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Presented at Oxford Round Table
“At-Risk Children”
Oxford University, 2004

Teacher Preparation in Impoverished Communities: Challenges and Opportunities

Introduction

Demographic studies of poverty, refugees, and immigration trends give a picture of dramatic and wide-ranging shifts taking place on a global level. These far-reaching changes have presented institutions of higher learning and teacher preparation with the critical task of meeting new needs: the growing gap between rich and poor; rapidly increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees; and a post industrial economy requiring higher levels of education. Recent historical events have introduced a sense of great urgency to the effort of finding ways to address these current issues, becoming more inclusive of complex interconnections, and decreasing the disparities in the larger world population.

My research (Bernheimer, 2003) focused on answering critical new questions facing higher education today. What are the life experiences that students in poverty bring into teacher preparation programs? What motivates them to want to become teachers? Can these students bring unique insights into our educational institutions?

How can we build upon the strengths that often remain unnoticed behind fear, silence, and alienation?

Three areas of findings emerged from this work: 1) The depth and severity of challenges facing students in poverty coming into higher education, 2) The importance of new approaches to teaching that can bridge the gap between higher education and the world of these students, and 3) The hidden gifts that our nontraditional college students bring to the field of education. This paper will examine these challenges facing teacher preparation programs as they set out to accommodate their student's special characteristics.

Institutions of higher education hold a key to inclusivity for adults outside the mainstream of middle-class communities. As greater numbers of nontraditional students enter college programs, ways must be found to incorporate, welcome and ensure the success of individuals living outside the middle-class and privileged cultures these institutions were designed to serve. The impediments to this inclusion are often immense, bringing into question the structure and content of traditional practices.

California's community college system through its policies of open enrollment and low-cost education offer a last hope for many impoverished students. These colleges have also been struggling with problems that are part of our changing social and economic landscape. Los Angeles, in particular, has a large population of people living in poverty, ranging from generations of entrenched poverty to newly arrived immigrants. It is a city that has been grappling with the educational challenges of these new forces of modern life. Sporadic newspaper articles illuminate the local repercussions of a world in flux. Recent headlines of three Los Angeles Times articles refer to realities often hidden

from public view: “County’s Poor Areas Tripled,” “California Leads U.S. in Foreign Born,” “Low-Pay Sectors Dominate U.S. and State Job Growth.”

Beneath the statistics and headlines lies another world that few people understand. This is the everyday struggle of families, children and parents who are attempting to find a way to survive and hold on to dreams of a better life. During my experience as a community college instructor in Los Angeles, specializing in programs serving students in poverty, I came face-to-face with the human struggles and educational challenges behind these statistics. I found myself facing classrooms of students coming from worlds far outside the middle class culture of higher education and my own background. The obstacles for the students and myself as an instructor felt overwhelming and insurmountable.

Challenges beyond Academic Preparedness

Childcare and teaching are popular fields for low-income women and a few men. It is an area they can relate to from personal life experience through their own childhood, parenthood, or the care of other children. This reality places teacher preparation at the cross-junction of the widening economic gap in America and globally, particularly in relation to impoverished women. Over the last 30 years, as rich nations have become richer and poor countries poorer, increasing numbers of women are leaving their families and migrating north in search of work (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002). Along with native-born women in poverty, many female immigrants will find their way into our programs.

I have watched these students come into the college campus filled with new hope and dreams. Along with these dreams, they also bring great apprehension about entering this unknown world of higher education. Academic challenges, monumental as they are, are not the only difficulties they face. These students find themselves strangers in an alien world. They do not look, act, speak, or dress like traditional college students who typically fill our campuses. The kinds of struggles and experiences they lived have not prepared them for the world of higher education. They remain largely unnoticed or are seen simply as misfits. Receiving little orientation and assistance, the maze of offices, paperwork, and new terminology leave them frightened and overwhelmed. Their socioeconomic level and weak language skills label them as students who are simply not ready. Their primary identity quickly becomes one of “deficient outsider” who does not belong on the college campus.

There are many ways that educational institutions send messages of exclusivity to their students. Carmen, an immigrant from Mexico, described 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.

For those who survive the initial obstacles, sitting in a college classroom will bring little comfort. They do not understand classroom etiquette, often calling out inappropriately or withdrawing in silence. Our textbooks will not touch on the

experiences they have lived. Attending college also means going against the accepted roles of their families and culture. Stepping into this unfamiliar world will take an ongoing act of courage. For many, this fragile new beginning will end in failure. First-generation college students have the lowest success rate in obtaining a degree. Fewer than 50% of these students who began college in 1989–90 went on to receive a degree or were still enrolled five years later. Even extenuating factors, such as socioeconomic status, that distinguish them from their peers fail to explain the unusually high dropout rate for first-generation students (NCES, 1998).

At the same time, the challenges our nontraditional students bring to institutions of higher learning may be a gift in disguise. They are raising important questions about the underlying assumptions and priorities of our educational practices. As strangers, they are creating an opportunity for self-reflection and change that will enable colleges to more effectively educate students of increasing diversity. Virginia Shabatay (1991) discusses the important role of the stranger in our classrooms. The stranger asks something of us: she asks that we be open to differences and allow for the uniqueness of the other to be brought forth in a caring environment. She reminds us that the stranger has often been the character in literature who is the prophet in disguise or the wise person who has something to reveal to us if we pay attention. She believes that if the stranger is ignored, destruction or failure will ensue.

As the rate of poverty and immigration increases, we must ask ourselves, “How do we respond to the stranger in our institutions?” “What are the important messages they bring that we have not heard?” “How can we embrace the stranger as a valuable part of our system?”

Message of Classroom Practices

It was a September day of sweltering heat in Los Angeles. I stopped speaking as Lydia, a middle-aged woman, entered the classroom halfway through our session. Her face streamed with sweat as she tearfully apologized for being late. She informed me the buses were on strike and she had just walked twelve miles to get to class. I was already aware of the strike. I had lost a third of the students in this class. Teaching at a college serving some of the most impoverished students in Los Angeles, I knew this was another blow to their fragile existence and slim hopes of a new life. Stories such as Lydia's tell more than a personal crisis. They are a lens into the destructive forces that confront large populations of people today.

My initial experience of teaching students in poverty was filled with growing frustration when none of my usual techniques proved successful with them. As a college instructor, I had previously developed skill and experienced high levels of success with students. I thought it was my job to walk into the classroom, give a fascinating lecture, apply this information through group activities, and lead a stimulating discussion. Suddenly, however, I discovered the inadequacies of my traditional methods as I watched my new students sink into despair and defeat.

I was not aware of the depth of struggles facing these students nor the hidden message being sent to them through our teaching practices. I began to realize that the message of our classroom practices, focusing almost exclusively on external information in a neutral learning environment, was far from neutral. Parker Palmer (1993) believes

that our classrooms teach more than a body of knowledge or a set of skills. We actually teach a way of being in the world. This approach to education teaches an undeclared curriculum that outer knowledge is important while the world of our students' inner self is of little use in the educational process. For students outside the traditional culture of higher education, this mode of teaching leaves them as disconnected outsiders with no way of bridging the gap between personal experience and learning.

I started shifting my instructional approach to include personal stories, neighborhood observations, inner reflection and dialogue. The students began doing observations in parks and in their homes, watching for positive and negative interactions between parents and children. They looked for differences in temperament among children, and between a parent and child. Inner reflections in class allowed students to look at both painful and positive experiences in their own lives, and what they learned from them.

The students quickly responded, moving from silence and shame to expressive and highly motivated people. As class became a safe place, they began sharing the real stories of their lives, which often included suffering and painful emotions. Yet, these painful experiences became a source of motivation and inspiration to help others. Sharnette shared how her own difficulties growing up led her to a greater understanding of children's needs and motivated her to become a teacher:

I love children. And I want to make a difference...I guess because I was abused as a child...I want to do something for children. I have a lot of love to give. I am not going to make a big impact on every child, I already know that, but by being the type of person that I am and because I understand how hard life can be...I can make a difference. And maybe one day make other people make a difference too...I want to be able to help improve a child's life. And that goes for helping a parent, cause I know sometimes, with newborns it is difficult. And sometimes what can

make a difference with a parent just being angry and tired and frustrated and stressed out is somebody stepping in and saying, 'Okay, this is what I am going to do for you, I am going to take your baby for a few hours. You go have mommy time. And leave baby to me.' And that can keep a parent from going over the edge. And becoming abusive. And it also gives the child a chance to interact with someone other than the mother.

I don't know, but I think that if someone would have been there for my mom, to step in when her mother was going through the problems, then maybe my life would have been different from my mom's. And I want to do that. I don't want to see children abused, because you know what they are going through and you know one way to help stop it.

Listening to their stories, I realized that by centering our education on external data, we may be sacrificing some of the most critical aspects of learning; we are denying our students the benefits of their personal experiences. For many of these students, the very experiences that motivate them to become teachers are discredited in our textbooks. The realities that they experienced and survived – substandard housing, terrors of abuse, humiliation of second hand clothes, separation from family members, recovery from destructive drug abuse - are ensconced in terminology that heaps shame on the lives they lived. The real stories of their lives and the heroic nature of their journey to our classrooms will never be seen or understood in our textbooks or class lectures. Nor will they hear about the personal risks that are part of furthering their education.

When working with oppressed people from any background, we typically ask them to break away from their former identities in profound and fundamental ways. We are asking them to become bicultural in ways that can put them at risk and make them outsiders to their own world. They are becoming part of a very different type of culture that is often at odds with their own. This includes new gender roles, priorities, cultural practices, and a new use of language. It means that they must individualize and re-

evaluate their beliefs and perceptions. Yet, we offer little in terms of new connections in our classrooms or the college environment.

Maslow (1986) recognized that new learning always requires the risk of letting go of the safety of previous answers. He found the need for acceptance and safety exists for all human beings when faced with this risk. He believes two sets of forces are operating within everyone. One set clings to safety out of fear and the other set impels them forward toward growth “Assured safety permits higher needs and impulses to emerge and to grow towards mastery”(p. 49). The need for safety and connection is particularly critical for our nontraditional students.

Listening to the women in class began a dramatic change in my own life as an instructor. I altered my teaching of every topic to include personal stories. A new level of learning, sharing, and listening to one another led to further questions in my mind. I realized that authentic learning needed an approach to teaching that honored the value of adversity as well as supportive life experiences. An atmosphere of caring and respect among class members and across cultures, race and ethnicity emerged and grew. Their stories were teaching all of us about the complexities of life as a racial minority living in poverty, as an immigrant, as a first-generation college student. It was also teaching us that this class was a place where people cared, the truth was honored, and our learning was intimately connected to real life. Rosa describes her experience of sharing and listening to stories:

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.

We need to ask ourselves what we are teaching. Too many practices are based on many unexamined assumptions. These assumptions reinforce a form of “disconnected” living, encouraging us to distance ourselves from the subject matter and each other (Palmer, 1998). The results are frightening. Rather than learning to share ourselves authentically, become good listeners, to value differences, and to see the important ways we are all alike within our differences – we are teaching silence, shame, and isolation.

These traditional practices are creating an environment in which people will remain strangers to each other while sitting in the same room for many months. We are strengthening stereotypes and leaving people feeling fearful of the society they live in. We are leaving in silence the very people who can provide us with new and much needed understanding. We should always be expecting that a new knowledge will arise, transcending another, enabling us to move beyond the current limitations of conditioned knowledge that we have produced (Freire, 1998).

Effective Teaching Practices

Most middle-class students have learned to succeed with standard practices. Yet, these have not been found to make the kind of difference needed in who they are as people. “Connected learning” is a form of learning that connects personal and educational experiences. It is this level of learning that has the capacity to fully engage and transform student’s lives. This section will present several practices that proved

highly effective in helping nontraditional students to adapt to an otherwise alienating program: connected learning, orientation, and an introductory course.

Psychologists, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986) found a discrepancy between the kind of thinking required in school and the kind required in dealing with people. For women, the most powerful learning experiences were courses that helped them translate their ideas from the secrecy of private experience into a shared public language. Mothers usually named child rearing as the most powerful learning experience in their lives. The type of knowledge used in child rearing is typical of the kind of knowledge women value and schools do not. It is tuned into the concrete and particular, since mothering requires constant adaptive responses to changing situations.

It was stories that brought them back to a kind of knowing that had been "silenced by the institutions" they grew up with. Traditional courses begin with teacher's knowledge, rather than student's knowledge. Even though most women are drawn to knowledge that emerges from firsthand observation and experience, educational institutions emphasize abstract learning. One indicator of this lack of personal connection is that most women name out-of-school experiences as their most powerful learning experiences (Belenky et al., 1986).

Although this study focused on women's experience, it illuminates a basic need for all nontraditional students to connect in a meaningful way to the learning process. This level of connection is also important for traditional students who plan to enter professions of human service. Paulo Freire (1997) argued that authentic reflection focuses on real people as they experience the world. In this way, people develop their own power to

perceive themselves in the world and make ongoing choices for their lives. They come to see the world and their own lives as in a process of transformation.

Connected learning allows students to develop the inner resources needed for effective work with children. Teaching is a complex, unpredictable task that requires continual on-the-spot decision-making: Competent teachers need to be autonomous thinkers, acknowledging the truth of each person's stories, acknowledging that these stories can't be denied. Connected learning can be their starting point for reflection, dialogue, and personal growth. Storytelling is a process that helps teachers develop their own voices and gain the skill and confidence in divergent thinking, which is necessary to educate children for a changing society (Jones, 1994).

My study also confirmed that interpersonal skills such as listening, patience and understanding cannot be taught as abstract ideas. Our classrooms need to be places where students can experience their living presence. Noddings (1991) writes of her concern that the capacity to respectfully communicate with one another regardless of differences is seriously underdeveloped in American education. As an instructor, this credo required that I place new value on relationships, dialogue, responsiveness, and flexibility. I found that creating a classroom that modeled this type of caring relationship would mean a radical shift in my priorities and my self-perceived role as an instructor. Yet, with these changes came the gift of invaluable and missing stories from our nontraditional students.

Building Bridges for a New Journey

Many nontraditional students face a crisis of personal identity when they enter our programs. Whether these students experience differences due to socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity or immigration, they have started a new journey that requires letting go of many aspects of their former lives. Successful adaptation will largely depend upon their ability to develop “transcultural identities,” which can preserve affective ties to their home culture while enabling them to acquire the skills needed in our mainstream culture of higher education (Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

In such times, they need a supportive foundation that allows them to build upon their experiences as they risk trusting a new future. Rosemary spoke of the importance of encouragement:

I think it is very valuable for a person to know that they are not out there by themselves. And let them know that they can make it. There is still hope today. That they can build their lives up.

And I am a firm believer that everybody needs to have words of encouragement. People need that. You know, people fall. People get up. People fall again. And it is okay. But you know, in all of these falls, there is something that you must have learned.

With nothing from their past lives to build upon, students’ personal identity becomes only a source of silent shame. In this context, the question that begs for an answer is, what can bridge the gap for these students? How can we help them to stand tall as they face this new learning environment that initially leaves them feeling unprepared and out of place? Kaufman (1980) found that the key to healing a sense of shame comes through

caring and authentic communication in which one's unique identity is respected and valued.

One further finding was that an orientation program can create confidence, provide security, impart practical information, and establish dialogue among new students, faculty, counselors, and experienced students. Orientation programs can give much needed guidance. A glimpse into the personal lives of the sixteen women I interviewed during a four-month period revealed much that could not be seen in our classrooms: one woman was hospitalized with pneumonia; another was very ill with diabetes; one woman's cousin was murdered; another woman was recovering from her son's recent murder; one woman postponed an interview because of problems with a social worker; and one woman's husband died. Without personal and economic support systems, they were going it alone. At a time when they most needed human support, they remained isolated.

A support system to connect with others who have been through similar experiences would be more than just a nice endeavor. Sharnette poignantly described how this could be a lifeline for these women:

It will give them a sense of hope. It shows them that other women have done it. And understanding goes a long way when you've been through stuff like that. And I believe it will give them pride. It will give them their life back. Sharing experiences can give you that. It gives you a reason to live. It builds up your self-esteem, your self-discipline; it shows you that there is a way out of hell.

Orientations can begin a system of support that breaks the isolation of leaving one world behind and becoming an outsider in the new world. Sharing breaks through the

isolation. An acknowledgment of the vision that brought them to this program gives birth to new hope. An introductory class can offer the needed direction. It can bring that “sense of hope” Sharnette remembered so well. It can establish the needed bridge for a fragile population to pursue postsecondary education.

The “introductory class” can be designed to create a community of students sharing a common purpose. It can be a model for the kind of supportive environments these same students will create for the children in their future classrooms. As a noncredit class, the program frees the students from risks associated with grades and failure. The pace becomes relaxed, but the goals remain clear. This class can be the dress rehearsal for the full-credit college program that they aspired to. A departmental certificate of completion for the class adds to its educational validity.

The class introduces basic concepts of education and human development through observational, and self-reflective assignments. Bridging the gap between personal and educational lives through the writing and sharing of these assignments, the students experience a new validity to their values and opinions. They feel confidence, even a certain sense of authority. They speak; they listen; they are listened to. Jones (1993) has argued that everyone entering our field brings relevant experiences with children, starting with their own childhoods. Human development offers many opportunities for telling personal stories. Whether we are examining self-esteem, temperament, divorce, immigration, learning, communication, race or religion, students can contribute stories that capture their living experience. Sharing and reflecting upon these experiences in the classroom help to form a foundation for combining teaching theory and practice.

The introductory class concept allows students to go beyond developing individual competencies and enables them to explore their pasts through multicultural lenses. Each self-reflective and observational experience enhances the women's sense of competence and builds new bonds among them. Without personal sharing, the teacher runs the risk of making the textbook the single tool. Lisa Delpit (1995) wrote of her concern that our failure to allow student stories will produce only a mindless imitation of other people's beliefs rather than a reflection on teaching as an interactive process.

Along with my deepening commitment to teaching practices that proved effective with my nontraditional students, I was faced with difficult choices as an instructor. I had been educated to carry out the very system that needed changing. I felt thrown into uncertainty and risk as I experimented with ways to build a meaningful curriculum for my students. I no longer had the comfort of knowing all the answers, having a planned routine, and a nonemotional environment.

I realized that I was entering my own journey of bicultural disorientation. In addition to journal writing, I began reading books and articles by instructors exploring new approaches to teaching. Their writings often began appearing in my journal as I reflected upon how I could use new ideas to enhance my teaching. Benard (1993) found that there is virtual disregard for the fact that teachers need a nurturing climate and support system. In her research on fostering resilience in students, she found that it is ultimately an "inside-out" process that depends on educators taking care of themselves.

As educators, we must develop the traits we want to bring to our students. I wanted my students to explore and understand their personal experiences in order to become effective teachers of children. The same principles applied to me. I couldn't work clearly

with these experiences and emotions in the classroom without doing my own inner work. As Jersild (1955) wrote, “teacher’s understanding of others can be only as deep as the wisdom she possesses when she looks inward upon herself. The more genuinely she looks inward, seeks to face her own problems the more able she is to realize her kinship with others” (p. 83).

Just as our classrooms can become safe places for inner reflection and growth within our common purpose of caring for children, colleges can begin to develop their own supportive forums for instructors. It was bell hooks (1994) who wrote that in order to grow as instructors, we have to learn how to appreciate difficulty in our own stages of intellectual development. These were all reminders that, like our students, I was writing my own new story as an educator.

Conclusion

The stories of our students are of course part of a bigger story taking place in the world. They constitute a call to be heard, understood and appreciated for their own unique life experiences. We must find ways to honor the experience and needs of our increasing numbers of people living marginal lives due to poverty and immigration. In the United States, there are over 13 million children living in poverty (Children’s Defense Fund, 2000), and a total foreign-born population almost 30 million. Worldwide there are more than 130 million migrants (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). These are populations that often remain hidden from mainstream society, yet will play a key role in the future of our planet. The volatility of our world is testimony to these voices that have been silenced.

Through the stories of women in poverty, I was able to glimpse into the multidimensional dynamics of our changing world. Outwardly, the women appeared to be struggling students often lacking in academic and social skills of the college culture. Yet, in this transformative experience for me, these students told heroic stories filled with pain and tragedy, and revealed a remarkable resilience and important understanding of worlds hidden from our awareness. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, we need to understand the myriad ways this is affecting children and families. This study showed that our educational institutions cannot be responsive and effective to the changing needs of students without honoring their life experiences.

Many warning signs have been appearing, telling us that we must learn to find a way of becoming inclusive of the stranger. Maria Montessori (1949), who gave talks in the 1930's warning of a new world demanding a new human being, argued that we must begin this change with children. This concept needs to guide our work educating those college students who want to become their teachers, and who understand what these difficult conditions can mean to children and their families. Intricate global connections today are requiring that we understand, appreciate, and educate ourselves about many realities of living. We cannot afford to silence and judge our nontraditional students. Nor can we fail to hear, see, and understand the issues facing people growing up and living in communities of poverty. This study reveals that if inclusivity is to have any currency in a transnational education context, it must mean more than admitting the physical bodies of nontraditional students. It must incorporate their worldviews and stories.

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