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The Influence of Embodied Cultural Capital on the Retention and Matriculation Adults Entering College

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Keywords: embodied cultural capital, cultural capital, non-traditional students

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to highlight the challenges of non-traditional students entering college and to offer suggestions on research that addresses these challenges. Embodied cultural capital is the core of who we are and how we define ourselves. It is through this capital that an individual identifies their authentic self. Embodied cultural capital is derived from one’s life-long investment in education from all sources including community, family and schooling.

Introduction

Embodied cultural capital is the process and construct that determines and strongly influences our personal choices, as it is what we observe, mock, value and ‘embody’. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) introduced Embodied Cultural Capital as a construct that influences the success of students. Embodied capital is argued to be the most significant influence; however unlike other forms of capital (social, economic, etc.) obtaining embodied capital is largely out of the individuals’ control as it is developed from birth. Bourdieu (1986) defined embodied capital as consisting of both the consciously acquired and the passively inherited attributes of one’s self usually from the family through socialization of culture and traditions. Embodied cultural capital is not transferrable as an inheritance; it is acquired over time as it influences character and way of thinking, which in turn becomes more attentive to or primed to receive similar influences. The embodied state is what the individual [is] as identified by the self. Embodied capital can be increased by investing time into self-improvement in the form of learning. However, the individual must believe that the action or improvement is natural and right in order for it to become embodied (Bourdieu, 1991). “It is critical to fully comprehend the fact that the very attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions that become embodied cannot be transmitted instantaneously; they come with time, engagement, practice and want” (Hampton-Garland, 2009).

Background

Adult college students who begin college after the age of twenty-five face challenges beyond that of succeeding in the classroom. Unlike traditional students their responsibilities are great often including home, work and children. These responsibilities inherently come with challenges that overwhelm most, but to add to it the desire to obtain an education is laudable and yet often overwhelming. Embodied cultural capital becomes priceless once completed, but the journey is less than a smooth ride, but more like the potholes found on a city street after a winter of ice and snow followed by the harsh salt that quickly melts the menacing weather while leaving a destructive path. The review of this qualitative study offered insight into the thoughts, mindsets and actions of six diverse students and their schooling experiences. This qualitative study analyzed an interview protocol that included what I perceived as the three primary areas of life where embodied cultural capital would most likely be displayed including within the community, family and schooling environments. Participants were interviewed multiple times using a cross-
section of questions regarding common experiences in each of the areas. Questions such as: What do people who live here believe about education? Religion? Politics? When did you first start thinking about going to college? How did thinking about going to college make you feel? Each of these and other questions helps ensure that a meaningful understanding would explain the influence that our early messages and environment have on our future success. This is certainly understood and revealed throughout life, but the perception that the most important requirement for success in schooling was intelligence if not debunked should be an area for long and serious debate and inquiry.

Application to Adult Education

Application to adult education and further conversation based on reviewed literature and insights gained through completing the research project, the ability to engage in focused adult education research requires time, professional identity and skills, sensitivity and respect, and negotiation. Adult educators, politicians, funders and others interested in providing opportunities for adults to successfully complete their educational pursuits have ignored the capital garnered by individuals throughout their lives. One primary question that arises is how can embodied values, beliefs, observations and experiences ingrained in the very fabric of an individual diminish their perseverance and how can educators’ aware of learning styles, methods and adult development teach using a model of instruction that also diminishes negative beliefs and empower adult learners? Considering the multiple layers of challenges faced by adult learners and their pursuit of opportunity through the acquisition of education requires that research must be conducted on how to help learners and educators recognize the oftentimes unknown barriers to education such as those presented when embodied cultural capital is studied. Additionally, embarking on interdisciplinary research (psychology, sociology and education) that poses such questions as “how are adult educators and those working in higher education working through the challenges of embodied cultural capital and preparing students and faculty successfully complete their educational pursuits”, must be studied. Adult education has become traditional education and just as we continue to revisit our understanding and approaches to compulsory education and traditional higher education it is imperative that our largest body of learners become a primary focus in research arenas.

References