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Examining the Perspectives of Adult Working Learners and Key Stakeholders Using Critical Race Theory

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Examining the Perspectives of Adult Working Learners and Key Stakeholders using Critical Race Theory

Key words: Critical Race Theory, Workforce Development, Adult working learners

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Abstract

Purpose: This article reports on a Critical Race Theory (CRT) analysis of the perspectives of providers of employer-supported educational opportunities and adult learners, who identified as Black, Indigenous, or as a Person of Color, and were employed in service industries.

Design/methodology: A review of the literature was used to shape an initial interview protocol. Data were collected from working learners in retail, hospitality, restaurants, and healthcare industries. An “a priori” coding scheme that drew from CRT was applied to transcripts during analysis.

Findings: Analysis revealed that working learners’ skills, experiential knowledge, learning mindset, language flexibility, and knowledge gained from previous learning experiences were not consistently acknowledged by employers. CRT analysis illustrated that endemic racism exists within educational opportunities and in workplace learning.

Originality: CRT has not been widely used to examine adult education practice, especially for workforce development and employer-based education programmes. This research expands the use of CRT in adult education and encourages critical conversations around equity in learning opportunities offered by employers. CRT informed data analysis uncovered barriers to equitable

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3 learning opportunities and workplace learning. A discussion of inequities in work-based learning
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5 illustrates there is insufficient awareness of implicit bias, which points to the need for initiatives
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8 focused on social justice.
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Introduction

On his first day in office, United States President Joe Biden explicitly acknowledged “entrenched disparities in our laws and public policies, and in our public and private institutions” (Exec. Order No. 13985, 2021, Section 1. para. 1) and that “executive departments and agencies must recognize and work to redress inequities in their policies and programs that serve as barriers to equal opportunity” (Section 1. para. 2). This charge calls adult education researchers and educators to radically re-conceptualize educational spaces and move toward broader and deeper acts of social justice in order to affect social change. This work is needed not only in the United States but globally, in countries marked by a history of colonialism, inequality, and inequities. For example, a panel of nine international scholars called for citizens and governments to “confront the historical legacy of systemic racism and the enduring inequalities it has created” (Bhambra et al., 2020, para 1). These scholars named countries on every continent that have been affected by colonial and Eurocentric power structures that continue to perpetuate systemic racism.

In the United States, efforts to address endemic and systemic racism have been undermined by those who call Critical Race Theory (CRT) authoritarian and divisive (Krasne, 2020). The Trump administration threatened the cancellation of federal contracts for companies that used anti-racist trainings (Exec. Order No. 13950, 2020). CRT has a contested history in applied research (Brown and Jackson, 2021). Most recently, a number of U.S. states have initiated efforts to quell the use of CRT in educational settings (see Goldberg, 2021). In this divisive climate, it is important that CRT and the groundbreaking work of its founding scholars further the goals of equity in education.

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3 The purpose of this article is to describe how we used CRT to examine the perspectives
4 of adult learners, who identified as Black, Indigenous, or as a Person of Color, and were
5 employed in service industries such as retail, hospitality, restaurants, and health care. Those who
6 participated in this research were engaged in learning opportunities that may take place within
7 the workplace or off-site and include on-the-job training, on-site learning, and integrated
8 educational training. On-site learning involves classes offered at the place of employment, and
9 can include basic skills, ESOL, and credentials or certificates for skills needed to meet on-
10 boarding or career path needs. Integrated educational training combines instruction in basic skills
11 such as literacy or math with job related training. These learning opportunities could prepare
12 them, if they so choose, to engage in higher education that could potentially lead to a university
13 degree.
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28 **Literature Review**

29
30 The research team reviewed research articles, field reports, white papers, labor market
31 analysis, and other published materials. We examined literature defining and exploring
32 educational opportunities available to front line service workers, defined as employees who
33 interact, often in person, with the public as part of their job. The literature explored transitions
34 that adults experience across their education trajectories such as Adult Basic Education to Career
35 and Technical Education to Higher Education.
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44 The literature review revealed the complexities of a shifting terrain aimed to meet the
45 needs of different kinds of employers (Rho, Fremstad, and Brown, 2020) and represented
46 multiple viewpoints (economic markets, workforce development, organizational growth) each
47 with biases and motivations for participating. However, the voice of working learners tended to
48 be absent. Reports discussed working learners in the third person, absent of the learner's voice
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3 and agency (e.g., National Research Council, 2012; Shechtman, et. al., 2016). Language used
4
5 across the literature tended to situate working learners as passive recipients of education,
6
7 reflected in terms such as “upskilling” or in use of the language of the marketplace (e.g., invest
8
9 in workers, return on investment, and talent pipeline) (e.g., Deloitte & Aspen Institute, 2015).
10
11 Most of the literature represented an oversimplification of the complex factors that surround
12
13 working learners’ choice to take part in learning opportunities such as building foundational
14
15 skills, English language proficiency, satisfying job requirements, or earning a degree or
16
17 certificate needed to move into another field (21 CLEO Research Team, 2021).
18
19
20

21 **Unemployment and Mal-employment**

22
23
24 In the United States, the massive unemployment (Congressional Research Service, 2021)
25
26 that occurred in 2020 and disproportionately affected Black and Hispanic populations brought
27
28 existing inequities into sharp focus. This economic reality and the racial reckoning felt in Europe
29
30 and the United States brought about by the murder of George Floyd (Douglas, Chrisafis, and
31
32 Mohdin, 2021) provided further impetus to research the perspectives and lived experiences of
33
34 working learners and adult education stakeholders. Front-line workers’ education often exceeds
35
36 the education required to perform their job – a condition known as mal-employment (Habibi &
37
38 Kamis, 2021). Fogg and Harrington (2012) used the term mal-employment to describe the
39
40 experiences of immigrants. Inequity in employment is also visible, historically, in the experience
41
42 of Black Americans, especially those who moved during the period of the Great Migration
43
44 (1915-1970). Tolnay (1998) noted that Black migrants from the south had a similar number of
45
46 years of schooling as their northern counterparts, but the quality of southern schools was
47
48 considered inferior. The “miseducation of the Negro” was used to justify systematic efforts to
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2
3 limit the economic mobility Black Americans (Watkins, 2001) resulting in fewer work
4
5 opportunities for migrants, an outcome with generational impact (Wilkerson, 2010).
6
7

8 **Structural Barriers**

9
10 The continued inequities in education and employment within marginalized communities
11 calls for further consideration of structural barriers. Patterson (2018) identified dispositional,
12
13 situational, and institutional barriers to learning in adult education programs in the United States.
14
15 Institutional barriers include lack of support from employers such as release time, cost, and lack
16
17 of support from immediate supervisors. Patterson's analysis, however, does not address less
18
19 visible structural barriers. Even if support or mentorship is provided, if it is "race dysconscious"
20
21 (Vargas, Saetermoe, and Chavira, 2020, p. 1), racism is culturally reproduced (Vargas, et al.,
22
23 2020), and learners become disenfranchised and leave the learning environment.
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28 Given the insights from the literature, the research team posed two research questions to
29
30 better understand the perspectives of the study participants:
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32

- 33 ● What do the perspectives of adult working learners reveal when viewed through a CRT
34 lens?
35
- 36 ● What do the perspectives and practices of adult stakeholders who support work-based
37 educational opportunities reveal when viewed through a CRT lens?
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41

42 **Theoretical Framework**

43
44 Initially developed to examine society and culture in relation to American jurisprudence
45 as created by a racialized society (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001;
46
47 Gotanda, 1991; Matsuda, 1991), CRT has been expanded and drawn on as a way to interrogate
48
49 oppressive structures in a variety of contexts, including education. Critical Race Theory applied
50
51 to education is not a pedagogy; it is a well-established and recognized scholarly tradition that
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2
3 focuses on the transformation of an inequitable educational system that will benefit all people
4
5 (Closson, 2010; Dixson and Anderson, 2018). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT
6
7 as a way to analyze and critique educational research and practice. Solórzano and Yosso (2002),
8
9 Dixson, Rousseau, and Donnor (2006) and others have extended this work. Despite the history
10
11 of CRT in education, it has been seldom used to interrogate adult education, and when used, the
12
13 focus is primarily on higher education (Closson, 2010). Closson's (2010) exploration of CRT for
14
15 the field of adult education makes clear the challenge of using CRT because it "mixes strategy,
16
17 research method, and definitional premises" (p. 262) and reaches across disciplines known to
18
19 educators to assemble familiar concepts in a new framework.
20
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23

24 Solórzano (1997) identified five basic tenets of CRT in education: (a) racism is *endemic*
25
26 or the norm in the United States, (b) challenges dominant ideology, (c) commits to social justice,
27
28 (d) centers experiential knowledge, and (e) presents a transdisciplinary perspective. Yosso
29
30 (2005) argues that these five tenets define CRT in education as "a theoretical and analytical
31
32 framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and
33
34 discourses" (p. 74). As Yosso notes, CRT validates the experiences of People of Color while
35
36 challenging white privilege and the dominant ideology that supports that privilege.
37
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40 According to critical race theorists, *endemic racism* occurs because white people resist
41
42 seeing themselves as racist, and this belief is supported by a legal system that defines racism as
43
44 *intentional* behavior and policies (Bell, 1980) and claims *color-blindness* (Gotanda, 1991).
45
46 Endemic racism, as defined by Bell (1980), is a condition where white people tend not to see
47
48 their race or themselves as racist and do not see how racist structures are embedded in
49
50 educational policies and practices. When racial injustice is addressed, change occurs because of
51
52 *interest convergence*: change happens when that change is in the interest of white people (Bell,
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2
3 1980). If a legal or policy change benefiting Communities of Color does not concomitantly
4 benefit whites, change does not occur or is resisted. The *social justice* perspective of CRT
5 exposes interest convergence and works toward the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty
6 while empowering People of Color (Yosso, 2005).
7
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11
12 Aspects of CRT that are not included in the tenets identified by Solórzano (1997), but
13 useful for our analysis, include *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1991) and *community cultural*
14 *wealth* (Yosso, 2005). Intersectionality explains how race and gender (or other aspects of
15 identity) interact to shape an individual's experience, thus pushing beyond dichotomies. An
16 understanding of intersectionality is important for listening to the lived experience of people
17 within a racialized and gendered society. Community cultural wealth is a way to see the depth of
18 experience individuals bring to a learning opportunity. Yosso defines community cultural wealth
19 as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities
20 of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77). Community
21 cultural wealth is built through aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, linguistic,
22 and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005).
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38 **Methodology and Research Design**

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40 Our positionality as white women limits comprehension of the lived experience of
41 working learners who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). The use of the
42 acronym BIPOC in a U.S. context serves to highlight the unique relationship to whiteness that
43 Black African Americans, Indigenous individuals, and People of Color have had historically,
44 which shapes experiences and relationships to white supremacy. We recognize that other
45 countries have different racialized histories, but every country in the international community is
46 affected by racism in some way (Bhambra et al., 2020). We approach CRT recognizing that we
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cannot and should not speak for Black, Indigenous, or People of Color. Rather, CRT helps to illuminate structural aspects of racism that we, as white people, have been apt to miss. The metaphor Wilkerson (2020) uses is that of an old house. She writes that America is an old house built on a flawed structure, and we cannot repair that structure until we look beneath the plaster to see what problems are hidden. Thus, we engaged in this work to look more deeply at the structures within which working learners are attempting to succeed.

Participants

Interviewees were selected from a pool of participants from multiple geographic locations across the United States. The participant pool included working learners and key stakeholders such as instructors, support service providers, and employees who helped shape education programming. Initial analysis of interviewees left us wondering about who has access and who is encouraged to participate in learning opportunities. Our wonderings focused on the potential influence of race, language, and gender and how these characteristics may influence opportunities and access. Prior to the recruitment of participants, the research protocol was reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). To protect the confidentiality of human subjects, pseudonyms are used in place of all participants' names, and all data collection sites have been masked to maintain participant confidentiality. To ensure that findings were not influenced by the funding source, none of the research was conducted at a site that was operated by the funder.

Key Stakeholders

Key stakeholder interviews were purposively selected for CRT analysis based on the type of organization, role in the organization, and relationship to the working learner participants. Four key stakeholders self-identified as white, one declined to state, and one was an immigrant

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2
3 from Eastern Europe. They supported the implementation of educational opportunities by serving
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5 as employers, support providers, or educators. See Table 1 for a summary of key stakeholders'
6
7 characteristics.
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9
10 -----INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE-----
11

12 ***Working Learners***

13
14 From the pool of participants, six working learners were purposively selected for CRT
15
16 analysis based on their self-identified race or ethnicity. Each self-identified as Black or as a
17
18 Person of Color. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of these six participants followed by
19
20 descriptions of the working learner participants.
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24 -----INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE-----
25

26 **Winta.** Winta wants to become an accountant but struggles to get her degree earned in
27
28 her home country recognized, “*So I will try to find my document ... for the CPA department to*
29
30 *valid(ate) my education.*” Winta is comfortable reading and writing in English and uses spoken
31
32 English with customers and colleagues in her position as a clerk in a retail shop. She is further
33
34 developing oral English skills by participating in an English class offered by her employer. She
35
36 reports that, “[the English class is] *too easy for me. So I try more the difficult one.*” While higher
37
38 level English courses were offered at a local community college, Winta’s work shift prevented
39
40 her from attending. Her large extended family provides support for her learning by providing
41
42 childcare. Although improving her English helped her in her current job, she said, “*I want to be*
43
44 *more, I want to make more money. I want to know more. So I just want to be more. I don’t want*
45
46 *to do this job for my lifetime. So I will try to change.*”
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51 **Maggie.** Before coming to the United States, Maggie “*...went to university for four years.*
52
53 *I study science economic for four years, and I studied accounting, for one year. And I studied*
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3 *like a computer training for three years...*” Although she was experienced in banking and
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5 earned a degree in Haiti, in the United States she worked in a series of service jobs and
6
7 completed a Certified Nursing Assistant program. She said, *“I was working that time, working*
8
9 *and go to school. I don't have enough time for my family. And I do some sacrifice, sacrifice my*
10
11 *life to do this, I'm going to say this was my hard time.”* Maggie was able to persevere through
12
13 her “hard time” and “sacrifice” by staying connected with her mother. She said, *“I have my mom,*
14
15 *she helped me out a lot when I'm working and go to school, she helped me with my daughter.”*
16
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18

19 **Julie.** Julie has been in the United States for five years. She enrolled in community
20
21 college to improve her English and earned a dental assistant credential. She found a job in her
22
23 field, but felt unprepared and left to work as a volunteer in a food pantry. Julie said, *“...it was*
24
25 *hard for me. I feel like overwhelming because of my language. So, I had to back up. [I thought],*
26
27 *maybe I can volunteer first and get the experience.”* She also said, *“For me, it's hard to talk to*
28
29 *people. I feel like I'm a little bit weak, when you work as a dental assistant, you have to have*
30
31 *computers skill to put everything on the system.”* Julie felt that reaching out for support was not
32
33 an option. She said, *“All the classes were in English, so I didn't, I didn't have like nobody to*
34
35 *translate to me anything. I just had to figure out everything by myself. So it was really hard for*
36
37 *me. I even think to give up. Like, I was thinking to not continue because every time I get home I*
38
39 *was so tired. It was really hard.”*
40
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44 **Destiny.** Destiny was born in the United States and speaks only English. After starting
45
46 employment as a front desk clerk in a hotel, Destiny became the supervisor. When the company
47
48 eliminated the manager position, she took on additional responsibilities without additional pay.
49
50 She took online courses through a program offered by her employer as well as hospitality classes
51
52 at her local community college. When the local workforce agency made leadership training
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3 classes available through LinkedIn, Destiny took those as well. She was especially excited about
4
5 the LinkedIn courses because she was already on the platform. She said, “...oh this is perfect...I
6
7 can just like pick LinkedIn’s brain for a whole year and just learn different things.” She focused
8
9 on learning “what type of person you are and how you deal with people...how to strategize and
10
11 how to get the team motivated. As well as difficult conversations because they are always coming
12
13 up.” Destiny’s manager was pleased that she was taking courses, and she was given permission
14
15 to do some of the coursework on the clock when her team was able to cover for her. Despite her
16
17 efforts, she has been unable to progress into a better job. To move from her hourly position as
18
19 front desk supervisor to a salaried position, she will have to switch to a different company.
20
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23

24 **Victoria.** Victoria self-identified as Latina who was born in the United States. She
25
26 worked for over 14 years as a mechanic and recently moved into a supervisory role. She earned
27
28 a Bachelor’s degree through her employer while working nights, but did not immediately pursue
29
30 a supervisory position. She said she considers herself as “rough around the edges.” She said, “I
31
32 walked around with a chip on my shoulder. So of course I wasn’t in any position (to lead) at that
33
34 time.” Victoria was encouraged by a mentor to begin seeking leadership, so she decided to
35
36 participate in a training program, “I’d always known about it, but I had a bad attitude. So I didn’t
37
38 care. So you know when I finally grew up, someone says to me, if you sign up for it, I will vouch
39
40 for you, but I expect you to give it your best.” She is happy in her current position and said, “It’s
41
42 awesome. I love connecting and networking with people....it’s been a great experience.” She
43
44 wants to continue learning and said, “ I’m doing leadership training, finishing up with
45
46 (program).” Victoria credits her focus to the support of her husband and the fact that her children
47
48 are grown.
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3 **Muhazzim.** Muhazzim has been in the United States for six years. After emigrating, he
4 worked in a call center then joined the database administration team for the same company
5
6 where he took on a supervisory role. At the time he changed jobs, he was working on earning a
7
8 certificate in management/supervision from the local community college. He was able to
9
10 integrate the learning for his new position into the assignments for the certification program. He
11
12 also worked closely with his direct supervisor to learn how to be a member of the database
13
14 management team. He credits his supervisor for mentoring him and said his willingness to ask
15
16 questions is what helps him learn. *“I keep asking and even, you know, in every evaluation my*
17
18 *supervisor commends me. He said, like, hey, he's the one who will question most of the time, and*
19
20 *I love it. He literally said, I love it, how much questions you ask.”* He noted that he is divorced
21
22 and has no children living with him, which he said made it easier for him to spend time on
23
24 learning.
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30 **Data Sources and Collection**

31
32 Interviews were conducted in multiple geographic locations within the United States.
33
34 Each site had work-based educational programming with instructors, support service providers,
35
36 and company employees who helped shape the programming. Contact information for working
37
38 learners and key stakeholders were shared by workplace development programs, adult education,
39
40 or immigrant and refugee support services. Volunteers were invited to participate via email or in
41
42 person. Those who responded completed a screening questionnaire and an interview. Inclusion
43
44 criteria required participants' past or current participation in workplace-sponsored learning. Key
45
46 stakeholders were identified based on the relationships they had to support the working learners
47
48 we interviewed. Working learners were given a cash gift to recognize the time they gave for the
49
50 interview. Key stakeholders were not remunerated.
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The review of the literature into employer-supported learning opportunities informed our emerging understanding of the landscape, which we used to shape an initial interview protocol. Interviews were conducted by two researchers and lasted an hour. Interviews were recorded, and field notes were taken and transcribed. Following each interview, the two researchers combined their field notes and discussed their observations which were folded into the analysis. Data analysis followed each round of interviews and led to refinements in the questions asked and the interpretation of the responses. This continual questioning of data resulted in several iterations of the interview protocol.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted using an a priori coding system derived from the CRT literature. The CRT tenets and premises were added to a comprehensive code book. As the researchers' understanding of the concepts grew through engagement in the data and the CRT literature, the a priori codes that became most salient were *experiential knowledge*, *endemic racism*, *interest convergence*, *community cultural wealth*, *color-blindness* and *social justice orientation*. Because the data are limited, investigator triangulation was used as a way to increase rigor. Denzin (2012) describes investigator triangulation as an opportunity to apply different or alternative theories to the data. Examining data collaboratively encourages multiple perspectives, which offers a more complete understanding of the data, and supports the trustworthiness of findings. Specifically each investigator brought experience with different theoretical lenses to the study, and each was discussed before identifying CRT as the most useful lens for answering the research question.

Working Learner Analysis

The code "community cultural wealth" was used to explain the different types of capital the working learners drew on. Aspirational, social, linguistic, familial, and social capital were

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1
2
3 especially evident. Examination of the coded excerpts revealed persistent tensions between what
4
5 the learners noted they brought to their learning and employment experiences (e.g., goals, skills,
6
7 experiential knowledge, language flexibility) and what was made available to them (e.g.,
8
9 employment opportunities or educational options). Analyses revealed employers, support
10
11 providers, and educators appeared to undervalue the experiential knowledge of learners. At that
12
13 point, we had analyzed only participants who were female English language learners. To check
14
15 the trustworthiness of the finding, the team returned to the data to examine the experiences of
16
17 three additional participants whose profiles matched those of other participants except for
18
19 language and gender. These multiple data points served as data triangulation and helped refine
20
21 our understanding of the role language and gender may have played in the participants' learning
22
23 experiences.
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27

28 **Key Stakeholder Analysis**

30
31 Analyses made visible critical incidents of endemic racism. Critical incidents are
32
33 unplanned or unanticipated events that researchers noted as memorable, illustrative, or unsettling
34
35 (Finch, 2010). The critical incident excerpts coded "endemic racism" included descriptions of
36
37 learners and educational opportunity. The code was applied to excerpts whether or not the
38
39 interviewees expressed knowledge of the racialized nature of the incident. The code "interest
40
41 convergence" was evident in the selected excerpts of data describing incidents where anti-racist
42
43 action was taken when it also benefited whites or the dominant power structure. This code was
44
45 applied to excerpts where stakeholders discussed how changes to policy and practice impacted
46
47 individuals and business. A social justice orientation was applied as a code when an interviewee
48
49 shared that an action had taken place in response to perceived inequities.
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Findings

RQ1: What Do the Perspectives of Adult Learners Reveal?

This section contains a discussion of the emergent themes of mal-employment and the role of intersectionality. The section ends with an examination of insights gained about community cultural wealth and the role of social capital in accessing opportunities.

Mal-employment and Intersectionality

Mal-employment describes the experience of four of the six focal participants who were immigrants. The experiences of the four immigrant women raised the question of how race/ethnicity, language, and gender may have contributed to differing experiences and what opportunities were offered.

Language discrimination. Winta and Maggie had four-year degrees from universities in their countries of origin, but they started work in low-paid service jobs. Although Julie had a certificate in dental assisting, she felt unable to work in that position because of her limited English proficiency. She moved into a volunteer position at a food pantry. We wondered whether language discrimination may have contributed to their experience, but Muhazzim, who was also an English Language Learner, had a different experience. This difference led us to consider the role of gender in the opportunities made available.

Gender discrimination. As a man unencumbered with family responsibilities and reporting to a male supervisor, Muhazzim may have been able to make connections in ways that the women were not. He commented on his close relationship with his manager, who provided guidance and support educationally, professionally, and personally. His identity as a man and the networking this relationship with his manager afforded may have shaped his ability to progress

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2
3 in his career goals. Muhazzim's close relationship to his direct manager raised a new question
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5 about the role of social capital, which is part of community cultural wealth.
6

7 8 *Community Cultural Wealth*

9
10 The elements of community cultural wealth most frequently coded were aspirational,
11
12 familial, linguistic, and social capital. Familial capital was evident when Victoria mentioned that
13
14 her husband of 19 years works for the same employer and is "...100 percent supportive." Winta
15
16 described how her large extended family gave her support, and Maggie talked about her mother.
17
18 Maggie and Winta were part of their immigrant and refugee communities and through them
19
20 learned of organizations that provided avenues for learning. Julie was also connected to the
21
22 immigrant and refugee community, which helped her find learning opportunities. By virtue of
23
24 being multilingual, Winta, Maggie, Julia, and Muhazzim had linguistic capital. Destiny, a Black
25
26 woman born in the United States appeared to draw on aspirational capital as she worked and took
27
28 classes despite knowing her employer offered little chance for promotion.
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32
33 Muhazzim and Victoria appeared to draw heavily on social capital. They referred
34
35 extensively to connections to individuals within their employment setting. Victoria described
36
37 herself as being "good at networking." Victoria was able to move ahead because of her
38
39 connections with others in her company. As Victoria noted, she was hesitant to pursue a
40
41 leadership position until she was mentored by a male colleague.
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45 Winta, Maggie, and Julie described connections and support drawn on from their
46
47 personal stories of community cultural wealth and life experience but did not mention
48
49 connections within their places of employment or target careers. Destiny did not discuss her
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51 community or family connections and she did not network within the company. She was praised
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3 by her managers for taking courses and lost the opportunity for growth when a position within
4
5 her company was eliminated.
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8 Although the sample is too small to make generalizable statements, the data from
9
10 Victoria and Muhazzim suggest the networking they engaged in as part of their jobs is important.
11

12 It may have been Muhazzim's and Victoria's ability to connect to others within their
13
14 organizations that helped them advance professionally. It is important to note that it was not a
15
16 failure on the part of other participants to leverage social capital. Instead, the opportunities
17
18 presented to them did not help build the social capital needed. Neither Destiny, Winta, nor
19
20 Maggie were mentored despite their educational histories.
21
22

23 24 **Summary RQ1**

25
26 The use of CRT problematized the types of learning and jobs BIPOC and immigrant
27
28 working learners are directed into regardless of their background and strengths. Although all of
29
30 the participants had strengths as evidenced by their experiences, often these strengths were not
31
32 drawn on by their employers. All participants had qualifications, some with degrees from their
33
34 own country, but these assets and resources were not consistently acknowledged or recognized
35
36 by their employers. Mal-employment is well documented (Fogg and Harrington, 2012; Habibi &
37
38 Kamis, 2021), and a CRT analysis illustrates that mal-employment needs to be considered
39
40 through the lens of intersectionality and the types of social capital available to working learners.
41
42 Moreover, mal-employment raises the question of how endemic racism contributes to the limited
43
44 opportunities made available.
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49 50 **RQ2: What Do the Perspectives and Practices of Adult Education Stakeholders Reveal?**

51
52 The use of CRT afforded insights into the perspectives of key stakeholders. For the
53
54 purpose of this article, we selected eight critical incidents and provide excerpts from interviews
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2
3 that illustrate the codes of social justice orientation, endemic racism, interest convergence, and
4
5 color blindness.
6

7 8 ***Social Justice Orientation*** 9

10 Three critical incidents show how a social justice perspective was evident among some of
11
12 the key stakeholders. Ivana spoke of how she assisted working learners around the challenges of
13
14 digital technology access. She said, “*Technology is a big, big challenge for our clients. It’s a*
15
16 *huge challenge....I plan to buy laptops for two of these clients. I found very cheap laptops, \$220*
17
18 *and the [program] will buy these laptops for them, and I will enroll them in this basic computer*
19
20 *skills program.”* Similarly, Matthew supported his students when he allowed students to bring
21
22 their children to class because he understood the challenges of childcare. Leslie advocated for
23
24 her students when working with human resources about the materials given to the English
25
26 learners. She explained, “*[HR] said they tried to make it [training video] simpler. I was like,*
27
28 *are you kidding me? Eighty percent of your employees are immigrants, and you have this video*
29
30 *that is so idiomatic English.”* Her comment to HR pointed out the need to make program
31
32 changes to address cultural differences and better align with linguistic proficiency.
33
34
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37 38 ***Endemic Racism*** 39

40 Although key stakeholders sometimes took action to support or advocate for their
41
42 students, critical incidents showed how key stakeholders could be unaware of systemic racism in
43
44 the programs they described. For example, Matthew discussed how his students who work in the
45
46 fast food industry were different from his students who were sponsored by a large employer. He
47
48 said, “*Many of our other students are working, but because of our socio-economic area, they’re*
49
50 *[in] fast food. They’re at the low end of the scale on wages and that is a different type of student*
51
52 *than what we get with [program name for the sponsored students].... You get into fast food and*
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3 *the students (are) fortunate if they've got the same manager at the end of the semester they had at*
4 *the beginning of semester. Lots of turnover, working very strange shifts. They just struggle much*
5 *more than the sponsored students.” Although he never named race, the fast-food industry, low-*
6 *wages, and insecure working conditions, has a complex history with the BIPOC community*
7 *(Chatelain, 2020). Though Matthew recognized the unfairness of the situation, he did not*
8 *demonstrate an awareness of implicit bias, as evidenced in his description of the students’*
9 *experiences.*

19 ***Interest Convergence***

21 Interview data coded as interest convergence identified two critical incidents. Key
22 stakeholders identified policy and program decisions that benefited the learners, but only when
23 those also benefited the employers. For example, Lynn said, “*We have a jobs committee that we*
24 *created a couple of years ago that was a response to our tenants struggling to be able to hire*
25 *enough people to fulfill the open jobs at the [location]... So if they're struggling to recruit, then*
26 *we're going to focus our initiatives on the recruitment side.... [Shows] the opportunity to work at*
27 *the [location]; that we were invested in careers and that we had ample opportunities here to*
28 *develop and grow a career.” In another critical incident, Carmen recognized that soft skills for*
29 *job searching supports the learners and benefits employers by turning workers into “someone*
30 *that the companies would want to hire.”*

44 ***Color-blindness***

46 Two critical incidents illustrate how color-blindness contributed to the construction of
47 endemic racism. Matthew stated that as a first generation scholar he understood the challenges
48 faced by his students, and if he could do it, anyone could. This suggests that while he understood
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3 the challenges of being a first generation student, he had not examined his privilege as a white
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5 male.
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7
8 Color-blindness was also evident in Ralph's perception of what learning behaviors are
9
10 desirable and what a culture of learning should look like. Ralph described a competitive culture
11
12 and did not accept time limitations as an excuse for not participating in learning opportunities.
13
14 He said, "*If you can't find six to 10 hours a week, when you're working you know 45 or 50*
15
16 *hours...what are you doing that you can't afford a couple hours a day, or you know, half of your*
17
18 *Saturday or four hours one evening to help further your career?"* Ralph suggests that everyone
19
20 has some amount of free time for learning. Perspectives such as Ralph's do not acknowledge or
21
22 value the different lives and cultural values of people from cultures that are not white and male.
23
24
25

26 **Summary RQ2**

27
28 Analysis of eight critical incidents shows key stakeholders strove to support working
29
30 learners, but did not name racism as a factor that shaped learners' experiences specifically. This
31
32 lack of awareness supported interest convergence, which, if the sole motivator for providing
33
34 opportunity for economic advancement, can foster systemic racism (Bell, 1980). While white
35
36 key stakeholders reflected on their experience and sought to connect to the lives of the adults
37
38 with whom they work, they tended to be color-blind and missed how their experience may differ
39
40 from working learners who are immigrants or Black, Indigenous, or People of Color.
41
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45 Even when key stakeholders took an explicit social justice stance, endemic racism shaped
46
47 colorblind policies, program design, and individual ways of thinking. Discussions of policy and
48
49 program design revealed how interest convergence informed decision making. Data showed that
50
51 in some circumstances, participants took action against an inequitable system but were not
52
53 consciously aware of the systemic racism that informed the educational context in which they
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3 were working. When key stakeholders took action, it tended to be at the individual level to
4
5 mitigate an immediate issue rather than to identify and address systemic problems. This
6
7 revelation is not meant to blame the key stakeholders for inaction; rather it suggests that
8
9 individuals, even when they seek to make a difference, are limited by their roles.
10
11

12 **Conclusions and Implications**

13
14 The experiential knowledge of working learners provided insights into the role of
15
16 intersectionality and community cultural wealth. Although working learners were doing
17
18 everything in their power to progress, and key stakeholders were striving to support learners as
19
20 much as possible, systemic barriers that are part of endemic racism prevented the full realization
21
22 of anyone's efforts.
23
24

25
26 The data identified and problematized the mal-employment faced by working learners.
27
28 The opportunities made available failed to build on the strengths brought by bilingual and
29
30 multilingual individuals. It also revealed that even when working learners are aspirational,
31
32 committed, focused, and take advantage of every opportunity presented, they may not be able to
33
34 move beyond their current position. Without racially conscious mentoring (Vargas, Saetermoe,
35
36 and Chavira, 2020) that helps build social capital within an organization, there may be little that
37
38 can be done to move up. In short, the economic and workforce development systems appear to be
39
40 stacked against them, and this may be because of endemic racism.
41
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43

44
45 Key stakeholders were committed to their students and strove to mitigate the challenges
46
47 facing working learners whenever they identified an issue. However, color blindness may be
48
49 preventing key stakeholders from taking action, or they may be limited by the role they play--
50
51 they have only so much power to make changes. When changes beneficial to working learners
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53 were enacted, it was only when those changes benefited the organization as well.
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3 This qualitative study is not without its limitations. The analysis delves into the
4
5 experiences of working learners and key stakeholders, but the data set is small and the analysis
6
7 relies on researcher interpretation. Findings are not generalizable in the traditional sense, yet the
8
9 use of CRT principles and approaches to data analysis may be transferable to other contexts. We
10
11 recognize that the racialized history of the United States deeply informs our use of CRT and the
12
13 findings that emerged. Nonetheless, this small scale study is indicative of wider trends that can
14
15 inform international efforts by demonstrating the power of a CRT analysis and the acute impact
16
17 of barriers to equitable learning opportunities.
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20
21 Data analysis, informed by CRT, prompted us to ask important questions about the role
22
23 of race, language groups, gender, and illustrated how problematic it is when the experiences and
24
25 qualifications of immigrants and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are not consistently
26
27 acknowledged or recognized. Findings indicate there is an insufficient awareness of implicit bias
28
29 in policy, program design and implementation, and even at the level of well-meaning individuals.
30
31 We seek opportunities to widen the conversation and move analysis beyond interpretive
32
33 description and into the realm of social action to provoke change at policy and program level as
34
35 well as among practitioners. The research process provided the context to pose important
36
37 questions that will continue to be interrogated far beyond the parameters of this study.
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Table 1.
Participants: Key Stakeholders

	Gender	Workplace	Job	Notes about Role
Carmen	F	Workforce development CBO*	Career Navigator	Refers learners to educational opportunity
Ivana	F	Workforce development CBO	Career Navigator	Refers learners to educational opportunity
Matthew	M	Adult education program	Teacher	Teaches courses financially supported by workforce development agency
Leslie	F	Airport	Teacher	Taught in the airport, but is an employee of an adult education program
Lynn	F	Airport	HR employee	Administered the course taught by Leslie
Ralph	M	Retail organization	Manager	Enrolled in courses to recruit learners he supervised

*Community Based Organization. In the United States, a CBO is a public or private nonprofit organization that represents a community and provides educational or related services to individuals in the community.

Table 2.

Participants: Working Learners

Pseudonym	Gender	Home language	Prior Education*	Current Learning Course	Prior Job	Current Job
Winta	F	Somali	4yr degree Accounting	ESL	Unknown	Retail Cashier
Maggie	F	French	4yr degree Economics	CNA	Banking	Security
Julie	F	Spanish	HS diploma ESL class	Dental Assistant, English, Computer	None	Food Pantry
Destiny	F	English	Some college and Employer sponsored hospitality courses	LinkedIn Learning	Front desk clerk	Hotel front desk supervisor
Muhazzim	M	Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, English	MBA	Supervisory course	Dept. supervisor	Database management
Victoria	F	English	BA, Management Certificate	Leadership training	Mechanic (bus)	Supervisor

* Educational attainment was self-reported. We did not ask for documentation or other forms of proof.