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The Black Panther Party and Emancipatory Adult Education

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Abstract: The purpose of this roundtable paper is to illuminate the emancipatory adult educational activities created and implemented by the Black Panther Party in the 1960's. These "survival programs" were specifically designed to serve the educational needs of the community. For the purposes of this paper the Community Learning Center, the Son of Man Temple, and the Seniors Against a Fearful Environment (SAFE) program will be briefly discussed.

Keywords: Black Panther Party, emancipatory education

According to Cornel West (2008), "The emergence of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, in 1966 was one of the great moments in the history of the struggle for Black freedom and deep democracy in the United States of America" (p. ix). Specifically, the Black Panther Party developed a variety of "survival programs" in the efforts to educationally serve the community. In particular, the Black Panther Party believed "these programs satisfy the deep needs of the community but they are not solutions to our problems...but they will help us to organize the community around a true analysis and understanding of their situation" (Huey P. Newton Foundation, 2008, p. 4).

All of the survival programs were free to the community members. One example of an adult educational effort was the Community Learning Center. This center sponsored an evening Adult Education program that served the East Oakland residents (Huey P. Newton Foundation, 2008). Twice a week, Maureen Knightly conducted GED classes at the center. It was anticipated that the Adult education program offered by the center would extend its curricular offerings and include "consumer education, home economics, courses for senior citizens, and other courses" (p. 12) with the aim of serving the needs of the adult learners in the East Oakland community.

Another adult educational effort was the Son of Man Temple. Using the adult educational method of a forum, the Son of Man Temple was affectionately known "community forum, a place where the dreams of the people can become ideas, where ideas can become a practical reality, where that reality will lead us forward to freedom" (Huey P. Newton Foundation, 2008, p. 14). Additionally, the Son of Man Temple may have been influenced by the Chautauqua adult education movement in that the forums included presentations from speakers and artists who provided entertainment such as poetry; instrumental, vocal, and dance recitals; and drama performances (Huey P. Newton Foundation, 2008).

A third adult educational effort was the Seniors Against a Fearful Environment (SAFE) program. Senior citizens in the community requested the assistance of the Black Panther Party after they were dismissed when seeking assistance from the Oakland Police Department. Therefore, the Black Panther Party conducted a six-week comparative crime study to gather data to address the issue within the senior citizen community. As a result, the SAFE program began offering free transportation and escort services for senior citizens. In addition, the Black Panther Party "encouraged a spirit of respect for and concern about the special needs of the

elderly through the presentation of educational programs and the distribution of educational and scientific materials” (Huey P. Newton Foundation, 2008, p. 19)

While considering Freire’s (1985) assertion for emancipatory education, of which has been a significant contribution to the field of adult and community education, with regard to the Black Panther Party it is clear there was a commitment to emancipatory education because they unapologetically believed, “When consciousness and understanding is raised to a high level then the community will seize the time and deliver themselves from the boot of their oppressors” (Huey P. Newton Foundation, 2008, p. 4).

In conclusion, one could argue that the Black Panther Party intentionally designed programs for adult learners “whereby learners’ questions, concerns, and experiences become the context for learning” and created a space inclusive of “problem-posing education” where “students and teachers are co-investigators in dialogue” (Boucovalas & Lawrence, 2010, p. 43). While this paper only begins to explore the nearly two dozen of community-based educational activities and programs, it is apparent the Black Panther Party made a significant contribution in the emancipatory education of adults in various communities.

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