

## **Using Oral History and Archival Exploration to Forge a Path to the Past: A General Survey of the Adult Education Opportunities Available to African American Adults in Cincinnati, Ohio, 1930-1949**

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**Abstract:** This paper provides a local history of African American adult education in Cincinnati. It identifies two categories of learning opportunities: learning in the community and learning by experience. This study also identifies AAAE's liberal education platform as a major influence over those opportunities because it indirectly supported Jim Crow racism. This history of African American adult education for many years suffered from what Franklin (1989) called the "conspiracy of silence" (p. 44) which resulted in people of African descent being viewed ahistorically within adult education. This history has not been sufficiently explored (Neufeldt & McGee, 1990). Most of what is available on African American adult education looks at institutions, agencies, leaders, and philosophies (Neufeldt & McGee, 1990; Peterson, 1996) but few include socio-historical observations about the African American learners from their perspectives. To ensure that adult learners' voices are included in historical narratives, historians should not just limit themselves to written sources but should also consider using oral history. The purpose of this oral history project was to provide a descriptive account of adult education for African Americans in Cincinnati, Ohio, during the 1930s and the 1940s. The following research questions were addressed: 1. What adult educational opportunities were available to African Americans during this time period? 2. To what extent were these opportunities influenced by racism?

### **Racism in Mid-Twentieth Century Adult Education**

The mid-twentieth century was characterized by a system of de jure and de facto segregation called "Jim Crow" (Litwack, 1998). Jim Crow denoted "the subordination and separation of black people ... much of it codified, much of it still enforced by custom and habit" (Litwack, 1998, p. xiv-xv). African Americans were regulated by unfair rules designed to control them by limiting their civil, political, and social rights (Litwack, 1998). Adult education was not immune to the racism that was so prevalent in American society.

By the 1920s, adult education was becoming a more organized branch of education. In spite of the fact that the Progressive Movement had heightened America's awareness about the social conditions that existed in the United States like poverty, racism, domesticity among women, and social justice, the adult education movement as a whole supported a liberal education platform that reified the social status quo. Some adult educators like Eduard Lindeman and Alain Locke did support the idea of adult education playing an active role in promoting social justice (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994).

Adult education through the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE) and Carnegie developed a variety of initiatives to deliver adult education to the American public. It not only considered what type of adult education should be provided like classroom based versus non-classroom based but it also looked at how to deliver those services and what topics should be focused on. The leadership of AAAE felt that "adult education in a democracy must create informed citizens, promote tolerance and understanding of differences, and maintain social stability" (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 194) but did not feel that specific platforms for social justice dealing with issues of race and class were needed to accomplish those tasks. Adult education's ultimate goal was to make knowledge accessible to the public.

“By several actions, the Carnegie Corporation and the AAAE reinforced the segregated and inferior status of African Americans in American society” (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 217). This resulted in issues related to African American adult education within the national organization being sidelined and trivialized. The treatment of African American adult education by AAAE reflected the social times of the nation in which White Americans held positions of authority and African Americans were made subject to that authority. Liberal education by not actively responding to Jim Crow racism and prejudice was invariably mired in problems that were created by Jim Crow and the programs that it supported consequently reinforced the inequality that existed. Programs that did not depend on the liberal education philosophy had a greater likelihood of empowering African American adults.

African American adult education was seen as a temporary project as opposed to a national necessity as adult education in general was viewed. Alain L. Locke, the first African American president of the AAAE, felt that part of the adult education agenda should focus on the cultural and life circumstances of African Americans (Gyant, 1996, p.71). Under the auspices of the AAAE and at the urging of Locke in the 1930s, programs of adult education were developed specifically for African Americans. AAAE provided time-limited support for the Harlem and Atlanta experiments in African American adult education, the publication of materials for African American adult education and conferences on African American adult education. Additionally, AAAE through its official publishing organ of the day, *The Journal of Adult Education*, featured articles on African American adult education but they were rarely full-length articles. The overall perception of African American adult education as evidenced by its treatment within adult education at large was as a dispensable, circus oddity type endeavor of negligible consequence to adult education in general. The needs of African American adults never occupied center stage in AAAE policy formation consequently programming for them separate, inferior, and disempowering in terms of quantity, quality and duration.

### **Study Design**

This oral history project on African American adult education was framed within an Africentric theoretical perspective. "Afrocentric research...seeks to uncover and use codes, paradigms, symbols, motifs, and circles of discussion that reinforce the centrality of African ideals and values as a valid frame of reference for acquiring and examining data" (Okafor, 1994, p. 88). An Africentric study compels the researcher to embrace a system of knowledge that differs from that of the dominant European American society, to acknowledge the values of African American culture, and to address in an active way the effects of European American oppression (Milam, 1992). In order to do this, the past experiences of African American adults must be maintained as the central focus. The historical sources used in the reconstruction must reflect those experiences and should include the voices of African American people. Material that has been previously used must be reevaluated from this perspective to make sure that accurate reconstruction occurs and historical researchers must actively look for ways to fill in the gaps commonly left by written historical sources. An oral history project is one way of filling in the gaps of the recent past and is a method of inquiry that is in alignment with an Africentric theoretical perspective because it allows for the centering of the African American experience.

### **Participants**

Thirteen African American elders were interviewed. The elders needed to be persons who were at least 80 years, who lived in Cincinnati, Ohio sometime between 1930 and 1949 as an adult and who had at least one adult learning experience during that time period. Six of the thirteen were over the age of 90. Five were men and eight were women.

### *Archives*

I sought archival material from various sources: oral history participants, area churches, local community like the YMCA, YWCA, the NAACP, the Urban League, Cincinnati Public Schools, and the public library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County. Most of the elders in my study, the churches, and the Cincinnati Public School District did not have any archival documents and The NAACP did not have records prior to 1950. I was able to obtain a great deal of information at the Cincinnati Historical Society Library as well as a modest amount of information from the public library and the YMCA main office in Cincinnati.

### *Analysis*

"The historian's basic task is to choose *reliable* sources, to read them *reliably*, and to put them together in ways that provide *reliable* narratives about the past" (Howell & Prevenier, 2001, p. 2). I used a process similar to inductive analysis (Charmaz, 2000) which involved carefully reading and re-reading the transcripts and archival materials. During the course of those readings, I "listened" for the voices of my participants so that I could accurately tell their stories. I looked for patterns then imposed meanings on them based upon what I believed the interviews and archival documentation were saying as a whole. A spreadsheet was used to help organize the archival and interview data.

### *Findings*

Cincinnati possessed northern sensibilities that extolled parity and social justice while simultaneously holding southern inclinations toward Jim Crow prejudice and racism. In just about every sphere of life, African Americans lived under Jim Crow styled segregation. They were segregated in churches, neighborhoods, in public establishments, and relegated to menial jobs (Dabney, 1926; Koehler, 1986).

Two categories of learning opportunities were identified in mid-twentieth century Cincinnati: learning in the community and learning through experience. I will highlight two examples from each category and show how they were influenced by Jim Crow racism. Learning in the community was composed of learning activities in community based organizations like churches, YMCA, YWCA, the Division of Negro Welfare, Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, and Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Association (CMHA). These community based programs were often segregated and with the exception of the church, these organizations for the most part followed the liberal education platform promoted by AAEE which led to education that was inferior and disempowering.

The Black Church was a learning venue that was free of racially based discriminatory policies. It provided physical as well as a mental and social sanctuary for African Americans. The Black Church was a place where African Americans were in charge and could see their fellow African Americans in a more positive light because they were the leaders and the organizers and were not relegated to positions of inferiority. They served as sites for spiritual development, civil rights activism, leadership development and education. Sunday Schools, Bible studies and Sunday morning services were the primary vehicles for biblical instruction in the African American community. Conferences and public lectures provided leadership training and cultural education. Ollie Bolton has lived in Cincinnati since she was five years old. She graduated from Woodward High School, attended the Evening College at the University of Cincinnati and is a life-long member of Southern Baptist Church. Through the church she said, "You learn, you grow in knowledge and you have to grow in your Christianity". Beulah O'Connor migrated to Cincinnati with her husband. She was a housewife and mother of ten children. She said, "We would discuss the Bible then we would discuss how it affected us."

Biblical learning was never intended to be static but was dynamic in nature and was to be applied to all of life's situations. Education in the church was a vehicle for learning how to navigate through life in Jim Crow Cincinnati and developing oneself as a Christian.

Organizations like the YWCA, YMCA, Division of Negro Welfare, CMHA, and the public library had well developed programs for vocational training, leisure time education, and home management. Many of these programs were very paternalistic in that they emanated not from the culture of those they were aimed at but from culture of the dominant White society. The African American masses had very little input into the programs. These programs followed the liberal education philosophy advocated by AAEE. In fact, the YWCA records indicated that they frequently relied on AAEE publications to guide their programming. Vocational education is an exemplar of how racism insidiously infiltrated adult education. Vocational education was a direct reflection of the availability of jobs in the labor market. The labor market, however, offered few opportunities for African Americans beyond low level, menial jobs, like maids, laundry girls, and laborers. The vocational offerings were typically aimed at preparing African Americans for these types of occupations. These were occupations that would reinforce the stratified racially based caste system in Cincinnati in which White Cincinnatians were on the top and African Americans were on the bottom. Novella Nobles and Ollie Bolton both talked about how they were discouraged from entering more high status occupations like stenography and clerks. They were told that they should not bother with training for those jobs because no one would hire African American girls to work in an office.

Most of the community organizations did offer training beyond the lower tiered jobs. The YWCA had a Professional and Business Girls division and the YMCA offered a class in stationary engineering. The Division of Negro Welfare had as part of its agenda helping African Americans to gain entry into the trade unions and apprenticeship program which it felt would create more occupational opportunities. These efforts would indicate to some that programs did not follow the liberal education policy strictly because they did recognize to some degree that the plight of the African American was different than that of White Americans and that as a consequence of that they needed to tailor programs to meet those differential needs. However a closer look at this shows that this training was limited and in fact still resulted in a reification of the racial status quo. The bulk of the vocational education available was for lower tiered jobs which mirrored what was available in society. African Americans were only permitted to enter other occupations in small numbers. Consequently, the vocational education offered for higher tiered jobs was also available in small numbers. Community based organizations made adult education available to African Americans. In that sense, they accomplished the primary goal of AAEE which was to diffuse knowledge. Unfortunately, these programs were not as effective in elevating the African Americans beyond their perceived place of inferiority.

Learning by experience was the second category. This included formal academic experiences, self-directed learning, specific vocational training, and social mentoring. These experiences did not rely on liberal education philosophies as the foundation for the learning activities but were none the less affected by them. A consequence of liberal education was that it bred social conformity by not challenging the status quo or being sensitive to issues of diversity. Locke lambasted adult education for promoting an "educational policy of ignoring differences and stressing conformity" (Locke, 1934, p. 420). Liberal education catered to the unique population that it was aimed at had a greater likelihood of resulting in an education that was culturally relevant and emancipatory. The learning activities in this category were more likely to lead to such ends.

Pastor Waldrop in the truest sense was a self-directed learner. He grew up in Alabama and moved to Cincinnati so that he could obtain an education that would prepare him for the ministry. He felt that knowledge about African American history and public speaking were paramount to being a successful minister of the Gospel. He went to libraries, attended night school, sought out private tutoring and relied on nature to teach him what he needed to know to become a minister. He made the following remarks about preparing for the ministry. "But in knowing how to present yourself, I came to know that I was in the ministry and I wanted to know how to speak and how to handle my voice and things of sort. I don't think I went into any such learning as how to be a carpenter .... I just wanted to know how to be a really good talker and how to make speeches and things of that sort." Through the wide assortment of learning activities that he undertook, his unwavering faith and his determination, he was able to develop a learning program that spoke to his needs, was culturally consistent, and was emancipatory. Many of the liberal education programs that were available educated African Americans away from their cultural centers because they were based on the White dominant culture. By being self-directed and unwilling to settle for socially proscribed opportunities, Pastor Waldrop developed a positive racial identity in addition to gaining specific skills needed in the ministry.

Military experience was also a form of adult education for African Americans in Cincinnati. Three of the men in this oral history project talked about these experiences. Ted Moore is known as Uncle Ted. He was born in Alabama and described himself as a hot headed fast talker in his younger days. He was drafted into military and was assigned the job of fireman. He quickly discovered that for the most part it was not a Black man's army. When Uncle Ted was drafted, he went to the Great Lakes Training Center, the service school for firemen but he never did receive the training to become a fireman. "We just went through the basics of it. You know, the actual fireman, we never saw a water room on a ship." He was assigned to the Naval Supply Depot. That was where 90 per cent of the African Americans in the Navy served their country. For 17 hours a day, he loaded and unloaded cargo in various locations like the South Pacific. In spite of the fact that his official training did not result in skill enhancement, he felt that the experience had a learning benefit. "It learned me how to talk to people. How to act around people. And just in general it gave you a whole new, how you say that, just a new way of life." This was an unanticipated by-product that proved to be helpful to him in Jim Crow Cincinnati. Learning occurred across a variety of venues with a variety of outcomes and it behooved African American adult learners to be ever vigilant in seeking education and using that education beyond what its intended purpose was. "It is the use of the trained mind to learn, from people and circumstances as well as from books" (*The Union*, 1949, p. 2). Lifelong learning required that resources, outlets, and opportunity be made available for the African American community and African Americans needed determination to persist over the hurdles and stumbling blocks that had been placed in their paths.

African American adult education in Cincinnati, Ohio was punctuated with the same Jim Crow prejudice that had insidiously infiltrated the liberal education platform extolled by AAEE as the panacea for adults in the mid-twentieth century. Liberal education by design disempowered oppressed populations because it did not attend to the unique characteristics and situations that affected the material reality of people who were oppressed in society. The primary goal was simply to diffuse knowledge, to make it accessible to the American populace for the purpose of developing more informed citizens to strengthen the democracy. "Adult education in the United States has not only done little to improve race relations but has never conceived of this as an objective of its endeavor" (Reddick, 1945, p. 490). Racism and discrimination were

part and parcel to living and learning in Cincinnati but they were not the final determinates of the education and the impact that education would have on African American adult learners. African Americans adults determined this for themselves. African American adults took the education that was provided for them and molded it into something that was useful to them as individuals and was beneficial to the community. They also developed their own educational venues that worked toward dismantling the racial status quo that was so easily acquiesced to by the AAEE. African American adult education in mid-twentieth century Cincinnati was either a function of Jim Crow or an act of resistance toward it.

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