Placing Multiculturalism Front & Center in Adult Education

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Multiculturism and its Importance

As a general concept, multiculturalism refers to the "pluralistic view that stresses inclusion, mutual respect, and a celebration of group diversity" (Healy et al., 2019, p. 43). In adult education, multiculturalism's primary purpose is to work "within the educational system to foster an awareness and appreciation of diversity" (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2008, p. 46). In theory, multicultural education in adult and postsecondary education in the United States should focus on the growing diversity of its population, partly resulting from migration and globalization trends (Healy et al., 2019; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). One would expect that given these rapidly increasing diversity trends, multicultural education efforts would strive to stay ahead of the curve or at least keep up.

With greater diversity, greater cultural awareness becomes very important for adult educators in their relationships with their students, for student relationships with each other, to enhance students' preparation to enter the workforce, and to help them thrive in a global society. Unfortunately, it appears that many postsecondary settings are limiting their multicultural education efforts to students' enrollment in elective diversity courses (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2008); basically relegating multiculturalism to be categorized as a side issue or non-issue, which leaves many students either not exposed or minimally exposed to multicultural perspectives. Some of the factors contributing to this dynamic include educators' lack of

awareness of their own biases, educators' tendency to create "race-neutral" or "color-blind" environments, and general curriculum exclusion of multicultural perspectives. Placing multiculturalism front and center in adult education, rather than ignoring or making it a side issue, would have an impact on addressing these factors.

Factors and Strategies

It is well known and accepted that much of who we are as human beings and how we relate to each other is a result of our social environment, and educators are no different. A recent study examined the assertion that teachers' own racial biases help drive educational inequality and confirmed that teachers' attitudes on race mirror those of society at large (Starck et al., 2020). This study set aside the common myths that educators are blind with respect to color and/or race and as educators are automatically capable of creating race-neutral zones in their classrooms.

There is general consensus among scholars and researchers that educators' self-awareness of their personal cultural biases is an important first step to help move multicultural perspectives from the sidelines and place them front and center in their classrooms. Some strategies to improve educators' cultural self-awareness include the following:

a. a capacity to recognize the effect that their own personal values/beliefs have on their students (Howe & Lisi, 1995),

b. acknowledging and claiming their own culture so they can appreciate other cultures (Rose-Cohen, 2004),

c. examining their own perception of culture to deepen their understanding of cultural diversity (Ricard, 1996), and

d. engaging in educator multicultural training to help shift or mitigate their own personal biases (Starck et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, in the United States, decisions about teaching material is based primarily on a White Eurocentric perspective, with little to no inclusion of the non-White multicultural perspective (Brookfield, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lund, 2010). This means that non-White multicultural experiences are also not captured nor represented in the material students read and in class discussions. Thus, students of color have to adjust and accommodate to theory and experience unfamiliar to them (Lund, 2010). This creates a learning environment that assumes students of color are somehow deficient, ill-prepared, or in need of remediation efforts (Ladson-Billings, 1998). And even in situations where multicultural perspectives are offered, they come about as an after-thought or are presented as "other" or "alternative" views deviating from the norm (Brookfield, 2014). In the end, it is the students of color who always need to adapt.

There have been calls for bold action to address the absence of multiculturalism from the curriculum such as making multicultural education mandatory (Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2011) or completely moving away from White European perspectives towards only multicultural curricula incorporated into coursework (Howe & Lisi, 1995). But some simpler strategies to address this include:

a. opening discourse to include ideology that reflects other racial traditions (Brookfield, 2014, p. 34),

b. wrapping the curriculum around students' lives to demonstrate that their stories are welcomed and valued (Sealy-Ruiz, 2007, p. 59), and

c. departing from the syllabus to take advantage of teachable moments and opportunities to knock down walls (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2008, p. 52).

Embracing multiculturalism in adult education does not have to be a difficult or daunting task. Educators are more than capable of finding creative ways to promote "human dignity, justice,

equality, freedom, self-determination, and democracy" (Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2011, p. 13), the core principles and essence of multicultural education in their day-to-day practice. It would be safe to assume that most educators are already doing so. An open mind and willingness are all it takes to keep multiculturalism front and center at all times.

Reflection Questions for Educators

1. What are your personal biases with regard to multiculturalism?

2. What effect do personal values and biases have on the students you serve?

3. What can you do to foster multicultural discussions among students?

4. How is multiculturalism included in your curriculum and syllabi?

5. What resources (training, outreach, PD) are available to better prepare you to embrace multiculturalism?

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BIOGRAPHY
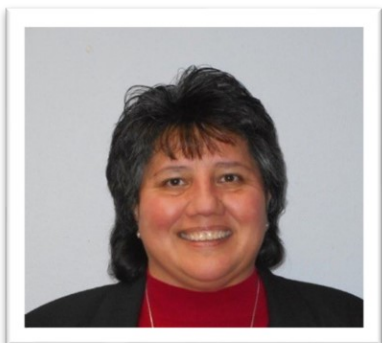
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