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Abstract

The twentieth century has witnessed an upsurge of Human Resource Development (HRD) activities reflected through globalization and overall economic initiatives to improve the economy. This paper undertakes a critical approach to adult education in the United States and does so through the lens of human resource development issues, trends and policies. Through the use of key reports and other recent literature, adult education is placed in a wider economic development framework. It concludes that there is a future for adult education in the United States with implications for the program to provide a more comprehensive lens for understanding adult education programs and economic issues.

Keywords

United States, adult education, human resource development, neoliberalism, critical human resource development, globalization

EXPLORING HUMAN RESOURCE AND DEVELOPMENT: ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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In tomorrow's world a nation's wealth will derive from its capacity to educate, attract, and retain its citizens who are able to work smarter and learn faster – making educational achievement ever more important both for individuals and for society writ large (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p.vi).

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, constant reminders of the need to be knowledgeable, efficient, and savvy in an effort to be competitive in today's world, permeate every area of our society. As a result, there has been a remarkable expansion in the scope of adult learning systems in recent decades. Examples are reflected across the range of post-secondary education and training: from higher education to work-based learning (both initial and continuing) and diverse forms of compensatory adult education (especially in relation to the development of basic skills of literacy and numeracy), as well as learning for civic and leisure purposes. Increasingly, then, a growing importance has been attached — not least by governments — to the provision of learning opportunities for individuals, not simply in childhood and youth, but also throughout their adult lives.

Reports from the 6th International Conference on Adult Education, the United States' (U.S.) long term strategies and goals for its adult learning and education program centers on the following themes: (a) to invest in the skills that we need now, (b) and in the future, to maintain its position as a strong and prosperous world-class economy. Such themes outline are evident as increased focus on forms of adult learning have become a central focus for businesses and corporations in an effort to spur economic development. To this end, Grubb and Lazerson (2004) identify a pervasive 'education gospel': the view that the essential role of adult learning (and education more generally) is to generate the high levels of skills deemed necessary for economic competitiveness and growth in the globalized economy, yet the realization of alternatives to such educational purposes have slowly emerged. In this paper, I argue that in its very nature, HRD practices can and often encompasses exploitive organizational interests

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(Cunningham, 1993; Fenwick & Lange, 1998). Further, the concomitant placement of HRD in adult education wields soft control through surveillance, classification, normalization, deficit assumptions, cultural engineering, workers' self-regulation, and learning demands (Fenwick, 2001) that relies on market models to influence adult education.

Conceptual Framework

In the mid-1990s there was an increasing interest in a third resource – knowledge capital – with the realization that the wise management of knowledge provides the main sustainable competitive advantage in a competitive and dynamic economy. In this view, corporations need to maintain their current knowledge, disseminate specific knowledge to specific parts of the organization, create new knowledge, and unlearn useless knowledge (Delahaye, 2011). As a means of retaining the benefits of traditional management but to also include the imperative of managing knowledge I look to human resource development (HRD) activities that undergird many of the educational systems around the world that influence adult education and learning (ALE) programs. In one of the first published review to appear, the 'strategic' theme in HRD is seen to comprise four elements:

- A. the use of planning;
- B. a coherent approach to the design and management of personnel systems based on an employment policy and manpower strategy, and often underpinned by a 'philosophy';
- C. matching HRM activities and policies to some explicit business strategy;
- D. seeing the people of the organization as a 'strategic resource' for achieving 'competitive advantage'. (Hendry and Pettigrew, 1986)

Human resource development can be defined as a set of systematic and planned activities by an organization to expand human capital and talented workforce to reach their highest potential. This framework provided opportunities to develop their personal and organizational skills, knowledge and abilities to meet current and future job demands (Stone, 2005). The growing impact of globalization on HRD has affected adult educational development in the United States and many countries alike. Martin Albrow (1996) provides a thorough definition that includes processes of making or being made global by, e.g. the active dissemination of practices, values, technology, and other human products/constructions throughout the world. As such, increased globalization has resulted in a common question for adult education amongst both the U.S. and UK: how do we create a more holistic approach to adult learning that includes social, political, economic issues rather than just human capital? What is evident is that globalization has led to increased disparities in income and poverty levels, decreased demand for labor in certain countries, and loss of cultural identity in many countries.

Under this umbrella of competition lie other major players such as businesses that also strive to compete globally. Valle and Finch (2008) note the employers' role in adult education stating "...reflected in a range of new workplace initiatives, (e.g. Employment Assisted Development Programs, Learning Sets, the increasing popularity of training and development plans) driven by new trends in human resource management thinking, such as 'the learning organization'" (p. 2). Critics of HRD challenge the field's supposed allegiance to human capital theory (Collins, 1991; Fenwick, 2004), the consequent commodification and subjugation of human development to exploitive organizational interests (Cunningham, 1993; Fenwick & Lange, 1998; Hart, 1992; Howell, Carter, & Schied, 2002; Spencer, 2001), and the concomitant deployment of HRD technologies wielding soft control through surveillance, classification,

normalization, deficit assumptions, cultural engineering, workers' self-regulation, and learning demands (Fenwick, 2001; Townley, 1994).

While many corporations and policymakers applaud HRD as an economic policy initiative that is aimed at increasing the competitiveness of a country, Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, and Murillo (2002) argue against the use of such macro-level discourses on micro-level policy and practice using a critical-discourse analysis. Building on Foucault and other theorists, they interrogate the relationship between discourse and power, claiming that when a discourse achieves dominance it becomes naturalized, meaning that it loses its connection to particular ideologies and interests and comes to hold the status of "common sense."

Adult Education in the United States

An adult is categorized as anyone 16 years of age and older who is not in the military or in prison (P. Stowe, personal communication, February 18, 1999). According to Stowe, "the definition is inclusive but excludes a great deal of informal learning such as reading a book, teaching yourself a software program, or learning from a co-worker who is a mentor." As such, adult education is defined as "Adult education activities are formal activities including basic skills training, apprenticeships, work-related courses, personal interest courses, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and part-time college or university degree programs" (United States Department of Education, 2007).

The history of U.S. adult education programs spans over four hundred years in the United States. Examples include religious instruction, vocational apprenticeships, and common schools of the original thirteen colonies and to the first federal involvement in adult literacy education during the Revolutionary War (Rose, 1991). The education and training of a population, in the United States is and continues to be essential to productivity and thus to economic growth. Education directly enhances productivity, and thus the incomes of those who receive schooling, by providing individuals with useful skills. While adult education gained its roots from religious education, World War II marked a shift in adult learning. A series of measures sought to aid in the training and life-long learning of adults after there seemed to be a lack of interest in adult and continued learning.

During World War II, as in World War I, it was discovered that hundreds of thousands of American adults were undereducated and functionally illiterate; having literacy skills at a level lower than those of a fifth-grade student (Cook, 1977, p. 51). Discourse about adult education gained its heightened popularity after World War II when intelligence tests were introduced in the military as a way to provide "objective" evidence of soldiers. As such, the results of the military's standardized tests of "mental ability" initially developed in 1917 played another significant role in shaping ALE programs almost half a century later. Moreover, in the early 1960s, as part of a new "war," the "war" at home was not fought on foreign soil, but at home, under the domestic program called the War on Poverty.

Programs focused on ALE were embedded in the "Great Society" programs of the 1960s to help alleviate the number of Americans living in poverty. In May 1964, President Johnson gave the speech that launched his "Great Society" programs, in which he argued, "The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time" (Davis, 1995, p. 367). With his appeal to "abundance and liberty," Johnson secured the interest of those in Congress concerned with employment, productivity, and poverty ("abundance") as well as those concerned with national security ("liberty"). In August 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act, was passed by the

Congress and signed by President Johnson. It contained within it Title IIB: the Adult Basic Education Program (Rose, 1991, p. 14).

Laws, such as the Adult Education Act of 1966, moved ABE from the poverty programs of the Economic Opportunity Act to the education programs of the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) (Rose, 1991, pp. 14-18). Ironically, this move, coupled with legislation such as the National Literacy Act of 1991 (NLA) with its focus on strengthened literacy and broad educational goals, had also emphasized the importance of adult literacy education for workforce development to ensure America's competitive position in the world economy (Chisman, 1989). Essentially, the concept of adult education has and continues to be embedded with the political and economic interest in training adults for the needs of the economy; an issue that Flemming (2010) notes as problematic as the focus is situated more on policy rather than academic interests.

Overall, the development of adult education programs from the mid twentieth century onwards can be divided into three parts that correspond to significant shifts in approaches to adult literacy. First, the discovery of adult "illiteracy" during the 1960s led to government grants, awareness of adult illiteracy, and the development of local practice and experience. Second, there was a period of consolidation during the 1970s and early 1980s around the principle of learner-centered approaches, with minimal assessment procedures and central direction, and a growing body of expertise among practitioners who also began to undertake their own action research. The third phase, which began in the late 1980s and continues currently, has involved a considerable shift of policy and focus, under pressure from the federal government to ensure that education respond to national and economic needs.

Adult Education and Economics

There is a connection between the economy and adult education and not just in the context of funding for programs. It is also the link between the economy and adult education (Flemming, 2010). In Hall and Soskice's (2001) analysis of 'varieties of capitalism,' they identify two forms of capitalist economies: Liberal market economy (LME) and a coordinated market economy (CMO). In their analysis, they note that the United States both have a liberal economy in which it is strongly market-orientated in its institutional arrangements and is identified by neoliberal policies; radical innovation in goods and services; and the development of new sectors of the economy. Such neoliberal policies, according to McGregor (2009), have resulted in an ethos of the free market that has gradually colonized teaching and learning and has commodified its participants and outcomes.

In the United States where ideals such as consumerism and capitalism dominate the economy, public education is viewed by many as a "flea market" which is multifaceted, untidy, and to some extent, even unpredictable (Ball, 2004). Efforts to commodify and standardize education (Levidow, 2000) place students in a position of potential customers in order to justify the commodification and privatization of educational services for preparation in the workforce. This, according to McNeil (2000), diminishes the role of the "public" in public education. Neoliberalism functions on the premise that "human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Gamble, 2001, p. 130).

Future of Adult Learning and Education

The U.S. legislative context does not outline a single piece of legislation focused on adult learning and education. In a report from the National Center on Education and the

Economy (2009), the authors compile some of the common strategies used by countries to develop a framework for Adult Education. The most popular approaches can be categorized into the following areas:

1. Creating standards for adult learning in the areas of literacy and numeracy
2. Creating certifications to improve the transparency and portability of skills and knowledge
3. Developing financial incentives to encourage low-skilled workers to enroll in education
4. Encouraging employer involvement and workplace connections
5. Developing quality assurance measures for providers

Hill et al. (2008) critique the aforementioned strategies and challenge that nations should focus on *why* some adults are illiterate, financially lacking, and underemployed. They provide the following suggestions for the U.S. *National Report on the Development and State of the Art of Adult Learning and Education* (2008):

- to include the need for actions that enable and empower adults to organize civil society and engage in their own problem-solving
- to strengthen competencies for adults to participate in the policy process
- to identify problems, find an array of solutions, and work together for social transformation
- to acquire decision-making and problem solving skills for critical social interaction
- to support labor education rather than corporatist mechanisms that control learning outcomes and measure learning based on job performance or literacy levels that will reap disproportionate gains for some and limited rewards for others (p.2).

The authors go on to critique the report in three areas: participatory process, content, and policy. In regards to the participatory process for creating solutions for more comprehensive ALE programs, Hill et al. note that many countries ignore UNESCO's call for a more collaborative and comprehensive model for ALE that undergird social issues in adult education. The authors further note that detailed descriptions of the content for ALE programs in the U.S. did not provide a whole picture of such programs. Finally, public policy focused on ALE is one that is "economistic, and designed to remediate defective workers; other human values are displaced in favor of an ideology of workforce education" (p.5). Essentially, it is important that ALE policies integrate notions of human rights; social justice; and recognition of cultural diversity, peace and the active involvement of women and men in decisions affecting their lives.

Conclusion

Overall, this is a time of change and continuous development for adult learning and education in the U.S. While adult education has grown and changed over the years, over the past few decades, there has been an increasing focus on education for primarily human resource development due to factors such as globalization. What can be witnessed in the U.S. is a shift in how education is conceptualized and defined with the process of economic development. Education, therefore, in the new globalized sense, is vital in developing the intellectual and

creative power of each nation's society. Thus, it cannot be denied that the ALE systems are used as a strategic toll for human development, but more so economic development.

Consequently, ALE for the sake of human resource development is significant for many reasons, primarily for workforce development; however, the question still remains as to how much of the HRD approach to ALE involves cultivating social solidarity and forging national citizenship. Above all, it is important for education stakeholders and policymakers to recognize the limitations of the neoliberal lens that focuses on HRD, and its tendency to reduce all issues to financial rather than human or social terms. To this end, the United States must broaden its focus to more realistically understand the intersections of education and economics in our globalized world. It is the hope that such implications will result in better aligned global policies and goals that make international collaboration and social justice issues more important for understanding the underpinnings of the nation.

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