

ADULT EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES AS A SUBJECT OF POLICY AND POLITICS

ARTHUR L. WILSON¹

Abstract

This article seeks to examine adult education policy in the United States. It looks at the emergence of formal governmental policy in the 1930s and traces some of the shifting ideological traditions producing policy up to and through the advent of conservative governments from 1980 through 2008. It also examines the scholarly inquiry into adult education policy which shows an emphasis on adult basic education and literacy as a major government responsibility and a broader critical concern of adult educators with emancipatory interests.

Keywords: adult education, United States, Politics

In several communications with the editor of this special edition this essay has had various working titles such as “Adult Education as a Subject of Politics,” “Adult and Continuing Education Policy,” “Adult and Continuing Education in Tension Between Society and Politics,” and “Adult and Continuing Education Policy in the US – Major Issues and Trends.” All these and others speak broadly to any number of issues, not the least of which include what do “policy” and “politics” mean. I have chosen the broader terms of policy and politics because I think doing so will allow us to develop a momentary view of a range of issues and trends that might collect under a query about adult education policy and politics in the United States.

To address the larger themes of the special issue, I will report on three related aspects of adult education as a subject of policy and politics: first, an overview of various US policies on adult education; second, a brief review of US adult education scholarly analysis of adult education policy; and third, a brief commentary on what a “politics of adult education in the US” might mean. Whereas the on-the-ground provision of adult education in the US remains a hotly contested effort in terms of who gains access and who does not, who benefits and who does not, overall I would characterize the state of US adult education policy study as fragmented and relatively under-developed. Further, US adult education policy itself is highly fragmented and subject to competing interests that ultimately can be seen to be more concerned in recent times with various sorts of neoliberal economic development initiatives that putatively promote economic well being at the expense of other traditions of adult education policy focused on promoting enlightened citizenry, individual progress, and community development. Finally, while there is a vocal minority of both practitioners and academics who avidly promote a political activism in adult education, the larger

¹ Department of Education, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA.

number of adult educators are more focused on the instrumental provision of adult education with at best socially ameliorative goals.

Adult Education Policy

To begin, all kinds of adult learning and adult education have been evidenced in the United States since its colonial times (speaking from a Western European perspective, that is). But to ask about adult education policy in the United States means to ask for whom, by whom, and to what ends. Here I present examples of adult education policy in the 20th century in order to then describe in more detail the policies emanating under conservative governments from the 1980s to the present. One of the first significant adult education policies was the US Government's Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). This policy provided literacy, vocational, and teacher support programs for those most affected by the 1930s Depression. After World War II another major policy initiative was known as the G.I. Bill. It provided educational benefits to millions of returning service personnel whose education had been interrupted by the second world war. In various forms such post-military adult educational benefits have continued ever since. It is possible that the US military services represent one of the world's largest adult education providers. Continuing traditions from FERA in the 1930s, the Adult Education Act of 1964 included some of the most far-reaching adult education policies ever enacted in the United States, committing millions of dollars allocated on a state-by-state basis.² Although criticized and never fully funded, it produced a whole generation of various kinds of support for adult basic education, high school diploma equivalency education (General Education Development testing), English-as-a-second-language (ESL), and various employment training acts. Other aspects of adult education were also provided by Title I of the Higher Education Act of 1965. In 1977 the US Congress endorsed the Mondale Act which pledged support for lifelong learning in the US but never funded the mandate. Although there has always been a focus on supporting education for employment training, as the conservatives concentrated legislative power in Washington, DC, in the 1980s, more and more legislative action was directed towards reducing the aspects of the welfare state that contributed to the well being of individuals and more was directed towards supporting and subsidizing the workforce training needs of capital and industry.

² See: History of the Adult Education Act, National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium, Inc. <http://www.naepdc.org/issues/AEAHistory.htm#1964>. See also: R. Hill, et al. Appendix I, A Review and Critique of the 2008 United States National Report on the Development and State of the Art of Adult Learning and Education.

Historically, then, there have been progressive policies that have addressed adult literacy issues, traditional liberal learning goals, citizenship and civic involvement interests, as well as training for employment possibilities. Since the 1990s the traditional supports for these broad educational goals have diminished as policy interests, representing increasing focus on economic agendas, have come to be dominated by neoliberal concerns for enhancing capitalist expansion, which pass under any number of names such as new capitalism, globalization, knowledge economy, post- or last modernity, and so on. When examining US Government policy statements on adult education, one is confronted with a bewildering array of governmental acts emanating, through congressional auspices, from a variety of governmental departments³: the Department of Labor, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and, of course, the Department of Education.⁴ If the Adult Education Act of 1964 was the liberal definer of a generation's effort in adult education in the United States, the Workforce Investment Act, which also included the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and the Carl E. Perkins Vocational and Technical Act, passed in 1998, represented the next watershed policy initiative by the US Government. The Workforce Investment Act "reforms Federal employment, adult education, and vocational education programs to create an integrated, „one-stop“ system of workforce investment and educational activities for adults and youth."⁵ This act enabled the establishment of "one stop" local and state referral centers whose purpose was to make more efficient the assessment of educational needs in order to more efficiently direct adults to proper interventions. The "bottom line" in such efforts has been whether a "client" received the necessary training to get a job, keep a job, or improved performance on the job while mitigating other influences on employment such as health, poverty, and/or educational attainment. Various educational and workforce development acts were thus consolidated legislatively in a spirit of both reducing what was considered egregious transgressions of the social welfare state and promoting a sounder economic national well being by producing a more competitive globalizing economic power. Earlier in the decade the National Center for Education Statistics was distributing compendia such as the National Household Education Surveys" Tabular

³ Perhaps the first place to start is to direct readers to enter the US Government's Department of Education at <http://www.ed.gov>. There are myriad links to follow from there.

⁴ See, for example, <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/edlite-2001onestop.html>.

⁵ See: www.ed.gov/policy/adulted/leg/legis.html.

Summary of Adult Education for Work-Related Reasons, 2002-2003.⁶ It is interesting that the accountability movement in US education funding as represented by the President Bush's No Child Left Behind policy of 2000 is paralleled by the Workforce Investment Act call for greater accountability by documenting success either through employment placement or advancement. It is also interesting that a lot of the information available to the public on government educational web sites represents more activity from the early 2000s rather than toward the end of Bush's second term. That does not mean adult education has disappeared from policy purview. In September 2007 then-President George Bush issued the following "Executive Order: Strengthening Adult Education"): "It is the policy of the United States to use existing Federal program that serve adults, including new Americans, to strengthen literacy skills, improve opportunities for postsecondary education and employment, and facilitate participation in American life."⁷ The executive order defines anyone over 16 years old as an adult and adult education as the "mastery of basic education skills to function effectively in society; secondary school diploma or its equivalent; or the ability to speak, read, or write the English language." The Hill et al. critique of the National Report is quite critical of this executive order. Even so, despite the relentless press of neoliberal government economic policies for decades, this directive is remarkably similar to policy initiatives dating from the Adult Education Act of 1965 and has roots in the FERA policies in the 1930s. The Workforce Investment Act is perhaps a penultimate example of neoliberal economic policy. Yet in its midst is an executive order reprising, or perhaps better said, continuing more liberal notions of adult education policy in the United States.

Early observations of the inaugural efforts of President Barack Obama, given the extremity of the current worldwide economic collapse, augur perhaps for a new era in educational policy in the United States. Indeed, in President Obama's first State of the Union address in February 2009 to both houses of Congress called for more adult, vocational, continuing, and higher education as the responsibility and duty of American citizens.⁸ This call comes immediately after highly partisan passage of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. In January 2009 the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education organized a lobbying push for a \$500 million dollar addition to the already budgeted \$500 million in the FY 2008

⁶ K. O'Donnell, Tabular Summary of Adult Education for Work-Related Reasons: 2002-03 (NCES 2005-044). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005.

⁷ See: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/09/20070927-11.html>.

⁸ See: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/02/24/The-Presidents-address-Excerpt/>

budget “for adult training and employment programs.”⁹ This call was preceded earlier in January 2009 by legislative call from ProLiteracy Worldwide¹⁰ for “Increased Funding to Support Literacy Programs” because nearly one in seven in the US lack basic reading skills, that many unemployed lack reading skills, that \$60 billion a year is lost in lost productivity because of literacy and health problems, and that almost 90 percent of adults who need literacy training cannot get it because of a lack federal, state, and local funding: “Program funding would inherently benefit the overall economy, as it provides additional tax income, more employment, reduced welfare payments and greater citizen involvement.” Such a call could have easily been issued in the 1960s but still resonates today even with its emphasis on economic improvement through adult education. It will be seen whether such policy calls represents a continuation of or break from the neoliberal agendas of the last three decades in American educational policy.

Adult Education Policy Study

Ever since the 1920s in the United States there have been professional efforts to influence governmental adult education policy through the various formal professional organizations (American Association of Adult Education, Adult Education Association of the USA, American Association of Adult and Continuing Education; each of these was successor to the former in one way or another). It is common practice in the United States for trade and professional associations to try to influence governmental policy regarding the provision and regulation of professional efforts like adult education. Leadership in these various societies both commissioned or conducted adult education policy analysis and effected efforts to influence national policies. Those efforts continued until the 1990s when the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) splintered into two associations (the parent remained and the Commission on Adult Basic Education [COABE]¹¹ departed). Afterwards AAACE reduced many of its activities to membership services while COABE continued its legislative policy initiatives for adult and family literacy as well as English-as-a-Second Language education. Both a complementary and competing area of practice and inquiry concerns itself with what has many names such as human resource development, human capital development, training and development, and so. The American Society of Training and Development

⁹ See: <http://www.aaace.org>

¹⁰ See: <http://www.proliteracy.org>. ProLiteracy is non-profit educational organization that “champions the power of literacy to improve the lives of adults and their families, communities, and societies.”

¹¹ See: <http://www.coabe.org>

(ASTD), organized in 1944, now claims 70,000 members worldwide under a banner of “through exceptional learning & performance, we create a world that works better.”¹² ASTD has an active legislative agenda and provides “up to the minute” information of workplace policy emanating from Washington, DC: “What should you know about this bill [the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009], and what can you do to help your organization take advantage of these opportunities.”

Also more and more prevalent in American society are various kinds of “think tank” organizations who study economic, political, educational, and other societal conditions in order to comment on and make recommendations for US adult education initiatives. The Center for American Progress is one example. “Lifelong Learning: New Strategies for the Education of Working Adults” was recently published to argue that all the economic gains made in the latter half of the 20th century are now threatened because “the American worker is steadily becoming less educated just when better and more diverse educational opportunities are essential for our labor force to maintain its justifiably famous productivity, flexibility and ingenuity.”¹³ The author further argues that as educational attainment stagnates so too will economic growth, therefore policy changes are necessary: “the United States can no longer pursue an educational policy that essentially gives up on adults...[we have to] get much better at educating our working adults.”¹⁴

Academically speaking, the formal study of adult education emerged in the 1920s and grew to some presence by the late 1970s in terms of having established academic programs of study in higher education. Academic adult educators have historically taken an interest in policy, and there is a sporadic history of adult education policy analysis.¹⁵ Since the 1980s the presence of formal inquiry in adult education in higher education has either waned on US academic campuses or more often been assumed under human resource and workforce development programs, reflecting the generational shift from humanist, progressive orientations to adult education to the more economically-focused agendas of government policy in recent times.

One area of study that has consistently interested academic adult education analysts is that of the governmental provision for adult basic education. As indicated earlier federal funding first became available as early as the 1930s and became institutionalized in the 1960s. I have tried to indicate so far that such policies while undergoing a major shift in emphasis

¹² See: <http://www.astd.org>.

¹³ B. Bosworth, *Lifelong Learning: New Strategies for the Education of Working Adults*, p. 1, American Center for Progress 2007. (http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/12/lifelong_learning.html).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ For example, there have been a series of “handbooks” published in the United States approximately every 10 years since the 1930s; they do include policy analyses as did the 1989 and 2000 editions and as will the forthcoming 2010 edition.

to workforce issues in the 1990s also still reflect earlier concerns with citizenship and human development. In a review of the 5th volume of *Adult Learning and Literacy: Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice*, sponsored by the National Center for the Study of Adult Literacy and Learning, Guy argues that even though adult literacy policy has been around for many decades, it is still “highly fragmented and subject to fits and starts in its development.”¹⁶ Even though he characterizes the National Center’s effort as uneven, he finds promise in the fact that there is enough scholarly interest to have produced 5 volumes. Another effort to characterize literacy policies appeared also in 2005: *Conflicting Paradigms in Adult Literacy Education: In Quest of a U.S. Democratic Politics of Literacy*.¹⁷ The author, George Demettrion, organizes his review of literacy efforts since the 1980s from three perspectives: the participatory literacy movement, new literacy studies, and the functional workforce perspective. Allan Quigley, a prominent scholar on literacy policies in the US and Canada, argues that Demettrion’s effort creates a hitherto unwritten history of the “Bush-Clinton-Bush” years in order to show that literacy policy efforts are hotbeds of conflict and that literacy policy is not “a politically benign, pedagogically simplistic set of activities to teach adults to read.”¹⁸ The most trenchant critique yet of US literacy policies just emerged in December 2008 under the authorship of Robert J. Hill of the University of Georgia and a number of his colleagues.¹⁹ In preparation for CONFINTEA VI in 2009, UNESCO, through its Institute for Lifelong Learning, requested “national reports” on adult learning and education. The report put together by the US National Commission for UNESCO is extremely flawed according to Hill and colleagues: the Commission neglected the participatory process indicated by UNESCO, the report addressed very few of the indicated content areas, and the policy “implicit” in the report is “designed to remediate defective low-wage workers”: “Readers of the U.S. National Report will not come to understand how ALE [adult learning and education] polices are formed, how various interests are negotiated, conflicts handled, consensus arrived at, or the rationale behind allocation of resources. There is no integration of economic policies with social mechanisms and processes that can mitigate

¹⁶ T. Guy, *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy: Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice* (v. 5), edited by J. Commings, B. Garner, and C. Smith, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2005. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 2006, 56 (3), 227-229.

¹⁷ G. Demettrion, *Conflicting Paradigms in Adult Literacy Education: In Quest of a U.S. Democratic Politics of Literacy*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2005.

¹⁸ A. Quigley, *Review of Conflicting Paradigms in Adult Literacy Education: In Quest of a U.S. Democratic Politics of Literacy*. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 2007, 57 (4), 347.

¹⁹ *Op. cit. fn. 1.*

the sociocultural determinants of the problems that adult learning and education have the power to address.”²⁰

Other analyses focuses on more general policy issues in adult education. Quigley, for example, argues that the general endeavor once known as “adult education” has in the later part of the 20th century abandoned its responsibilities for contributing to a just society by its ever-increasing development into sub-specialties that have fragmented the broader field of effort.²¹ He proposes that adult education can reclaim its prominence by recognizing how it has given up its earlier interests in progressive social change, that by definition adult education should be engaged in the very “visioning” of a better society, and that the field needs to develop strategies for helping create a “more equitable civil society for all.”²² He proposes social policy as a major mechanism for achieving a just society. Mayo argues that while institutions like state-funded universities are often sites for creating and maintaining hegemonic arrangements, they can also be sites of resistance.²³ In a similar manner, Holtz has argued that “the economics of the globalization process affect people’s understanding of the prospect of social change, how this change should take place, and who are the most likely agents of this change.”²⁴ Torres claims that “since the capitalist state has a class content reflected in its policy-making, adult education policies constitute an example of class-determined policies oriented to confront the political and social demands of the powerless and impoverished sectors of any capitalist society.”²⁵ Wickens and Sandlin argue that most literacy education formulated by international organizations like the World Bank UNESCO represent a form of neocolonialism in the way they envision the purposes of literacy in traditional functionalist ways as tied to the workforce and how the programs are funded according to their productivity.²⁶ Greene examines the provision of adult education in New York City to ask the classic adult education purpose question – education for domestication or

²⁰ Op. cit., p. 4-6.

²¹ A. Quigley, *Adult Education and Democracy: Reclaiming Our Voice Through Social Policy*. In, A. Wilson and E. Hayes (eds.), *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass 2000.

²² Op. cit., p. 210.

²³ P. Mayo, “In and Against the State”: Gramsci, War of Position, and Adult Education, *Journal of Critical Educational Policy Studies*, 2005, 3 (2).

²⁴ J. Holts, *The Politics and Economics of Globalization and Social Change in Radical Adult Education: A Critical Review of Recent Literature*, *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies*, 2007, 5 (1).

²⁵ C. Torres, *A Political Sociology of Adult Education: A Research Agenda*, *Education (Malta)*, 1991, 4 (1), 31.

²⁶ C. Wickens and J. Sandlin, *Literacy for What? Literacy for Whom? The Politics of Literacy Education and Neocolonialism in UNESCO- and World Bank-Sponsored Literacy Programs*, *Adult Education Quarterly*, 2007, 57 (4) 275-292.

liberation – to argue that “gatekeeping” by professional educators who work to serve the market.²⁷ All such analyses represent the critical emancipatory interests of adult education scholarship that find problematic the putative abandonment of traditional social change goals in US adult education and wish to criticize the neoliberal turn in policy formation.

The Politics of Adult Education

American adult educators have long argued that adult education is necessary in order to “keep up” in a rapidly changing society. Lifelong learning as central to the economic well being of nations by continually retraining that developed so prominently in Western European nations in the 1990s was preceded in the US with lifelong learning as a developmental process for all maturing adults. Adult education policy in the United States has traditionally supported the needs of society by focusing on the needs of individuals. Reaching higher educational attainment, becoming a more responsible citizen, contributing to economic progress have all been central to policy initiatives since the 1930s in the United States. Beginning in the 1980s with the rise of conservative governments foremostly supporting the expansion of capital, more and more policy has favored market orientations to providing adult education and for adult education to serve. Adult education is both subject of policy and subject to policy and the production of policy is always political. Different ideological orientations drive the production of policy, and I have tried to introduce those shifting ideological traditions that have produced adult education policy in the US. Scholarly traditions in the US have tended to be mostly centrists and instrumental albeit with a fairly vocal minority favoring leftist emancipatory and liberationist efforts. As the scholarship reported here indicates, those that identify themselves with radical liberatory traditions can be counted upon to counter the capitalist motivations of much current policy by invoking references to adult education’s historical involvement in social movement involvement such as the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, or the women’s movement. As ideological traditions square off to promote policy that favors their orientations at the expense of their opponents, then policy is politics. So, historically, American adult educators have laid claim that the right way is the liberatory way and that repressive ideologies always require confrontation. But with their long term interest in the study of adults and their learning, most American adult educators have tended to not see the on-the-ground daily politics of actual adult education practice. Even though some of the last generation of American adult education scholars has struck a defiant intellectual stance in

²⁷ D. Greene, Gatekeepers: The Role of Adult Education Practitioners and Programs in Social Control, *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies*, 2007, 5 (2).

the face of oppression and domination, the study of the political practice of adult educators is only just beginning in the US.