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Culturally Responsive Adult Education—Embracing the Power of Experience, Collaboration, and Collective Action

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In a time of racialized social and cultural unrest, adult education has an essential responsibility to return to its activist roots to both educate learners and lead the response to calls for systemic change. Although community-based adult education has often reflected social justice concerns through its historical commitment to marginalized and disadvantaged communities, the experiences of these learners is not frequently centered in the classroom or research literature (Isaac-Savage & Merriweather, 2021; Ross-Gordon, 2017). However, the K-12 field has increasingly engaged with issues of racial justice, white privilege, and cultural appropriation through research on *culturally responsive*, *culturally relevant*, and *culturally sustaining* pedagogical approaches (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014). In adult higher education, there has been a similar shift toward research on teaching and its alignments with systemic understandings of oppression (Closson, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2017). In the non-formal and community-based context, however, the research on this topic is limited; and thus this research brief draws from the K-12 and higher education literature (French, 2019; Rhodes, 2018).

In this research brief, the term culturally responsive adult education (CRAE) will be used to signal teaching that is broadly committed to responding to differences in learners' race, cultures, and communities, and is a response to undoing less affirming models of teaching. CRAE curricula centers the experiences of racialized communities, includes learners in decision making about their learning, and engages in community-based social/racial justice work (French, 2019; Guy,1999; Rhodes, 2018). To be effective, educators must reflect on how their own cultural identities and biases impact their practice (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000; Rhodes, 2018). Below, I outline key components of CRAE and provide resources for practice.

Embracing Experience

At its core, CRAE incorporates culturally significant experiences, life histories, and identities in curricula and instruction (Alfred, 2009; Guy, 1999). CRAE practitioners embrace different racial, cultural, and heritage communities through learner-centered and community-based methods of engagement (Guy, 1999; Lee & Sheared, 2002). The integration of non-western knowledges (e.g., Africentric) offers a challenge to the westernized universalism of more tra-

ditional curricula while validating other ways of knowing (Alfred, 2009; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). Integrating this information into instruction assumes racial and cultural diversity is a personal and communal asset and a necessary means of understanding (Kong, 2010).

Adult learners bring a set of prior knowledges, "polyrhythmic realities" (Sheared, 1999), or "funds of knowledge" (Larrotta & Serrano, 2011)—the historically and culturally-embedded skills, insights, and strategies that they use to navigate the world—to the classroom (Rhodes, 2013). Culturally responsive adult educators thoughtfully utilize these intelligences as sources for content development that can enhance both motivation and learning (Alfred, 2009; Sheared, 1999).

For adult learners of color, CRAE can be a revelation, given that schooling has often forced many to embrace standards of success that disconnect them from their community (Schwartz, 2014). By encouraging learners of color to identify points of paradox between their funds of knowledge and mainstream culture, they can create counter-narratives that become sources for innovative instructional practices (Closson, 2010; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000). Unearthing personal cultural histories creates new opportunities to apply what they have learned and situates learners' experiences in a global and historical context, illuminating the systemic and temporal nature of oppression (Closson, 2010).

Counter-narratives also reflect multiple identities, allowing the classroom to become a place where complex standpoints are affirmed (Schwartz, 2014). Similarly, disability critical race theory, which braids embodiment, ability, and culture, offers a framework to critique what is seen as "normal" (Annamma et al., 2018). Its focus on disability and interlocking oppressions (racism, sexism, ableism) acknowledges the multiple stigmas that adult learners, many of whom struggle with undiagnosed learning disabilities, often face (Annamma et al., 2018; Closson, 2010). Fully engaging with disability creates opportunities to unpack the socially constructed and/or visible aspects of oppression and situate the experiences of the disabled and marginalized learners at the center. It also underscores the social activism on which culturally diverse, differently abled communities have embarked (Annamma et al., 2018).

There is limited research regarding the use of culturally responsive strategies with adult English language learners (Johnson & Owen, 2013; Rhodes, 2013). However, the affirmation of translanguaging strategies, which (re)defines multilingualism as a legitimate form of communication, enables multilingual adults to stay connected to culturally-affirming native language practices (Emerick et al., 2020; Johnson & Owen, 2013). Translanguaging is a linguistic "third space" that can be used to scaffold workplace skills development and learning (Emerick et al., 2020; Pacheco & Miller, 2016). Translanguaging, studied primarily in K-12 education, has highlighted the importance of native languages in creating spaces of support. More research is needed in adult education to explore translanguaging's possibilities.

(Re)Distributing Authority

CRAE actively engages with issues of power, equity, and authority through the creation of justice-oriented educational structures. This encourages participatory practices in which learners and instructors collaboratively shape the direction of learning (Ramdeholl, 2015). Equitable classrooms facilitate community and enhance learners' emotional safety (Manglitz et al., 2014). They also create a space for dialogue around knowledge building as a collective experience (Guy, 1999; Kong, 2010).

Equity-centered instruction, including co-teaching, requires educators to navigate questions raised by sharing authority (Ramdeholl, 2015; Schwartz, 2014). Learner co-teachers can bring experiential knowledge(s) to lessons that challenge the status quo and (appropriately) compli-

cate discussions about social issues (Ramdeholl, 2015). Paying attention to power dynamics that are shaped by race and privilege is also key (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000). This includes assessing how institutional structures are shaped by the race/cultural backgrounds of teachers and administrators, and the impact that this has on teaching and learning (Manglitz et al., 2014).

Creating inclusive adult education learning spaces has long been a goal. However, Calabrese Barton and Tan (2020) point out that it implies that minoritized learners only have the option to join the mainstream, and only when invited. Instead, they propose the concept of "rightful presence." In this justice-oriented approach, teachers are encouraged to see themselves as authentic allies validating learners' analyses of their experiences, and valuing their insights and emotions triggered by the injustices they face (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2020). As a result, learners are able to more fully engage strategies of resistance and shift deficit narratives about their capabilities (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2020).

Engaging in the co-creation of learning as experts of their own experience can be difficult for some adult learners, as their earlier learning experiences may have centered around "all-knowing" teachers who are responsible for shaping all aspects of learning (Lee & Sheared, 2002). Additionally, some instructors may feel uneasy about learners taking on more authority in the classroom (Alfred, 2009; Rhodes, 2013). For example, Rhodes (2013) found that while ESOL adult educators felt comfortable integrating culturally relevant materials into their lessons, they were much less likely to encourage learners to participate in directing their learning. However, while (re)distributing power may not address the broader structural barriers that shape how learners must inhabit the world outside the classroom, it can become a useful starting point for the creation of communities of learning, justice, and radical care that provide learners with tools that help them unpack everyday systems of oppression.

Addressing Systemic Inequities

The existence of deep-rooted, systemic racism and injustice highlight the need for social activism (Kong, 2010; Manglitz et al., 2014). CRAE facilitates these practices by championing learning activities that bring the community into the classroom to organize for justice and equity (Kong, 2010; Lee & Sheared, 2002). This work includes expanding learners' critical consciousness and their understanding of structural and systemic oppression, which supports a deeper appreciation for collective action and movements for racial and sociopolitical justice (Closson, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2017).

The power of collective action is also embedded in learning that can take place in and that is generated by social movements (Choudry & Kapoor, 2010). For example, studying racial justice movements or housing and food insecurity can be springboards to deepen knowledge on topics such as health equity and wealth inequality. This helps learners more fully process the complexity underlying social issues and advances movement-based knowledge (Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Kong, 2010). It can also foster a sense of collective empowerment as they apply this knowledge in efforts to create lasting change (Kong, 2010).

Educator Cultural Self-Awareness

Implementing CRAE requires educator cultural awareness, sensitivity, flexibility, and critical self-reflection (Manglitz et al., 2014). Critical self-reflection means examining cultural identity and social history as well as cultural beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, and worldviews (Lee & Sheared, 2002). If learners are expected to be open and engage with their experiences, educators must also be vulnerable and do the introspective work that being culturally responsive necessitates (Brookfield, 2014; Manglitz et al., 2014).

White educators in particular must pay attention to how their race and privilege shape classroom interactions (Brookfield, 2014). At a time when

there is greater consciousness about the endemic nature of racism and white supremacy in the US, white educators must evaluate how they are framing, interpreting, and/or presenting material in the classroom (Brookfield, 2014; Manglitz et al., 2014). This includes making sure that personal or historical narratives that center whiteness are not universalized (Brookfield, 2014).

CRAE is challenging to enact; and it requires institutional support, including financial support and planning time, to be effective (Ray, 2019). Collaborative activities that allow educators to learn more about themselves and their learners, create curricula, and try out new instructional approaches, is critical to implementation and sustainability. The impact in the classroom must also be assessed (Kong, 2010; Milner, 2003). Overall, educators should be willing to take risks and adopt a sense of humility. This enhances the possibility for relational repair and learning through restorative practices when challenges arise (Brookfield, 2014; Ray, 2019).

Culturally Responsive Practice Strategies

Aligned with the key components of CRAE, specific instructional strategies were identified in the research literature:

1. Make use of primary source materials (e.g., heritage newspapers) alongside practices that honor learners' everyday survival strategies (e.g., creating a personal glossary of their commonly used words/terms) to sustain culture and identity through teaching (Larrotta & Serrano, 2011; Paris & Alim, 2014).

2. Embrace participatory instructional actions (e.g., co-teaching) and classroom organization (e.g., circular seating arrangements) to deepen the impact of expressive activities, such as narrative writing, role-playing/theatre, and poetry that focus on learners' reflections and elevate their voices (Schwartz, 2014).

3. Engage learners in local social movement activities that strengthen the connection between the classroom and learners' home communities and foster organizing skills through projects like teach-ins, protest marches, and voter registration events (Kong, 2010).

4. Provide writing prompts focusing on civic and community connections that initiate thoughtful discussions about learners' social selves, their communal hopes and fears, and collaboration as a source of tension and healing (Mirra & Garcia, 2020).

5. Participate in "race reflective" journaling with other educators to encourage an examination of personal experiences with race and racism, unpack belief systems, probe how experiences are represented in the classroom, and identify responses to and understanding of injustice (Milner, 2003; Ray, 2019).

6. Dialogue across racial lines to examine racism's structural impact, how white privilege operates, and the role of collective action in facilitating meaningful change (Manglitz et al., 2014; Ramdeholl, 2015).

The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racialized oppression—transparently illustrated through highly publicized, state sponsored acts of brutality against people of color—highlight the need for classrooms that offer opportunities for discovery, growth, and community building. Adult educators are called to be reflective, innovative, and bold to nurture learners' sense of themselves as knowledge and social change producers (Isaac-Savage & Merriweather, 2021). By 2025, people of color will be a majority in the U.S. (Bahrampour & Mellnik, 2021); CRAE provides a useful framework for assuring that all adult learners will be prepared to engage in the courageous and emancipatory work required to nurture a more justice-focused future.

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Suggested Resources

https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources

https://educolor.org/resources/

https://www.literacyjustice.org/

https://www.nctm.org/socialjustice/

https://centerracialjustice.org/resources/

https://lead.nwp.org/kb/equity-access/