

We Need a Massive Movement for Adult Education

David Greene

Adult education could revitalize and energize the country. At present, widespread low-literacy and low-numeracy levels deprive us of many potential contributions. Students in adult education classes and millions more potential students have knowledge, skills, experience, understanding, and perspective to offer the United States. Because adult education students are immigrants, women, minorities, and members of the working-class, they have important perspectives that need to be voiced and organized. Their participation and activism already enrich our democracy and could do so even more if there were a stronger grassroots movement for increased educational opportunities and for justice in the many other areas of life in which adult learners are struggling.

What are the Obstacles in Our Way?

There are many obstacles in the way of a massive popular education program in the U.S., including lack of funding for classes as well as a lack of living wage jobs and a social safety net that make attending class possible. In addition, myths, stereotypes, and prejudices about adult students are common in society and among teachers and students. One myth that persists in the literacy field is that education for adults is the same as education for children. This fails to take into account the experience and learning that adults have gained. Antoine Brunvil, a student in one of my classes, recently helped to teach a class about the history and politics of Haiti, his homeland. He was full of inspiration and information. His teaching engaged and challenged his fellow students. When we underestimate the knowledge, experience, and understanding of adult students, we lose out on the contributions of people like Brunvil.

Unfortunately, it is not just their input in the classroom that we lose when we succumb to this stereotype, but also their leadership in building a

movement for social change. In the same way that teachers sometimes treat learners as empty vessels needing to be filled (as Paulo Freire put it), we also treat them as passive recipients of services. While administrators and teachers work hard to raise the money for programming and provide engaging curriculum, it is rare for them to see students as agents in the life of the program. That's a big loss.

Adult Students Are Key to Social Change

Ryan Springer, an adult student organizer in New York City, states that "when adult education students are informed and given the opportunity to actively participate, they can change their lives, their communities, and our society." Massive literacy programs can be a doorway to seriously address issues of poverty, health and safety, housing, inequality, and employment.

Such a movement, however, would seriously threaten the status quo. People who are invested in this system and the profits that it has provided may not want change. Even adult education practitioners, who otherwise mean well, can act as "gatekeepers" — allowing stereotypes and prejudices to keep adult learners' voices from being heard. Calvin Miles, the president of VALUE (Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education), believes that the adult education system itself can be a serious obstacle to movement building, sometimes serving to keep students "in their place."

"The problem with the literacy community is that it doesn't make enough noise," said Maria Quiroga, a leader in the fight for literacy in New York City. It's time for all of us to make some noise. Let's step forward to build a movement for a more just society, including liberatory and empowering education for all.

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