

Forum: The Power of Equity and the Future of Adult Education

(Part 2 of 3)

Adult Education DEI Champions: It's Time to Take Our Seat. Remain. And Speak Truth To Power!

Adriennie Y. Hatten, A.Y. Hatten & Associates

Any conversation that is intended to focus on creating an equitable adult education system must address the concept of resistance (or backlash) to the value for achieving diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) that ebbs and flows in our society. Some resistance to conversations that address diversity, equity, and inclusion is fueled by decisions of policy makers, including the Supreme Court of the United States of America, which denied the use of race as a status or category in admissions decisions in June 2023 (Walsh, 2023). Resistance is also fueled by the limited media attention to events that, if covered, would continue to put the evils of racism front and center in the minds of all, even for those who often do not have to recognize or acknowledge it. People's perception of racial equity can easily be skewed, as noted by Gause et al. (2023) when they explored the intersection of race and media portrayal in the context of protest movements. The core finding is that protests led by people of color were more likely to be depicted using language that evokes fear and anger, perpetuating a stereotype of threat.

It is important for adult educators to take the lead in assuring that appropriate policies and protocols are in place to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational settings. Students achieve at higher rates when those who support their academic endeavors both believe in them and have similar lived experiences (Hines & Hines, 2020). Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) educators can serve as both role models and supporters of students' academic and professional achievements. They can also support their colleagues in understanding the experiences of students who have similar cultural backgrounds as theirs, an important duty

that should not be placed on the students (Harrison, 2021). This is why it is necessary for adult educators who are DEI champions to hold a seat at the table where policy and resource decisions are being made - your invitation is your passion and your experience - stand on that, or rather take your seat on that!

It should be no surprise that there would eventually be increased push back on racial equity and justice if those who are asking for it continue to be depicted as a threat. Bias against the importance of the principles of DEI is divisive even when the practices are helpful to all. Diversity refers simply to the differences and commonalities between people. If you have more than one person in a room, I guarantee they will have similarities and differences in their backgrounds, lived experience, or along other dimensions of diversity. Equity assures that all have access to the opportunities and resources needed to achieve the desired goal. Equity cannot be attained unless there are effective communication processes in place to identify both goals and needs. Inclusion means creating environments that value and appreciate the diversity that exists amongst the target population or people in any given "space." Ultimately, a skewed public opinion and the power bestowed on individual leaders in adult education can promote resistance to DEI efforts that inhibit the supports and resources needed to assist adult educators in effectively meeting the needs of their diverse groups of students. I contend this is the reason that those of us who understand the imperative of DEI within adult education must *Take Our Seat. Remain. And Speak Truth to Power!*

The refusal to address the structural and systemic racism that has continued to plague the ability of our society

to achieve optimal performance is a decision to ignore the reality that we do not currently live in a just society. Adult educators operate at the unique juncture where our students bear the burden of America's systemic and structural inequalities and bring into our programs their expectations to receive relief and corrective actions to overcome those barriers. Thus, it can be argued that adult educators, leaders, and advocates are at the forefront of social and racial justice and must resist efforts against equity and inclusion by remaining present at every table where decisions are being made to ensure that these decisions are to the benefit of those they seek to serve - their students and at times even themselves and their colleagues!

After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, many organizations and individuals that make up the American workplace began to issue statements proclaiming racism causes many harms and is a public health crisis (Bellware, 2020). Michigan was the first state to make this public declaration on August 5, 2020 (Yearby et al., 2020). Organizations began to foster conversations and hire leaders and consultants to develop strategic approaches towards becoming a just society and eradicating racism. Unfortunately, by mid-to late 2023, the misnomer that we are a post-racial society began to re-circulate with the underlying assertion that there was no longer a need to address diversity, equity, or inclusion because somehow America had "arrived" and no longer needed to address individual or structural racism. By preemptively claiming to be or having completed the work needed to become a post-racial society, America found itself once again at risk of repeating the destructive cycle of prematurely dismissing the long-standing influences of systemic racism on individuals in need of adult education services. While many knew that there was still much work to be done to assure that all people could have their needs met, others began to believe that we, too, had "done enough."

As a result, some organizations began to abandon DEI strategic planning processes (Park, n.d.) that were more than 2 years in the making, disappointing staff who had been actively engaged in equity-based efforts. Staff who were anxiously awaiting implementation of goals and strategies to craft new, robust DEI vision statements were left waiting. Staff who had designed hands-on training sessions on establishing inclusive workspaces where all could flourish and who had developed robust DEI

objectives and realistic timeframes now saw DEI initiatives abandoned mid-stream and needed funding abruptly rerouted to other initiatives. Staff who had volunteered to serve on newly formed DEI committees, employee resource groups, etc. began to face real concerns that their work would not be respected and, worse, could be prematurely ended.

This cannot become the path in adult education. We must all continue to do the work of ensuring the adult education leaders and advocates understand that DEI principles are more than simply increasing the number of people of color hired. It also includes:

- Creating an environment of trust, which is crucial for fostering open communication, collaboration, and employee engagement.
- Shifting and reducing unequal power dynamics, which support staff in cross-departmental engagement, innovation, and in investing in the growth of the organization.
- Improving problem-solving because diverse teams are better at solving problems than homogeneous teams as they have a wider range of perspectives and experiences.
- Enhancing employee engagement by cultivating a feeling among staff of respect and value leading to better engagement and contribution to the organization's success.
- Reducing turnover by implementing strong DEI policies and practices because employees will feel more appreciated and supported.

Workplaces that consider the needs of their staff value the importance of creating inclusive workplaces that allow their team members to bring their authentic selves into a space where they feel valued and respected, and ratcheting back these initiatives affects us all! Adult educators and leaders must put a stop to dismantling organizational structures that support our learners and that assure accountability to efforts that help each individual learner achieve their personal and professional goals. We adult educators and allies must step forward when transparency, authentic engagement, data-driven innovation, and inclusion are replaced with silence and misaligned objectives. We must not stand by and allow important voices to be silenced when making key

decisions. This significantly hinders effective decision making and the adequate allocation of resources. Within the adult education field this move in the wrong direction increases the likelihood that policy and procedural barriers that keep lower income and minority adults from achieving their academic, career, and community goals. When this happens, programs may see a decrease in their ability to allocate financial resources that provide much needed wraparound services such as basic needs or funding to ensure learners stay gainfully employed while participating in their programs.

The importance of drawing on the lived experiences of adult education students as the basis for policy and financial decisions to ensure that challenges are continuously met with relevant and viable solutions is too important to abandon and must continue. Adult educators cannot allow inclusive practices like this to slip away. We must not allow all of the gains we have made in successfully educating diverse adult learners to become a thing of the past as many other social justice movements have. Even worse, we must not allow all of this work to become a figment of our collective imaginations. If we allow this backtracking to succeed, we may make it more difficult for BIPOC who have only recently been able to safely sit in rooms with or as members of the C-suite and leadership teams to get the resources we understand that they need. Veering away from an equity-focused workplace means that non-BIPOC people who have embraced DEI concepts will now be forced to deal with the frustration of losing the gains that they, too, experienced from efforts that emphasize DEI.

Any misguided efforts to either erase the importance of addressing diversity, equity, or inclusion in the adult education sector or resist the presence of advocates for DEI approaches that positively impact the beneficiaries, has the power to hinder progress that we (mostly) all had agreed can provide great outcomes for all. Now, we face a decision to accept or reject what the resistance to DEI efforts or failures to complete substantive DEI-related initiatives might lead to. These include less inclusive learning opportunities, lower economic uplift, and significant barriers for individuals, families on local, national, even global levels of society. The possibility of not achieving desirable equitable outcomes for all creates the necessity for adult educators, who see the most benefit of DEI and the harm from its absence in policies

and procedures that impact adult learners, to Resist the Resistance to dismantle DEI initiatives or undercut their potential to succeed. DEI principles and practices are integral to our work improving the lives of our learners!

Ways for Adult Educators to Take Our Seat. Remain. And Speak Truth to Power

Resist Imposter Syndrome

Adult educators and their learners need to spearhead DEI and resist the resistance, even if others at the table do not realize it and may even try to discourage them. However, their success does not require appreciation, only respect. Adult educators should focus on measurable outcomes and emphasize our country's past decisions that excluded diverse voices, leading to ongoing challenges in achieving desired outcomes for all.

In this same vein, adult educators who champion DEI principles should avoid imposter syndrome which is the feeling that they:

- do not belong where they already are
- must continue to ask permission to be where they are
- must always be proving that they deserve to be there

Serve on Committees: Adult educators should be leaders who help advocate for students. They should push to open criteria for membership on committees in adult education organizations. This includes seeking input from newer staff who should be included on key decisions. Also, it is important to start discussions and create forums for sharing ideas and experiences that can be collected and fashioned into inclusive solutions.

Initiate Research and Write: The larger society and the adult education system needs to better understand adult learners so that their needs are better attended to. Storytelling is a key component of qualitative research and is needed to expand the knowledge base that will create inclusive and equitable policies and practices that benefit adult learners.

Stay Informed: Adult educators should keep up to date on DEI trends and best practices. They should attend conferences, webinars, and workshops to expand their knowledge and skills. They should not assume the work

that they have done is enough, there is always more to do. Also, BIPOC adult educators should remember that they also need DEI trainings to ensure that they are not contributing to unjust workplaces, policies, nor giving reason for DEI initiatives to be squashed.

Ways to ensure DEI Innovation Remain at the Workplace

Engage Leadership: DEI initiatives are more likely to be successful when they have the support of top leadership. Adult educators should work to ensure that organizations' leaders are committed to DEI and are willing to invest the necessary resources. If they have already shown that they are willing to invest in DEI they should still be reminded of DEI principles in meetings and at key decision points.

Advocate for Resources: Those committed to DEI should push for adequate funding and support for DEI initiatives. This includes professional development for staff, culturally responsive curriculum, and resources for underrepresented students.

Build Alliances: Adult educators should connect with colleagues or organizations who share a commitment

to DEI. They should collaborate on initiatives, share resources, and support each other's efforts. There is strength in numbers. Also once established, others should be invited who may not be as committed but are not resistant; many times, people or organizations that are unsure about DEI need a peer or near peer to help them see the positive outcomes.

Celebrate Diversity: Adult educations can work to ensure that their organization highlights the diverse backgrounds and experiences of adult educators and learners. Their successes and contributions to the workplace and community should be showcased. It is important to balance the types of images and stories used; do not only use the most sad, scary or other stereotypical story. Stories should be as diverse as people are.

By using these recommendations, adult educators can play a vital role in ensuring that DEI remains a priority in workplaces and across the entire field. We are small but mighty, and the outcomes that we work towards are bolstered by the work of DEI. Yet, this work will help create a more inclusive and equitable environment for all learners, educators, staff, and leaders regardless of their background or circumstances.

References

- Bellware, K. (2020, September 16). Calls to declare racism a public health crisis grow louder amid pandemic, police brutality. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/09/15/racism-public-health-crisis/>
- Gause, L., Moore, S. T., & Ostfeld, M. C. (2023). Anger, fear, and the racialization of news media coverage of protest activity. *The Journal of Race Ethnicity and Politics*, 8(3), 446–468. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2023.27>
- Harrison, D. (2020). Let us teach us: A diversity call to action for adult education. *COABE Journal: The Resource for Adult Education*, 9(2).
- Hines, E., & Hines, M. (2020, Aug 11). Black teachers are critical to the success of Black students. *Time.com*. <https://time.com/5876164/black-teachers/>
- Park, L. (n.d.). Why dei backlash exists and what to do about it. *SAP*. <https://www.sap.com/africa/insights/viewpoints/why-dei-backlash-exists.html>
- Walsh, M. (2023, July 29). Supreme Court ends affirmative action in college admissions in decision watched by K-12. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/supreme-court-ends-affirmative-action-in-college-admissions-in-decision-watched-by-k-12/2023/06>
- Yearby, R., Lewis, C. N., Gilbert, K. L., & Banks, K. (2020, September 2). *Memo: Racism is a public health crisis. Here's how to respond*. Data for Progress. <https://www.dataforprogress.org/memos/racism-is-a-public-health-crisis>