

Chapter 5

Building Cultural Capital and Workforce Skills for Immigrants Through Adult Education in the United States

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, adult education has provided an avenue for immigrants needing basic language acquisition and skills for employment. Immigrants contribute to a diverse landscape by bringing their cultures, language, education, and skill. This chapter focuses on the role of adult education programs in the United States and the ways in which accessible, low-cost language and job skills courses enable adult immigrants to establish social and community networks and prepare for new career pathways. Findings from a small qualitative study on immigrants with college degrees are also discussed to provide context on the value of adult education for establishing communities of support. The chapter ends with recommendations on ways in which communities and governments can support the success of immigrants.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, adult education provides an avenue for immigrants needing basic language acquisition and employment skills. Immigrants contribute to a diverse landscape by bringing their cultures and traditions, language, education, and skills. While the United States has many adult learners in post-secondary education, the term “adult education” refers specifically to government-supported programs offered through community colleges (two-year, post-secondary colleges) and schools in each state. This type of culture and language-based education is essential for workforce preparation and successful

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transition. The United Nations World Migration Report (United Nations, 2020) noted that “Migrants’ inclusion in the receiving society relates to diverse societal/policy areas that are closely interdependent. Inclusion outcomes in one policy area – such as language, education, labour market inclusion, family reunification, political participation and naturalization – will likely impact others” (p. 6).

Despite strong support for adult education programs, traditional approaches may pose barriers to access for immigrants, and assumptions about their needs and abilities have created a system that may no longer meet today’s diverse immigrant population’s needs. The U.S. adult education system was created in 1856 in response to a growing immigrant demographic that needed basic skills and language acquisition. The system was intended to help immigrants integrate by providing courses in language acquisition, vocational skills, and parenting (West, 2005). However, immigrants with a college education have different workplace skills and, therefore, different needs than those the current adult education system addresses. In 2016–17, 9% of the 2.1 million students enrolled in California’s adult education programs reported they had a bachelor’s or higher degree (WestEd, 2018). The work certificates offered through adult education career technical education (CTE) programs are a mismatch for highly skilled college-educated immigrants. Immigrants may experience the phenomenon of brain waste, which has an associated cost to them, their families, and society. This problem poses a significant impediment to thousands of immigrants with post-secondary education attained in their home country who cannot readily enter the American workforce. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how American adult education programs support college-educated immigrants’ development of workplace skills, focusing on programs in California, which is the nation’s largest adult education provider. This chapter will explore adult education in the United States and its role in promoting the development of essential social capital and workplace skills for immigrants as well as in fostering social and economic justice, with a focus on college-educated immigrants.

Social capital is a concept commonly used to understand how inequality persists in society. According to Bourdieu (Huang et al., 2009), individuals foster networks and leverage relationships to increase their skills, knowledge, and abilities—cultural capital that can help them succeed. The concept of capital is important as it equates to specific abilities that are commodified and can be used to advance personal needs and goals (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). While much has been published about the relationship between cultural capital, education, and individual success, education’s scope and influence on social or civic engagement vary. A meta-analysis of studies on education’s role in fostering social capital finds that schooling contributes to increased social capital, with ensuing societal benefits such as interest in community service and other civic-minded endeavors (Huang et al., 2009).

This concept is particularly applicable to migrants, who bring assets and talents from personal and professional experiences in their countries of origin but find that additional knowledge and capital may be needed to build or rebuild friendships and professional networks. Additional education, ranging from traditional degree-granting programs to less formal adult education or language courses, provides an avenue for recent immigrants to better understand cultural differences, improve language skills, and otherwise add to their existing knowledge and capital. However, approaches to education for immigrants vary by country and national contexts (Erel, 2010). For example, European countries that have received waves of migrants from countries in crisis may have more established programs and support systems. Erel (2010) also noted that the concept of capital is not objective and static; rather, the accumulation of any type of capital must consider issues such as gender, religion, and ethnicity, with implications on how those identities affect privilege and power.

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