclusion that mentions disability and 2 references to a specific disability. The chapter that specifically discusses access covers all but 4 references to accessibility. Although disability is listed, the intersectionality of PWD and specific groups for whom access is often restricted or denied, such as the poor, English language learners, and those without basic academic skills is not addressed. The barriers faced, such as economic conditions, are described for other marginalized groups, but they are not explicitly addressed for PWD. There are also 9 cross-references that direct readers to the category "Disabled Learners" where only 3 of 52 listings are for different chapters. Other than the chapter on disability, the references to disability usually consist of a mention as "disability" in a list of marginalized groups or the reference to "disability studies" in a list of theoretical frameworks; there is no substantial analysis of disability in significant areas of adult education where PWD are present.

Discussion of Disability in the Adult Education Context

There are several adult education learning environments where it is particularly important to include disability in the discussion. Today there are growing numbers of PWD attending 4-year universities, community colleges, Adult Basic Education courses, English as a Second Language classes, workplace and vocational training sessions, and health and wellness programs. The numbers of veterans and online students with disabilities in adult education has also increased. Because addressing issues of equity is a crucial element of adult education programs (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010, p. 6), the omission of PWD from adult education dialogue is a significant deficit, particularly as "[p]eople with disabilities constitute possibly the largest minority group whose access . . . has been limited" (Rocco & Fornes, 2010, p. 379). The importance of power in educational systems and society in general is a compelling topic in adult education literature, particularly from the emancipatory and critical perspectives.

Gaining access to education and opportunities that come with education is another noteworthy subject in adult education. Ginsberg and Wlodkowsi (2010) cited figures that show an increase in adults involved in formal education, yet they acknowledged that "when these numbers are examined through the lens of income, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and credential and degree completion, troubling disparities and challenges emerge" (p. 25). Significantly, these numbers reflect inequities within an area of society that has been historically committed to fighting inequality (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010, p. 25). Access to educational opportunities for PWD is especially important because they not only face barriers due to discrimination based on race, class, gender or other identity markers, but they also face impairment specific barriers such as a lack of wheelchair ramps, missing closed captioning on videos, or unavailability of audio for text. Social justice requires that all people have equal access to opportunities for success. As adult education works to provide more learners with opportunities to find success, and, therefore, create a more just society, attention to access is required. Ginsberg and Wlodowski (2010) argued that equal opportunity "is grounded in every adult being prepared for skilled work and formal education, being able to afford their costs, and having the will and opportunity to learn…. [Adult educators and researchers can] reignite the discourse and action for equitable access and participation" (p. 32). Including disability in this new discussion is essential. Access is also about inclusivity; providing access does not necessarily ensure equal opportunities.

Recognizing and including PWD in adult education can provide more equitable learning opportunities within society. "[I]n teaching for social justice, it is inadequate to simply point out injustices; rather, educators must invite the learners to discuss and explore these injustices using their own perspectives and experiences so that they may fully understand them and enact change" (Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, and Bowles, 2010, p. 340). PWD disabilities must be included in all levels of adult education, as learners, as teachers, as program directors, as researchers, and as writers.

For adult education researchers, incorporating "disparate and marginalized voices, including the stories, contributions, and histories of the 'others' who are often omitted from our texts" (Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, and Bowles, 2010, p. 340) is vital. The first step for including PWD is to recognize the need to shift the thinking toward a perspective that acknowledges the importance that "[b]uilding a community based on the representation of its rich diversity should be more than an exercise in absorption of assimilation" (Bernstein, 1996 cited in Moore & Slee, 2012, p. 230). Inclusive education requires a new way of looking at education; it requires educators who are not satisfied with merely accommodating disability and integrating PWD, assuming they must adapt to current educational structures, but educators who are willing to change those structures and meet the individual needs of all students.

Students in many adult education settings such as Adult Basic Education programs are often those who were previously unsuccessful. Schools often "practice a form of educational triage as they determine which students could be pulled through and those who aren't worth the effort" (Moore & Slee, 2012, p. 229); frequently students from marginalized populations, such as racial minorities, the poor, and the disabled, are those not targeted to be pulled through. Their presence in adult education represents the results of exclusionary educational practices and offers educators a chance to address this inequity. Disabled learners are particularly susceptible to being left out because, when identified as children, they typically end up in special education environments that are "segregating, insulated, self-protecting, [with a] racially biased

philosophy" (Gerber, 1996, quoted by Goodley, 2011, p. 139). Adult educators need to recognize that PWD are present in adult education settings and need to be fully included.

While it is easy to claim there are learners with disabilities in all areas of adult education, just as there are PWD in all other areas of society, whether visible or invisible, it is more complicated to comprehend the absence of disability from adult education discourse. One factor to consider is that "unlike race, class, gender, sexual preference, … disability is a relatively new category" (Davis, 2013, p. 263). If, as Davis (2013) claimed, "the political and academic movement around disability is … a first- or second-wave enterprise" (p. 263), then viewing disability as resulting from the negative constraints society has used to oppress PWD highlights the distinction between disability and impairment and provides a robust basis for its study in adult education. Recognizing the intersection of disability with race, gender, class, age, and sexual orientation provides an opening for critical thinking about the relationality of these factors in adult education.

Conclusion

When we question why the voices of learners with disabilities are silenced in adult education literature, we must consider the power structure within the field. Rocco and Fornes (2010), quoting Giroux (1992), argued that understanding "who speaks, under what conditions, for whom, and how knowledge is constructed and translated within and between different communities located within asymmetrical relations of power" (p. 385) is crucial. They went on to contend correctly that those in adult education perpetuate "this asymmetrical power relationship with people with disabilities by centering on issues of disease and health and not on the experiences of adults with disabilities as a social justice issue" (Rocco & Fornes, 2010, p. 385). This is where a shift must occur. This is where we can find the answer to the question asked by Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, and Bowles (2010), "How can we teach for change when for the most part, the adult education writings, especially work from North America and Europe, have encompassed an implicit cultural hegemony?" (p. 340). By using a new angle to view learners with disabilities, adult educators and researchers will see that, as a marginalized group, PWD and their needs and rights must be included in the social justice discourse of adult education.

Now, as we head further into the third decade after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, we can see that while "there has been an unprecedented upsurge of interest in the general area of disability amongst social scientists in universities and colleges across the world" (Barnes, 2012, p. 21), the field of adult education does not appear to have caught up with this wave of research, publication, and academic studies. We must seize the opportunities here and change the discourse on disability within adult education to reach the potential of the field for improving the lives of marginalized individuals.

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