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Christian Education and Constructivism: Learning through the Adult Sunday School Class

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Abstract: Religious education has been the foundation of the Christian church. Sunday school has been an integral part of the teachings in the Christian church. However, little research exists, which examines adults' learning in Sunday school classes. In this paper, we use the constructivist learning theory as a framework to examine learning experiences of adults in Sunday school.

Introduction

Christian education can encompass a variety of topics. Commonly, Sunday school and Bible study serve as the foundation for Christian education. Although research exists on Christian and religious education, our review of the literature found no studies which explored Sunday school learning from the context of constructivism. The purpose of this study was to examine African Americans' learning experiences in an adult Sunday school class.

Christian Education and Sunday School

Historically, Christian education has been a source of religious development in the Christian church. Christian churches are often affiliated with a larger religious body—a denomination. Elias (1993) reported, “Religious bodies are organizations with goals and purposes of providing personal growth, interpersonal support and fellowship, and societal improvement and change (p. 177). Academically, the term Christian education was a “label for writing and speaking about religious education for those who proposed a more theologically oriented religious education” (Elias, 2002, p. 172). As for the purpose of Christian education, White (2004) states it “is to make disciples or learners of all ages” (p. 4). She further explains, from an African American perspective, the purpose is to “correct history” and empower people and help them flourish by providing “honest dialogue and relevant teaching” (p. 4). Undoubtedly, Christian education has expanded from its early beginnings. For African Americans, Christian education has not only been useful for spiritual growth, but as a means to address societal injustices.

As part of their mission to assist followers of Jesus Christ in their development, Christian churches provide some form of religious education. Commonly, educational programming in the church falls under the auspices of a Christian education department. Often a Director of Religious/Christian Education oversees the entire educational programming in the church, or in some instances, an entire denomination. The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (n.d.), an African American denomination, has a department of Christian Education whose primary goal is to “make disciples through events that form and transform” (para. 1). The Congress of Christian Education of the National Baptist Convention USA (2009), another African American denomination, edifies its “students with Biblical truths, creative ideas, and practical solutions to the dilemmas that confront our world” (para. 1).

The extent of educational programming varies from church to church. There are several factors that impact adult education in the church. Within the African American church, they include the church's history and tradition, internal and external influences, church leader, and

resources (Isaac, 2002). By nature, the church is a conservator of existing values (Lincoln, 1999). Thus, the values that a church places on its religious beliefs can deter a church from providing “secular” education (i.e., financial management). Societal issues confronting members or a community, such as AIDS, may result in a church providing health education. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) found that better-educated pastors had the most innovative and creative ministries and were more resourceful. A church’s resources can determine the number and type of learning opportunities available to members and the community. Isaac (1999) examined three African American Baptist churches in Atlanta, Georgia, whose membership ranged from 1,200 to over 9,000. She found that combined they offered almost 300 courses, workshops, and seminars in one calendar year. Interestingly, all three pastors were seminary trained and two of them held terminal degrees. Stark contrasts exist among churches’ educational programming. However, one common educational thread is Sunday school.

Most, if not all, Christian churches offer some form of Sunday school. Sunday schools were first organized in London in 1780 (Watkins, 1978) and began as a way to educate children and the poor and provide religious and moral instruction. According to Palmer (1880), the early Sunday school had several purposes including serving as a “medium for the spread of the biblical instruction” (p. 45), and bringing “the clergy and laity together,” and creating an interest in the “latter in church work” (p. 48). It was believed that knowledge of the Bible, would teach people “the duty required of them as social, rational and accountable beings” (The Origin, n.d., para. 7). Sunday schools became the most generally accepted means for teaching Christian principles to the young (Watkins). Today, of course, both children and adults participate in Sunday school. Sunday school is a place where people can network and meet new friends, gain a sense of belonging, and grow in their spiritual journey.

Adult Learning and Constructivism

According to Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2006), adult education is comprised of various types of educational activities which enrich the lives of its learners. These activities can include formal as well as informal learning programs (Kim, Hagedorn, Williamson & Chapman, 2004). The type of learning one chooses to pursue depends on his or her own needs and/or motivations. For instance, some people participate in adult education for the sake of learning. On the other hand, an employer can require its employees to take a management training program prior to advancing into management. Ironically, work-related learning has become more significant due to the numerous changes in technology and the marketplace (Merriam & Clark, 2006). Therefore, “adult education both reflects and responds to the forces prevalent in the sociocultural context” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 23).

While there are numerous theories which explain how adults learn, for purposes of this discussion, we explore learning from the context of constructivism. Constructivism, according to Taylor (2006), has developed from the work of Kelly (1955), Piaget (1954), and Vygotsky (1978). The framework asserts that learners construct meaning or knowledge based on their interaction with and reaction to life’s experiences (Taylor, 2006). As a result, knowledge is something that is constructed based on one’s prior experiences and the new learning becomes filtered through his/her perceptions. In the teacher-student exchange, the instructor and student are encouraged to participate in “an active dialog (i.e., socratic learning)” (Kearsley, 2009, para 2). Furthermore, the “instructor is to translate information to be learned into a format appropriate to the learner's current state of understanding.” In addition, curriculum “should be organized in a spiral manner” so students “continually build upon what they have already learned” (para. 2). In

order to best understand the constructivist framework, we utilize Hein's (1991) interpretation of the constructivist learning theory; below, we outline several guiding principles.

First, learning is an active process and requires the learner to use sensory input to construct meaning. Second, learning is a social activity and is associated with our connection with others (especially the individuals with whom we interact). Learning "in connection with others [is] good practice" (Merriam & Clark, 2006, p. 42). The dialogue that transpires in a community of learners facilitates learning. Learning in connection with others can be profound and enable learners to engage in rational discourse and gain confidence in their belief system (Merriam & Clark).

Third, learning is not instantaneous and requires a learner to reflect upon the material. This reflection occurs through exposure and meditation upon the material. According to Merriam and Clark (2006) reflection is the process we use to make sense of the world in which we experience life. "Reflection is fundamental to learning—without it we would simply be bombarded by random experiences and unable to make sense of any of them" (p. 39). Reflection then is a cognitive process which requires individuals to examine their beliefs and responses and integrate the new learning or understanding into their knowledge or experience.

Fourth, the learner must be motivated to learn and must be self-directed. Self-directed learning (SDL) has been noted as a cornerstone of adult education; Caffarella (as cited in Taylor, 2006) stated that SDL is "critical to survival and prosperity in a world of continuous personal, community, and societal changes" (p. 197). SDL therefore, is a process where learners assume primary responsibility for how they learn the material and incorporate it into their knowledge base. Taylor suggested that SDL includes learning pursuits which can be isolated or independent such as investigating a historical event. SDL can also include programmed instruction or correspondence classes with "a more formal approach, given that learning objectives and perhaps a structured learning plan would have been provided (p. 197). Nevertheless, learners control what they learn, when they learn, and how they learn. Lastly, learning occurs in context; learners incorporate and relate material to what they know and what they have previously learned.

Methodology and Findings

The purpose of this research was to examine adults' learning experiences. More specifically, we wanted to explore adults' learning through Sunday school. Using convenience sampling, one-on-one interviews were conducted with two men and two women regarding their learning experience in their respective Sunday school class. The participants were from three different Sunday school classes at two predominantly African American churches. Participants ranged in age from 40 to 70. Three of the study participants are married. One has a bachelor's degree and two have some college. Two are retired and another works full time. Each of the participants' Sunday school classes used a book that consists of weekly lessons. A different topic is examined each week.

Both churches were located within large metropolitan areas. Linconia Tabernacle Christian Center was established in 1936 to serve a mainly suburban community of African American professionals. Today there are approximately 250 members and several Sunday school classes are held each week. The pastor, Bishop White, holds a master's degree. Prior to becoming a full-time pastor he worked in social services. Unlike Linconia, New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church has a small congregation of about 40 people. It was established in 1890 and its current building at one time served as the only school in which African Americans in the city could attend. Mt. Zion only has one Sunday school class which is attended by

approximately 15 people. Rev. Robinson has been pastor of the church for approximately five years and has a Ph.D. He served as a department chairperson at a university.

Using thematic analysis, several themes emerged which explained adults' learning; however, due to space limitations we will only discuss two of them—social interaction and self-direction. The themes are reflective of “individual and connected learning” (see Figure 1) among the participants. In addition, learning is cyclical. Self-direction lends itself to social interaction and vice versa. While in Sunday school, they learn from the instructor and other class members. However, they also engage in individual learning, self-directed learning, in preparation for class. Each participant reported that their instructor used a combination of instructional techniques including discussion and lecture.

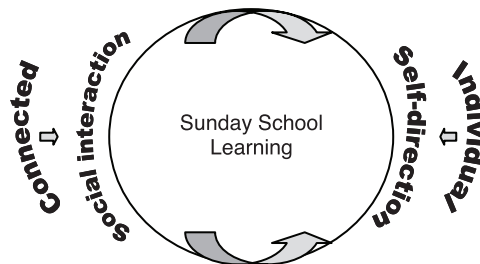


Figure 1 Sunday School Learning

Social Interaction

All four participants discussed the significance of classroom discussion to enhance their knowledge of the Sunday school lesson. Based on the books used in the three Sunday school classes, a premise is to have the learner read the material on his or her own and complete the related questions. Each participant reportedly, came prepared to discuss the material and dialogue with the instructor and other learners in their classroom. Annie stated, “I favor discussion because you get more input that way.” John, who has been attending Sunday school for 20 years, indicated his instructor “leaves the door open for you to come in to ask various questions that . . . you feel relates to you at that set time.”

Self-direction

Participants indicated they reflected on the upcoming Sunday school lesson throughout the week. They used their Sunday school book to guide them in their reflection upon the material. For example, Mary, an unemployed medical records clerk, indicated that she read the recommended daily scripture and sometimes she read the lesson as well. John, who attends the same class as Mary, also indicated he reads and reflects on the daily scripture. Like Mary and John, David, a full-time employee, takes time daily to reflect upon the Sunday school material, but reviews it more thoroughly on Saturday.

Discussion and Conclusion

Christian education in the church allows participants to grow in their spiritual walk. In the African American church, it can also serve to correct history. As a component of Christian education, Sunday school is by one of many vehicles for transferring Christian principles (Watkins, 1978). The two churches in the study epitomize how diverse Christian education programming can be in a church. One church only offered one Sunday school class, while the other provided several classes.

In many instances, adults who participate in Sunday school have some knowledge of the Bible and Christian beliefs. Such was the case of the participants in the current study. However, most attend Sunday school to deepen their biblical comprehension and grow in their Christian walk. According to Hein (1991) new knowledge cannot be assimilated “without having some structure developed from previous knowledge to build on” (para 16). This was manifested by John who stated, “Sunday school opens the Bible a lot more to me; it allows me to understand it a little bit more.” John has been attending Sunday school for over 20 years, so there is the inherent assumption that he has some knowledge of the Bible. The findings support the notion that learning through a Sunday school class is a social activity and is associated with our connection with others. Discussion, as an instructional technique, “encourages active, participatory learning” (Brookfield, 2004, p. 212). Although the participants were self-directed during the week, on Sunday they enhanced their knowledge because of their interaction with others in class. Clearly, these participants valued Sunday school as a means to strengthen their Christian faith; they appeared to be motivated to learn in order to become more knowledgeable of the bible. Learning was not instantaneous, as the learners reflected upon the material throughout the week. This reflection occurs through continued exposure and meditation upon the material. According to Hein (1991), their reflection makes them active learners. The study results also demonstrate that learning occurs in context. The participants incorporated and related the Sunday school material to their Christian beliefs. Thus, their participation in the class not only encouraged them to reflect upon the material, but also build upon their previous knowledge.

This research is significant for researchers and practitioners. There is a lack of adult education research that has been conducted within the African American church. And, as Isaac (2005) points out, adult educators often overlook the impact that the African American church has on adult learning and adult education in general. The research findings broaden our knowledge relative to informal learning contexts. The findings highlight the significance of constructivist learning for these adult learners. Social interaction and self-direction was paramount for these learners to be able to incorporate the material in their daily lives. Discussion is an important instructional technique. For the participants in this study, it enabled them to further enhance their biblical knowledge. Studies on the use of discussion and dialogue in the Sunday school class can broaden our knowledge on instructional techniques. Future studies could examine the application of other learning theories in Sunday school and other Christian education classes. Additionally, the learners valued an instructor who was well-prepared and could answer their lingering questions. Therefore, adult educators need to consider their role in the learning process as facilitators and how they can enhance and promote adults’ learning.

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