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Rural Community-Based Organizing For Social Change

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RURAL COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education: Natural Science and Environmental Education.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Overview

How does social change happen? According to the American historian, playwright, and social activist, Howard Zinn (1997), with active patience, people will begin to recognize the gap between what should be and what is. When this idea takes root in people's minds and hearts, they will begin to mobilize, lighting a spark that can spread like wildfire.

The relationship of theory, methods, and social action was deeply understood by 20th century thinkers, Morton Deutsch and Robert Krauss, when they argued that the true value of social theories would be dependent on the range of their methods and the courage of their willingness to apply these theories to problems of social significance (Fine, 2006). To understand the need for social change, we must understand forms of oppression and social injustice which create the need in the first place. According to Fine (2006), oppression is the experience of repeated, widespread, systemic injustice. It is structural, institutional, occurring in relations between people and even within the psyche or mind. Some groups of people suffer oppression in the legal system, education, employment, housing, healthcare, or through outright violence, by bureaucratic hierarchies, media and cultural stereotypes, and market mechanisms. Oppression is legitimized ideologically, producing systems of privilege and consensus among members of the dominant society whereby their interests, needs, desires, are articulated over those

of the subordinate group. To take up this project of developing activities that awaken people to social injustices, it is important to frequently revisit tools for disrupting and dismantling systems of oppression (Fine, 2006).

This capstone will seek to answer the question, *How can community organizers design and facilitate a series of workshops to develop rural leaders for social change in southeast Minnesota?* In my effort to answer this question, I collaborated with active community organizers to design educational activities and facilitation techniques to be used in four in-person sessions to engage a group of rural community members in social investigation, reflection, and action. This chapter will provide the reader with an insight into my personal experiences with, and approach to, working with grassroots movements to establish democratic problem-solving strategies for social change.

A Different Approach

I had just begun to encounter the language of systems thinking in non-formal education at an environmental learning center only one year ago. In a nutshell, systems thinking is a holistic approach to analysis that focuses on the way that a system's components interrelate and how systems work over time and within the context of larger systems (Bolman & Deal, 1991). When I heard there was a model of learning that no longer accepted reductionism as a way to fully depict, or allow us to fully understand, new complex and dynamic scenarios, I felt an overwhelming sense of clarity. A systems thinking approach shifted my worldview in relation to educational theories and practice and gave me new language to explain the value of interconnectedness in my educational work. Consequently, this shift caused me to question the beliefs, values, and

methodologies of traditional research and look for alternative approaches to influence systems-change.

Upon further exploration, I came to understand the broader significance of systems thinking when applied to real-world circumstances. My understanding was largely rooted in grassroots-based, first hand experience. From growing up in rural Iowa to facilitating community integration for adults with different developmental abilities, then working on the edge of a radical Indigenous education movement, and, finally, becoming a regenerative agriculturalist and environmental educator, I knew there were several different ways to approach big-picture thinking as well as the pragmatic steps to bringing about slow, positive changes. At the time, I did not have the language of systems thinking to apply to my self-reflection and decision-making in education. Learning to tackle big issues from a systems approach is a lifelong endeavor and skills I continue to hone in my current position as a community organizer.

While my professional peers in formal education seemed busy trying to solve problems linearly and objectively, I struggled because I wanted to know why there only seemed to be one type of approach in the first place. Considering differing approaches to complex problems helped me understand how I “see” the world. For some reason, approaching the instructional and cultural problems within the context of my “classroom” grounded in my own worldview, fraught with all my biases, and considering how I fit into the interrelated parts made knowledge seem less hierarchical, specialized, and regulated. In other words, systems thinking provided a basis for me to *co-construct* knowledge without setting my knowledge apart from my learners. Taking a self-directed

and collaborative approach to co-constructed knowledge helped shape my belief in the capability of every person to investigate their own reality and take action to shape their own destiny. In result, my newfound approach was actually opening the door to a deeper understanding of our collective participation in democracy.

Systems thinking supports the observable phenomena that people are always learning from each other and their environment, thus emphasizing how intimately we are connected (Bolman & Deal, 1991). To face these experiences together demands that we develop resources and processes to take collective action at all levels within society. In doing so, we can work to change systems of injustice and replace them with genuine political, social, and economic democracy. Educators and social theorists such as Paulo Freire (2013) and Myles Horton (2003) believed democracy is achieved through radical education and grassroots action. Through alternative education programs such as workshops and leadership development, they sought to affirm and document the knowledge, concerns, and struggles of the people who benefit least from our society. Informal or non-formal adult education programs have emerged as centers for participatory democracy to flourish, bringing diverse people together to analyze and respond to local circumstances.

Some of these programs are funded by the Department of Education (Cannon, 2006), however, the organization I represent does not receive funding through this entity. Our efforts are driven by membership dues from over 4,000 households and foundational giving. In my role as a community organizer for Land Stewardship Project (LSP) in southeast Minnesota, I work in rural communities with small-mid scale crop and

livestock farmers, meaning they farm around 2000 acres or less. Together we build bridges between the emerging regenerative agricultural movement and the broader political, economic and social movements of our time.

Summary

When faced with growing employment, education, and healthcare disparities in rural communities, as well as an intensified marginalization and criminalization of the poor, immigrant and working class families it becomes necessary to re-imagine and design education programming for adult learners who work and reside in rural communities to not only provide essential social economic services but also to engage learners in a process of consciousness raising that can support local movements for democracy, economic prosperity, and social justice (Cannon, 2006).

Aagin, I come back to the questions asked of Howard Zinn in his 1997 interview, “How does social change happen?” Well, social change doesn’t just happen. History teaches us that people drive social action through participation in a democratic society. I apply system-thinking to my capstone to develop interactive and engaging activities suited to adult learning that will enable full participation in systemic, social change. These activities will draw out dominant themes and questions posed by working class adults living in rural communities in the Upper Midwest, specifically in the state of Minnesota.

Chapter two will provide an analysis of the literature detailing the rise of alternative learning models in U.S. adult education, social theories such as popular education and participatory democracy, and informal or non-formal educational

programming in the form of workshops and trainings, as well as aspects of group facilitation in those settings.

Chapter three lays out the who, what, when, where, how, and why behind my research project providing much needed context. Chapter four includes my reflections on major learnings throughout the project process and my assessment of impact, limitations, benefits to academia, and future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In order to pinpoint the specific literature that informs my question, How can community organizers design and facilitate a series of workshops to develop rural leaders for social change in southeast Minnesota? - it is essential to understand the context for which this need arises. In other words, analyzing our current political situation and the social and political dynamics of rural communities in the Upper Midwest can help community organizers and social change educators develop a strong command of the issues facing their communities. It is also relevant to understand how adult education of the 1920's led to alternative ways of learning focused on engaging adults in democratic participation across social identities. This chapter will explore the theories and differing approaches to adult learning from more formalized education frameworks to grassroots community-based frameworks and analyze the most promising examples of implementation. The review that follows will identify strategic community-based practices used by organizers and social change educators to develop rural leadership around social change initiatives.

U.S. Politics Now and The “Rural-Urban Divide”

In a 2016 Washington Post interview with former U.S. Representative Collin C. Peterson of Minnesota - Democrat, reporter Christopher Ingraham, was told by Peterson that, “There’s no question President Donald Trump got elected because of rural America.” Of course, there are countless variables such as redistricting, gaining control

of key governorships and state house offices, and so forth, that have led up to our current administration. However, the argument Peterson is making is that, as far as politics goes, rural America is experiencing increasing polarization. The differences in worldview and lifestyle, he asserted, create a natural divide among rural and urban voters, and a May 2018 study conducted by the Pew Research Center agrees. According to the study (Bialik, 2018), America's urban, suburban, and rural communities have diverged over the past two decades with rural counties becoming more Republican while urban areas become more Democratic. The study also supported Peterson's claim that a majority of rural residents perceive an urban-rural divide over values, showing that 58% of rural residents surveyed say that values of urban dwellers are very or somewhat different from theirs. At the same time, 53% of urban residents say those in rural areas have values that do not align with theirs.

Peterson emphasizes this distinction between values because it has great impact on the prevailing discourse and corresponding actions (Ingham, 2016). Figures from Bialik's 2018 study illuminate the political dimension to this perceived values gap by pointing out that most Republicans and Republican-leaning independents in urban (64%) and suburban (78%) say people in rural areas share their values, while Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents in these communities see a values divide with those in rural areas while Democrats in suburban and rural areas are more likely to say that urban residents share their values. The implications these trends have in my work as a community organizer and social change educator are heavy because of the way this

perceived divide influences the worldviews of rural people on important social and political issues.

For instance, people in urban areas are more likely than those in rural communities to say abortion should be legal in all or most cases, that the government should do more to solve problems, that the economic system unfairly favors powerful interests and that whites benefit from those advantages in society that black people do not have (Bialik, 2018). Adults in rural areas identifying or leaning toward the Republican Party make up 54% of registered voters, and rural Republicans are more likely than urban Republicans to say the legalization of same-sex marriage is a bad thing for society. They are also more likely to express very positive views of President Trump and say that growing number of immigrants are weakening American society. However, when it comes to seeing drug addiction as a major problem in communities both urban and rural residents hover around 50% (Bialik, 2018). In short, there are several growing problems facing both communities that shift politics in different directions. For example, rural residents are more likely to say the availability of jobs and access to public transportation, and high-speed internet are major problems in their area while urban residents express greater concern about the availability of affordable housing, poverty, crime and the quality of K-12 public schools (Bialik, 2018).

Although some rural groups of people have mobilized to rally behind their political champions, as stated by Peterson (Ingham, 2016), this does not extend to everyone living and working in rural communities. Again, Bialik's 2018 study confirmed this observation by showing that 59% of Americans feel some attachment to their local

community, but only 16% feel *very* attached across the suburban, urban, rural landscape. Although four-in-ten rural residents say they know all or most of their neighbors, compared with 24% in urban and 28% in suburban areas, isolation is still a common barrier expressed by many rural residents in preventing social cohesion and change. Isolation, whether at the community-level or national-level, actively boxes rural residents out of the broader social and political conversations and movements which influence their lives, thus creating a need to re-engage people in democratic processes through community-based educational programming.

Although facts and figures can give us a glimpse into the complex dynamics playing out at a broad scale, it is important to situate problems within people's lived experiences without further dividing and disempowering them in our search to better understand what's going on. Linda Burnham has worked for decades as an activist, writer and strategist, focused on women's rights and racial justice. Before retiring, Burnham served as Senior Advisor at the National Domestic Workers Alliance. She co-founded the Women of Color Resource Center located in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she served as Executive Director for 18 years. She also edited and contributed to the 2009 anthology, *Changing the race: Racial politics and the election of Barack Obama*. At a recent leadership development training for white anti-racist organizers, Burnham (personal communication, February 25, 2019) spoke about our present moment in politics. At great length, she described the global shift into right-wing ideology which centralizes anti-black racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, xenophobia, islamophobia, anti-semitism, and gendered oppression. She described the process that American

democracy is undergoing to further suppress and dissolve voting and human rights, as well as the reorientation of the executive branch and Republican Party towards authoritarianism, resulting in increasing polarization on many levels. According to Burnham's political analysis, the Republican constituency is extremely energized across economic backgrounds with very little opposition. In other words, they know how to organize their political base. In light of this fact, she asked the most salient question that undergirds my work, "What politics will represent working class people and the poor?" In particular, she stressed the importance of organizing poor, working class whites and advocated using a compassionate approach to better understand the pain and social and economic dynamics present within those largely rural communities. This important connection strengthens and supports the reasoning behind my work, first and foremost, by acknowledging that the politics of rural America still hold considerable power and are subject to change.

State of Rural Minnesota Today

To make progress in the social change movement means being able to name key problems that hinder and opportunities that help social change practices in rural Minnesota communities where the basis of my work takes place today. First, it is important to understand that there are many technical definitions for "rural" based on population, geography, or in relationship to "urban" for example. For the purposes of my project, I do not feel it is necessary to drum up a strict definition of what exactly "rural" means. Instead, I will mention attributes throughout my review that are commonly

associated with rural people and spaces with the understanding that every self-identifying rural person does not cohere to any one definition of what it means to live rurally.

Agricultural journalist and blogger from the Upper Midwest, Alan Guebert, said in a 2018 blog post that “rural America is both bleeding people and its people are bleeding.” While it is important to understand education as being fundamentally about furthering human potential in a democratic society, it would be wholly unachievable to do so without grounding that reality in the highly instrumental economic, political, and social mechanisms exerting pressure on our lives. A person living in rural America today, does not have to look much past their front window to witness the economic gap between American rural working class people and their non-rural counterparts. The difference in rural America, however, is that gap is widening faster when compared to American urban and suburban communities.

My work is situated within rural communities based in the southeast region of Minnesota. According to the the Minnesota Demographic Center (2016), nearly 25% of Minnesotans currently live outside of an urban area and rural Minnesota is facing a steady population decline from natural changes such as birth and death, as well as migration out of rural areas to other parts of Minnesota or other states. Greater than 90% of residents living in rural Minnesota are white. Minnesota residents who self-identify as Black or African American and Asian or Pacific Islander most likely live in urban areas, however, the majority of Minnesotans who identify as American Indian live in rural communities. Residents in non-urban areas are more likely to be older, with 44% of rural residents over the age of 50, compared to only 32% in urban areas.

The increasing homogenization of rural communities in the Upper Midwest is causing more harm than good. Although increasing homogenization impacts various political, social, and economic dynamics, a primary example of the inherent detriments to this progression can be seen in the area of health. The Minnesota Department of Health (2017) defined health as a state of complete physical, social, and mental well-being and that social, economic, and environmental factors as well as individual behaviors and biology work together to create. In one of the department's recent studies on health, they examined the social determinants of health in Minnesota's rural communities, and concluded that when people face social, economic, and environmental disadvantages, such as structural racism and a widespread lack of economic and educational opportunities, health inequities such as higher mortality and cancer rates, death from chronic diseases, unequal distribution and access to healthy food, and an insufficient healthcare workforce persist.

Educational attainment can influence an individual's profession, career development, and wage level. It is a frequent measure of socioeconomic status, which is associated with health outcomes, health behaviors and access to health care. The levels of education attainment vary across regions. In a 2010-2014 American Community Survey done on education attainment in Minnesota by the USDA Rural Atlas, they found that the more rural, the less educated the population.

Employment also influences a wide variety of health conditions, including whether people have sufficient salary to cover living expenses, health insurance, access to paid sick leave, and flexibility to meet health care needs. There are many reasons a

person may not be an active member of the labor force, including being a full-time student, being retired, or having a health disability that prevents participation. People who do not have a job are considered unemployed. The Minnesota Demographic Center (2016) found the unemployment rate is highest in rural parts of the state.

Poverty is another important determinant of health status at both a county and individual level. The wealth of a community can influence the type and amount of services that are available to residents. Individual economic status plays a vital role in health outcomes. Minnesota has a lower proportion of people living in poverty compared to other states but there are still people affected by poverty. In a 2011-2015 American Community Survey, it was reported that childhood poverty in Minnesota is more prevalent in rural counties than the seven-county metro area. Children living in poverty experience lifelong health problems related to environment, socioeconomic status, family health, behaviors and access to quality medical care (Minnesota Demographic Center, 2016).

Individual behaviors, community and environmental factors all influence health outcomes. The behavior of groups and individuals can have direct and indirect effects on overall health of a population. Understanding these differences between populations can help to identify social determinants that create health disparities. The inequitable distribution of social determinants of health within a community, such as safe housing, places to purchase affordable food or reliable transportation, can determine health behaviors and indicators.

I pose the issue of health outcomes and care in a rural context because it is actually a universal issue. Both rural and urban residents are dealing with an expansive and broken healthcare system. Our health and overall quality of life has a huge impact on our ability to maintain employment, provide for loved ones, and participate fully in our communities. Rural Minnesotans are increasingly dealing with more health concerns, unaffordable and inadequate healthcare coverage, an insufficient healthcare workforce, and the closure of rural clinics and hospitals. Healthcare is one example of a highly complex system, so much so that many people often feel lost in the dark when attempting to navigate their healthcare needs. Not only is health as a system dynamic, it is also a basic need and determinant of how well people are going to perform in various aspects of their life such as education, employment, democratic processes and caregiving. All of these things are interconnected and impact people's lives in real ways, and when people are impacted by something happening with their healthcare there needs to be mechanisms for them to access information about what is going on, ask questions, problem-solve and make changes. The social, political, and economic systems impacting our lives are important to wrestle with because challenges such as these shape and transform our attitudes, beliefs, and actions towards the whole of society as we try to understand our sources of strength, power, and ability to change reality. To develop a working understanding that furthers our ability to shape reality, people of all ages turn to their culture's ways of learning.

U.S. Adult Education

Where does our individual and collective power come from? The approach behind my project is centered around the educational practice of dialogue, the process of engaging participants in a discussion together about their own experiences and decision-making processes. Dialogue is an educational practice rooted in the principles of liberation theory developed by the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (2013). The historical and contemporary roots of mainstream U.S. education does not reflect this approach. However, there were some figures who stepped up to challenge mainstream education theory and practice. Eduard Lindeman is considered to be a major philosopher of adult education in the United States. According to Lindeman (1926), adult education is cooperative, non-authoritarian, informal learning with the ultimate purpose of uncovering the meaning of experience. To exercise his beliefs and values, he advocated for the use of small, learning groups and the elimination of lectures and mass teaching.

Lindeman outlined a critical theory of adult learning and introduced adult education into American literature. He went on to emphasize four cardinal principles of adult education (Brookfield, 1984). First, education is a lifelong process. In other words, an adult's education was not bound by classrooms and formal curricula. Second, adult education is non-vocational, meaning job training is one form of education and understanding the meaning of labor is another with the latter being of great importance to the whole of life. Third, adult education should emphasize situations not subjects. In adult education, he argues, the curriculum is built around the learner's needs and interests. Adult education begins in respect to the learner's work-life, recreation-life, family-life,

and community-life. In this way, Lindeman was influenced by his friend, John Dewey (1859-1952), who believed that adult education begins when adults feel themselves needing to adjust to new situations. Lastly, the fourth principle assumes adult education should place primary emphasis on the learner's experiences. An adult's reality is the living textbook which acknowledges the interconnectedness between doing and thinking.

Lindeman stressed the importance of discussion as the means for relaying and sharing a learner's knowledge. He believed that the curriculum should focus on the method instead of content. By focusing on the process, learners acquire a set of analytical skills developed through group discussion which could be applied to understand a range of different content or situations.

By the 1940's, Lindeman's view of the purpose of adult education grew more specific. He believed that the maintenance of a democratic society should be used as the curricular agenda for group discussion. He eluded to the progression of all successful adult education groups becoming social action groups. This progression of education to action is the lynchpin of democratic participation, being that Lindeman takes adult learning into informal, unconventional settings in which skill-development is diminished and people questioning their present realities is enlarged (Lindeman, 1926).

Lindeman (1926) eventually arrived at what he understood to be the hallmark of adult education: full participation of democratic citizens in informed social action. Even the role of teacher, who Lindeman believed to be secondary to the learner, was expected to relinquish control over the learning process to the learner. Adult education, he asserted, should invoke historical and cultural awareness which ultimately construct our

surrounding environment, whereby engaging adult learners to reflect critically on their internalized values, beliefs, and assumptions is necessary.

Maximum, direct participation of all stakeholders is the basis of participatory democracy. According to Lindeman (1926) and the adult educators who followed him, direct participation is associated with unmediated involvement by the working class in everyday decisions affecting their lives and their peers. Democratic participation cannot be forced, however, resulting in varying levels of commitment.

To achieve full or maximum participation, Nitri (2001) argued that learners must address the use of authority, or the superior influence of power. Participatory democracy binds itself to non-elitism, thereby dismantling the use of privilege to exert authority over others and prevent them from participating fully. The principle of non-elitism is the distinguishing characteristic of participatory democracy. Nitri (2001) further discussed the general acceptance among adult educators that promoting democratic order goes hand-in-hand with fostering social justice.

Adult Education as a Source of Democratic Participation

Lindeman's vision for adult education provided educators after him with a powerful account of what he believed was involved in an adult's learning process that looks to enhance human potential and the whole of society. It is a vision shared with another educationalist, Paulo Freire (1921 - 1997). Paulo Freire is a Brazilian theorist and activist and is one of the most prominent social thinkers of the twentieth century. Much like Lindeman, Freire pushed the bounds of adult education, specifically in under-developed countries, into uncharted territory. He emphasized the importance of

critical consciousness, or the ability to intervene in reality in order to change it, for social change (as cited in Maguire, 1987). He moved beyond what he referred to as the *banking* concept of traditional education, whereby knowledge is constructed by elites then deposited to learners, and into creative processing, critical thinking, and democratic participation that has become known as popular education.

Popular education is about developing critical consciousness in order to perceive economic, political, and social contradictions and take action to change the oppressive elements within those systems. Four aspects of Freire's (2013) work have contributed to theoretical breakthroughs and innovative educational practice in adult learning. First, his emphasis on dialogue rather than curricula insists that people work with one another, as opposed to working on one another. This conversational approach to education involves respect and reciprocity. Second, Freire was concerned with praxis, action that is informed by dialogical approach between theory and practice. He believed that dialogue has great potential to deepen understanding and mobilize communities when it is a co-operative approach. Third, Freire gave specific attention to the significance of educators working with those without a voice. His most influential work was built around a 'pedagogy of the oppressed' or a 'pedagogy of hope', uplifting the process of conscientization, developing consciousness. Finally, Paulo Freire (2013) emphasized the importance of situating educational activity in the lived experience of learners and used this context as the guide for the approaches educators would take to their practice.

Adult Learning in Alternative Ways

According to Cannon (2016), adult education in the U.S. is predominantly funded and regulated by the Department of Education. However, many grassroots community-based organizations offer informal or non-formal adult education. Community-based programs that favor the collective knowledge of a learning group over advanced degrees and credentials are the bedrock of informal or non-formal adult education programs. Adult education not only has the potential to provide job training and literacy skills, but it can also engage learners in a process of consciousness raising and social activism that promotes local and national movements for participatory democracy and justice (Cannon, 2006).

Mars and Ball (2016) asserted that mainstream education has mainly focused on school-based or employment-based learning through formal curricula and standardized models. A major factor in rural economies is agricultural production and consumption which can be shaped by purchasing and voting power of adults in this country. Without their full participation in the democratic system, legislation and market decisions can and do suffer. The function of informal and non-formal settings as educational frameworks, some argue, can enhance the development, sharing, and transformation of diverse forms of knowledge among adult learners to enhance their participation (Mars & Ball, 2016).

In the southern United States, for over 45 years, Myles Horton and those at the Highlander Center recognized adult education as a powerful driver of social change movements (Horton & Jacobs, 2003). The Highlander Folk School started out working with poor Appalachian people to use education as a tool to question and challenge an

unjust society, particularly as it impacted labor and civil rights. Highlander has experimented with popular education in non-formal settings to cultivate social action. Educators at the center developed programs for adults in the community to engage politically in localized social movements with the goal of raising a critique of corporate control over communities in the region (Maguire, 1987).

According to Clark (1978), the Highlander Center focuses on the grassroots movements of working people, and racial minorities and cultural minorities. The work conducted there is based on five firmly established educational concepts that guide the staff and programs as an alternative approach for supporting adults as they navigate and solve problems in their socioeconomic and political context. The first of these concepts is rooted in the core focus of democratic education and decision-making. For them, this means providing multilingual settings and affordable, place-based training for local people to access opportunities to express their political views and participate at all levels within society. The next concept stresses the importance of working with groups over individuals. A group of people aimed at changing the status quo and disrupting the consolidation of power have a far greater and lasting impact than the single individual. The third concept is the assumption that political and economic conflict is inevitable and natural in a democratic society. When people work together to collectively define and sort out the conflict, they fight against oppression in enduring ways. The fourth concept is the use of short-term residential workshops as a means of bringing groups of people together to solve their problems. Participants are largely working class, living in poverty and have family responsibilities, therefore, workshops are tailored to the structure of their

lives meaning they typically last a few days, occur over weekends, and are organized around a common problem. The final concept is about involving all participants in workshop discussions, grounded in the belief that each person has something to contribute and that it is the responsibility of the educator to draw out and support these contributions (Clark, 1978).

I use the concepts developed by social change educators at the Highlander Center because the intensity of impact in rural communities and internationally can be witnessed today. A key principle of Highlander's work is a philosophy and praxis of international solidarity which has brought about transnational alliances between workers in the US South and in the Southern hemisphere. Current efforts to support Southern communities fighting for economic justice, democratic participation, and immigrant rights are attracting educators and community organizers from across the globe. In fact, many community organizers who mobilize for social change through my organization, Land Stewardship Project, have gone through Highlander's training workshops. Through the use of participatory action research and organizing initiatives, Highlander plays an ongoing role in supporting community leaders and youth-centered camps for social change (Cannon, 2016).

Community-Based Rural Organizing for Social Change

Literature about rural organizing is not widely published (Szakos & Szakos, 2008). That being said, there are many examples of effective organizing for progressive social change going on in rural areas. Writer and community organizer, Joe and Kristin Layng Szakos (2008), supported the claim made by figures like Peterson (Ingham, 2016)

and Burnham (personal communication, February 25, 2019) that conservative American politics has used community-based organizing in rural areas to shift national power and that waiting for demographics to change is not an effective strategy for shifting that power to include enhancing the dignity, liberties, and freedom of all.

Organizing in rural areas is nuanced. Rural areas vary from place to place, depending on geography, culture, traditions, weather, and the economy. Distance is a big factor in rural areas, resulting in fewer media outlets, less cell phone reception and Internet access. There are fewer gathering spaces and organized groups which begs the question, what does rural community-based organizing really look like? Szakos and Szakos (2008) have come up a few key themes that emerge when we take a closer look at rural organizing.

First, rural residents' share a strong sense of place (Szakos and Szakos, 2008). This connection is critical to the relationship-building that goes on in rural communities. Many people remain in rural areas, even in the face of some of the challenges I mentioned above, because place hold intrinsic value in their lives. For many rural families, a connection to place is a deep part of their identity and this bond is extremely important for rural organizers to always consider.

With smaller populations, people in rural areas have more opportunities to access other people and power than their urban counterparts (Szakos and Szakos, 2008). Relationships happen in closer proximity and with multiple ways of overlapping when someone can be your neighbor, friend, relative, or retailer. Rural organizers are also more likely to have access to elected officials which potentially makes less required work

geared towards getting the attention and follow through with public decision-makers. This process can make moving on an issue at the local level surprisingly quick at times. However, it is important to keep in mind that small communities have a limited amount of power in regards to state, federal, or corporate decisions that impact their lives (Szakos & Szakos, 2008).

On the other hand, rural organizing can also move painfully slow when the stakes for active leaders can be high and very personal (Szakos and Szakos, 2008). There is an intense amount of peer pressure and unwanted controversy that can accompany key issues and decisions that tends to make more visible and active people in rural communities extra mindful of the risks they take. That all being said, tactics that organizers may endorse with utmost confidence in urban areas can have the opposite effect in rural areas because it escalates the debate beyond what is useful. Again, relationship are so accessible, therefore, people can take aggressive organizing very to be very personal. This attribute of rural organizing can hinder a social change initiative that has benefits for everyone in the community, so it is important to know of these limitations and utilize alternative tactics to advance the work anyway (Szakos & Szakos, 2008).

Organizing for social change in rural areas can be some of the most exciting work because rural communities are at the frontlines of corporate extraction and exploitation of natural resources and labor. Every national public issue plays out in rural areas, from drug addiction to lack of access to health care, to immigration, to unemployment, to energy costs, and so on. Thus, finding solutions to these issues at the rural level will drive

positive discourse and change at state and national levels. Szakos and Szakos (2008) emphasized the importance of viewing rural struggles as a microcosm of the national political mindset. Rural organizers cannot be overly selective about who they call their constituency because rural organizing is charged with finding the issue and political path that appeals to a broad segment of the rural population.

Rural people are less mobile and have long memories, leaving rural organizers with fewer second chances to get it right. Szakos and Szakos (2008) also pointed out the fewer numbers of people there are to work with in rural areas. In many ways, rural people have more to lose if organizing in their area takes a turn for the worst. For that reason, rural organizing tends to propel movements that take people, economic development, and environmental issues towards long-term solutions.

Developing Rural Leadership

The work of community organizers working as social change educators lends itself well to grassroots, community-based organizing occurring in variable settings. Leadership development describes the structured opportunities in which educators develop the skills to do social change education (Arnold, Burke, James, Martin, & Thomas, 1991). A key component of the leadership development that occurs in a workshop at the community level is the capacity and ability of socially, politically, and economically excluded groups of people to maintain control over their resources and education. When possible, all content-based instruction facilitated in a workshop should be participant-led, or learner-centered (Horton, 2003). This may involve outside

presenters and educators, so long as control of the process remains in the hands of the community.

A workshop is a small piece of time that brings together a group of people and challenges them to explore the social, organizational, and political aspects of their lives and new ways of approaching problems that they will want to bring home with them (Clark, 1978). Workshops are too short to solve complex problems, but they can present options for learners to try and reflect upon as they proceed with their problem-solving. Designing a workshop can take many forms, and community educators who have worked with adults using a popular education approach have laid out the basic elements of a workshop: a call for a workshop; recruitment of participants; analysis of interest levels, power dynamics, motivations and agendas; conflicts between groups or individuals; the educational structure of the workshop, such as panels or individual presentations; and, the content of the workshop (Clark, 1978).

For the purposes of my project, I will focus on the education structure within a workshop where democratic thought and action can take place, the role of the expert, and the content. Clark (1978) described education structure as the flow and form of the information to which an educator has varying levels of influence. To be useful, the education structure must try to mimic natural learning processes. If the education structure should include one or more experts, then it is ideal to limit their number, access, and role. More often than not, educators who represent the identities and interests of those participating in the workshop create a safe space for learners where their culture and traditions are understood and respected by the educator.

Content is the primary focus of the workshop, consisting of not only the information transmitted but also the process of transmission, reflection, and evaluation. The content of a workshop may include basic or technical skills acquisition, however, the main objective of a workshop for democratic and social change is to enact a process of dialogue and action in response to the conditions faced by learners in their lives. Many adults will come to a workshop to develop their practical knowledge and skills, however, the key question is how to get people to stay and engage in critical analysis about their social conditions, and ideally begin a process of collective action to change oppressive conditions. Arnold et al. (1991) supported this claim and expanded on its importance by breaking content down into four main areas.

The first area of content they put forth concerns identities and interests of participants in the workshop (Arnold et al., 1991). Identities include social, organizational, and political identities. This type of process happens continually and helps community educators include people who have overlapping interests and goals for taking action. The second area of content names the issues. What matters to the learners creates the basis for the themes and questions which offer the greatest potential for building critical consciousness, educational activities, and social action. The third area of content assesses the forces. This requires a clear and strong understanding on the dominant social, political, and economic agenda that influence a learner's reality. The fourth context area plans for action. After taking care of the first three content areas, the learner or group of learners must weigh their next possible course of action. Opportunities for action are created by the relationships of forces the learners identified

earlier. Arnold et al. (1991) further stressed the importance of integrating educational work within the context of social and political organizing. As a community organizer, it is critical for me to engage in continual social and political analysis to help sort out the educational opportunities within the content areas put forth by Arnold et al. (1991) to better implement and facilitate adult learning around social change.

Tools for a Community Organizer / Social Change Educator

The role of a community organizer in a leadership development workshop is to take a pulse or evaluate the group through close observation to familiarize oneself with the collective educational needs of the group. Organizers, such as Arnold et al. (1991), have come to think of this process as facilitation. Facilitation is used to describe our role and our boots-on-the-ground work during an education session (Arnold et al., 1991). The basic premise of a facilitator is to allow for the group to take responsibility for its own learning by the helping the group clarify its objectives and determine its plan of action (GATT-fly, 1983). However, it is important to note that the role of a facilitator in social change education is never “neutral” (Arnold et al., 1991). GATT-fly (1983) organizers make a point of not being neutral since biases and political perspectives held by facilitators help shape the kinds of questions they ask drawn from lived experience.

Responsibility heightens as the educator must continually perceive, react to, and track the discussion and problem-solving process of the group so as to build-in educational strategies for moving the discussion forward. This may mean the educator moderating the group keeping time, repeating questions or key points, reframing the problem, making space for new voices, and inserting group breaks (Clark, 1978). Another

important role is that of observer. The facilitator must be an astute people-reader, interjecting to draw attention to contributions that get passed over and make verbal assessments of group progress (GATT-fly, 1983).

The process of facilitation denotes equal and reciprocal relations between educator and participants. The facilitator is intended to give direction and focus while taking input from the group. To avoid a one-way interaction, the facilitator should prepare questions that engage participants in a dialogue as opposed to posing questions with “correct” answers (GATT-fly, 1983).

Applying their popular education model, Arnold et al. (1991) address eight aspects of facilitation in social change education: the use of space, making the most of who we are, establishing credibility and challenging notions of the expert, getting and giving feedback, encouraging/challenging resistance, working with discomfort, dealing with conflict, and timing. According to Arnold et al. (1991), the use of space is considered to be a statement about power relations, from the arrangement of furniture to noise levels to the use of certain props. Therefore, it’s important for facilitators to find and design the type of space their group needs. This includes making the space accessible to people of all abilities.

Making the most of who we are refers to the role facilitators play in addressing our social, organizational and educational identities. Social identity encompasses our class, gender, race, disability, and our location within the oppressed or oppressor groups. Organizational identity speaks to facilitators affiliation with an organization. Are they an insider or outsider? Arnold et al. (1991) suggest the organizational identity matters

because they are particular risks and benefits in challenging the way things are within an organization than from the outside in which a facilitator should be aware. The educational identity gets back to the notion that because social change educators have a stake in the outcomes of their work, they cannot be “neutral.” For this type of educator/facilitator, the participants are colleagues, community members, and allies. It should be understood that the facilitator may need to take appropriate distance at times, but that is the role of the educator to contribute and help clarify the strategies of the group without preaching about what people should do. Arnold et al. (1991) suggested that making the most of who we are means clarifying whether, as a facilitator, we identify as the target of oppression or a member of the dominant group, being clear about our self-interests, naming our fears, and seeking appropriate roles for ourselves depending on our identities. As an educator on our feet, it is essential to be modeling equity in our working relationships and monitoring our participation to see whether we are reinforcing or challenging inequity. One way to help us sharpen our modeling and ongoing monitoring abilities is to make sure our learning has varied sources and that we understand the limits and strengths of our position.

Arnold et al. (1991) emphasized the tension between the need to establish credibility and the need to challenge the notion of an expert. Strategies for establishing credibility while sharing the expert role include seeking participant input to negotiate learning objectives that inform a relevant design. It is important to budget time throughout a learning session for participants to effectively raise their concerns, identify their goals, and be acknowledged for their contribution. Sharing expertise mean

effectively eliminating terminology unfamiliar to participants. When a facilitator is not sure of what terms to be using, it is encouraged to observe, be an active listener, and ask for help from the group. Another useful strategy establish group credibility and expertise is to take time for introductions, along with the particular interests that brought people to the session. With this exercise, participants will see that the facilitator prioritizes hearing from them, respects the knowledge and experiences they bring, as well as their hopes for the session. If it is important to distribute materials, includes resources that lift up the voices of people with shared identities with the participants in the session.

Giving and getting feedback is a way to develop skills in constructive, critical dialogue while also improving upon our facilitation practice. Guidelines for feedback include talking in the first person which communicates personal responsibility for responses, being as specific as possible, challenging the idea or action and not the person, showing appreciation and acknowledging achievements as well as what can be improved. Other strategies include asking clarifying questions, identifying common ground, making our own thinking visible to others, consider alternative approaches, and avoid assuming that difference is political and impassable (Arnold et al., 1991).

When challenging and encouraging resistance, Arnold et al. (1991) view varying forms of resistance. First, resistance can stem from a person's social identity and relation to power which clarifies difference levels of stake and power. Second, resistance can result from discomfort with the content and perspective which gives facilitators information about participants' readiness to engage with the issues. Third, resistance can be about democratic process that value the contribution of all participants which can

frustrate people not used to that way of doing things. Fourth, resistance can arise from participants' fear about losing their jobs, and a distrust of organization practices. Fifth, resistance can arise from critical thinking which is not sabotage. Some ways Arnold et al. (1991) offered to challenge and encourage forms of resistance includes asking questions to seek clarity, allow people space to flesh out their ideas, summarize what you hear people saying, do not belittle or use counterattacks, ask for input from others, propose a shift in direction, relate the resistance back to a larger issue, and know when to agree to disagree and move on.

In many learning situations, there are tendencies to fear discomfort as it arises and avoid dealing with the opportunities and problems discomfort creates. Arnold et al. (1991) asserted that social change education has a responsibility to work with discomfort as a way of improving the strength, trust, climate, and viability of social justice movements. The tips they give on working with discomfort include watching for symptoms of avoidance behavior, putting word to what we notice, probing people as to what they mean and asking for permission to probe further, allowing for silence, being supportive to someone sharing their feeling, building in time to heal, encourage input from other participants sharing the space, and finally, summarizing the main points and knowing when to move on.

Power relations, respecting difference, and developing ways to work together are all issues with social change education and struggling with conflict is an essential piece of the democratic process. Conflict can stem from using different language, frameworks, or speaking without listening. So the facilitator's' role can include questioning, checking,

challenging, and summarizing until the group reaches a certain level of clarity on how positions are similar and different. Arnold et al. (1991) reminded facilitators that conflict will occur, so plan for it. Pay attention to what is bubbling beneath the surface, stop the process when conflict seems to be building up consistently, name the opposing sides, explore the whys and whats behind people's positions, make connections to large societal issues, encourage participant responsibility for the process for addressing the conflict and seek agreement on a way to proceed, not on the positions themselves.

No matter how good the design of a session may be, participant energy and insight can quickly be dissipated with bad timing. Arnold et al (1991) addressed their approach to timing with strategies such as not over-planning on activities, marking begin and end times for activities, negotiate times for agenda items from the beginning of workshop and stick to it, cut from the middle of a session and not the beginning or end because introductions and summary are key, adapt and simplify activities when short on time, negotiate shifts in plans with participant input, and negotiate changes when unanticipated issues arise. It is the role of a facilitator to share the responsibility for timing with the group.

In short, a facilitator is responsible for working effectively with a group to help reach the objectives for a learning session. Arnold et al. (1991) presented a set of principles and strategies in which a social change educator can follow to do this work which encompass monitoring time, the democratic use of space, encouraging active participation from all members of the group, naming the issues that arise, drawing on a range of expertise from within the group, offering alternative insights when appropriate,

summarizing ideas and accomplishments, constructively addressing conflict and discomfort, encouraging critical questions, and building a spirit of collective inquiry and will to act.

Summary

In framing the discussion around social change education for adults, this chapter covered the early frameworks for adult education in the United States, the shifting of adult education as a source of workforce development to a source of democratic participation, thus spurring on alternative approaches to engaging adults in learning and shaping the course of their lives and communities. This surge of knowledge and resources dedicated to collective liberation is intended by rural community organizers and social change educators in the Upper Midwest to be used to shift the narrative and current trajectory of increasing homogenization and degradation of rural communities today. The strategy mapped out in my project involves community organizers and social change educators using popular education models to design and facilitate educational activities that will engage rural leaders in social change work within their communities.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Purpose

The purpose of my capstone project was to identify an area of social change work currently taking place in rural communities in southeast Minnesota and develop a set of educational activities and facilitation techniques to support that work. The area of social change I focused on for my project involved people who identify as white and live rurally, in small towns or cities, in racial justice work.

My specific focus for this project was, “How can community organizers design and facilitate a series of workshops to develop rural leaders for social change in southeast Minnesota?” The project consisted of four in-person sessions, each two hours long, with an additional five hours of reading and reflection between sessions. The people who participated in these sessions will hereby be referred to as the *Racial Justice Co-Learning Circle*. I worked with the facilitator of the first racial justice co-learning circle to design activities and facilitation techniques to be used in the second round of four sessions. Our intention was to strengthen the set of educational materials and facilitation techniques implemented in the first round of the co-learning circle. The topics discussed in this chapter include an explanation of the principles that guided my project, and descriptions of the project background, my choice of method, setting and participants and the timeline for project completion.

Guiding Principles

My project emerges from the theory that when people get the chance to share their knowledge from experience with others in a group, they can guide one another and develop a shared understanding and lens in which to analyze the systems of power that work through their lives. This is revolutionary work that takes time. It was important to situate our social change work within the political moment we live in and this project applied a popular education approach to get community members the political education they needed to participate in the democracy in which we live.

According to Maguire (1987), activities grounded in participatory democracy include a three-part process: social investigation, education, and action. These activities promote education and learning by a process of critical reflection, social, and political analysis that generates tools to engage in transformation of oppressive situations within the learner's reality. They aim to develop critical consciousness, improve the lives of those involved in the research process, and transform fundamental societal structures and relationships. They effectively remove the separation between knowing and doing. This form of participation is not value-free, and it is not objective because practitioners openly identify with powerless peoples and take an active role in social change.

The design for my project based heavily on the guiding principles of Paulo Freire's method for engaging adults in participatory democracy using a popular education approach. The tenants of a popular education approach used in my project:

- Draw on the lived experiences and knowledge of everyone involved - participants and facilitators.

- Encourage active participation to engage people in dialogues, fun and creative activities, and draws on the strengths of the diverse experiences represented in the room which includes learning opportunities that engage multiple senses.
- Draw on multiple modes of learning
- Create space for trust and participation, taking into account the larger context of behaviors, attitudes, and values that influences our identities and realities.
- Pose a clear agenda to all participants, acknowledging that all education reproduces a set of values, ideologies, and attitudes and is not neutral.
- Create access to all participants, and actively works to explore and challenge ways that create unequal access to participation.
- Connect lived experiences to historical, economic, social, and political structures of power to make patterns and connections to our lives clearer.
- Explore our multiple identities and experiences of inclusion and exclusion, oppression, and privilege. Popular education is not about building tolerance, but about acknowledging hard truths and building respect, acceptance, equality, and solidarity.
- Empower individuals and groups to develop long-term strategies for social change which transforms power structures and relationships to build a more just society. It is important that this work not be reduced to short-term campaigns and events. Instead, it is about strengthening and

engaging in a democratic process based on values, connected and accountable to concrete needs of a community.

- Develop new community leaders to build movements for social change.
- Result in action that challenges systems of oppression and develop democratic ideas, spaces, and strategies moving forward.
- Affirm the dignity and worth of every human being.

Paulo Freire (2013) believed democracy is achieved through radical education and grassroots action when everyday people are engaged fully in democratic processes. The purpose of my project was to lay out activities and facilitation techniques for engaging rural adults in a form of democratic process that involves building a political analysis around racial justice strategy.

Project Background

In 2016, Land Stewardship Project (LSP) organizers visited with members of the organization leading in various capacities to learn about what issues were important to them and how the organization might engage other members in these issues. During those visits, a common thread that emerged was concerns around racial justice issues. In response to this interest, LSP, working with Voices for Racial Justice and Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance, held three racial justice trainings involving over 100 LSP members and staff. The majority of participants in these trainings were farmers living in rural communities. Through these initial workshops, LSP members gained clarity about how the current food and farming system is not serving their needs. Insights were shared around how infrastructure, community attitudes and public policies

combine to pose significant barriers to beginning and diversified farms. It was also made clear during these trainings that no matter what barriers white beginning farmers face, the structural racism that exists within the food and farming systems makes barriers for farmers of color even greater.

Out of these initial racial justice trainings came the first ever LSP Racial Justice Cohort. This cohort consisted of 17 LSP member-leaders and 3 LSP member-organizers. The purpose of this cohort is to make LSP more effective at advancing racial justice by training and elevating LSP farmer-leaders to advance a just food and farming system and advocate for racial justice. Starting in December 2016 and running through April 2017, the Racial Justice Cohort met monthly to learn about privilege, power, structural racism, self-interest and land rights. The trainings were led by ally organizations working with Latinx, Indigenous and Asian American farmers. The cohort learned firsthand about the additional structural barriers that beginning farmers of color face within the current food and agricultural system. From this cohort, came the first wave of LSP member-leaders and staff members who decided to establish peer learning circles within their home communities to further the knowledge and skills gained in their cohort experience to develop more rural leaders taking social justice action around race.

Participants did not need to have a well-developed political analysis. That being said, it was important that participants had a self-assessed personal and material interest in changing the current political, social, and economic system.

I also sat down multiple times with the group facilitator to listen to their reflections and document their curriculum plans.

Setting and Participants

The activities and techniques laid out in my project are intended to engage white, rural participants living in the southeast region of Minnesota. Participants were selected from the original 17 Land Stewardship Project (LSP) member-leaders and 3 LSP member-organizers who went through the Racial Justice Cohort training. These were people deeply engaged in LSP's racial justice work and self-identified a strong interest in continuing their political education. The setting for these four sessions took place at a designated location in Winona, Minnesota which was arranged in advance by the active facilitator. For the first round of sessions, our group size was 6-8 participants.

Planning and Design

To guide the planning and design of these educational activities, I utilized a similar approach taken by Cho, Puente, Louie, & Khokha (2004) to better align with a popular education approach. The co-learning circles covered a variety of topics related to race, power, and privilege. In each workshop, participants engaged in activities and discussions, drawing on their own experiences and the information provided in workshop materials.

Each of the workshop sessions includes:

- Overview of goals, stated as statements and as framing questions;
- Brief background article on the topic;
- Tips and notes for facilitators;

- Directions for the workshop activities, including time, list of materials needed, facilitator preparation, source of the exercise, and sometimes teaching points, variations, and things to watch out for during the activity
- Supplementary resource materials, including fact sheets, videos, and articles.

Apart from framing intellectually complex and emotionally heavy material, the facilitator played a more active role in responding to group dynamics and guiding participants through activities. I have done my best to provide a solid structure while fully expecting the workshop content to undergo modifications based on group make-up every time the four sessions are repeated.

Timeline

The first round of the racial justice co-learning circle was spread out over four months. Sessions started in February 2019 and wrapped up in June 2019 with my role being a guide to the main facilitator. It is important that the active facilitator provide consistent communications with participants in the group to schedule meetings and get them the supplemental readings in between sessions. For the first round of the racial justice co-learning circle, the active facilitator mainly communicated with participants via email. The next round of racial justice co-learning circles that will use the materials from my project will take place in January-April 2020 with my role potentially being active facilitator or co-facilitator.

Summary

Chapter three laid out the who, what, when, where, how, and why behind my research project providing much needed context. The next chapter will include my reflections on major learnings throughout the project process and my assessment of impact, limitations, benefits to academia, and future research.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Overview

My project emerges from the guiding principle that when people get the chance to share their knowledge from experience with others in a group, they can guide one another and develop a shared understanding and lens in which to analyze the systems of power that work through their lives. In other words, everyday people make social change happen when they engage fully in democratic processes. The purpose of my project was to lay out activities and facilitation techniques for engaging rural adults in political education around racial justice. My specific focus for this project was, *How can community organizers design and facilitate a series of workshops to develop rural leaders for social change in southeast Minnesota?* Throughout the capstone process, I have learned that research on organizing in rural communities is fairly sparse. The research I collected for my project came from observations and ongoing dialogue with other social change educators and workshop participants. As a researcher, it seems particularly important to ground my learning process and outcomes in the lives of the people most impacted by my research.

Major Learnings

The writing process was challenging in many ways. I intended for my research project to be as place-based as possible, however, the literature in support of that focus did not exist. Therefore, I broadened the topic slightly and that meant finding clear and compelling ways to connect each subtopic with my main focus. Social change includes

the political and economic spheres that influence people's lives. It was important for me to include as much relevant detail as possible about the current standing of rural communities in the Upper Midwest in regards to democratic participation, education and employment, and social equity without diving too much into one area. Another piece that made writing challenging was not knowing the prior knowledge of my audience which was also why I tended to keep the literature review broad.

The time spent reviewing literature, collecting stories and materials, and writing has had a big impact on my learning. The main learning I have taken away is that social change work requires relationship and respect, and that ultimately, this kind of organizing with white people is the explicit work of white people. It is our responsibility which is not to say we won't hear from communities of color when we mess up. Hopefully, we will and learn from the opportunity to assess our strategy and further deepen relationships in ways that were not possible before. The most important thing to do is to do something. There is no need to for perfection, which leads back to the notion of working with white people where they are at. Coming at other white people in our rural communities with condescension and without compassion will almost certainly be met with defensiveness and further divisiveness. That means facilitators and social change educators must continually develop our communication skills and confidence, patience and humility. Many if these skills are actual values that rural communities hold dear and that is what truly brings this work home for me. Rural people are my people, my family and the community members who raised me, taught me to care for others above all else, and support me. I call this capstone "my project", but it took the ideas and actions of

visionary leaders and on-the-ground people to piece this whole thing together and enable this work to continue.

Revisiting the Literature

The most important parts of the literature review was Linda Burnham's(2019) analysis of our nation's current political climate and the perceived "rural-urban" divide. Not only did she cut to the heart of national and global political trends, she posed one of the most important political questions for my work, "What politics will represent working class people and the poor?" In particular, she stressed the importance of organizing poor, working class whites and advocated using a compassionate approach to better understand the pain and social and economic dynamics present within those largely rural communities.

Impact

Organizing large numbers of poor and working-class rural people can have a tremendous impact on local, state, and national levels of governance. The purpose of this project was for members of rural communities to set aside intentional time and practice to sharpen their political analysis of what's going on in their region to inform racial justice strategy moving forward. This process starts from values like justice for all and then organizes people, resources and ideas to build the power needed to make a difference. This project, in strong alignment with social change organizations led by and centering the lives and concerns of people of color, can help shape public policy around racial equity.

Limitations and Benefits to Academia

One major limitation of my project is the lack of analysis of interlocking oppressions involving race, gender, sex, class, age, and disability that make up the complex circumstances of people's lives. Further assessment of how these interlocking oppressions create solid racial justice work is needed to truly impact the most targeted people in our communities. The impact of this project would grow exponentially from the inclusion of more stories, theories, and practices centering the lives and work of people of color leading social change movements and drawing examples from those movements over time. It is also important to note that finding a critical analysis of historical and current information about forms of oppression and the political landscape in rural Minnesota is rather difficult. Information and stories are out there, but less so in academia and in public records making the efforts behind this project an important contribution to academia.

Future Research

If time and resources were not a major factor in the creation of this project, I would have preferred to shift the bulk of information from literature to personal testimonies from the people actually living out their existence in rural communities in the Upper Midwest. This could serve as a future related research project for myself or others in similar or related areas. My recommendation would be to act respectful, humble and patient when entering these communities. The process should not overemphasize ends over means. The process of building relationships with people is necessary to approach social change work from a place of values and humanity.

Conclusion

My project will be shared among colleagues in my organization, engaged members who take on leadership roles, and potentially funders or board members who need a pulse on where things are at. Although “curriculum” around social change is always changing to fit the needs of communities and political moments, this project can serve as a signpost of what analysis and strategy was used at this point in time to be used in emerging strategies for moving social change forward in our rural communities.

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