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Developing Anti-Racist Adult Education Scholars: The Role of Adult Education Faculty

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of adult education faculty in the preparation of anti-racist adult education scholars. We examine this issue through a brief discussion of adult education literature and relevant literature from other disciplines. We recommend a call to action which promotes the deliberate and strategic development of anti-racist adult education scholars and prepares faculty for their roles toward this end.*

Introduction

This paper explores the role of adult education faculty in the preparation of anti-racist adult education scholars. Our interest in this issue is born of our personal journeys to become anti-racist adult education scholars. We are doctoral students; a White female and a Black male. We have completed coursework on race and culture in adult education, undertaken individual reading and reflection, and engaged in mutual critical conversations. This paper is another step in our journey.

The concept for the paper emanated from discussions which took place during a roundtable we facilitated at the 2009 Adult Education Research Conference. More than 30 faculty members and graduate students joined us to discuss the role of adult education programs in developing anti-racist scholars. A wide range of questions were raised by participants. What do we mean by anti-racist research? What is an anti-racist researcher? Do we see this as a responsibility of the field? Does this assume there are anti-racist faculty members, graduate programs, and universities? Who has access to the halls of power? What implications does this have for admissions policies? Who do we look to for knowledge? What theoretical perspectives inform our research?

Numerous ideas, issues, and needs emerged during the discussion including: the historical social justice focus of our field, we must borrow from diverse theoretical perspectives and knowledge bases, culturally grounded knowledge is automatically anti-racist, anti-racist research opens up to community activism and oppositional knowledge, an anti-oppression approach to research which integrates racism with other intersecting oppressions is needed, scholarly support for anti-racist research (e.g., journals that will publish anti-racist research and special issues that focus on this topic) must be provided, we must create awareness of why this matters, we can't control whether other adults embrace anti-racist research methods, we need this education now, and there is a need for a critical discourse on this topic between research scholars, community scholars, and faculty.

One theme which arose during the roundtable and subsequent conversations is the key role that faculty members can play in preparing adult education graduate students to become anti-racist scholars. Yet, numerous questions arise. Do faculty members see this as their role? Are they adequately prepared for this role? Do faculty members have the supports they need to fulfill this role? Do the roles of white faculty members differ from the roles of faculty members of color in preparing anti-racist scholars? To understand faculty roles and seek answers to these

questions, we turned to the adult education literature and other relevant literatures for insights. However, an explanation of our understanding of anti-racism, anti-racist research and anti-racist scholars is needed to frame the discussion.

Anti-racism, Anti-racist Research and Anti-racist Scholars

The social system in the United States privileges White citizens over other racial and ethnic groups (Lund, 2005). This privilege creates ideological and cultural biases which affect social science research because social scientists like other people have been socialized to accept race-laden assumptions about the world, human nature, and knowledge (Stanfield, 1993). Anti-racism addresses privilege and the resulting biases. It involves “identifying, challenging, and changing the values, structures, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism” (Dei, 2005, p. 4). Anti-racism work has a distinct action focus; i.e., to achieve social justice through social change, for and with people who are oppressed by the majority because of their race or ethnicity.

Anti-racist research assumes that institutional racism is endemic in mainstream social science research (Dei, 2005). We can see this in the topics of study, the commonly used theoretical and conceptual frames, and the privileged methodologies (Dei, 2005). It is also evidenced in “who is allowed, legitimated and validated to research what and how” as well as “how existing structures allow for the production and dissemination of certain knowledges” (Dei, 2005, p. 13).

Anti-racist research places “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 (Dei, 2005). Anti-racist research questions the social structures that oppress peoples of color and uses the knowledge gained to break down these structures (Dei, 2005).

Anti-racist scholars challenge the racist values and assumptions that undergird mainstream social science scholarship. They understand that racism impacts all scholarship, not just research with an explicit focus on race. Anti-racist scholars are critically reflective practitioners who seek to understand their racial identities and how their identities impact their scholarship (Brookfield, 2000; Dei, 2005; Schöen, 1983; Stansfield, 1993). They seek to uncover issues of ethics and human values in their work and address imbalances of power in knowledge construction (Dei, 2005; Deshler & Grudens-Schunck, 2000; Stansfield, 1993). They are also transparent and accountable (Dei, 2005). With a general understanding of anti-racism, anti-racist research and anti-racist scholars, we can now turn our attention to racism in adult education scholarship.

Racism in Adult Education Scholarship

To examine the role of adult education faculty in preparing anti-racist scholars we must first understand why this issue is important to our field. The field of adult education has a long history in the fight for social justice and the civil rights movement. However, the field is not immune to racism (Colin, 1994; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000; Peterson & Brookfield, 2007). Adult education mirrors our society and educational systems; therefore, our educational programs “can play a significant role in reproducing and maintaining the status quo” (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000, p. 147). In addition, many adult educators are blind to the institutional racism embedded in their organizational practices as well as racism in their curriculum, teaching

strategies and behavior (Hayes & Colin, 1994). Finally, as the field has become professionalized it has been criticized for losing its social justice focus (Cunningham, 1996). This has raised the question of whether the preparation of anti-racist scholars is still seen as a responsibility of the field.

Recent research provides direct evidence of the racism in adult education graduate programs. Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey (2010) explored “how white privilege and racism function in adult education graduate programs regarding admissions, retention, and curricula” (p. 27). They found that adult education texts and articles which deal exclusively with race, white privilege or diversity are not assigned as texts or readings in the core adult education graduate program courses of many graduate programs (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey). They also found that while the knowledge and contributions of white adult educators are privileged (e.g., Myles Horton, Malcolm Knowles, and Cyril O. Houle), the contributions of adult educators who are people of color are marginalized (e.g., Septima Clark, Alain Locke and Nanni Burroughs).

Lund’s (2005) multi-case study of adult education professors of White European descent provides evidence of racism in the adult education professoriate. Her findings “indicate there are still damaging racist attitudes and behaviors; although there is an intellectual acknowledgement of racism, actions to combat racism are minimal; racism is still a black and white issue; and the lack of dialogue in the professoriate regarding racism precludes awareness among white European descent professors” (p. v). These examples and other research findings indicate that systemic racism exists in our graduate programs. Therefore, an examination of the adult education literature which is designed to gain an understanding of the role that adult education faculty members can play in preparation of anti-racist scholars seems warranted.

What Does the Adult Education Literature Tell Us?

The adult education literature tells us that faculty members can and should play a key role in combating racism and preparing anti-racist scholars. Faculty members are responsible for creating and maintaining a nurturing, supportive, and positive learning environment for students and of a collegial environment for faculty members (Colin, 1994). They can play a major role in the development of anti-racist scholars and in fostering anti-racist scholarship by the environment they help build with colleagues and graduate students of color (Colin, 1994).

Faculty members play key roles in hiring new faculty, promotion and tenure decisions, the establishment of admissions criteria, admissions decisions, and the development of program curricula (Colin, 1994, 2010; Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010). Each of these responsibilities presents opportunities for faculty members to support the development of anti-racist scholars. In addition, faculty members can serve as mentors to junior faculty members and graduate students. Mentoring can be used to promote dialogue around issues of race and racism in adult education scholarship (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004).

However, before faculty members can work to prepare anti-racist scholars, they must acknowledge that racism still exists in American society, that it negatively impacts people of color, and that racism is endemic in our institutions of higher education and adult education graduate programs (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Colin, 1994, 2010). Next faculty members must “confront their own personal racism” and the impacts that it has on their scholarship (Colin, 2010). This is difficult because racism is often invisible to the white majority faculty members in the academy and when racism is addressed dialogue on the issue is masked

in rationality (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002). Unmasking one's own racist assumptions and actions requires hard work that involves ongoing critically reflective practice (Brookfield, 2005).

Yet, neither changing one's racist assumptions and behaviors nor changing systemic racism in adult education programs or society can be achieved by white faculty alone (Lund, 2005). White faculty members must partner with faculty and students of color to address racism and prepare themselves and others to become anti-racist scholars.

What Do Other Relevant Literature Tell Us?

Adult education is not unique in its social justice focus. Other disciplines also address issues of social justice and work to counteract racism. Faculty members in these disciplines, which include nursing and social work share similar challenges in preparing anti-racist scholars.

Nursing faculty members of color face similar challenges in white majority nursing schools. Anti-racist pedagogy is embraced to counteract such challenges. This pedagogy is defined as liberatory, critical, or radical pedagogy rooted in deeply held beliefs about social justice. It "requires a commitment to educate students in ways that make racialized power relations explicit, deconstruct the social construction of race and analyze interlocking systems of oppression that serve to marginalize and exclude some groups while privileging others" (Hassouneh, 2006, p. 256). The widespread use of anti-racist pedagogy could assist adult education faculty members in preparing anti-racist adult education scholars.

On the other hand, in the field of social work faculty members and practitioners devote substantial time to personal growth and development. These efforts are aimed toward becoming and remaining effective in addressing institutional racism (NASW, 2007). Mechanisms used by social work faculty members to prepare themselves for anti-racist work and anti-racist research may provide models which adult education faculty members can use toward the same end.

In addition, even faculty members from disciplines that do not have an explicit social justice focus can provide insights on preparing anti-racist scholars. A Russian professor states that "white faculty members whose disciplines have not trained them to think about racism and white privilege need to become active allies of the students of color on their campuses, and of the professors of color who are already advocates for those students. White professors can be particularly useful in helping change unconsciously racist attitudes and behavior of other whites, but they must also think about how to support students of color who feel alienated" (de Sherbinin, 2004, p. 16). Given that other disciplines are struggling with similar issues, it is imperative that adult education faculty members engage in dialogue with faculty members from other disciplines to share insights, pedagogies, research practices and additional mechanisms that will help them to fulfill their role in preparing anti-racist adult education scholars.

A Call-to-Action

Our brief review of relevant literature demonstrates that over the past several decades a relatively small number of adult education scholars have loudly and persistently called for change to address racism in adult education programs. These scholars have worked tirelessly to foster awareness and create change; they have had some successes. However, the experiences of many faculty members and graduate students who are people of color as well as recent research findings on racism in adult education graduate programs tell us that these calls for change have been largely ignored (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Colin, 2010; Lund, 2005).

Despite this, we are heartened by the dialogue which took place with those who attended our roundtable at the 2009 Adult Education Research Conference. We are encouraged by the awareness that will come from the recently published special issue of *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education Special Issue*, titled *White privilege and racism: Perceptions and action* (Lund & Colin, 2010). In addition, we look forward to the contribution that will be made by the forthcoming publication *The Handbook of Race and Adult Education: A Resource for Dialogue on Racism* (Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, Peterson, & Brookfield; in press).

Yet, we believe that even greater awareness and action is needed. Therefore, we have outlined a call-to-action. This call-to-action provides specific steps which can be undertaken over the next several years by small groups of faculty members and graduate students who want to effect change. They are designed to increase awareness, support faculty as they work to prepare anti-racist scholars, and promote change in racist policies and practices. These recommendations are:

- Conduct a symposium on the role of adult education faculty in developing anti-racist scholars at the 2011 Adult Education Research Conference.
- Create a Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) Task Force on the role adult education faculty in preparing anti-racist scholars.
- Revise the CPAE Standards for Graduate Programs in Adult Education to reflect program expectations and faculty responsibilities for the preparation of anti-racist adult education scholars.
- Work with the CPAE faculty development SIG to create faculty development programs on this topic.
- Use social media to foster ongoing dialogue and resource sharing among adult education faculty members and graduate students on this issue.
- Develop a model for cross-cultural mentoring programs on anti-racist research practices (faculty - faculty and faculty - student mentoring).
- Promote a dialogue to discuss anti-racist and other forms of anti-oppression scholarship; similarities and differences as well as the benefits and challenges of the approaches.

We recognize that some scholars have attempted similar efforts in the past. We also recognize that many other steps could be taken to prepare anti-racist adult education scholars and to support adult education faculty members to undertake their important role. We hope to learn from past attempts and gain additional suggestions from those who attend our session at AERC 2010. Most importantly, we seek to gain commitments from adult education scholars (faculty and students) who are ready to roll up their sleeves and join those scholars who have been working hard to prepare anti-racist scholars and to eliminate racism from our graduate programs.

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