



Reflections

Adult Literacy and Its Discontents: Rethinking Social Justice Issues in Adult Literacy

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Adult literacy and race are closely interconnected constructs. Across the generations, poor education and literacy policies in the United States have left a legacy of minority families, particularly African Americans, unprepared for the disciplined world of work and the demands it makes on individuals in the modern globalized marketplace. One witnesses a deepening chasm between the literate and the illiterate, illustrating the degree to which the system has failed African Americans, the majority of whom, today, live in urban disadvantaged and marginalized communities. The unprecedented pace of global economic, political and technological development is exacerbating the already gaping chasm.

The prevalence of illiteracy in disadvantaged communities in the US makes a case for a serious study of race and social justice. Performance indicators point to several impediments to the full engagement of minorities in the literacy enterprise. These indicators demonstrate the need for advanced literacy skills and higher incomes if the social ills that typify poor neighborhoods are to be averted. The nation's economy is transforming to one that requires new skills and knowledge. In many cases, postsecondary credentials are critical to meeting the demands of knowledge-based industries that are central to powering economic growth. Notwithstanding the notable legal triumphs of the past century—the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, *Brown v Board of Education*, and Affirmative Action—educational inequity between whites and blacks in America persists.

Laying bare the impediments

Some scholars (Ferdman, 1990; Jensen, 1969) overlook the literacy resources that are disproportionately inaccessible in the black community. They are quick to point to arguments that discredit and devalue the African American culture and intellect. However, current scholarship has dismissed such untruths and pointed to more serious underlying problems facing African Americans (Johnson, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Hollis, 2004; Ogbu, 1995).

Central to this discussion on social justice is the denial of basic rights and opportunities, and the presence of racial disparities, which continue to pose severe challenges in disenfranchised environments even in

the post-racial era. In a recent article on the literacy predicament of African Americans (Ntiri, 2009), several serious impediments were presented as central to the continuing discourse on America's adult literacy dysfunctionality within the context of racism and social justice. The three most salient remain incarceration, urban residential segregation and intergenerational illiteracy. These post-industrial trends result from discrepancies in the administration of the key socio-economic dynamics that shape the larger society on the one hand and African Americans on the other.

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The culture of incarceration, for example, has become the leading concern in the struggle for social justice, as poor urban centers are declared high-risk areas for violence, criminal behavior and ignorance. There is growing focus on youth who are regularly and unfortunately victims of the school-to-prison pipeline. The system victimizes African American school children with punitive measures that include suspensions, expulsions, mis-education and "diploma denial" (Fine & Ruglis, 2009). This single fact has added immeasurably to the growing expansion of the prison industrial complex, where incarceration of blacks, males in particular, is unquestionably one of the most haunting social justice challenges of the twenty-first century. The statements below summarize the reality of the social inequities of the US justice system:

When the interests of the minority group do not coincide with those of the majority group, the desire to eradicate racism is minimized. Bell (1992) calls this "interest convergence". On the other hand, when a minority group interest can be exploited to give advantage to the capitalistic intentions of the majority group, cooperation is evident. A good example is the widespread incarceration culture of African Americans where free or cheap labor is made available by use of prisoners (Alfred & Chlup, 2009). Prisons have become a lucrative enterprise for those in the construction industry; the more prisons are built, the richer the contractors who are inevitably not minorities. Additionally, the prison industry is a good source of employment for officers and staff, the majority of whom are white. (Ntiri, 2013, p. 161)

Another major social justice challenge is the level of poverty and economic dependency in inner city communities, which put African American families at risk of inferior literacy skills in the urban residential complex. While some thinkers place the intractable, systemic burdens of earlier years on a dysfunctional institutional setup, others put the blame on the zip codes, where the combination of family circumstances and community challenges place limitations in their literacy paths, leading to a bankrupt adulthood. Demographic changes in urban areas, along with the intersection of race and social class as primary determinants of where people live, are re-segregating the races and denying access to advanced levels of literacy.

The so-called "white flight", a phenomenon that started in the 1950s and 60s (Crowder, 2000) involved the movement of middle and upper classes from urban to suburban communities. This action was a pivotal force in the social and economic decline of urban environments. Loss of businesses and shrinking tax bases contributed to the disempowerment of African American communities. The segregation, prejudicial and discriminatory practices in fair housing that ensued all came at a high price. An accurate portrayal of the housing problem is captured by Massey and Denton (as cited in Ntiri, 2013) below:

Even following the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which outlawed discrimination in housing, government policies have been misapplied and have resulted in restriction of black

residential mobility (Cross & Keith, 1993; Haymes, 1995). Institutionalized racial discrimination within urban housing markets and white avoidance of black neighborhoods has led to the creation of the nation's largest urban black communities which remain very segregated, isolated and more accurately "hypersegregated". (p. 154)

What one witnesses in the discussion of America's residential values are the inherent racism and the transformation of urban environments into what Cross and Keith (1993) have named the urban realization of the ideology of apartheid.

The third and most deep-seated and insidious impediment to literacy advancement of African Americans in US society is the lingering intergenerational literacy factor. Intergenerational literacy, often used interchangeably with family literacy, is cyclical; it is passed on from generation to generation. Gadsden (2000) defines intergenerational literacy as something that:

houses vision and implicit meanings and purposes that are constructed and conveyed within families and communities, that are influenced by societal access and barriers, and that become a part of our own social and contextual historiography. (p. 872)

They recognized literacy as a major transforming agent, a pathway to power, a catalyst for academic success, and a key factor in the quest for subsequent employment and upward social mobility.

It is how families cultivate knowledge and learning and pass them on. Intergenerational illiteracy among African Americans has continued to linger over the years in spite of the relentless efforts and determination to acquire formal knowledge in the struggle to gain equality. Disenfranchised, segregated and oppressed, African Americans fought during and after slavery against all odds to seek literacy and learning as essential elements to their freedom (Foner, 2010; Janks, 2010). They recognized literacy as a major transforming agent, a pathway to power, a catalyst for academic success, and a key factor in the quest for subsequent employment and upward social mobility.

Many educational scholars and recent assessment studies point to several structural and social impediments to literacy acquisition (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Ntiri 2009; National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008; Ogbu, 1995). They include weak government educational policies, the inequities in resource availability, limited and fragmented formal education, limited outlook on social and economic future, and other key internal and external variables associated with living in poor conditions in post-industrial urban communities (Ntiri, 2013; National Commission on Adult Literacy 2008). Another scholar (Sacerdote, 2005) highlighted three reasons for this continuing legacy: a) the direct effect of slavery; b) the effects of being black in a society with racist institutions; and c) the effects of living in the south. Urban communities of Detroit, Gary and Baltimore, where the residents are significantly black, are symptomatic of this reality.

Recommendations

Below are suggestions for addressing adult literacy issues that confront African Americans in the twenty-first century. Possibly, these need to be built around a broad-based consensus. Equally important is that sustainability must be integrated into every facet of the plan of action.

Stakeholders and policy makers must pay particular attention to the need for redressing educational inequities between blacks and whites in the United States by:

- Urging all policy makers at the national and state levels to push for more rigorous laws to address the needs of those individuals in the rapidly expanding prison industry complex. Throughout, it must be borne in mind that the system incarcerates over 50 percent of its clients from poor African American communities and thrusts African American families into misery and distress.
- Underscoring the need to disrupt the continuing underperformance of black children and youth, and investing in mechanisms that demonstrate that “Black lives matter” and that prisons and violence are not the answer.
- Building strategies to energize urban centers and enhance literacy training by inviting entrepreneurial partnerships between public and private businesses. Such synergies would design and promote more General Education Development (GED) and workplace literacy training as a way of positively engaging the community in urban areas. The partnerships would also reduce crime, urban poverty, violence and other social ills that affect illiteracy rates.
- Promoting adult literacy should start with the introduction of changes in the formal system to curb the hemorrhaging of disadvantaged communities from formal and more competitive learning institutions.
- Redressing the exclusionary processes in society and within formal education that aggravate the literacy gap, in this instance between African Americans and the dominant racial groups.
- Instituting reforms that are informed by research and proven interventions. Formal research should be targeted at the failures and weaknesses of the educational system.
- Making every attempt to scrutinize legislation, and legal practices in general, to ensure they do not foster institutional racism and structural inequality.
- Initiating a “Literacy Stimulus package” to address the question of inequitable distribution and differential access to resources for underserved and sheltered populations.
- Calling African Americans to re-evaluate their investment in literacy and break the cycle of intergenerational illiteracy.
- Alerting Americans to the need for a strong foundation of basic skills across the racial divide, to enable everyone to cope with the rapid pace of change in an increasingly technological and interdependent world.
- Refocusing our energies and reordering our priorities to open up more alternatives for literacy training in urban communities where African Americans reside.

Conclusion

Social justice and inequality have thrived in all aspects of life in this society whose prescription for fairness and equality is embedded in a Constitution that states that all men are created equal. Though giant strides have been made over the years to push for change to reduce racial discrimination practices and procedures, which will ultimately, lessen the burdens of unequal treatment and advance literacy, the strides tend not to be giant enough. The rapid rise of the new social justice movement, *Black Lives Matter* is proof. This movement is a powerful demonstration and testimony to the unsatisfactory societal response to the assault and devaluation of African American lives. The unnecessary deaths of so many black men and youth have led to activism for social justice to redress the recurring cycle of injustice and wrongdoing against minorities in the US. Stimulating inclusiveness, fairness and empowerment are fundamental to correcting these wrongs. With literacy as the key to opening doors to opportunities for a better life, literacy advocates, policymakers and community leaders must come together to design programs to sensitize American citizens about the crippling obstacles and

realities that confront black people and they must carefully develop strategies to eliminate the roadblocks and find viable alternatives to bring inclusion and parity to the marginalized, undereducated masses particularly African Americans.

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Biography



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