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Lisa M. Baumgartner  
*Northern Illinois University*

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# **“I am one dedicated person working for freedom”: Septima P. Clark’s Contributions to Social Justice Adult Education at Highlander Folk School**

Lisa M. Baumgartner  
Northern Illinois University

Keywords: Septima P. Clark, social justice, Highlander Folk School

Abstract: This paper unearths Septima P. Clark’s contributions to adult education efforts at Highlander Folk School. Autobiographical texts and archival holdings were analyzed through a critical, feminist lens to determine her contributions. In addition, the adult education strategies she utilized in her work were examined using a Freireian framework.

The history of adult education has primarily been presented as a White, middle-class, male endeavor while the contributions of African Americans to the field of adult education have remained unknown (Denton, 1993; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Peterson, 2002). For example, it was the African American adult educator and Highlander Folk School employee Septima Clark along with Esau Jenkins and Bernice Robinson who envisioned, developed, and disseminated the Citizenship School Program, began in January, 1957 and continued until 1970, which empowered African Americans to vote. However, people associate Myles Horton, the founder of the Folk School, with the Citizenship program.

One of several of Clark’s social justice adult education initiatives during her lifetime, the Citizenship school program began on Johns Island, South Carolina under the auspices of the Highlander Folk School, founded in 1932, to promote social justice initiatives. Students learned literacy and voter registration requirements that assisted in African American voter registration efforts (Clark, 1986). Soon, Clark trained community leaders across the Deep South to teach and staff their own Citizenship Schools and African American voter registration skyrocketed. The Citizenship School program came under the direction of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1961 and was integral to the success of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s.

Despite her lifetime of contributions to social justice efforts, details of Clark’s activism as an adult educator remain in the shadows. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine, describe, and analyze Septima Clark’s contributions to the field of adult education. The specific research questions that guided this study were: (1) What contributions did Septima P. Clark make to the social justice adult education efforts at Highlander Folk School? and, (2) What adult education components or strategies can be identified in her work?

## **Theoretical Framework**

Much of the information on Clark’s professional life is seen through the eyes of others (Davis, 1981; Hornsby, 1991). I wanted to give voice to Clark’s social justice journey using *her* words. Hence, I used a narrative framework because this type of framework recognizes that “stories exist on several levels...including the community, region, national, cultural, and individual” (Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p. 124). Narrative explicitly acknowledges the larger context in which the story occurs (Johnson-Bailey, 2004).

Using a feminist and critical lens, I examined Clark's autobiographies and archival holdings to reconstruct Clark's work and teaching in a new light. Specifically, I analyzed Clark's life and teaching using Freireian concepts of oppression, problem-posing, and praxis.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data collection procedures included the analysis of Clark's two autobiographical texts *Echo in My Soul* (1962) and *Ready from Within* (1986) and data from three archival sites. I analyzed data at three locations including the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, Charleston, SC., the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, and the King Library and Archives in Atlanta, GA.

*Data collection and analysis for books.* Clark's text *Echo in My Soul* (1962) reveals Clark's thoughts in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement. It briefly discusses her childhood, young adulthood, and teaching career before coming to Highlander Folk School. However, much of the book concentrates on her work life as a social justice educator caught up in the details of her work for the Citizenship Schools. In contrast, *Ready from Within* (1986), written a year before her death, reveals a woman making sense of her life's work and celebrating her accomplishments.

I read both books three times. First, I read for information and created a basic chronology of Clark's life. On the second reading, I formed a loosely constructed narrative around each research question. After I completed the archival searches, I read each book a third time to glean information I may have missed. The experiences at the archives informed my third reading and allowed me to see information in a new light.

*Data collection and analysis for the archival searches.* The three archives were chosen because the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* indicated that these were the most data rich sites. The materials that I coded included interview transcripts, photos, programs, letters, announcements, and audiotapes. I examined the following collections at the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture: The Septima P. Clark Collection (1919-1978); Septima P. Clark and Bernice Robinson Collection (1965-1981); Esau Jenkins Collection (1960-1980); Peter and Lucille Poinsette Collection (1920-1990); and the Bernice Robinson Papers (1952-1989). At the Wisconsin Historical Society, I explored the following collections: Highlander Research and Education Records (1917-1978); Myles Horton Papers, (1851-1990); and Septima P. Clark (sound recording) (1973). At the King Library and Archives in Atlanta, GA, I reviewed the following collections: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference Records (1954-1970) and the Septima P. Clark Papers (1963-1967).

### **Findings**

Clark made numerous contributions in time, talent, and money to Highlander Folk School. Her roles included director of summer workshops, director of education, workshop planner, recruiter, curriculum designer, fundraiser, teacher, teacher trainer, supervisor and motivational speaker. Clark's contributions to Highlander are detailed below. In addition, Clark's adult education strategies including problem-posing and praxis are explained.

*Contributions to Highlander.* Fellow YWCA worker Anna Kelly urged Septima Clark to attend a Highlander workshop after Kelly returned from a workshop on public school desegregation in 1953 (Clark, 1986). Clark served as Director of Workshops for Highlander Folk School during the summers of 1954 and 1955 before becoming Director of Education in 1956 (Clark, 1962). Clark corresponded year-round with Myles Horton concerning her activities. Correspondence in 1955 included Clark's efforts to recruit potential community leaders on

Wadmalaw Island to attend Highlander workshops. In a report to Highlander Folk School, Clark detailed her activities:

On Sunday I visited one of our potential leaders on Wadmalaw Island...I went to the church to see him...I approached Mr. J \_\_\_\_\_ and told him of my plans to get him to attend a workshop at Highlander. He asked me to come into the service ...I sat through the service and was called on to talk at the end...[Clark said] Can you sit there and fail to register? To vote? Or refuse to join the NAACP? I trust not...Today I'm trying to find a man [sic] among you who will attend a workshop at Monteagle, Tennessee, where people from all over the United States and many countries across the sea will gather to share experiences of building recognition of human rights and bring to each person a chance for a good life...Show to the people around you that you have a [voter] registration certificate; that you will come out to the polls and vote when an election is on your island; that you have a membership card from the NAACP; and that you will send a man [sic] to represent you at the United Nations workshop or the desegregation workshop at Highlander Folk School...I will see that you have transportation there and back and can secure a few scholarships for community leaders. (Clark, 1955).

Clark invited Esau Jenkins, a citizen from Johns Island, SC to attend a workshop that discussed the United Nations in 1956. Jenkins, concerned with issues closer to home, indicated that adults on Johns Island interested in improving their reading skills and in voting did not have a place to meet (Clark, 1986). Jenkins and Clark convinced Horton to finance the first Citizenship School on Johns Island which was set up as a grocery store in the front and a classroom in the back two rooms (Clark, 1986). Clark noted that this arrangement was intentional, "We planned the grocery store to fool white people. We didn't want them to know that we had a school back there...We didn't have any windows back there at that time, so white people couldn't peep in" (Clark, 1986, p. 47).

When the first Citizenship School opened on Johns Island, SC in 1957, Clark and her niece Bernice Robinson, taught literacy and citizenship to adults so they could register to vote. Clark created a curriculum for Citizenship School attendees. She authored a Citizenship School booklet that contained information on the purpose of the Citizenship School, state requirements for registration and voting, and instructions on how to fill out a money order (My Reading Booklet, Southern Christian Leadership Conference Records, 1960). Later, she recruited community leaders in the Deep South and trained *them* to teach community members to read, write, and pass voting registration tests in order to register to vote.

Clark was also a fundraiser for Highlander Folk School. She wrote and distributed Highlander's annual report to potential donors. In a May, 1959 letter Clark described Highlander's mission, achievements, and need for financial support:

As you well know there are two Souths. There is the soul-sick South of the Ku Klux Klan...but there is also the South of Martin Luther King...and of brave educators (white and Negro) who have risked their careers...for their principles. Highlander is one of the few places in the South where Negro and white can meet and study together and work out ways to combat prejudice and segregation...My three years... at Highlander have been filled with achievements. We had Negro students of Clinton, Tennessee with us. Leaders in the Montgomery bus boycott have supplied leadership for some of our workshops...Numerous workshops have been conducted on Citizenship and Integration. Exciting citizenship and literacy classes have been taught by our students in the Sea Islands...What we are working for is an educational program that has become a resource

and rallying point for scores of brave southerners who are leading the fight for justice and better race relations in these crucial days...P. S. Won't you please make your check to Highlander Folk School today. Contributions are tax deductible. (Clark, 1959, p. 1).

In 1961, the Citizenship Program came under the auspices of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference founded by Martin Luther King, Jr. By this time, the Citizenship school program had gained national attention. Clark (1986) noted that a total of 897 citizenship schools were in operation before the program closed in 1970.

In short, it appears that Clark's duties at Highlander included secretarial duties such as writing reports, keeping track of attendance at schools, finding transportation to Highlander for students and taking notes at meetings. Other tasks are those of a leader or teacher: recruiting, writing donor letters, and creating curriculum.

*Adult education components/strategies.* Several of Clark's adult education strategies can be traced back to Paulo Freire. Freire (2000) believed that oppressed people needed to free themselves and their oppressors from oppression using a variety of strategies. First, Freire discouraged "banking education" where students served as receptacles of the instructor's knowledge. (p. 53). Freire encouraged students and teachers to engage in problem-posing, liberatory education. This type of education encouraged two-way dialogue about issues important to the student. Teachers facilitated students' critical reflection and action on community issues. In this quote, Clark demonstrates her commitment to student discussion and critical reflection in a training/leadership workshop.

We were trying to make teachers out of these people...We'd have a long discussion all morning about what the constitution was. We were never telling anybody. We used a very non-directive approach...The people left...went home to teach and to work in voter registration drives...They start their own citizenship classes, discussing the problems, in their own towns. 'How come the pavement stops where the black section begins?' Asking questions like that and then knowing who to go to talk to...or where to protest it. (Clark, 1986, p. 64).

Like Freire, Clark recognized that she needed to draw on people's experiences in order for them to learn. She used things familiar in their experience to teach them abstract concepts such as mathematics. Clark stated, "We used the amount of fertilizer and the amount of seeds to teach the arithmetic, how much they would pay for it and the like" (Walker, 1976, p. 7). Her adult literacy students learned words that were relevant to the issue at hand—learning more about their state and its laws in order to become a registered voter. Clark says she took the idea of the Citizenship School Booklets, which contained this information, from Miss Wil Lou Gray. Clark writes,

Another idea I obtained from Miss Gray. In developing her program for the schools for adult illiterates, she had compiled and had published a little book that she used in her teaching. It contained interesting and valuable information about South Carolina, such as the population figures, the amount of acreage devoted to the different crops, the percentage of cleared land and the woodland (Clark, 1962, pp. 148-149).

A final facet of Freire's problem-posing education is praxis (Freire, 2000). Praxis is another concept employed by Clark in her interactions with students. Praxis is a continual cycle of reflection and action. First, a theory is constructed and applied to a real-world problem. In short, action is taken on the problem. People evaluate the results and critically reflect on them and go back and forth and refine the theory. The following quote demonstrates part of the action-

reflection cycle. A student at a workshop proposes a problem, people reflect on it and offer suggestions for action. A participant-observer of the 1965 workshop reported:

Discussion of the content of the pamphlet moved...to the subject of studying issues before voting. This raised a troubling question in the mind of one workshop member, 'What should be done if the papers don't give fair coverage to civil rights issues?' Here a number of suggestions were made by both staff and participants. The idea of a boycott of the newspaper was suggested. (Workshop for Volunteer Teachers in the Citizenship Education Program of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1965, p. 123).

Clark's life and work exemplifies several Freireian concepts including freeing herself from her oppression as well as educating her oppressors (Freire, 2000). Clark overcame many external barriers erected by Whites as well as her own internalized oppression regarding race and gender during the course of her life. She states, "I used to feel that whatever was white was right and it took many years of working before I would feel that they were not exactly right, as I thought they were. As the change came over me, I was able to get the change over to others" (Clark, 1986, p. 54). Regarding gender she stated, "I grew up with the idea that women didn't have a work to say. But later on, I found out that women had a lot to say, and what they had to say was really worthwhile." (Clark, 1986, p. 82). Some of her workshops spoke to White audiences such as "The Role of the White Southerner in the Current Struggle for Justice" (Workshop on "The Place of the White Southerner in the Current Struggle for Justice, May 25-28, 1960). Further she encouraged Blacks to recognize White oppression and to free themselves from their own oppression.

### Conclusions

This study added to the extant literature on Septima Clark and on African American adult education efforts—particularly during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In a small way, it extended Johnson-Bailey's (2002) findings from her study of African American adult education from 1920-1945. Johnson-Bailey indicated that African American adult education programs between 1920-1945 were done for three reasons: "education for assimilation... education for cultural survival...and education for resistance." (p. 93). It seems that the Citizenship School Program sought to have learners know and understand the voting regulations and requirements in order to assimilate learners into the "voting culture." Like African American adult educators and learners from 1920-1945, adult educators after that period educated learners for cultural survival. Blacks still suffered under de jure segregation and after these laws were abolished de facto segregation continued during the course of Clark's life. Clark's speeches in particular demonstrate her efforts at education for cultural survival.

This study helps unearth the contributions of one Black woman to the field of adult education. Other scholars have come before me to examine Clark's life and work from different perspectives. Scholars must continue to give voice to adult educators whose work and contributions are in the shadows.

Last, although it has been suggested that applications of Freireian techniques has been limited in North America (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), Highlander programs, past and present, demonstrate the effectiveness of using Freireian principles and techniques in adult education. Clark's life and work exemplify these concepts in action.

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