



Video Collection Review

Reimagining Education by Exploring Past Activism

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The *Reimaginers: Education Activists and Promises of Change* is a series of web videos produced by the Center on History and Education at Teachers College of Columbia University. It was driven by the current crisis in education caused by moving from face-to-face instruction to online education due to the pandemic. In the introduction to the series, the Center scholars point out that the move to online learning has been successful in some cases. However, more significantly, it “laid bare the structural inequalities that define our educational system” as philanthropic and corporate partners sought “to use the current crises to further privatize education, minimize teachers’ autonomy in the classroom, and promote full-time computer-based learning” (Center on History and Education, 2020, para. 1). The video series shares examples from the past where education activists offered alternative schooling structures and transformational educational visions that can be models of innovation to address today’s concerns. Changes in format from face-to-face to online called for reimagining education, yet those involved in the Center were concerned that this “reimagining” might not be a creative way to improve education. They were alarmed that it could further marginalize traditionally oppressed groups.

The video creators acknowledged that the changes in education were taking place while Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests were sweeping the country; they recognized parallels between these protests and the resulting violence against current activists with the experiences of past activists who protested incidents of violence against Black individuals. Both past and present activists opposed systemic racism. The video creators wondered how the lessons of the past could be applied to reimagining today’s educational environment in a socially just way that would support the work of BLM. Much of the video content and the rationale for its inclusion in the series is connected, not only to education, but also to the issues of equity and social justice.

The Center scholars asked the questions: “[How might] the past inform genuine efforts to reimagine education? Who has offered alternative visions of education? What have they imagined? What would their ideas look like now?” (Center on History and Education, 2020, para. 2). The history of the struggle of Black Americans to fight for equity in education access, participation, and resources, from literacy programs to job training to higher education opportunities, is filled

with activists whose work can provide some answers. The videos, and accompanying resource lists, provide a rich archive for today's adult educators who are looking to support social justice activism in education. The materials amplify the often-silenced voices of Black and Latinx Americans who have contributed to educational innovation. These resources illuminate the deep and intersectional history of race and education.

GATHERING EXPERTS & MINING HISTORICAL RECORDS

In each video, there are two hosts, one from the Center and a second who is currently a student or teacher. The hosts and an intellectual from the field engage in a dialogue about the specific topic of that video. The experts are from diverse backgrounds. They are knowledgeable and well-respected in their areas of expertise, publishing frequently and often presenting at scholarly meetings. These contributors include:

- Dr. Robert P. Robinson who specializes in the Black Freedom Movement and education
- Dr. Tatiana Cruz whose expertise includes African American history, Latinx history, and 20th century social movements
- Dr. Johanna Fernández, a historian of social movements, the political economy of American cities, and African American History
- Dr. Scot Danforth, a scholar who examines political and ethical issues of disability studies and inclusive and democratic education
- Dr. Stephen Brier, an urban education leader specializing in U.S. social and labor history and digital technology
- Dr. Crystal Sanders, an authority on African American history, southern history, and the history of Black education.

These scholars introduce moments of educational innovation over time and historical social justice activism. They discuss applications to the current day.

The videos offer photographs from the 1960s through the 1970s, and there is a list of four to six resources with each video. These educational materials include books, short videos, documentary movies, podcasts, newspaper and magazine articles, interview transcripts, academic journal articles, legal documents, and open access digital archives. Both the quantity and quality of these resources expand the set of materials available to adult educators and encourage the use of texts that are written by Black and Latinx authors. The materials provide a link between current grassroots organizing and past resistance movements that introduced radical ideas that are relevant today. The videos are posted on the web page for immediate access and close captioning is available. They are linked to YouTube where transcripts can be found. The format is effective because it enhances understanding of how educational movements for social justice affected change and connects to the possibility of transformation today. The guest scholars and hosts speak from their own lived experiences as Black or Latinx Americans.

THE REIMAGINERS SERIES

The series includes six videos that reveal the work of Black, Latinx, and disabled activists who “theorized and enacted creative educational change” (Center on History and Education, 2020, para. 3) that resonates today. The videos cover the Black Panther’s Oakland Community School, the desegregation of public schools in Boston, the political activism of Puerto Rican youth in the Young Lords, the protests of disabled students at University of California at Berkley, the significance of the CUNY open admissions policy, and the development of Head Start in Mississippi.

The first video, *The Black Panthers' Oakland Community School*, acquaints viewers with the Black Panther Party’s full-time school that began in Oakland, California as a day-care and home school in 1970. It later educated community children from 1974 to 1982. In the discussion, projects described such as the OCS student justice courts are linked to current practices like restorative justice programs. The school’s founders aimed to create an innovative educational environment to develop independent critical thinkers, goals that are meaningful in contemporary educational circumstances. Also, their methods can be instructive for modern educators.

The values and objectives of the Black Panthers' Oakland Community School illustrate the same philosophical foundations as progressive adult education that emphasizes practical problem-solving through real world experience (Scott, Mizzi, & Merriweather, 2020). The school director focused on "teaching students how to think, not what to think" (5:31) and saw students as “as co-creators of knowledge and not just passive learners” (5:38). Traditionally, childhood education has focused on classroom curriculum. The Oakland Community School adopted a more experiential model, sending children to grocery stores to practice mathematical calculations and read street signs to navigate through the neighborhood. Adult educators can review these innovations to find inspiration for integrating their students’ life experiences into the learning process (Brookfield, 1995). Adult education experiential learning takes many forms like service-learning projects that connect college students with non-profit community work, social movement participant training sessions on lobbying, or neighborhood scavenger hunts for adult immigrants learning English. The focus on learner experiences ties together past educational activists and current adult educators.

In *Latinx Struggles for Educational Justice*, the court-ordered desegregation plan for Boston is examined. It becomes clear that during this period, there were layers of conflict surrounding race, language, socioeconomic class, age, and education levels just as these identity subjectivities cannot be neatly separated today. The need to recognize the diversity within communities and the power of grassroots activism (in this case parents and community members) is significant. The key message is that assumptions should not be allowed to govern the process of reimagining education; the views of stakeholders must be included. Part of reimagining education includes assessing and evaluating programs. The work of the Latinx activists in Boston reminds adult educators that if the evaluation and reimagining of educational policy and programming is to be transformational, it needs “to empower marginalized groups, set agendas and outcomes for community-based programming, build capacity, and create change” (Hill, 2020, p. 150). The protests against the harmful desegregation policies are a powerful example for today’s adult educators and learners.

In the third video, *The Young Lords: Radical Visions for Learning*, the political movement of Puerto Rican youth provides a counterpart to the Black Panthers as a model of activism and recognizes the power of young people whether conducting a school boycott in the sixties or leading protest marches in today. Just as the 1960s activists produced a newspaper and set up peer education programs, present day young leaders are creating voting rights education and voter turnout mechanisms. It is important for adult educators to acknowledge and understand the trauma that students experience. Such an awareness is essential to move education forward in positive ways; the curriculum inside the classroom needs to reflect the lived experiences of the learners. Trauma-informed practices can provide safe spaces for adult learners to flourish (Wartenweiler, 2017).

The Rolling Quads and Disability Studies provides the story of the University of California at Berkeley disability rights activist group in the late 1960s. The creation of this group at a time when there was not a disability rights movement is reflective of both the Black Panthers and the Young Lords as political activists worked to assert self-determination and fight oppression. The conversation highlights the demand to look at the systemic change that is needed now and reimagine how true alliances between activist groups might bring about this necessary revolution, making education more inclusive for all learners.

In the fifth video, *CUNY and the Struggle for Open Admissions*, the panel discussion describes the history of the City University of New York. It describes student protests that led to open admissions, dramatically changing the landscape of higher education. Significantly, the push for open admissions was a demand that CUNY become more demographically representative of the New York city high school student population which was at the time 40% Black and Latinx while the university system was overwhelmingly white. This activism also led to the introduction of Black and Puerto Rican studies programs. The message for adult educators in higher education is that student and faculty activism (Becton et al., 2020) is essential, especially in times of budgetary constraints and top-down policy making.

In the final video, *Head Start in the Mississippi Delta*, the early childhood education program is viewed as a "vehicle for liberation" (Center on History and Education, 2020, para. 9) when educational opportunities were limited and violence towards and oppression of Black Americans was significant. The whole family approach and job creation elements of Head Start are still relevant. Adult educators are cognizant of adult learners who bring their life circumstances and experiential knowledge to class.

Experience is not neutral. It "is culturally framed and shaped. How we experience events and the readings we make of these are problematic; that is, they change ... according to the cultural, moral, and ideological vantage points from which they are viewed" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 379). Reactions to the death of George Floyd highlight how ideological viewpoints shape our experiences. Black Lives Matter protestors do not, and should not have to, leave their activist experiences out of their educational environments. The lives of these adult learners cannot be overlooked in reimagining education. The videos offer an opportunity to bring their experiences on the street into their classrooms and examine the effects of past activism. If "the core of the work of adult and continuing education is a concern with equity" (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010, p. 6), then experiences of injustice must be addressed in adult education. It is not enough to merely identify

instances of oppression; adult educators need to highlight the plight of marginalized individuals to increase understanding and inspire change. By studying the work of previous educational activists, instructors and students can question beliefs, values, and positions within the structures of our society. They can evaluate what inspired change in the past and how the same principles might encourage reform now. The videos provide a means to initiate needed conversations.

While the videos can be watched separately and explored as discreet topics, there are thematic intersections that can be examined throughout the series. Issues of race, education, and oppression are prevalent. Each video may focus on a particular group, Black children or college wheelchair users or Latinx youth. They may take place in California or Chicago or New York. However, there are connections, both direct and subtle between the videos. The video on the disability protests of 1977 mentions the role the Black Panthers played in feeding the protestors. Although the Boston Public schools video focused on the experiences of Puerto Rican students, it highlighted the way subjective labeling of skin color was used to divide students into Black, White, and Hispanic categories to integrate schools. Students from the same family were labeled differently and sent to different schools due to the shade of their skin color. These connections add meaningful layers to analyze and important ways to capture the individual experiences of Black and Latinx Americans. The roles of parents in the videos on Boston school desegregation and Head Start are another connection that recognizes the need to involve all stakeholders in reimagining education. Listening to all voices is important rather than just providing a platform for the privileged and powerful who already speak the loudest. The political nature of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords offers a way to examine movements such as Black Lives Matter and provides adult educators with an important historical foundation to teach race.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS ON LESSONS FROM THE PAST

The Reimaginers: Education Activists and Promises of Change web videos detail transformative educational change from the past that can educate present day activists and adult educators. By using the video series, adult educators can “create space for social justice and prepare adult learners to critique and understand injustice” (Alfred, 2016, p. 31). The videos include narratives of resistance and present the experiences of people of color through their own often unshared stories; the series can enhance opportunities to teach race in adult education classrooms and to shape social justice movements. The series can provoke dialogue, reveal critiques of educational practices, and instigate analysis of the impact of past activism. It can promote new ideas to reimagine socially just education. The educational materials provided on this website present unique viewpoints that are relevant today. It is vital for adult educators to acknowledge the importance of history as they work to meet social justice goals and provide inclusive education, particularly given the goals of adult education to further social justice aims. *The Reimaginers: Education Activists and Promises of Change* connects directly to adult education practice and theory.

The videos focus on reimagining education. By “advancing democracy and social justice through critical revolutionary adult education [that] is central to the discipline” (Alfred, 2016, p. 32), adult educators can fight for social justice and “begin a “re-imagination of what it means to educate for democracy and social justice” (Alfred, 2016, p. 32). Large scale movements are important for

accomplishing social justice goals, but immediate changes on the local level are also significant accomplishments. As the videos point out, adult educators need to value neighborhood initiatives like the creation of a school by the Black Panthers and projects conducted by the Young Lords to deal with garbage collection and lead paint in tenements. The actions of groups highlighted by the Center video creators can inspire adult educators to recognize the importance of focusing on specific local action (Brookfield, 2016).

Just as the interdisciplinarity of adult education unites the purposes of education and the goals of social justice, the video series joins the study of history and today's social movement learning, offering concrete instructional materials. The examination of policy conflicts of the past can illuminate policy making of the present as adult educators develop programs that meet the needs of adult learners and argue for funding. Knowledge of what worked in the past can offer a strong rationale for socially just policy funding today. The videos and additional resources that highlight past obstacles to educational access can provide adult educators insights as they try to improve access for marginalized learners facing oppression in modern society. The vast array of adult education programs such as literacy and language instruction, military and workforce training, health and higher education, labor organizations, and cultural institutions can increase the effectiveness of social justice movements by forming strong and successful alliances modeled on the work of activists presented in the video series. If adult educators whose practice is rooted in social justice are to understand the complexity of adult education, they must explore social change movements that are an integral part of education history. *The Reimaginers: Education Activists and Promises of Change* is an excellent place to start.

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