Adult Education Research Conference

2019 Conference Proceedings (Buffalo, New York)

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Recommended Citation

Kaplan-Bucciarelli, Janet (2019). ""Can You Just Move the Curtain?": Stories of Women from the Educational Underclass at the College Door," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2019/papers/8

"Can You Just Move the Curtain?": Stories of Women from the Educational Underclass at the College Door

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Abstract: *This study explores prospective students' lives and beliefs about college, and proposes principles and practices that respond holistically to learners' strengths and vulnerabilities rather than emphasizing academic deficiencies.*

Introduction

There has been a massive expansion in higher education (HE) participation since World War II (Trow, 2007). Where HE was once seen as a *privilege* offered to children of the elite, in the 1960s and 1970s, it came to be seen as an individual *right*. Now a college credential has become an essential *need* for almost anyone aiming for a better or better-paying job, housing security, and the many other benefits associated with a stable, middle class lifestyle. As HE has evolved from an *elite* to a *universal* system of education (Lumina Foundation, 2017; Trow, 2007), college students now arrive with extremely diverse experiences, abilities, and learning differences. Adults make up almost 60% of the total student body at community colleges (Soares, 2013), and increasing numbers come from poor or working-class communities, are first-generation college students, or non-native English speakers. Some were formerly incarcerated or are transitioning from the military. Many work, have been out of high school for many years, are single parents, and have alternative high school credentials. While these *post-traditional students* (Soares, 2013) arrive with great hope, learning capacities, and experiential knowledge, many also bring with them a history of trauma and a lack of academic skills.

The population of adults in this study is referred to as *thresholders* — a term borrowed from Goto and Martin (2009) to describe marginalized adults with many life challenges who are "on the threshold of starting a new life through education" (p. 10). Thresholders are regularly described as unskilled, uneducated, or underprepared and, because they most often leave college before completing a credential, they are frequently seen as a problem for HE and for the economy. Many community colleges and community organizations have designed transition or bridge programs to boost academic skills and college knowledge, but their results are mixed (see C. Smith & Gluck, 2016.) This leads me to believe that either we are not responding adequately to the information we have about thresholders or we have "incomplete knowledge or flawed understanding" (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2016, p. 59). Either way, unless more effective educational responses are designed and implemented, tens of millions of adults will continue to be "economically and educationally stranded" (Brown as cited in Asimov, 2018), and confined to the "educational underclass" (Rose, 1989, p. xi).

Purpose and Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative study was to contribute to a more holistic understanding of thresholders, and to offer suggestions to help practitioners better prepare for and respond to this motivated cohort of adult learners. The three overarching research questions were: Who are pre-college learners as *whole* people? How do these learners think about school, learning, college,

and their own knowledge and capabilities? And how can adult and higher education institutions better support and teach adults at the threshold of community college?

The participants were ten women (ages 29-56) in three pre-college transition classes associated with a community college and community education center in a small city in the Northeast US. Two described themselves as Hispanic/Puerto Rican, one as African-American, one as Latina/White/Brazilian, two as Ghanaian, and four as White. For five of the ten women, English was not their first language. Data consist of nineteen semi-structured, narrative interviews of one to two hours in length, biographical timelines, and demographic surveys. The first interview focused on timelines, and the second (several weeks later) explored the women's interests, experiential knowledge, and aspirations. In the early part of data analysis, I listened to the interviews from the participant's perspective without assigning meaning (Boyatzis, 1998). Later, I went back again (and again), noting additional subcategories, and adding interpretative themes. My experience as an adult student and adult educator, and someone with knowledge of both the adult basic education and HE worlds, offered me a unique position as a researcher. Rather than centering college, the interview questions recognized and validated the spaces *outside of academic settings* where the women's lives and learning had primarily taken place, and I took great care to approach participants as *context experts* (Attygalle, 2017).

Findings

The goal of this study was to expose and examine the personal, academic, and work experiences of a group of thresholders, and learn more about how they thought about college and themselves, as learners and students. The findings included here are a selection from the larger 2018 study of the same title. They are organized under the following categories: *influential life experiences; past experiences as students; future aspirations; thinkers and learners; and thoughts about college and self.*

Influential life experiences While there was great variety in the participants' backgrounds and routes they had taken to the transition class, there were similarities, as well. I was struck by the amount of trauma and adversity in these women's lives: sexual abuse, violence at home, the death of supportive loved ones, parents divorcing, struggling single mothers, neglect, serious injury, being bullied or beaten at school, depression, poverty, being removed from home, losing one's home and pets in a fire, changing schools every year. In describing their adult lives, most of the stories included numerous disappointments and struggles such as failed romantic relationships, immigration-related hardships, and work lay-offs. Many described caretaking responsibilities, which had taken precedence over their own educational desires. In addition to trauma and adversity, the participants also spoke of their resilience and progress made towards overcoming challenges. Discussing their lives and the positive role college could play proved to be an emotional experience for many, for while hope was palpable, all carried with them a great deal of wounding and uncertainty as a result of the lives they had lived.

Past Experiences as Students I wondered what role school had played in the participants' lives and how past experiences might affect how they would approach classroom learning later in life. Although most participants described positive beginnings, their overall memories were of school as a place they went because it was required, not a place of authentic learning and growth. Seven of the ten participants dropped out of high school before graduating and two who graduated believed their educations had been deficient. There was a palpable *intertwining of family and school* factors. Describing her decision to leave high school, Reese (age 36) wiped away tears as she said, "I'm a really smart person and it wasn't that I couldn't do

the work or didn't want to. But I got to this place where I didn't care about it. Like, the system wasn't caring about me and I didn't care about it." The majority of participants attributed their lack of educational attainment, in part, to a lack of adult support and guidance. Interestingly, for most of the participants, leaving school was not so much a result of what had happened *in* school, but what had occurred *outside* of school.

Despite the chaos and disruptions of their K-12 years, most of the women enrolled in professional development or other post-secondary courses as adults, and often reported having positive experiences. Yumzaa (age 40), who had spent her childhood in rural Ghana in a school system defined by lack (of furniture, teachers, curricula, and safety), said she was thrilled to be an adult student in the US. About her adult education classes, she explained, "Now I'm exposed to a teacher I can meet face to face, express my concern, then she will help me…That's something I've never seen before in my life!" Still, *doubt* was a common theme with several of the women doubting the integrity of the educational institutions they had attended, the value of the credentials they had achieved, or the knowledge they had (supposedly) acquired or demonstrated. Many of the participants described insecure attachments to themselves as students and to school.

Future Aspirations In terms of their lives five years in the future, the women yearned for *relief* from the stress and uncertainties of their daily lives. In addition, they wanted increased *self-respect*, and *meaningful work.* When Wanashi (age 56), whose life had included numerous moves, educational starts and stops, domestic violence, mental and physical health challenges, and substance abuse, was asked how she hoped to feel in five years, she laughed almost in disbelief, and replied, "Hopefully at peace…Hopefully at peace." Having *self-respect* (listening to themselves and valuing their own needs) was something many of the women mentioned as an important priority going forward. Debra (age 51) said she now believed she had a learning disability that had gotten in her way all along, but when she was in high school, she just assumed she was not smart. She regretted underestimating her abilities, and that was something she wanted to change going forward. Anita (age 29, from Brazil) also was determined to respect herself more going forward. To be with her now ex-boyfriend, she had abandoned flight school and her plans to study English in Canada. In the future, she would do things differently, she said: "Don't go behind *him*. Don't be with him and forget what *you* want to do."

Many of the participants imagined having more *meaningful work* in five years, and several mentioned helping other people. Marie (age 30) had great passion for food and cooking, and she hoped to own a restaurant and be a chef. When she spoke about the culinary arts certificate she was aiming for, several times she mentioned her desire to "help and to teach." She wanted to show street kids (like she used to be) that "There's so much beauty in the world…you can find happiness in the most minimal thing at home—[like cooking.]"

Taken together, these aspirations tell the collective story of adults in a transitional place in life, simultaneously propelled by the past and drawn by the future…with college floating somewhere in between. The participants did not envision the educational credential as an end-goal; rather, they described it as a central strategy they planned to use to stablize and expand their lives. Seen this way, the epidemic of low completion takes on a different hue. Educational attainment is not just about success in school or socio-economic mobility; in the participants' minds, it was integral to their future experience of basic well-being.

Thinkers and Learners Post-traditional students are normally studied within the context of HE and are described as academically unprepared, low-achieving, and lacking in confidence (Herideen, 1998; Ross-Gordon, 2003). Too often, adult learners are defined by what

they lack rather than by who they are, what interests them, what they can do, what they have learned, and what they already know. It is important, however, to look at thresholders *outside* of academic settings because that is where they have spent most of their lives and that is where they know themselves best. As Marie (age 30) put it, "Most of my learning, I did it outside of school, you know? I wasn't able to get my education, but life, itself, taught me a lot."

I asked each woman to describe her interests (what she liked to explore, discuss, or do on her own time), and give an example of something she had learned *outside* of an academic setting. Their stories coalesced around four themes, which communicated a great deal about them as thinkers and learners. They spoke of *expansive conversations, creative interests*, *work-related learning*, and *learning for personal development.* It was remarkable the way they smiled and sat up straighter as they spoke about gaining exposure to new ideas and people different from themselves, or using their minds when they engaged their hands. In this part of the interviews, joy entered the conversations.

Reese, who was very uncertain about moving on to college, spoke of being fascinated by conversations with her girlfriend who worked with developmentally disabled kids and adults. She also described how she researched and built a "vivarium" to house the adorable White's Tree Frogs she saw posted on Craigslist one day. Kyra, who had moved from the Midwest to the Northeast US told me about how much she learned about politics and people by listening to National Public Radio (NPR). The participants mentioned engagement with a wide range of topics and disciplines, including earth and animal science, law, medicine, history, politics, business, food science, crafts, and design, among many others. When describing their learning and knowledge gained outside of school, most spoke with a sense of self-efficacy and competence. These findings suggest that the academic realm in which most researchers come to know thresholders is the realm in which thresholders are least experienced and least competent.

Thoughts about College and Self Themes that emerged related to participants' thoughts about college included *enthusiasm, stress, fear of failure,* and *prepared and ready.* Several participants spoke enthusiastically about college, and looked forward to the "opportunity." All of the women, however, associated becoming a student with an increase in stress and further disruption to their already busy and difficult lives. They were concerned about managing their lives and relationships once college was added, and some worried about not feeling comfortable on campus beyond the safety of the transition classroom. When asked to imagine a typical day in college, they used the words "overwhelming," "nerve-wracking," and "all-encompassing." All also expressed a great *fear of failure*. One woman told no friends or family that she was in the transition class because, "I don't want to feel stupid [later] because I didn't make it through."

Because much literature focuses on learner deficits, I was surprised that half of the sample described themselves as *prepared and ready* for college. The participants' academic self-concept seemed determined more by their emotional state or assumptions about "good" college students than by an informed understanding of college readiness standards. Interestingly, two extremely articulate, self-reflective participants demonstrated critical and analytical thinking in the interviews, but did not perceive themselves as ready for college, while other participants who needed continual prodding to go deeper in their reflections believed themselves to be both prepared and ready.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Thresholders are developing adults who envision college as a strategy to improve their lives, heal from past wounds, help other people, and chart better futures. Their step toward

college is an expression of great hope. Because they arrive with a history of trauma and educational disruptions, however, that hope is often accompanied by fear. Institutions must acknowledge that thresholders arrive with one foot on the gas—eager to move forward—and one foot on the brake—wanting to avoid a reopening of old wounds. Being on the verge of college is both an exciting and extremely precarious place to be.

Transition programs often are designed to familiarize thresholders with college processes and develop academic skills. The findings of this study led me to question these motives. Rather than designing curricula around academic skill or information deficits, I suggest transition programs orient themselves around *three essential principles of a thresholder-responsive approach to college transition,* and build academic skills from there. These principles are that 1) thresholders arrive at the college door as resilient individuals with significant strengths and vulnerabilities; 2) because they are academic newcomers, their interactions with the college need to be both affirming and orienting, and 3) the transition to college is a relational endeavor that must be supported by meaningful interactions between thresholders and academic insiders.

Recommendations that flow from these principles focus as much on non-cognitive development as on academic skill-building. They call for institutions to become trauma-sensitive (TS), minimize stress for students, foster authentic connections between thresholders and academic insiders, and engage thresholders as capable learners in the academic setting. In a TS organization, everyone participates in trainings to understand how students' experiences of trauma and adversity impact their lives and ability to seek information, take risks, problem-solve, advocate for themselves, and learn. As one expert told me, TS organizations create "services that are more likely to be healing than harming" (Steve Brown, personal communication, January 19, 2018). Some colleges provide wrap-around support that respond to students' non-academic needs. Amarillo College opened a one-stop advocacy and campus resource center with a food pantry, mentoring program, legal clinic, counseling service, and scholarships for adult students (Amarillo College, n.d.). Such initiatives communicate that the college understands its students' lives and is a true partner in students' overall success.

This study found participants were making decisions about enrolling in college without a thorough understanding of what college actually entailed. One very competent learner described the registration process as "completely intimidating." She wished the college staff would just "move the curtain," so she could "see" what college was really about. Thresholders like her need opportunities to learn through authentic relationships with successful students like them. With her peer mentor, a thresholder could glimpse her own possible future. And because thresholders have much more experience as *learners* outside of school, transition teachers should help them discover themselves as capable *students* in the academic setting. If a learner does not see how building a vivarium or making life and death decisions about the health of a client demonstrates critical and creative thinking, a teacher can help make those connections and help the student discover herself as a competent *student*.

Thresholders come to college wanting much more than a credential; they "want their learning to make them more powerful in the world beyond the academy" (Herman and Mandell, 2004, p. 1). If we fail to understand what moves them and frightens them, what encourages participation and what deters it, we lose a rich opportunity. By acknowledging the realities of learners' daily lives and adjusting institutional practices, we can improve transition initiatives and address educational justice in a society increasingly divided into the "college haves and have-nots" (Carnevale Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016).

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