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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Michelle (2011). "Banned from the Discourse: Race to the Top and the State of Texas' exclusion of Welfare Recipients from Educational Policy Discourse," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2011/papers/49>

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Banned from the Discourse: Race to the Top and the State of Texas' exclusion of Welfare Recipients from Educational Policy Discourse

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Abstract: This paper explores the tensions that exist between the espoused purpose of Race to the Top education reform and the state of Texas educational plans to enhance the state's economy through increased education. We use Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the basis of our analytical framework.

Introduction

President Obama (2008) suggests if an individual does not obtain a postsecondary education, one is likely to remain in poverty. While the Race to the Top (RTTT) program and its policies are focused on closing the gap between K-12 education and postsecondary education, we echo the sentiment that postsecondary education should be accessible to all regardless of social economic status (Obama, 2008). Albertini (2009) suggest the educational needs of welfare recipients vary; some will need postsecondary education more immediately, whereas others may not considering they are not a monolithic group.

Our discussion is guided by our primary research question: What implications will current education reform programs have on welfare reform recipients, particularly in state of Texas? We focus on Texas because its State Strategic Plan (SP) is to increase the number of adult education students into postsecondary education for the purposes of enhancing the state's economy and workforce. In this paper, we examine the tension that exists between RTTT and state of Texas Strategic and Integrated plans.

Analytical framework

In order to understand the tension between welfare reform and current trends in educational reform, we use Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the policies that define the nature and scope of adult education. This analytical lens allows us to critically examine the language of the various policies because CDA techniques focus upon "not only what is said, but what is left out, not only what is present in the text, but what is absent" (Rogers, 2003, p. 8). As such, we pay particular attention not only to what is stated in the policies with regard to current educational reform agendas, but also to what is not stated. It is through these tensions, contradictions, and voids in policy language we question the role of welfare reform programs in the larger scope of education and economic reform.

We have divided our manuscript into three sections. First we the discuss RTTT policy. Then we discuss the educational plan for welfare recipients at the state, regional and local levels for the state of Texas. Drawing from both, we conclude with our analysis and implications for adult education in the state of Texas.

Profile of Race to the Top

Since the inception of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in 2009, the legislation was designed to not only support initiatives for the purpose of job creation, but to also invest in RTTT fund to help reform the education systems across the country (RTTT Executive Summary, U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The monies earmarked for the RTTT fund is approximately 4.35 billion dollars (RTTT Executive Summary, 2010). Paying close attention to the RTTT fund of the ARRA legislation, the remodeling of the system stemmed from the No Child Left Behind Act instituted during the Bush Administration coming under attack. While Duncan (2009) reminds the audience improving education can restore the economy, this is not the only ambition of the reform. Duncan asserted the reform has the ability to transform education by preparing students for lasting opportunities in K-12 preparations, post-secondary education systems, the workforce, and to demonstrate competitiveness in a global economy.

In what follows, we briefly describe the two phases of the RTTT. Phase I provides an explanation of the six Priorities, while highlighting Priority Five. We then provide our analysis of the RTTT funding allotted for the state of Texas as it relates to workforce development programs and welfare to work programs.

Phase I of RTTT

The RTTT reform fund addresses four areas of education which include; “(a) Adopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace; (b) Building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals in how they can improve their practices; (c) Increasing teacher effectiveness and achieving equity in teacher distribution; and (d) Turning around lowest achieving Schools” (Department of Education, p. 19496, 2010). During phase I, states are required to explain how they will meet all six priorities. These priorities include; “(1) Comprehensive approach to education address the four core education reform areas, (2) Emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), (3) Innovations for Improving Early Learning Outcomes, (4) Expansion and Adaptation of Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems, (5) P-20 Coordination, Vertical and Horizontal Alignment, and (6) School level Conditions for Reform, and Innovation, and Learning” (Department of Education, pp. 19496-19497).

Phase II of RTTT

In phase 2 of the application process, states must submit a cogent expense document demonstrating how they will finance their reform process (U. S. Department of Education, 2010). The funding in the money pot can be divided into in five sections providing more funding (\$350-700 million) for states with a larger population such as California and Texas, while providing less funding (\$20-\$75million) to states like New Mexico, Hawaii, and Montana (U. S. Department of Education, 2010). Moreover, the RTTT allotments are awarded to states depending upon the level of Local Education Agencies (LEA) participation along with budget requests, and activities proposed for the monies each state is requesting.

RTTT and Adult Education

The Department of Education (2010) called attention to the six priorities required of states in the application process. Priority five, in particular requires states to verify how they will disseminate funding to promote lifelong learning development as it relates to adult education in their application process. The application should make evident how states will address adult education programs as it relates to “post-secondary institutions, workforce development institutions, and other State agencies and community partners (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice, and criminal justice agencies)” (Department of Education, 2010, p. 19496). By incorporating adult education into the learning process, the author labeled the term P-20 where the learning begins in preschool and continues throughout adulthood with the possibility of little remediation.

The State of Texas

In this section of the manuscript, we examine the implementation of the federal mandates and policies pertaining to the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), using the State of Texas as the example. According to the U. S. Department of Education, the state of Texas has been allotted \$350-\$700 million in education funding through RTTT. However, Smith (2011) reported a reluctance to support application and use of the RTTT funds in Texas for two consecutive years. This perceived unwillingness seems to contradict the Texas’ Strategic Plan (SP) which states the key to success is education.

Profile the Texas Workforce Education Plans

In order to understand the complexity of the implementation of the WIA within the State of Texas, we examine the state, regional and local levels at which Texas attempts to enforce the WIA policies. First, we provide an overview of the Texas Workforce Investment Council and the State’s SP for the Texas Workforce System Fiscal Year 2010-2015. Then, we review the Regional Integrated Plan for the Fiscal Years 2009-2010. Finally, we review the policies and procedures that are followed at the local city level within the region. Each summary is followed by our analysis of the individual plans.

Background – State Level

In 1993, the 73rd Texas Legislature created the Texas Workforce Investment Council (Council) to ensure the development of a highly-skilled and well-educated workforce in Texas. The Council is responsible for working with the Governor and the Legislature to ensure the state and federal mandates under the WIA are being met by the Texas workforce system.

The Texas workforce systems, which work with the Council, are primarily responsible for implementing the federal workforce programs. This system is comprised of 28 local workforce boards and eight partner state agencies. This partnership has produced “over two-hundred and thirty (230) One-Stop center and satellites; development of an awarding-winning client information, eligibility and performance measurement system; and, outstanding program performance” (Strategic Plan, p. 1). The Council and Workforce systems success has been achieved through constant realignment, evaluation, coordination and collaboration between the system partners along with the Council. Together these partners have developed a SP aimed at advancing the workforce in Texas.

The SP for the Texas Workforce System FY 2010-2015 enables the Council to “effectively facilitate planning and evaluation across eight agencies with multiple programs that comprise the Texas workforce system” (Strategic Plan, p. 1). When the council began to develop the current SP, it reviewed the experiences of the last plan and through careful consideration identified ways in which this plan could provide continuing success, meet new challenges and achieve significant system outcomes. In this review process, eight priority issues were identified that needed to be addressed by the systems partners to identify program and participant outcomes. In addition to these outcomes, they have also identified critical issues and interdependencies also affecting those outcomes.

Texas has the second largest workforce in the country and as the population grows and changes in composition, service designs and resource allocation have to be continually evaluated. (Strategic Plan, n.d., p. 9) Therefore, the plan lists the critical issues as being career and technical education, adult education, college and work readiness, middle-skills jobs and apprenticeship, demand driven programs and services, employer needs and satisfaction, and education system coordination and alignment. These issues are related to the number of workers with consideration of their skills and educational levels.

State Level Policy Analysis

The critical issues related to adult education are focused on “developing Adult Technology Training and Industry-Specific Curriculum Development for the adult population” (Strategic Plan, n.d., p.11). This target population are those being “16 years or older that are participating in adult education programs.” Specifically, “the blind and disabled, veterans, English language learners and individuals with low literacy levels” (p. 10) The SP concludes that “receiving a diploma is the key to being successful and it is the responsibility of the local workforce boards to ensure that the participants receive a diploma.”

Although the SP mentions specific groups, it does not explicitly mention the welfare population when defining its target population. Paradoxically, this population is primarily served by the Local Workforce boards and its systems partners. By leaving this population out of the target population definition, the SP is ignoring their significance and educational needs. In addition, the SP has explicitly stated “receiving a diploma is the key to being successful.” This is important because one of the eight priority issues states “Local workforce boards must understand and meet the needs of their local communities because they are the system’s front line partner in offering relevant programs and services” (Strategic Plan, n.d., p. 2). Some of the system partners such as the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), and Texas Workforce Commission also primarily serve welfare participants. The plan makes an attempt to provide a broad overview of the expectations of the systems partners in working to advance the workforce in Texas excluding the needs of welfare recipients.

Background – Regional Level

The Workforce Solutions of the Brazos Valley Board created an Integrated Plan for the Fiscal Years 2009-2010. It is one of the 28 local workforce center boards the Council lists in its SP as responsible for implementing the federal mandates at the local level. Its sole mission is listed as “to provide the employers with a quality workforce” (Integrated Plan, 2009, p. 3). The three major goals of this plan are:

- (1) to increase workforce presence in educational institutions in the Brazos Valley by addressing specific training needs and increasing awareness of Workforce technology education needs and career opportunities;
- (2) foster growing relationships between Workforce and Brazos Valley Employers by actively seeking new relationships and potential partners; and
- (3) improve public relations and community awareness by marketing communications to target different population (i.e. seniors, youth and parent), communicating with Brazos Valley residents, and performing community outreach to connect with employers (Integrated Plan, 2009, pp.3-4).

The Workforce Solutions Brazos Valley Board has its local delivery system setup to include the Workforce Center Operator and two Job Readiness Training contractors. In the region, the only full service facility is located in Brazos County; while there are six satellite offices located in various counties. The Workforce Solutions maintains Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with Educational Services Center, Region VI to provide GED classes and testing within its designated and surrounding counties.

Regional Level Policy Analysis

The plan provides detailed information about the expectations of the Workforce staff that are integrated with the services from other local non-profits organization; employers and local businesses ensure the advancement of the workforce in Texas. The Plan also includes detailed tables listing the target occupations for the Brazos Valley. This plan focuses on the Work First philosophy emphasized by Welfare Reform Initiatives.

Within the 48 page document, educational services first appear as a three sentence section titled “Coordination with Adult Education Programs.” It states the following: “Education Service Center, Region IV offers ABE and GED classes several times each week and has incorporated financial literacy training into its ABE classes. GED Testing is available on-site at the Bryan Workforce Center each month. Bryan ISD offers Even Start services and Civics Literacy classes to customers in Bryan” (Integrated Plan, 2009, p. 13). Although the text appears to address the ways in which educational services will be incorporated, it provides few details about which customers are to be served with these programs, who providers are, and where services can be received. The lack of detail and vagueness of this section is problematic especially since one of the eight priorities listed in the SP (n.d.) is that local boards must understand and meet the needs of their local communities in offering relevant programs and services. Without these important details, there is uncertainty as to whether or not the local board understands and knows the needs of the population it predominately serves. Also because of the broad and vague application of adult education programs to the community, the welfare population can easily be excluded from these programs.

Educational services appear for a second time in a section dealing with Customers needing English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Much like the section on coordination with adult education programs, this section is comprised of three sentences. It states the following: “Limited English proficiency individuals are referred to Education Service, Region VI for Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes. Bilingual employees at the Workforce Centers are able to assist with job identification. In addition, the Board purchases Alchemy software with which an ESL module can be used in any of the seven Workforce Centers or at an employer’s site using a laptop computer” (Integrated Plan, 2009, p. 10). This section suggests customers

needing ESL classes are only lacking the ability to speak English needed to obtain employment and possesses basic computer skills. It limits the educational service to ESL classes which can be received at the Workforce center, GED center or on the job. The board also provides staff in the workforce centers that are bilingual so they can assist customers with job identification services. Here again, the emphasis is on finding a job not obtaining an education.

Background – Local Level

The Workforce Solutions Brazos Valley office located in the city of Bryan, Texas is the full service facility for this Region. Its website offers detailed information on what programs and services provided for Workforce customers. The programs it currently administers include Choices, WIA Adult, WIA Youth, WIA Dislocated Worker and the SNAP E&T. This center works in partnership with HHSC to ensure customers meet all participation requirements to continue their eligibility for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Food Stamps.

The website provides detailed information about participation requirements for each program and the level of services also available. There is also a PowerPoint titled “Workforce Orientation” that can be reviewed by visiting the website. It gives detailed information on how Workforce Solutions can help and what they will ask of the participants.

Local Level Policy Analysis

The website and the Workforce Orientation PowerPoint convey similar messages. These messages include working pays, job search, and employment and work in general. For example, one of the slides has the following message, “When you applied for TANF assistance, you agreed to look for work” (Workforce Solutions, 2010). There is no mention of any educational services offered to TANF recipients in these materials. Instead, foregrounded are the requirements for participating and the penalties for non-participation. The emphasis here again is a “work first” message. All the programs and services provided by the Workforce Solutions office in Bryan are aimed at finding the customer employment and reducing welfare dependency.

Implications and Recommendations for Adult Education

At all governmental levels and plans within the state of Texas, the emphasis for welfare recipients is not education; it is work. The state level plan includes educational services for a targeted population that does not include welfare recipients. It states “Local workforce boards must understand and meet the needs of their local communities because they are the system’s front line partner in offering relevant programs and services” (Strategic Plan, n.d., p. 2). However, the local workforce board of the Brazos Valley’s idea of relevant services for education is vague and targeted to a non-specific population. This vague idea of educational services is then passed on to the Workforce Solutions office in Bryan, Texas to be implemented under the restrictive policies; pushing recipients off welfare rolls into work without offering them the opportunity to utilize the educational services available. The message and primary focus of these three plans are clearly to continue reducing welfare dependency by placing recipients in jobs. While the State’s strategic and the Integrated plans state it is critical to continue increasing the employee pool for employers with highly skilled and educated workers,

these plans do not explicitly address the educational needs for those individuals they serve, namely welfare recipients.

In 2007, roughly 80% of the jobs in Texas did not require employees to have a bachelor's degree (Strategic Plan, n.d., p.12). It also notes the growing industries are health care, energy and technology based companies. The jobs these companies will offer are called "middle-skilled work" and will require some technical or educational training. However, with the focus on primarily entering employment immediately, the welfare recipients in Texas are destined to continue the path of being service workers with very a basic education and low levels of literacy.

RTTT policy makers are willing to invest over four billion dollars overhauling the K-12 system with a new reform identified as P-20. P-20 encompasses pre-school to postsecondary education and workforce development. The funding has been allotted in the amount of \$350-700 million for states like California and Texas. Applicants interested in RTTT funding are asked to be specific in the ways which the money will be utilized for adult education programs in their states. Although Texas' SP does vaguely address adult education, these programs are for a non-specified population. Therefore, we argued the adult learners in the Choices and WIA Adult program who are in need of adult education are excluded from the current political discourses and language informing policies. We suggest continued dialogue about the role and placement of welfare reform programs within the larger discourses about educational and economic reform is imperative to ensure the working poor have equal opportunity to liberate themselves from poverty.

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