Reclaiming Social Justice: A Position Paper
Investigating Competing Representations of Adult Education and Its Purpose in a Neo-liberal World

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ESREA
European Society for Research on the Education of Adults

Between Global and Local:
Adult Learning and Development
İstanbul, 2011

Positioning and Conceptualizing
Adult Education and Learning
within Local Development

Proceedings Book
Positioning and Conceptualizing Adult Education and Learning within Local Development

Prepared to print by

Özlem Ünlühisarcıklı
Gökçe Güvercin
Onur Seçkin
İşik Sabırlı

Boğaziçi University Press
İstanbul

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Summary

The push towards globalization puts the world’s wealth in the hands of only a few, creating political and social discourses that lead to competing representations of adult education and its purpose. In this paper, we argue that neo-liberalism has had divergent effects on the conceptualization and practices of adult education, fostering conflicting ideologies and practices of human resource development and social justice. We charge adult educators to reclaim social justice as the purpose of adult education, establishing a force of transformation and communication that calls for a new social order of collectivism, justice, and democracy.

Introduction

Since its inception, broader politics and issues of meaningful civic participation have influenced adult education (Heany, 1989; Schied, 1993). Neo-liberal transformation of society, often concealed within the rubric of globalization, is shifting economic, political, social and environmental relationships; and adult education is struggling to find its relevance within the new world order (Walters, 1997). The push towards globalization puts the world’s wealth in the hands of only a few, creating political and social discourses that lead to competing representations of adult education and its purpose.

Historically, adult education was invaluable to building the nation-state and establishing the American social order (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). Today, the relationship between state and capital continues to implicate adult education in establishing a new world order. Reflecting the dual role of adult education as liberator and domesticator (Holst, 2002), contemporary adult education is caught in a tension between contrasting ideologies of social justice and human resource development. For example, adult literacy programs throughout the United States have recently begun to question students’ ability to contribute, collaborate and compete amidst the “Great Recession” and, as a result, shifted their focus from basic skills to career pathways. Herein establishes the need to continue the philosophical debate on the purpose of adult education. Will adult education continue to be an usher for hegemonic neo-liberal policies or will it reestablish ideals of democracy and social justice?

In this paper, we argue that neo-liberalism has had divergent effects on the conceptualization and practices of adult education, fostering conflicting ideologies and practices of human resource development and social justice. We argue that knowledge is taken up for its economic value (Jarvis, 2006) and adult education is tightly coupled (Weick, 1976) with job skills and economic opportunity. The call for globalization of education, places more emphasis on the market value of adult education, particularly adult literacy, than the human value of learning, making adult education a commodity. In order to understand the impact of neo-liberalism on adult education, it is necessary to acknowledge the gross inequities that are maintained through illusions of what it means to be an adult learner and what the field defines as useful knowledge. We argue that

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there is a need for critical reflection, dialogue and transformative action (Freire, 1998), in which learners build the capacity to challenge socio-historical discourses of knowledge and power.

Reclaiming social justice as the purpose of adult education, this paper positions adult education for an era of “new paradigms, theories, purposes, and practices” (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997, p. 4), putting it squarely in defense of civil society instead of neo-liberal coalitions of power. The field of adult education will establish itself as a force of transformation and communication calling for a new social order of collectivism, justice, and democracy.

**Historical representations of adult education**
The purpose of adult education¹ has largely been driven by bureaucratic and hierarchal systems of power and dominance namely the government, while the burgeoning discipline of human resource development has called a new player into the movement – business. Today, the field is split amongst contrasting ideologies of social justice and human resource development, creating a philosophical debate on the purpose of adult education. Since the second half of the twentieth century, there has been conflict between those individuals and organizations that favor a national adult education system focused on broad, liberal education for all adults and those that favor education that enables the least-educated adults to contribute to the economic productivity of the nation (Sticht, 2002). Those differences are described here as dominant and alternative dimensions of adult education.

**Dominant dimension**
The shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy promoted the growth of adult education in the United States and countless institutions and organizations to promote it (Cook, 1977). Under the veil of democracy, federal, state, and local governments as well as private institutions have invested enormously in adult education, especially adult literacy programs. These programs and pedagogies are rooted in geographical, historical, cultural and social contexts in which we work and live (Holst, 2010). Representing the dominant class, these institutions seek to prescribe education to the population as a means of instilling its values and ideas on those cultures, whilst maintaining dominance and power. Historically, the American educational system has valued adult education in periods of technological innovation and workforce demand. For example, the General Educational Development (GED) was developed by the federal government for returning World War II veterans requiring basic skills for more advanced workforce training, and possibly higher education (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). Today, technology, innovation and business have globalized society and the need for a better trained and skilled labor force continues to grow as our nation attempts to secure positioning as a world economic leader. The tightly coupled relationship between adult education and the economy continues to supply the workforce with low-skilled laborers through the discourse of “learn more to earn more,” encouraging adult literacy students to enroll in credentialing programs leading to low-wage jobs. This transformation of adult learners from basic education programs to conformed, technically trained workers is viewed as human resource development.

**Alternative dimension**
Amidst the discourse of “learn more to earn more” is a muffled voice of emancipation and social justice, which has been disturbing adult education since its American expansion. Although American democracy presented boundless opportunities and rewarded hard work, initiative, and ability, restriction and marginalization circumscribed opportunities for many adults. Specifically, women, Native Americans, African-Americans, immigrants, farmers, and industrial workers
were limited to educational opportunities due to race, gender, class, or ethnicity. Throughout the history of adult literacy, groups such as the Association for the Advancement of Women, Indian Rights Association, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and The National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, have rebelled against the prescription of dominance (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). During the 1970s, influenced by Paulo Freire, some American adult literacy education programs began using critical pedagogy to uncover the moral and political dimension of education. Freire was concerned by the marketization of education and, more broadly, the politics of neo-liberal reform. The spirit of Freire and critical pedagogy is alive in the academic journals and discourse within the field, but less prevalent in traditional state-funded programs.

Present and changing representations of adult education
The present and changing representations of adult education must be considered if we plan to reclaim social justice as the heartbeat of adult education. In this section of our paper, we discuss neo-liberalism, the impact of neo-liberalism on the socio-cultural and political representations of adult education and finally, our social justice representation of adult education.

Neo-liberalism
In our market-driven world, the push towards globalization puts the world’s wealth in the hands of only a few, creating political and social discourses that lead to competing representations of adult education and its purpose. According to Giroux (2005), neo-liberalism is a “virulent and brutal form of capitalism...wedded to the belief that the market should be the organizing principle for all political, social, and economic decisions” (p. 2). Neo-liberalism is viewed as an assault on democratic ideology, favoring profit margins for public welfare; in fact, possibly the greatest effect of neo-liberalism is its total separation of economic and democratic ideals. Within our globalized market the neo-liberal agenda holds a close relationship with the nation-state, posing an expansive threat to democratic ideals of equality and freedom, traditionally espoused in education. Furthermore, neo-liberalism puts power squarely in the hands of corporations controlling the market; therefore, any questions of freedom or justice are reduced to economic, not human, decisions. The power of these corporate colonialists to nullify any possible economic or political alternatives is a serious threat to our freedom. Giroux (2005) explains that through its concentrated power and wealth in a select few, the neo-liberal agenda has lifted economic needs above social needs. We assert that moving adult education outside the realm of social services jeopardizes its role as a fundamental human right and, consequently, students will be left behind.

During the past forty years, this new capitalist model has infiltrated society and adult education was not left alone. Economic crises and global economic competition motivated governments to repurpose public education as a tool for economic development, focusing on the “investment in both human capital and the production of new research or new knowledge” (Peters, 2000, p. 339). With human capital theory as its lynchpin, education ceased to be basic human right; instead it became an instrument of production. According to Rose (1999),

The new citizen is required to engage in a ceaseless work of training and retraining, skilling and re-skilling, enhancement of credentials and preparation for a life of incessant job seeking: life is to become a continuous economic capitalization of the self (p. 161).
Marked by its new human development goal, the government developed accountability standards to control the purpose, content, and delivery of secondary education. Higher education, through its focus on research, was co-opted by business funders and began professionalizing fields and linking them to advanced training. Community colleges received greater funding and security by providing technical skills to the majority of low and middle-skilled laborers. Finally, adult education was tapped as a valuable economic resource for quickly developing the unemployed into low-skilled workers. This tiered educational system has favored certain groups to become the leaders and managers of society while ushering the others into the workforce (Giroux, 1991).

A specific example of this is the Adult Education for Work educational policy, which is closely tied to and motivated by the neo-liberal agenda.

Adult Education for Work proposes building a core strand within the Adult Education system that would add a critical new focus: Helping low-skilled adults attain the basic and/or English language and work readiness skills they need to successfully progress on to postsecondary education or training and progress in high-quality, family-sustaining employment. (National Center for Education and the Economy, 2009, p. 5)

An expression of this policy is Adult Education Career Pathways (AECP). AECP reflects the vocationalization of adult literacy (Druin & Wildemeersch, 2000) founded by the discourse of promoting national economic growth and prosperity by enhancing the national competitive advantage. Although this program champions the potential of individuals to obtain high-quality, middle-skilled, family-sustaining careers its reality has positioned learners into low-skill, low-wage jobs such as Certified Nursing Assistants or private security. AECP may appear to empower adult learners to achieve higher education and end cycles of poverty, which is possible for already high achieving students; however, low functioning students and those lacking the resources and support to persist in adult basic education are only further marginalized by the market’s agenda.

Socio-cultural and political representations
The partnership between the public and private spheres, organized by market interests, has introduced a new socio-cultural landscape in American education. According to Kaufmann (2000), “schools as social forms, cultural institutions, legitimate certain ideologies, productions of knowledge and social formations that have been passed on to the student in order to maintain the existing class, race and gender structure of society” (p. 433). Within this context, learning is not only commodified for future profit sharing, but also produced to maintain the status quo. The socio-cultural power of neo-liberalism to create a docile, passive, technically trained workforce is possible through the blending of the public and private domains.

Neo-liberal policy trends have thus resulted in deepened poverty, increased income inequality, diminished program access, and a restructured labor market and welfare system. The public pedagogy taught in our schools and reinforced through our media responds to these social problems with aversion and rugged individualism, calling for poor minorities to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” Citizens unable to succeed amidst the injustice are criminalized, institutionalized, or simply forgotten. McLaren (1994) examines these pedagogical discourses, which “demonized others through absence or deviance” (p. 214). He suggests complementing critical pedagogy with multicultural education to challenge privileged Whiteness.
Beder's (1987) work, entitled *Dominant Paradigms, Adult Education, and Social Justice*, posits that two distinct paradigms, capitalism and empiricism, continue to affect adult education in implicit ways, lifting economic needs above social needs. Capitalism provides a structure and value system and empiricism is a system of social thought and way of knowing. We agree with Beder in that capitalism places individuals as the basic unit of the division of labor forcing human capital theory to become the "dominant rationale for all public subsidy of adult education, including adult literacy" (p. 109). We further agree that empiricism affects human capital by replacing historical notions that adult education promotes critical understanding and social change with skills and competencies. While human capital theory has long been a part of adult education and usually used as a rationale for adult education, now, under neo-liberal politics and polices, it is used to wed adult education and labor market productivity. With adult education being wed to labor market productivity, the impact of neo-liberalism on social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) must be taken into account. For example, if we consider general labor practices and economic forces, it is understood that individuals rise within their own profession and the economic system only to be replaced by school-leavers, immigrants, refugees, etc. This leads to nothing more than social reproduction of inequality, awarding economic, social and cultural capital.

As we see it, neo-liberalism depresses the need for social services. Neo-liberal campaigns cry that social welfare, for instance, is a matter of choice and poverty a matter of responsibility. Phrases such as "Poor people are lazy" and "Why doesn't he just get a job?" permeate American political conversations regarding welfare and education. The current phase of globalization has evolved with the implementation of neo-liberal policies that emphasize productivity and global economic integration. These goals have taken priority over basic human needs; consequently, the public responsibility of caring for its citizens through the provision of social services has been pushed aside. Giroux (2005) explains:

Under attack is the social contract with its emphasis on enlarging the public good and expanding social provisions—such as access to adequate health care, housing, employment, public transportation, and education—which provided both a safety net and a set of conditions upon which democracy could be experienced and critical citizenship engaged (p. 4).

With such structures in place cultural and social capital are direct components of agency for adult education students that should not be ignored. For adult education students, agency is determined by the human capital they possess which includes, but is not limited to, former education, work experience, and basic skills. Structural factors (Giddens, 1979) that impact adult education students include the access they have to adult basic education programs, their learning experience and their ability to transition to the higher education or the workforce. In navigating social structures, it is not just what you know or what you have but the process by which these resources are reproduced and accumulated. It is also the process by which you demonstrate what you know or use what you have and the practices you engage in that allow for the exchange of both. There is a web of social and cultural capital in individual moments of agency embedded in or throughout structures in the system of adult education. For example, adult basic education students may have little former education. The structural barriers that exist in the rules that govern employment qualifications and potential costs associated with education and skills
training, call for cultural capital informed by academic and social capitals giving adult education students few moments of individual agency under neo-liberal conditions. Our leading global financial institutions have stressed the importance of education and training for increasing human capital through up-skilling, increased skilled competencies, the production of research, and the creation of new knowledge (Peters, 2000). On the contrary, we stress a divergent pedagogy that questions the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse and fosters agency. The action espoused is not reduced to classical Marxist struggle, but instead “includes the creation of public spheres where individuals can be educated as political agents equipped with the skills, capacities, and knowledge they need to perform as autonomous political agents” (Giroux, 2005, p. 3).

**Social justice representations**

According to the neo-liberal agenda, adult education is provided for its economic value and purpose of training a workforce that will contribute efficiently to the bottom line. Our representation of adult education is framed in a critical paradigm with a social justice purpose; it is a force of transformation and communication calling for a new social order of collectivism, justice, and democracy. It calls for a reversal of Thatcher’s view that “There is no such thing as adult education today, only adults attending classes” (Jackson, 1995, cited in Foley, 2001). Opportunities for critical thinking, critical reflection and building agency should be created and respected. Within these opportunities, adult learners will integrate workplace, literacy, and critical knowledge in a way that is authentic to the individual, but respecting to the collective.

When we speak about reclaiming social justice, we must first outline our definition of what social justice is and encompasses. Social justice is foremost about building bridges between those who are marginalized and those who are not. For us, social justice acknowledges two things: (1) human agency is a key part of social change, and (2) teaching is a political act that is never neutral. Simply, we define agency as action (Giddens, 1979). In the case of adult education, Kaufmann (2000) articulates agency as “the ability to resist and/or reproduce construction...as well as the deconstruction of representation, language and hegemonic culture” (p. 436). Agency cannot be discussed without an understanding of the pre-existing social structures that create and construct the context in which all agency takes place. Social justice, for us, is a concept that incorporates a broad range of sociological dimensions in education. Formally, we view it as a fair distribution of advantages in education and society with particular attention to fairness and equity with regard to race, gender, class, disability, sexual orientation, etc. For educators we believe this means creating a basis for understanding systemic inequality and oppression based on other identities including but not limited to classism, heterosexism, racism, ableism, etc.

In adult literacy education, being literate has become significant in contemporary policy discourse as a means of human capital development and as a response to the effects of globalization. The process of acquiring these skills is conceptualized as a ladder that has to be climbed and where people are ranked from top to bottom with the emphasis on what they can not do rather than what they can. We see this as a deficit model where those on the bottom rungs of the ladder are positioned as lacking the skills that others think they need. Social justice is often viewed as something that is to be achieved through equalizing opportunities, but in the case of adult literacy education, we believe what is necessary goes beyond providing opportunities and instead incorporates making provisions that prioritize equality of outcomes. In order to work towards an equality of outcomes, we must begin to create programs that build upon learners’
strengths rather than their weaknesses using accessible curriculum and delivering programs in a way that take learners’ backgrounds into account rather than simply preparing them for the workforce.

A good example of such programming is Roca Community Literacy and Leadership Project in Massachusetts (ROCA). ROCA is a community-based, multi-cultural organization hosting an adult education program that serves about 250 young adults and adults a year through 10 classes: three ESOL classes, GED in English and in Spanish, Spanish literacy, and two levels of computer classes. The mission of ROCA is simple: “to promote justice through creating opportunities for young people and older adults to lead happy and healthy lives” (New England Literacy Resource Center, 2011). The work carried out at ROCA is not guided hegemonic discourse, but rather one that guides the values of belonging, generosity, competence, and independence and derives from indigenous people of North America and the practice of peace circles. Boyes-Watson (2001) describes peace circles as “a gentle invitation to change one’s relationship to oneself, to the community, and to the wider universe. It offers an awakening of connection and purpose beyond the myriad of differences that keep people apart and in conflict with one another” (p. 18). Because this type of programming falls outside of all outside of existing adult basic education policy and funding frameworks, which look primarily to reproduce skilled laborers and shuffle them into the workforce, staff with ROCA dedicate their own time. The response from students has been positive and has a created space of egalitarian structure, and opened dialogues that allow adult students to develop their leadership skills. We challenge adult educators to follow ROCA’s lead, taking-up a curriculum that is not guided by hegemonic discourse and a neo-liberal agenda but one that honors diversity, justice and the student.

**Conclusion**

Today’s educators are said to be pragmatists in theory and positivists in practice. This orientation to being and practice is challenged by alternative approaches to adult education, which denote social action as one’s educational purpose (Price, 1991). For these social justice oriented adult educators, existence is simply not enough. If our ideals are grounded in the democracy of education and the communicative nature of learning then we must discover how to translate this theory to practice. The examples provided demonstrate both the constraints and potentiality of adult education to reproduce or challenge the status quo.

If Blakely’s (1965) claim that the role of adult education is “fundamental to the solution of all social problems” (p. 54) is true, then its potential to challenge our existing neo-liberal adult education needs to be addressed in the practice of adult education. We challenge adult educators and program planners to reclaim social justice as the purpose of adult education and put the brakes on “growing colonization of civil society by corporate power (Brookfield & Holst, 2011, p. 132) and create programs and engage adult learners in an education process that opens a space for them to build social capital and create new opportunities for themselves. We support programs that empower students to recognize injustice in the current social order and provide opportunities for learners to foster agency through communication action. As practitioner-researchers we need to take the social justice agenda and contempt for neo-liberalism out of the academy and into formal, nonformal and informal pedagogical spaces of practice. Only whence we move within the circles of injustice can we effect change.
References


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1 In this paper we use adult education and adult literacy education interchangeably. We use adult education to mean adult literacy and adult basic education as defined in Title II of the U.S. Workforce Investment Act. Federal funding that supports adult literacy programs in the United States and dictates, under Title II, that Adult Basic Education programs (ABE) must assist (1) adults in becoming literate and obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency, (2) adults who are parents in obtaining the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children, and (3) adults in the completion of secondary school education.

2 In this paper we take-up Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, specifically his “institutionalized form” of capital – objectification of cultural capital such as in education credentials (p. 84-88), developed from what he calls, *habitus*, brought about by socialization and exposure to systemic resources or lack thereof. These resources, accumulated assets including knowledge, skills, and abilities, are referred to as *capital* and particularly valued by more privileged groups in society. Social capital refers to the resources linked to “possession of a durable network” and how that network enables activation of other forms of capital (p. 88). Access to institutions and positions of power is much controlled by social capital.

3 We use agency as referred to in Giddens (1979) structuration theory, which examines the relationship between agency and structure. Agency defined as action and structure as the rules and resources. Structure and agency take place across time and space and socially construct one another.