



*Research Article*

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# Adult Learners' Community Cultural Wealth: Seeing ABE Learners through A CRT Lens

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## INTRODUCTION

A deficit perspective of students of color is prevalent throughout the field of education. Indeed, Yosso (2005) argues that deficit thinking is “one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in US schools” (p.75). This holds true within adult basic education<sup>1</sup> (ABE) programs as well. Within ABE programs, deficit stories about race, gender, class, and print literacy (dis)ability saturate policy and practice, often with negative consequences for the large numbers of low-income adults and adults of color who populate the classrooms (Belzer & Pickard, 2015; D’Amico, 2004; Fingeret, 1983; Hull, 1993; Hull & Zacher, 2007). Critical race theorists have described these deficit stories as “majoritarian stories,” which conceal and promote White supremacy and attempt to rationalize the oppression of students of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). However, ABE students of color bring assets to the classroom that often go unrecognized. Yosso (2005) offers a typology “community cultural wealth” that students of color possess, and which can be utilized to support their education. In this article, I explore the community cultural wealth of two ABE students, and I consider how different an ABE education that acknowledges these assets might be.

The analysis in this article is conceptually grounded in critical race theory (CRT) as it applies to education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005), with a particular concern for how it relates to adult education (Closson, 2010). Although CRT began in the legal field, it has been used as a framework by educational researchers since the 1990s (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ladson-Billings (2013) argues that the defining aspect of CRT that separates it from other educational research theories and methodologies that focus on race is its face value acceptance that racism is an

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<sup>1</sup> “Adult basic education programs” and “adult literacy programs” are used interchangeably in this article to indicate adult education programs designed to serve students seeking up to and including high school equivalency preparation. Analysis in this article does not include services to adult English Language Learners (ELL), which comprise a distinct branch of adult education programming.

everyday part of the fabric of life in the United States, rather than an aberration. Numerous scholars, within and outside of CRT, have established the ways that race has been socially constructed in the U.S. and how racism and racial hierarchies have been and continue to be used to maintain property and privilege for White people (Harris, 1993; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Massey & Denton, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1986; Spring, 2016). Accepting this reality means that CRT researchers can move away from having to 'prove' that racism is active in a setting – an ontological quest that can stymie research about racism - and move towards the goal of undoing racist systems, one of several foundational aspirations of CRT.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) delineate five specific goals for critical race research that seeks to transform racist systems in education: 1) Foreground and acknowledge race and racism in intersection with other forms of oppression within education; 2) Challenge dominant, deficit-based stories of people of color; 3) Commit to social justice; 4) Acknowledge student strengths and the importance of student experience; and 5) Attend to the connection between historical and contemporary realities of race and racism and make use of transdisciplinary knowledge and methodologies to better understand the experiences of people of color. These purposes are distinct from the purposes of most traditional educational research. However, given the persistent ways even “well-meaning” social science research can inadvertently objectify and further marginalize learners (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Minow, 1991; Parker & Lynn, 2002), a shift away from traditional paradigms of social science research is warranted. CRT offers education researchers and practitioners a window to see outside of Eurocentric epistemological paradigms that continue to position communities of color as deficient culturally, educationally, or biologically, and instead proposes alternative methodologies that emphasize the knowledge and cultural capital that students of color bring with them to the classroom (Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005).

Specifically, this article explores the concept of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), a response to Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital that seeks to name the assets that racialized students bring to classrooms, but which often go unacknowledged (Yosso, 2005). Yosso identifies six types of cultural capital that learners of color bring with them to educational settings: *Aspirational capital* - the ability to maintain hope in the face of oppression; *Linguistic capital* – the ability to navigate social interaction in multiple languages or using multiple communicative repertoires; *Familial/community capital* – the dedication to the improvement and support of one's community and extended kin network; *Social capital* – connections to others within marginalized communities that lead to economic and social opportunities; *Navigational capital* – the ability to navigate oppressive spaces that were designed to exclude the participation of marginalized people; and *Resistant capital* – the capacity to push back against oppression and persevere.

This analysis explores the experiences of two African American learners in one publicly funded ABE class targeted to adults who have difficulty reading. Although under-researched and generally under-regarded, the work of publicly funded ABE programs is intimately interwoven with other public education systems. Because students of color are consistently concentrated in under-resourced K-12 schools, where they are disproportionately subjected to more severe discipline, disproportionately placed in special education, and consistently offered curriculum that is less challenging, they leave before graduation at substantially higher rates than White students (Blanchett, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Oakes, 2005; O'Connor &

Fernandez, 2006; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Thus, the public ABE system serves many students of color as an opportunity to improve their literacy skills, as a source of K-12 completion, and as a starting point for pursuing higher education.

However, within the public ABE system, majoritarian stories that position these learners as deficient can continue to negatively inform the educational opportunities provided. Imagining and creating alternatives to discriminatory educational systems depend in part on unearthing and acknowledging our deficit-based understandings of what it means to be an adult literacy learner and interrupting how these understandings shape policies, institutional processes, and instructional practices. The analysis presented in this article is intended to push back against majoritarian stories of adult literacy learner deficit by highlighting the individual and cultural strengths, knowledge, and experiences two African American learners brought with them to their ABE reading class.

### Majoritarian Stories in Adult Basic Education

The nature of majoritarian stories in educational research, policy and practice has evolved over time. Initially, these stories attributed low academic achievement of students of color to biological factors, including lower cognitive capacity or cognitive impairment (Menchaca, 1997; Valencia, 2010). More recently, cultural-deprivation theories have mostly (but not entirely) supplanted biological theories in popular and educational discourse. These theories attribute differences in achievement for racially minoritized and low-income students to membership in a “culture of poverty,” which is characterized by a failure to value education and a lack of ability for long-term planning, and to race- and ethnicity-specific styles of parenting and community and family life (Ladson-Billings, 2007, Orellana, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005). Although both biological deficit and cultural deprivation theories have frequently been critiqued in the research, these beliefs still influence policies, teachers’ professional development, and classroom instructional practices (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Prins & Schafft, 2009; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997).

Majoritarian stories about students of color that operate in adult basic education may be rooted in these biological- and cultural-deficit theories and compounded by enduring American prejudices against students who do not do well in school-based language arts. These prejudices have historically emphasized learners’ perceived lack of intelligence and failed moral character and persist in modern classrooms (Zehm, 1973). For adults in ABE who have substantial difficulty reading, the association between learners’ print literacy status and their perceived deficits is particularly acute. Many scholars have noted how programs characterize these learners as childlike, dysfunctional, unintelligent, or incapable of making good decisions (Beder, 1991; Fingeret, 1985; Martin, 2001). For instance, Fingeret’s (1985) qualitative study of six North Carolina adult literacy programs suggested that deficit-driven understandings of adults as childlike prompted condescending treatment of learners, whom one teacher described as “little lost sheep” (p. 82). A presumption of limited intellectual capacity can inform the way policies and programs shape practice and may undermine learning opportunities that invite collaboration with adult learners (Belzer & Pickard, 2015; Beder, 1991). Most classes utilize top-down instruction, where the instructor selects material without input from their students (Beder & Medina, 2001; Purcell-

Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2002). Furthermore, this instruction may increasingly focus on standardized test preparation (Pickard, 2021). Many factors influence this instructional approach to adult literacy, but it seems highly likely that wide-spread deficit stories of learners contribute to the perpetuation of these largely unsuccessful instructional practices.

Just as deficit beliefs can drive practice, common practices in adult literacy programs can sustain and perpetuate deficit beliefs about adult learners. For example, many practitioners' use of grade level "equivalents" to describe adult literacy learners' reading levels invokes impressions of childishness, neediness and helplessness (Martin, 2001), reinforcing stereotypes about the limited capacity of adults who have difficulty with reading. Because a substantial majority of African-American adults who enroll in adult literacy programs are assessed as "basic" level learners (Pickard, 2016), they are likely disproportionately subjected to practitioners' use of demeaning, elementary school terminology to describe their reading skills and capacities.

Very often, these types of interactions and the racial power dynamics they reinforce may go unnoticed or unexamined by practitioners, because they are such a "normal" part of adult literacy education. Research that emphasizes the cultural and intellectual strengths of adult literacy learners of color can shift the lens through which practitioners view learners and support efforts to identify and interrogate the damaging but normalized beliefs that can negatively influence teaching and learning in ABE.

## METHODOLOGY

### Setting and Participants

The findings presented in this article were derived from an ethnographic study (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007) of the experiences of learners in one reading class for adults.<sup>2</sup> This class was offered by The Learning Center (TLC),<sup>3</sup> an urban, publicly-funded, community education program that at the time of my fieldwork had been in operation for almost 50 years. TLC offered a range of free classes, including literacy, high school equivalency, English language acquisition, and family literacy. The class that was the focus of my research was a literacy or "basic" level class, meaning that the adults placed in the class had been identified via a standardized assessment instrument as having difficulty with basic reading skills. However, during my observations participants in this class demonstrated a range of reading skills. This variability in skill level was likely a result of TLC's reliance on the standardized test as a stand-alone assessment and placement tool, although the potential for these tests to underestimate returning adult learners' true skills has been described in the literature (Sticht, 1990).

The class met twice a week, for two and a half hours each time. The number of learners in attendance on any given day ranged from 10-22 (mode and median were both 17). While new participants were regularly enrolled, particularly towards the latter half of the data collection period, and a few students left the program or moved to the next level class, there was a core group

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<sup>2</sup> Other reports from this research can be found at Author (2021a) and Author (2021b).

<sup>3</sup> All names of people and places in this article are pseudonyms.

of 13 learners who were present for most of the class meetings which I observed. These 13 students were recruited to participate in interviews for the study; two declined. The 11 who agreed ranged in age from 26 to 72. Nine were African American (three women, six men) and two were Latinx (one woman, one man). The group of students who agreed to participate in the study was loosely representative of the demographics of the class, which was, on average, primarily African American (70%) and majority male (60%). Only two White students participated in the class during my fieldwork; neither persisted beyond a few sessions.

The experiences of two African American students, Lamont (age 60) and Sean (age 40), form the basis of the analysis presented in this article. These learners were selected because they were considered by the teacher and the program to be two of the weakest readers in the class and thus very difficult to serve. Furthermore, Lamont and Sean had formerly been incarcerated and Sean had been diagnosed as a child with behavioral health issues, both experiences which can carry additional stigma within majoritarian ABE stories. It seems particularly important to name the assets these students brought to their ABE classrooms. It is my hope that acknowledging and celebrating the range of strengths and skills even of "difficult to serve" learners can help interrupt persistent deficit-based framings of racially marginalized adults who have difficulty with reading and encourage practitioners to find ways to incorporate their strengths into instruction.

## Data Collection

Data collection procedures included participant observation (Creswell, 2007; Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007) as a volunteer classroom aide twice a week for four months. Classroom interactions during teacher-led instruction and small group work time for these visits were audio-recorded and transcribed. Follow-up visits to the classroom or program site took place once or twice a month for four more months. During these eight months, I also attended a new student orientation, a meeting for all students in the program, twice observed a different reading class for comparison purposes, and made return visits to the program site and students' homes to conduct interviews. In all, I visited the program 23 times to participate as a classroom volunteer and 21 more times to conduct interviews or other classroom/program site observations, and I made 8 visits to students' homes. Descriptive field notes were written for all of these visits and for conversations with students or staff that took place outside of these visits, such as phone calls or chance meetings (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). Artifacts such as instructional materials, informational pamphlets about work opportunities distributed to learners, and written examples of staff communication were also collected (Patton, 1987).

In addition to many conversations that took place during classroom observations, Lamont and Sean were each interviewed twice over the eight months. The first interview took place early in the observation period and the second took place three to six months later, in order to explore their experiences and outcomes over time. Interviews ranged in length from 33 minutes to 80 minutes, and each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. Finally, I met one-on-one several times before or after class with these two students to work on reading material I had provided in order to supplement the instruction they were receiving in class. These interactions were recorded in field notes.

## Data Analysis

Early open coding (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011) revealed a contrast between these two learners' descriptions of their own knowledge and experiences and the narratives about them as difficult to serve or low-achieving that were circulating in their ABE program. I then began deductive coding (Creswell, 2007), using Yosso's (2005) typology of community cultural wealth to delineate specific aspects of these students' cultural capital. As articulated above, Yosso identifies six types of cultural capital that learners of color bring with them to educational settings: Aspirational capital, Linguistic capital, Familial/community capital, Social capital, Navigational capital, and Resistant capital. Examples of codes that emerged during this process include: community engagement, aspiration, motivation, helping others, work history, family support, digital know-how, and humor/creativity. Next, coded data were synthesized into narratives that illustrate these learners' community cultural wealth.

## SEEING ABE LEARNERS THROUGH A CRT LENS

The narratives offered below are short excerpts from the stories students shared with me during our interviews and informal conversations. These excerpts were selected to highlight specific aspects of these students' community cultural wealth.

### Lamont: "That Little Boy Something Else Now"

Lamont was a 60-year-old, African American man. He was tall and soft-spoken, and he reported coming to TLC with the express intention of improving his reading and writing. Although his teacher described him in conversation with me as unfocused and not sufficiently goal-oriented, in our interviews Lamont reported that he was very interested in learning to read and demonstrated what he described as the 'habit' of trying to read everything around him – signs, commercials, posters, whatever came across his visual field. Twice during our interviews, Lamont spontaneously engaged in attempts to read text in our surroundings: once he spent a number of minutes critically analyzing both the text and meaning of a poster on the wall that showed a person climbing a stack of books underneath the slogan "Reading takes you higher;" another time he took my list of questions for our interview and began to try and make sense of everything on it, including the title and the IRB information in the header. He reported seeking access to texts, information, and tools for reading in his daily life. He went to dollar stores and flea markets in search of books that were interesting and at his level. He watched Sesame Street on his phone. He imitated other students in the class who used the Google microphone tool on their phones to spell words they were unsure about. In short, Lamont appeared very motivated to improve his reading.

Lamont reported that life-long reading difficulties had shaped how he was able to work in the world and had limited the types of jobs he had been able to get working for other people. Nonetheless, he had accumulated extensive work experience. In addition to his job as a manager in an autoparts store, a position he held for many years, Lamont had owned and operated several businesses, including his own tow truck and towing service, a limousine service with two

limousines, and what he described as a horseback riding academy, including a stable with 13 horses. The horses were frequently rented out to schools and carnivals, and twice were hired to be a part of major motion pictures that were filmed in the city where TLC was located.

The story of the stable offers a poignant illustration of the community cultural wealth that Lamont brought with him to class. The stable came into being after a fire destroyed the lumberyard across the street from Lamont's family home. His mother bought the burned-out lot from the city for \$1, and Lamont used his connections to get free construction equipment to clear the lot and free fill dirt to create gardening beds, helping her build what would ultimately become an award-winning urban garden. He reported deciding to build a horse stable on the back part of the lot, where he worked regularly with neighborhood children, many of whose families were experiencing addiction issues and poverty. He allowed the children to help him groom the horses, clean the stable, and take the horses and ponies out to sell rides in local parks. He reported sharing the profits from these sales with the children and explaining to them that the remaining money was apportioned for the care of the horses. Lamont described being especially concerned with encouraging the children to do well in school:

I would tell 'em, "You don't go to school, you don't get no good marks, you know that pony over there? You not going to have that pony tomorrow, I'm going to give him to someone else and let *them* take care of him." And that would keep the kids, make them do they stuff, do it right. I told them, "You hooky school, you can't come here no more. Once your mother tell me, that's it, you're gone."

Eventually, a boy from the neighborhood, angry that he could not take out the pony he wanted, set fire to the stable and burned it down. However, Lamont decided not to press charges. He reported feeling that putting the child in the criminal justice system would eliminate the boy's chances of a more positive future. As Lamont told it:

[T]he kids *always* did the right things, but that one, but that one. But that one, come right now, he's the best kid I ever seen...I had to go to court and everything. I told the judge, there's no sense in putting him away. That's not helping him. You know, every kid make a mistake, *I* made a mistake when I was young...I said, "Well, you put him away, what he's gonna do? Gonna wind up being worse, *bad*. He's gonna, cause he's gotten it, he already pictured it in his mind. 'Everybody don't like me, they put me away because of this and that.'" But give him a good reason, you know. That boy, that little boy something else now.

By sparing the child the experience of prison, Lamont felt he was supporting the child's opportunity to become "something else;" as a grown-up, Lamont described him as "the best kid" he had ever seen.

These brief stories from Lamont's life arguably illustrate multiple aspects of community cultural wealth. His varied and extensive engagement with work demonstrates his navigational capital; he described finding opportunities working for others and developing multiple economic initiatives of his own when few opportunities were available to him. Furthermore, it seems likely that Lamont's linguistic capital supported his ability to navigate work and social interactions using

communicative repertoires outside of print literacy. In his work with the stable, we can see the extensive social and familial/community capital that Lamont possessed. These dimensions both focus on connections with and support of others in marginalized communities. Social capital highlights the creation of social and economic opportunities for others, while familial/community capital highlights relationships as sources of learning, among other things, moral and emotional lessons. In his collaborative work with his mother to develop a community garden, Lamont's connections facilitated access to material goods - construction equipment and fill dirt - that created numerous opportunities for both his family members and his community. In his work with the neighborhood children, Lamont taught many moral and emotional lessons; central to the stories he shared were a focus on education, responsibility, caring, and justice.

### Sean: "I Want to Be *In*"

Sean was a 46-year-old African American man. He was stocky and strong, with a shaved head and thick, square glasses with a slight greenish tint. He, too, came to TLC because of a strong desire to improve his reading. He specifically reported having the desire to read the manual to get his driver's license and wanting independence from others when completing personal paperwork such as medical forms and job applications.

Sean's attendance at the program suggested he was highly motivated to participate at TLC. He was usually early and missed very few classes; indeed, his daily schedule was comprised mostly of working to improve his reading skills. When I began the observation period, he was attending class at TLC four mornings a week, he attended a tutoring session at TLC one afternoon a week, and he attended tutoring sessions two afternoons a week at a faith-based program on the other side of the city. In our conversations, he repeatedly expressed his desire to learn to read.

While Sean was generally regarded by TLC practitioners as a dedicated student, the deficit narrative surrounding him suggested that he was potentially unable to learn or make educational progress. TLC staff reported to me that he was not showing testing gains, and for this reason his tutor planned to stop working with him. His classroom teacher reported being unsure of how to support him and feeling that there were so many students in the class that she was not always able to give sufficient attention to students who needed it.

Because the materials selected for the classroom were often too complex, with too many unfamiliar words, for Sean to be able to complete them independently, this sometimes meant the teacher would provide separate work for Sean to do. However, on several of these occasions, Sean was left to sit and wait with nothing to do, while the teacher got the main classroom activity going. A few times I saw him wait for a half hour, and I once saw him wait for an hour without anything to do.

Although in class he made no protest about this, Sean told me later that he had gone to the teacher privately to request that she include him in class activities. Here, he describes his conversation with her about a state capitals activity from which he had been excluded:

**Sean:** I just told [the teacher] today... I want to do stuff with the class too. If I can't do five, give me one of 'em to do. Just push me to do one, I want to push myself to do one. So I asked her, "When I go home this weekend, I'm a do something on the map. I want to do a state on the map. I want to look it up on the computer, I'm going to do everything and write it down." ...I want to show her, "Look, don't push me out. I want to be *in*. I want to learn."

**Author:** How did she respond?

**Sean:** She said that, she told me it was great. She said, "Go ahead." She said she proud of me for asking her that. I don't want her to push me out, be like, "Yo Sean, you just work on *this*," and everybody [else] working on *this*...like, *no*. Give *me* a chance. I *deserve* it.

These short excerpts suggest that Sean possessed *resistant capital*, which Yosso (2005) describes as "knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (p.80). In addition to taking external action to oppose inequality, resistant capital describes a person's ability to maintain a sense of self-worth and value within oppressive contexts, to not internalize negative messages. Sean's background diagnosis of emotional disturbance (ED) makes him part of a pattern of disproportional representation of students of color among those receiving special education services, and specifically part of the pattern of the disproportionate labeling of African American students as having ED (Blanchett, 2006). However, despite the negative messaging he had received during previous educational experiences, Sean resisted the framing of himself as undeserving and, at TLC, asserted his right to have educational opportunities. Furthermore, his actions suggest aspirational capital; despite past experiences of exclusion and labeling, he was still able to hope for better in the present moment of educational exclusion.

## DISCUSSION

Countering deficit thinking in ABE is important in challenging educational racism against African Americans, both because the pushout of African Americans from the K-12 system means many go on to use the adult literacy system, and because once enrolled in adult literacy programs, students can face stereotypes that echo offensive, race-based arguments about biological lack of educability and cultural deprivation (Beder, 1991; Pickard, 2021a). The failure to incorporate learners' assets into instruction may be interpreted as a reflection of practitioners' beliefs that adult literacy learners have few competencies or positive experiences on which to expand (Beder, 1991; Fingeret, 1985). However, by engaging the lens of community cultural wealth, we re-position Sean and Lamont as "holders of knowledge" (Delgado-Bernal, 2002) and valued community members, regardless of their print literacy skills.

Importantly, Lamont's and Sean's community cultural wealth could have served as a valuable instructional resource in their ABE reading class. Acknowledging adult students' assets, community networks, and life experiences is widely acknowledged as important to facilitating ABE student success (Albertini, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). The specific cultural capital of African-American adult learners is an important part of these assets. The richness and

complexity of Sean's and Lamont's life experiences were not engaged as a part of classroom instruction during the time I observed; I only know of these stories because they were shared during interviews and personal conversations. Instead, instruction was intently focused on producing the standardized test gains required in federal accountability policies.

This narrow focus is very relevant to instructors' perceptions of students. Requiring standardized test gains in an adult program can shift focus away from learners' lives as the foundation of teaching and learning, leaving little room for equitable relationship and connection. In this way, testing and teaching both become part of a structure of systemic racism that does not acknowledge or value ABE students' community cultural wealth. Interestingly, in Sean's experience, his teacher *did* acknowledge and appreciate his resistant capital, applauding his efforts to advocate for himself; however, this acknowledgement was not enough to overcome the framing of Sean as a learner incapable of making educational progress. This suggests that while addressing deficit beliefs about students is critical, multiple aspects of systemic racism work in complex relationship within the ABE system. In addition to addressing deficit beliefs and majoritarian stories, we must also address the inequitable patterns our systems of policy, assessment, and instruction reproduce.

ABE as a field has been slow to engage with the ways that systemic racism structures our work. Programs are often struggling to raise enough money to keep their doors open, and teaching and working conditions can be challenging. Nonetheless, even within the many policy and funding conditions that constrain ABE programs, practitioners can honor learners' cultures, knowledge, and experiences and attempt to create substantive opportunities for participation and growth that reflect and sustain their cultural wealth. Failing to do so means that regardless of how well-intentioned we are, we are often perpetuating - and more often than we would like to admit, we may be exacerbating - the racial injustices our students experience.

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