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**2010 RECONCEPTUALIZING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:  
LANGUAGE, CULTURE, POWER**

**INCLUSION OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

**IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL FRAME**

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**Abstract**

**This essay provides a theoretical base for pedagogy that embraces and incorporates the assets of non-traditional students in higher education and advocates for practice that honors and builds on student's cultural and social capital. It describes the challenges and opportunities faced by nontraditional students, in particular woman within colleges and universities, focusing specifically on early childhood and school-age teacher preparation programs. The paper proposes the use of narrative as a way to generate inclusive and transformative learning that expands upon the wisdom of students' lived experiences. This pedagogy enables immigrant and minority students to build on personal strengths in order to succeed in higher education.**

**Overview**

There are widespread population shifts taking place globally because of war, famine and poverty, as a result immigrants are often pushed out of their home countries and must establish a new life in host nations, like the United States. Immigrants are also "pulled in" to the U.S. because of job opportunities, family ties and the belief that the move to the U.S. will provide a better future for themselves and their families (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 2002). Regardless of what factors contributed to the

departure from their homeland immigrants regularly face economic, health and housing challenges, as well as racial and linguistic discrimination (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002), yet many persevere to redefine themselves in their new surroundings. For some, this new context may include access to education, for others it may entail reclaiming the education they received in their home countries. Those immigrants unable to make education a reality for them selves will place their hopes on their children, the second generation.

This paper focuses on minority, immigrant, and older student populations, who regardless of their journey have made it into higher education. This group may have encountered life circumstances that place them outside the mainstream of the traditional college population. They may have attended schools as children or adolescents that have not prepared them for the academic challenges of college life. They may be students of color, struggling economically, and/or older students pursuing a degree or change in profession.

Student experiences will be used in this paper to illustrate specific points from the fields of early childhood and teacher education. The authors use narratives from their practice as college professors to exemplify the challenges faced by non-traditional students and to describe an alternative pedagogy based on storytelling practice. The use of this type of practice serves as a bridge between the knowledge immigrant students bring and the academic expectations of the colleges and universities they attend.

### **Setting the Context**

Non-traditional students attend a variety of institutions but often choose community college to pursue their goals because these colleges are less expensive, are

located close to home and work and serve as a pipeline into four-year institutions. There are currently 1,195 Community Colleges in the United States that enroll approximately 11.5 million students. The average age of students enrolled in community colleges is 29, 42% of the enrollment is between 22-39 years of age and 16% is 40 years or older. Minorities make up 35% of the student population and 39% are the first in their families to attend college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2008).

Urban colleges tend to have more nontraditional students. In 2008, The Los Angeles Community College District Office of Institutional Research (LACCD) collected data on ten colleges in Los Angeles and reported that Hispanic enrollment exceeded 40% in seven out of ten colleges surveyed. Depending on the location of the college there was also a significant number of African American and Asian students. Two campuses on the list identified over 70% of the student population as Hispanic and a third campus was over 70% African American. The remaining campuses had a population where over 50% of students were a combination of Hispanic, African American and Asian.

The Public Policy Institute of CA recently published alarming data regarding community college students from 1997-2003. They found that less than one-tenth of students who wanted an AA degree finished. Only one-fourth who wanted to transfer to a four institution did so. And one-third of students did not return after the first year (Sengupta and Jepsen 2006). Beyond the personal challenges facing many of these students, such statistics reflect a breakdown in effective education at multiple levels as well as institutional bias against non-traditional students.

### **Challenges for Non-Traditional Students**

Entering college to pursue the goal of becoming an early childhood or

elementary school teacher can be intimidating especially for students whose lives differ from the academic culture they are entering. When discrepancies are left unaddressed, it can be a barrier to meaningful learning and may result in students dropping out of programs.

Most students entering college experience a range of difficulties such as keeping up with homework or adapting to college life. This is also true of non-traditional students but as will be described in the following section the challenges become more acute when students are adapting to the culture of higher education while juggling familial responsibilities, economic challenges and the academic expectations of the institution.

### *The Culture of Institutions of Higher Learning*

The culture in institutions of higher learning often sends a message of exclusivity that intimidates, alienates and puts into question non-traditional students' sense of belonging. There are many ways that educational institutions send messages of exclusivity to their students. Carmen, an immigrant from Mexico studying early childhood education, describes the message she received when entering the college:

You know, sometimes you see kind of a racism. Because you are coming from Cuba. Or you are coming from Colombia. Or from Mexico. And then you feel like in your heart you are not ready for this! And the way they are talking to you. Just be fair. But don't judge me for my appearance like, "Okay, you know, you are not going to be in the program." Just because of your color. Because your hair. Because of your skin. Because of your eyes. Or maybe because you don't have enough money. And if the college

can prepare any kind of program, I am saying, just be consistent (Bernheimer, 55, 2003).

Academic learning holds the expectation that students will meet the rules, demands, and regulations of the institution with little room for the student's personal life to be taken into consideration. When students are able to meet the expectations placed upon them their studies and sense of accomplishment progress well but if the student does not meet these expectations the culture of higher education often makes students question their ability to reach their goals.

Elena is an "older" student of mixed heritage who is returning to school after a divorce. She has two children and has moved to a different city to pursue a teaching credential. As she enters the Teaching Program she is balancing the new move, the guilt about leaving her children with her ex-husband, his lack of support and limited financial resources. During the first semester of her first class she is often driven to tears by the academic expectations in the program. She has some difficulty keeping up with classmates during the semester and begins to question her ability to become a teacher. She attends classes made up of mostly young college students, who have just finished their undergraduate program and do not have as many responsibilities.

For Elena the combination of personal and institutional expectations makes her question her decision to go back to school and her capacity to do the work required to finish her degree, even though she is quite capable of doing so. Although she is a talented and smart student her life circumstances have placed her in a precarious place. Through her networking abilities she will need to find support both

in and outside the institution she attends.

The culture of the higher education is unforgiving when students can't meet expectations charted for them. Although some professors and staff members will be empathetic, the student will eventually be pushed out because they are deemed "not worthy" of being in this privileged environment.

Tomas grew up in Boyle Heights, an immigrant neighborhood near L.A. Tomas dreams of becoming a teacher but struggled academically throughout his schooling experience. He was involved in local neighborhood organizations and decided that through teaching he could reach students, who like himself did not do well in school. Tomas works nights at a UPS warehouse. He supports his parents and attends college in the evenings. His parents are older and worked in the U.S. most of their life but have no medical insurance because of their legal status. Tomas pays their living expenses and medical bills as well as his own expenses.

Tomas was late with several assignments and by the fourth week of class he was behind. When asked about missed assignments he shared that his check from the college had not arrived and he had no money to purchase books. He did not provide this information because he was embarrassed. After lending Tomas copies of the books he began to turn in assignments. Still, it became evident that Tomas was struggling with writing. His papers had strong content but had many grammar and spelling errors.

Since non-traditional students are often the first generation in their families to attend college there are few models of how to balance the duties of home life with the

demands of higher education. These narratives make the case for *accommodating* practice that support students to be successful by acknowledging their lived realities and providing the support they need to reach their educational and career goals.

### **The Role of the Institution**

Although non-traditional students face some challenges it is the response of the institution that makes a difference in students' success. The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2004) found that a crisis is developing as we raise the bar for educational attainment for early childhood teachers while neglecting to provide support services they will need in order to succeed in institutions of higher learning. These include services ranging from financial assistance to help with ESL students, social support, and academic tutoring.

Beyond institutional support services, a critical component of success for non-traditional students will need to come from the faculty. Brookfield (1995) believes that addressing challenges in teaching requires more than trying something new or searching for standardized solutions. The scope of change needed will require faculty to question fundamental assumptions about how they teach and what students need in order to be successful in their education. Faculty will have to question basic assumptions regarding the role of an instructor as well as the perception they have of non-traditional students.

Faculty is unaware, unskilled or unwilling to teach non-traditional students in a way that helps to bridge institutional and academic divides. Some faculty are aware of the challenges these students face but are vested in an institutional ethos that demands a set way of teaching and explicit demonstration of the knowledge taught. Flexibility when teaching and working with non-traditional students entails making adjustments to

institutional behavior and faculty teaching practice. Yet instructors often keep non-traditional students at bay so as not to deal with the “messiness” of their lives inside the classroom. This places non-traditional students in an awkward position when their personal and institutional lives collide. As a result they often remain at the fringes of institutional life.

Effective change begins with examining beliefs, which appear to be essential to successful instruction. A starting point for faculty must be developing a deeper understanding of the students for whom they are providing an education. When the assets and needs of these students are recognized they invite institutions to open up to diverse cultures, experiences and ways of knowing. The challenges faced by non-traditional students are a gift to the institutions because they raise important questions regarding underlying assumptions about the purpose of higher education. Non-traditional students generate opportunities for faculty to examine dominant culture, content and pedagogy.

### **Social and Cultural Capital as a Theoretical Frame**

In his book, *Language and Symbolic Power* the French sociologist, Bourdieu (1991) distinguishes between three types of capital: economic, cultural and social. Understanding how social and cultural capital work to access knowledge is key in supporting NTS to succeed in higher education.

#### *Social Capital*

Social capital includes networks that enhance an individuals’ cultural capital or knowledge. These social networks are of great value since they serve as a way to interchange resources for members. Social networks are largely relational and include

family, school, work and outside fields of interest. Grenfell (2005) writes that it is through these networks that human beings enter new environments and acquire cultural capital.

There are two types of social networks, *bridging social networks*, that exist within heterogeneous groups and *bonding social networks*, which exist between homogeneous groups. Bridging networks are expansive, open systems and can include access to technology or relationships outside of the family and community. These open networks help to introduce new ideas and opportunities to members within a cultural group. Bonding networks tend to have redundant ties and remain insular because of shared beliefs, values and resources. Small, tight networks are less expansive than those with lots of loose connections.

Non-traditional students often operate within bonding social networks. When they enter college they become a part of a bridging network that offers them resources through student connections, faculty/student interaction, institutional partnerships, technology, and job placement. For some non-traditional students this network can be intimidating or artificial since they are use to more intimate, familial and community networking systems.

### *Cultural Capital*

Cultural capital includes the skills, education and knowledge that afford individuals higher status in industrialized societies. It is first acquired through family and grows as one develops and expands social networks. Cultural capital has three forms: an embodied state known as *cultural habitus* that includes the individual's way of thinking and socialization process; an objectified state that includes materials owned, such as

instruments, works of art or technology; and an institutionalized state that is comprised of educational qualifications whose value is measured in relation to the labor market (Bourdieu, 1991).

Universities and colleges have distinct cultural capital that students need to earn a degree. Generally speaking, institutions do not easily adapt their cultural capital to meet non-traditional students academic needs. The reasoning is that because students have made it this far they should have the cultural capital to succeed without much assistance. In addition students are expected to have the objects (technology, books and other resources) needed to participate in classes.

Although NTS enter colleges and universities with their own *capital habitus*, this capital is rarely mined. This is because the cultural capital they bring often differs profoundly from the capital institutions use to define success. Because the institution assumes all students have the same capital the faculty teaches accordingly.

### **What Capital Gets Valued?**

American education does not consider all social and cultural capital “equal” since certain types of cultural capital are needed to navigate elite systems, like universities. For example, Delpit (2006) in her book, *Other People’s Children* proposes that students of color must explicitly learn the *codes of power* needed to enter universities. The preservation of the codes depends on the shared belief about what knowledge gets valued. For the most part those who wield the codes and those who succumb must agree that a distinct type of cultural capital is needed to enter and exit in what Bourdieu refers to as *fields*. Colleges and Universities are fields that for the most part are built on Anglo-Saxon upper middle class and elite knowledge. To be successful, students must acquire

the “codes of power” needed to move through this distinct field. The process of acquiring cultural capital in these institutions is not easy for non-traditional students, many of whom are first and second generation immigrants. It is a stretch when students are not prepared for higher education or when they make it to colleges but find it difficult to keep up with academic demands. Some students resist “buying into” the codes of power altogether because they know that institutions don’t value their culture, language or experiential assets.

### **Inclusive Pedagogy**

Making use of the gifts of our non-traditional students will require faculty to realize that students learn more than a body of knowledge or a set of skills when they attend institutions of higher learning; they learn a way of being in the world. Traditional pedagogy transmits an undeclared curriculum that teaches that outer knowledge is important while the inner world of the students is of little use in the educational process. For non-traditional students, this pedagogy offers no way to bridge economic, social and knowledge gaps, leaving them disconnected and uncertain of their ability to succeed. Palmer (1993, 1998).

Faculty needs a pedagogy that supports non-traditional students to bridge these gaps and acknowledge their unique contribution to learning. The foundation for such pedagogy lies in creating a safe learning environment, in which they can take the risk of growth, change, and becoming part of a new community. Developmental psychology (Maslow, 1986) recognizes that new learning always requires the risk of letting go of the safety of previous answers. All human beings need safety and assurance when faced with the risk of moving into something new. Maslow identified two sets of forces operating

within humans as they enter a new learning situation, the first causes the individual to cling to safety out of fear and the second impels him forward towards growth. The need for safety and connection is particularly critical for non-traditional students as they enter spaces that not only put into question beliefs but also require deep transformation in order to enter a third space where the past and present converge.

It is in the halls of higher education that instructors can prepare teachers to bridge funds of knowledge and academic learning for their future students. Classroom practice that bridges the private and public self is inclusive and strengthens student's roots while they learn new content.

### ***Connected Learning and the Third Space***

While teaching in a community college serving students with limited resources, Bernheimer realized that standard practices were sending a message of alienation and exclusivity to non-traditional students. She began altering her teaching of course content to include personal stories. As a result a new level of learning, sharing, and listening ensued. This led to questions about how funds of knowledge can be incorporated into classroom learning to connect student's personal experiences with course readings, discussions and assignments. Bernheimer found that storytelling strategies created an atmosphere of caring and respect between class members across culture, race and ethnicity. As a result the classroom is transformed into a space where supporting social networks are created and sustained. She identified this process as *connected learning* (Bernheimer 2003).

Connected learning incorporates reflection, personal narrative, shared stories, and dialogue to bridge the gap between student knowledge and course content. It creates a

learning paradigm that extends beyond transmission of information and technique. It is rooted in the premise that teaching and learning require more than intellectual awareness; teacher, student and text need to connect relationally. It calls for learning that penetrates external knowledge through the complex world of inner experience, feelings and motivation. Without reflective practice, teacher preparation can result in a rigid and judgmental perspective in regard to the lived experiences of children and families. By creating opportunity for teachers and students to share experiences, culture and values, personal truth is validated and class content becomes relevant.

Connected learning brings with it the full complexity of intermingling lives, revealing identities that go beyond usual parameters of bicultural identities. It creates a “third space” as a mode of articulation, moving beyond a reflective space to one that engenders new possibility (Bhabha, 1996). It brings forth an interpretive space of new forms of cultural meaning, thereby blurring the limitations of existing boundaries, opposition, and established categorizations of culture and identity. According to Bhabha (1996), this hybrid third space is an ambivalent place where cultural meaning and representation have no predetermined unity or fixity. In such a space, students can articulate and connect with the true complications of their world.

Non-traditional college students are being thrust into a new, complex world that often places them at risk with family and community as they integrate new knowledge and begin breaking with traditional roles, language, and ways of being. Through the sharing of stories, readings and discussions our non-traditional students can begin developing an identity grounded in a third space. By understanding the continuity of their lives while absorbing new knowledge, they can safely change and accept learning

possibilities (Bateson, 1994; Palmer, 2004).

Carmen describes her experience in a class using personal stories as a basis for the pedagogy,

It is a big difference of listening from everybody, from everybody's heart, from somebody's heart and tears than reading it in a book – those learnings you cannot get them through the book. Because there is so much you can picture in a book. You can read about your pain. But you will never see pain in those faces. And there was a time when somebody said, “Hey, you guys are doing great by trying hard.” But the book will never tell you how hard you work. It won't ever say what is right in the book because those people didn't write the book for people who speak some other language (Bernheimer, 72, 2003).

The use of narrative life stories as a model for meaningful education matches research on adult learning. Dominice (2000) found adult learners have their own relationship to knowledge, which is influenced by the social and cultural characteristics of the individual's life history. Life stories bring the full dimension of an adult into the classroom, rather than leaving educators to project their own ideas into the adult's frame of reference, which is always more complex than it seems.

Combining narrative, dialogue and reflection gives non-traditional students an opportunity to validate their lives and learning. It provides an important antidote to the content in course readings about human development that often send a message that their experiences are somehow inferior or damaged. Using connected learning brings in the missing piece in these texts, the history, motivation, and circumstance behind a person's

life choices. They can give voice to this inner dimension and elucidate forms of resilience absent from standard theory.

Professors generally avoid creating processes that connect personal voice with content because they fear the voice of students may be too raw, real and honest. But as they establish safe environments, generate guidelines for classroom interaction, and thoughtfully lead storytelling the content becomes more relevant and alive. Classrooms that can link the student's inner experiences to what is being taught are frequently more dynamic because they are classrooms where the teacher is not afraid to let the student teach.

The benefits of this type of teaching extend beyond the classroom into work with children. Brownlee and Bethelsen (2005) found that using a relational pedagogy that values student's knowledge and connects learning with their experience is a more effective model for all students. It results in teachers bringing a more complex and constructivist perspective to their work with children in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

As diverse populations enter institutions of higher learning it is the responsibility of the members of the institution to get to know students academically, culturally and personally. This information can help nontraditional students succeed in their pursuit of a better life through knowledge. In addition, faculty must embrace pedagogy that models teaching that connects course content with the lived experiences of students by valuing the cultural and social capital they bring and by using practice that honors the assets and voice of diverse realities. When institutions of higher learning create a third space where the private and academic self meets nontraditional students become more fully integrated

in the institution, no longer as observers but as participants and drivers of their learning

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