

## **A Re-examination of the Role of Power and Politics in the Planning of Adult Education**

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**Abstract: This historical study of the political interplay of the federal government and a states' rights governor illustrates Cervero and Wilson's (1994) thesis of the importance of context in program planning. Contrary to their thesis, the study presents an historical illustration of the primacy of theory over context.**

### **Introduction**

Cervero and Wilson (1994) asserted that the typical literature on the planning of adult education suffers from the naivete of a pre-critical worldview they categorize as technical rationality. Using this assertion as a challenge to our thinking, we went back to the writings of Lindeman (1961), Bryson (1936) and Alderman (December, 1933) to see what meaning they placed on the program planning events of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and its implementation of the Emergency Education Program in Oklahoma from 1932 to 1936. We wanted to test this idea of the naivete of the so-called technical rationality versus the contextual forces at play during that period. Prior to beginning the study, we sensed that the Great Depression magnified the contextual limitations of program planning so well described by Cervero and Wilson (1994).

The review of the historical literature produced surprising results. Contrary to Cervero and Wilson's theory, the history of adult education in Oklahoma during the Depression clearly demonstrated that the real substance of the success of the Emergency Education Program in Oklahoma resided in the technical rationality of the program planners, not in the power struggle between Alderman and the governor of Oklahoma over the value of adult education. This paper presents the power struggle evidenced in Oklahoma during this period as a set of contingencies always understood by the program planners to be present in any transition from theory to practice. The paper also hopes to demonstrate that the so-called naivete of the classical program planners was considerably less naïve that we might assume, since they, in Lindeman's (1961) own words always understood the limitations of context, perhaps better than we. Perhaps, rather than the naivete of the classical planners of adult education programs, we should talk about our own naivete and the naiveté of the critical theory and postmodernist perspectives. Was the imposition of power from the federal government a distortion of the technical rationality of the times? Or was it an application of the technical rationality developed by Lindeman (1961) and later by Hopkins (Alderman, Dec., 1933) in his experiments with adult education in the State of New York?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Cervero and Wilson (1994, see also Wilson & Cervero, 1997) maintained that the so-called classical view of program planning assumes that planning is simply the application of a theoretical model to a real world setting. They insist that the classical view omits the important part of whose values and interests are represented by the application of the model. Consequently, any theory of program planning that works from a decontextualized model is naïve and ultimately ineffective because it leaves out the power imbalances inherent in any human enterprise.

### **Research Method**

We began with Cervero and Wilson's (1994) insight into the importance of context when planning adult education programs. We took their position as a challenge and as a lens through which we read government documents, newspaper accounts of the time, the *Journal of Adult Education* from 1930 to 1935, and personal correspondence between figures who played major roles in program planning under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and under its educational programs. In effect, we analyzed real world, historical events in which the planning of adult education was subject to extreme political and economic forces at play during the Great Depression.

### **Historical Setting**

Upon taking office on March 4, 1933, President Roosevelt faced a nation where some states reported 25% of the workforce as unemployed (Kornbluh, 1983). Recall that in those days our current social safety nets, such as social security and unemployment compensation, did not yet exist. The degree of unemployment during the Depression produced a desperate situation. An estimated 18 million people nationally were in need of relief when Hopkins took over as head of the FERA (Searle, 1963). At that time, "Farm, labor, and industrial leaders, as well as social and literary figures, talked kindly of Russian communism or of the need for a Mussolini for the United States, and often made clear that they thought American capitalism was doomed (Searle, 1963, p. 18)."

Voicing a counterview, Studebaker (1933) conjectured that the experience of Russia after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, in which 25,000 unemployed men began to terrorize that country, could not occur in the United States, because of the American population's long cultural attachment to Capitalism. However, Studebaker feared that fascism might take root. Eduard Lindeman (cited in Stewart, June, 1991) also had a deep fear of Fascism appearing on the scene because of the Great Depression. Lindeman had claimed that Mussolini always pointed to the U.S. when he wanted to give an example of a country ripe for fascism. Because of segregation and widespread poverty, Mussolini frequently mentioned the U.S. in his speeches as a country where all the conditions existed for the rise of fascism.

During this time in Oklahoma, large groups of people came in from the countryside to camp by the North Canadian River in Oklahoma City, not far from the Statehouse, where tents and shacks were set up and emergency food supplies distributed (Bryant, 1968). It was estimated that 27% of the Oklahoma workforce was unemployed at the time.

The educational level in Oklahoma, then as now, was one of the lowest of the 48 states. Writing about the national scene in 1930, Bryson (April, 1933) reported on prior research that sampled 17,782 individuals, 7% had a fourth grade education, 10% had less than 6th grade and 50% had less than 8th grade education. In this sample of adults only 27% had completed high school. Out of a total U.S. population of approximately 122,810,240 in 1930, Bryson (1936) estimated that around 15 million individuals were functionally illiterate. Alderman (1933), on the other hand distrusted U.S. census data, which listed approximately 10 million individuals as being either illiterate or functionally illiterate. Alderman suspected the census data, as did Bryson and others, because of the 1917 Armed Forces testing project. Assuming that the general mobilization efforts of World War I garnered a representative sample of U.S. citizens who met the age requirements for the draft, those test results cast doubts on the 1930 Census data. When 1,500,000 men drafted into the U.S. Army during World War I were tested, 25% could not read at all; 31% could not read well enough to take an aptitude test. Projecting from this sample, Alderman concluded from the 1930 Census that at least 12 million Americans could not read or write.

A survey of high school students was conducted during the 1930-31 school year in fourteen widely separated geographical areas of the United States. The high school students were asked to report the number of years their parents attended school. That survey indicated that roughly 30% of the fathers had completed 8th grade, while 20% had less than 8th grade. Another 26% had completed the 12th grade and one half of those had gone on to some college (Recent Social Trends, 1933). The educational levels of mothers were slightly higher than that of men with the exception of college attendance.

Criticizing the U.S. policy on education, Studebaker (1935) said that out of a 75 million population of adults in 1934, 64,000,000 had not finished high school and 32,000,000 had not completed the 8th grade. About 2,100,000 had finished college. Studebaker characterized the country's attitude toward education in 1934 as "trickle down education (p. 308)." Americans, he maintained, lived under the assumption that learning would trickle down to the masses without specific interventions of the government, somehow by accident.

### **An Idea Overcomes Political Realities**

Harry Hopkins was sworn in by Roosevelt on May 22, 1933 as Director of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration under the Federal Emergency Relief Act passed by Congress on May 12. (Searle, 1963). Roosevelt had become familiar with Hopkins' ideas and his ability to put them to work because of their former relationship in New York. When Roosevelt was Governor of New York, he had selected Hopkins to head the New York Temporary Relief Administration in 1932. According to Alderman (December, 1933) Hopkins had been surprised and encouraged by the results of the adult education programs in New York. We propose that ideas emerging from Hopkins' experience of using adult education to help unemployed adults in New York were used to launch the national Emergency Education Program. That is, they were generalized from the New York context and made into a form of technical rationality.

In 1932 Jesse Straus resigned as the chief administrator of the New York Temporary Relief Administration. Governor Roosevelt chose Hopkins to be Straus's successor (Searle, 1963). It was during this brief time that Roosevelt came to recognize the value of Hopkins' ideas about

social problems, and, thus, began their mutual admiration and friendship. It was also during this brief period that Hopkins began to appreciate the value of adult education as a way of engaging citizens in the productive use of leisure, even though this leisure was forced upon them by severely depressed economic times (Alderman, Dec., 1933)

Hopkins learned from his work with Roosevelt in New York that among the unemployed, there existed the possibility that some members could help others. Hence, teachers and pupils were recruited from the ranks of the unemployed. Classes for adults were organized so that large numbers of people who by force of circumstances had excessive time on their hands could be engaged in something productive. Hopkins found that hiring unemployed teachers to teach adults resulted in a very unexpected outcome. He discovered that new courage was generated among both teachers and students. Out of the class meetings emerged a new comradeship. Hopkins contrasted this comradeship with what he observed to be a solitary aloofness that he had often seen in despondent persons. Hence, Hopkins felt that classes for adults inherently generated high social values. Impressed by this "new" method of helping adults who were unemployed, Hopkins was convinced that government planners should use the most talented among the unemployed to instruct others in their group. In this way he wanted to provide relief in a way that would help individuals to work their way off of relief rolls to be self-supporting. He was convinced that education of adults was the best method of establishing self-reliance among the unemployed (Alderman, Dec., 1933).

According to Alderman (Dec., 1933), Hopkins felt the best way to avoid having a relief program injure the recipients was for them to help others. Since the destitute had no money, the best help they could give was that of service. Manual labor, he felt would do nothing to maintain people's courage, and maintaining people's courage was the main challenge of the Depression. When courage disappears, felt Hopkins, recipients of assistance cease to plan for their own support and thus become wards of the state. What unemployed men and women needed was the ability to keep faith in themselves. Hopkins was amazed at the good will and positive outlook generated by some unemployed adults helping others through adult education classes. Alderman (Dec., 1933) described the origins of the Emergency Education Program as discoveries made in the New York experiment under the governorship of FDR-discoveries that there was a relationship between learning and self-reliance, leading to hope about returning to the workforce. This was an unexpected insight into the social dynamics of adult classroom learning. It was this idea taken from the New York context that was put into practice amid considerable resistance in Oklahoma.

Hopkins hired Alderman as the administrator of the Emergency Education Program in September 1933 (Emergency Education Program, March, 1934). This appointment of Alderman led promptly to the removal of the Emergency Education funds from the control of the governor of Oklahoma, Bill Murray. "By November, 1933, the Roosevelt administration had begun to restrict Murray's control of relief funds (Bryant, 1975, p. 248)." But, by January 1934, the federal funds were removed entirely from the control of the Governor. Hopkins took it upon himself to inform the President that he had found it necessary to remove Murray from the program and take personal charge of the administration of relief funds in Oklahoma on February 24. Only in Oklahoma and in Louisiana under Huey Long were FERA administrators obliged to report directly to Washington. This bypassing of the governor's office by FERA officials evoked strong hostility between Gov. Murray and Oklahoma's State Superintendent of Education, John

Vaughn. Although the Governor continued to oppose the plan as a usurping of state rights, there was little he could do to influence or alter the program. On occasion the Governor even refused to sign documents approving federal funds to be funneled to Oklahoma, so strong was his opposition. Murray later said of the New Deal, "The despotism of a majority is worse than the despotism of one man, because you can shoot him (New York Times, June 9, 1935, L-13, Sec. 1)". Governor Murray considered the programs of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to be a form of dole that would eventually break the will of the people. Hopkins, on the other hand, did not believe that FERA's emergency education programs involved the concept of dole. As previously mentioned, he felt that the best way to avoid injuring an individual in times of necessary relief was to have the recipient of assistance help another person (Alderman, Dec., 1933). To his critics who accused him of squandermania, Hopkins' answer was blunt and simple, "Hunger is not debatable (Adams, 1977, p. 12)."

### **Discussion**

The so-called technical rationality of the times could be seen in Lindeman's notion of program planning which was published in 1936 as a manual for trainers.

1. Does the enterprise meet the current needs of human beings with effectiveness?
2. Does the enterprise provide channels of appropriate growth for all participants?
3. Does it develop and utilize true leadership? (Lindeman, 1936, p. 1)

The so-called technical rationality of the times could be seen in Hopkins' insight into the social value of adult education-that it gave people hope and a sense of self-reliance in the face of extreme economic adversity. This technical rationality of the New Deal met with the opposition of a populous and agrarian Governor who was both popular in Oklahoma and very powerful vis-à-vis his contemporaries. He had saved the oil industry shortly after his election by sending the National Guard out to forcibly stop production, causing the price of oil to go from 18 cents a barrel to 85 cents a barrel in 65 days. He used FERA funds to build roads to the farms and hire unemployed laborers to harvest crops. He used emergency education funds to pay off debts of rural schools, contrary to Washington directives (Bilger, 1983). This popular and powerful governor was clearly opposed to the New Deal, claiming that it violated the rights of ordinary American citizens and was clearly unconstitutional (Bryant, 1968).

The conflict between the way Governor Murray assessed the needs of Oklahomans and the way Lindeman, Hopkins and Alderman assessed the needs of the nation provide us with a wonderful example of Cervero and Wilson's (1994) description of planning as occurring in the context of "...relationships of power...marked by conflicting wants and interests (p. 25)." In this context, with the hindsight of 65 years, what was important in this event, context or technical rationality? What did the planners think about their ideas finding acceptance in Oklahoma? To really decide how naïve these ideas were, we turn to Lindeman (1961) when he talked about the relationship of theory to its implementation in a specific context. He said, "Knowledge and fact are relative to situations (Lindeman, 1961, p. 17)." On the notion of interests, Lindeman maintained, "Groups will arise whenever two or more people identify a common interest which to them seems worthy of perpetuation or enhancement. And conflicts between groups will occur so long as interests are variable (Lindeman, 1961, p. 101).

In this historical vignette, we recall the conflict in which Gov. Murray assessed the needs of Oklahomans and the way Lindeman, Hopkins and Alderman perceived the needs of the nation. Murray saw the needs of Oklahomans as the needs of farmers and farm families. On the other hand, Hopkins, Lindeman and Alderman assessed the needs of the American people as the need for hope and confidence in the future. With the hindsight of 65 years it appears clearly that the technical rationality of the times-the idea that adult education could serve an urgent social need by helping adult learners and teachers develop confidence in themselves and faith in the future-carried the day.

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