Intergenerational Trauma and Student Success: Equity-Based Approaches that Matter^{TM}

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Abstract: Intergenerational trauma (IT) (Lev-Weisel, 2007) negatively affects students, intensifying feelings of incompatibility/inability to succeed. Stereotype threat (Steele, 2010), invalidation (Rendón, 2009), microaggressions (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), and effects of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (DeGruy, 2005) leave students besieged by messages of inadequacy. Equity-based approaches grounded in critical theory illuminate how IT decreases when student experiences are valued rather than abrogated. Understanding effects of IT on first generation/underrepresented students (FG/US) can generate pedagogies, policies, and practices. Invisible, damaging effects of attending colleges built on plantations, sacred grounds of indigenous peoples, or land that was once Mexico must be esteemed through interventions/interpretations of inclusive excellence. Equity-based strategies and collectivist principles including storytelling validate traumas students face through intergenerational and historical transmission, increasing self-efficacy and academic performance (Connolly, 2011; Durham & Webb, 2014; Goodman, 2013). Promoting personal narratives as positive messages supports success through highlighting overlooked abilities to persevere through the unthinkable.

keywords: intergenerational trauma, first generation, underrepresented, counternarratives, student success

Introduction and Background

This paper examines the narratives of 59 students who are a part of the High Potential program at Saint Mary's College of California. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate how students who learn to express their stories with support from Master of Fine Arts (MFA) graduate students can begin to eradicate internalized intergenerational trauma and improve their writing skills while gaining self-efficacy and improving academic outcomes.

For decades, higher education researchers have sought to identify factors leading to student attrition, student persistence, and student success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Rosenbaum, Person, & Deil-Amen, 2006; Vargas, 2004). Chickering (1969) and then Chickering and Reisser (1993) explained their concepts of student identity development through seven vectors students traverse as they navigate their college experience. Astin (1997) sought to identify what matters in college, finding that engagement within and outside of the classroom was crucial to a student's persistence. Astin also postulated that what students put into an experience, in other words, how they manifest their interactions psychosocially and academically in the context of their environments will have "outputs," e.g. academic and psychosocial success. Tinto (1993) furthered the concept of the need for student integration into the campus community, while Kuh's (2008) work to identify high impact practices resulted in several benchmarks to be incorporated into the student experience to move students from dependence to independence and finally to interdependence (Frederick, Sasso, & Barratt, 2015; Sosa & Pascua Dea, 2017).

Authors have also incorporated and expanded the works of the foundational theorists to include New Majority (NM) students, or first generation, low income, and other underserved students. In their

recent work, Jones and Stewart (2016) highlighted the "waves" of discourse and discovery in student development theory, and how the *third wave* incorporates post-structural theories that speak more definitively to the experiences of first generation, low income, and other marginalized populations. Capturing the essence of NM student development through a lens that includes the impact of institutional racism, systems of oppression, and how persons in positions of power diminish the effects of historical trauma as necessary to exclude for personal growth, brings into focus the adverse effects of that negation. Contextualizing student development within this third wave aligns theory and practice with the largest and fastest growing populations entering college, thus placing educators in a position to increase retention, performance, and graduation of NM students by actually understanding more about their lived experiences (Jones & Stewart, 2016; Palmer & Maramba, 2011).

In work that spanned from 1996 until the 2010 AAC&U report cited here, Dey, Ott, Antonaros, Barnhardt, and Holsapple (2010) exhorted the significance of campus ecology for diverse students and the institutional responsibility to value diversity as vital to student achievement. Quaye and Harper (2015) presented engagement strategies for diverse populations, delineating central aspects of working with populations on their terms rather than from institutional perspectives that may negatively impact how diverse populations thrive in college. Harper (2010; 2012) and his colleagues created an anti-deficit framework that places the onus on educators to learn how to best obtain narratives and information from NM students to inform student support practices. Each of these foundational and subsequent researchers who have contributed so much to the study of higher education have revealed several key intersections of the student success lifecycle.

Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, and Young (2007) and Engle and Tinto (2008) studied first generation students in particular, finding more evidence of the need to support by implementing collectivist practices. Yet, few researchers have uncovered the connection between trauma and student achievement, nor has intergenerational trauma as a construct and non-cognitive factor entered into the dialogue around what can make or break a student's progress in college. This work strives to begin to make that connection while at the same time highlighting the dangers of doing so, as it is imperative that NM students are considered from a strengths-based rather than deficit based perspective and that pathologization be eradicated and not at all a part of this viewpoint (Sosa & Pascua Dea, 2016).

NM students (AAC&U, 2015) include students who belong or intersect the categories of first generation (Saenz et al,, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008), low income (Kezar, 2011), traditionally underrepresented, underprepared, underserved, and other sectors formerly (and all too often still) referred to as "minority" students. NM students comprise the future of higher education, and the promise of America (Hiss & Franks, 2014); uncovering and understanding the hidden stressors students may face beyond those already presented in the literature can provide additional insight into how to serve them while instigating institutional change (Caruana, 2014). The narrative change begins by using terminology like "NM" rather than deficit-based terms traditionally used. In this way, power to the people activates reality through strength. This approach authenticates the idea that power cannot be granted by anyone to those who already carry it within.

Objectives

The paper investigates how providing writing supports with a specific focus on promoting social connectedness, self-efficacy, and resiliency improves students' academic outcomes and student success (Baxter Magolda, 1998; 2014). Considering that often, NM students internalize intergenerational (IT) or historical trauma (HT), authors hypothesize that by examining student narratives to extract strengths based solutions to IT students can develop an understanding of IT and its potential impact on their success. Personal narratives of resiliency and perseverance validate student capabilities and sense of efficacy through listening to student testimonials/narratives. Authors believe that students who write and

share their own stories, supported by graduate-level student instructors, will strengthen their identities as college students, improve their writing skills, and learn to use their voices to increase self-efficacy.

Early outcome information demonstrates how narrative sharing as a critical pedagogy positively engages first generation, low income, and underrepresented students (NM students) while promoting their positive characteristics. The aspirational goal of this paper includes identifying strategies to extract avenues for instigating institutional change to support NM students while addressing the effects of intergenerational trauma on student success.

Theoretical Framework

Intergenerational/Historical Trauma

Understanding effects of intergenerational trauma on NM students serves to generate pedagogies, policies, and practices positively impacting students. Invisible, often damaging effects of attending colleges built on plantations, sacred grounds of Indigenous peoples, or land once Mexico must be understood through evolving, dynamic interventions and broad interpretations of inclusive excellence. Equity-based strategies and collectivist principles of storytelling validate traumas students face through IT, resulting in increasing self-efficacy and academic performance (Connolly, 2011; Durham & Webb, 2014; Goodman, 2013). Promoting personal narratives as positive messages supports development and success through highlighting resilience and overlooked abilities to persevere through the unthinkable (Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, (2007).). The capacity to implement intergenerationally transmitted strengths allowing generations to survive and thrive should be fostered rather than concealed. Transformational education (hooks, 1994) relies on bold interventions to dissolve cognitive dissonance that occurs when histories are negated, hidden, or in the case of slavery, altogether eliminated (DeGruy, 2005). Baxter Magolda (1998; 2014) promoted the important concept of self-authorship; this paper validates that construct and supports its efficacy.

Sotero (2006) stated there are four principles of intergenerational trauma, and each includes direct experience of the trauma/transmission of the trauma through sustained interactions with those who have experienced the trauma. Principles include: 1) the dominant group intentionally and purposefully perpetuates trauma on another group; 2) multiple calamitous occurrences that continue over extended periods of time; 3) collectively felt experiences of traumatic events that resonate within and around the group; and 4) the enormity of the traumatic event(s) significantly disturb/s the group from its instinctive trajectory and a culture of physiological, societal, and economic inequities endure from generation to generation. Sotero also identified who is susceptible, finding children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and relatives of persons who have experienced significant trauma including Chattel Slavery (DeGruy, 2005), The Holocaust (Abrams, 1999; Lev-Wiesel, 2007) rape, incest, human trafficking, child abuse and other ominously distressing events like the genocide of First Americans (Evans-Campbell, 2008) can experience intergenerational manifestations of those traumas.

Durham and Webb (2014) found that while not all persons internalize historical trauma, varying degrees of expression can occur regardless of the level of resilience or coping capacity of the individual. Some persons experience unresolved and misunderstood panic, fear, depression, anxiety, anger, pain, lack of motivation, imposter syndrome, sense of powerlessness, hopelessness, survivor guilt, deep sadness; these emotions are often compounded by negative and damaging behaviors. Often, these symptoms are hidden by failure to disclose them through alcohol and other drug abuse and masking of consistent undisclosed unease. Treating intergenerational trauma occurs through psychological interventions including narrative therapies. Goodman (2013) found that encouraging narratives from persons experiencing historical trauma helps in contextualizing the experience, and creating genograms can place familial patterns in focus while promoting the strengths and resilience of the family in surviving those traumas. Connolly (2011) also extolled the virtue of promoting narrative discourse among trauma and intergenerational trauma survivors; it follows that creating space for persons to express themselves

without fear of reprisal or ridicule can increase self-efficacy and confidence in the familial characteristics that guaranteed that survival. This paper presents how narratives of hope can positively impact student success when their work is constructed in tandem with graduate students who help them to shape their stories and feel free to tell them.

Narratives and Interventions of Healing and Hope

Higher education literature has long presented the critical case of academic achievement gaps and how they should be remedied (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). Regardless of the reality that so-called "achievement gaps" are largely the result of oppressive structures of institutionalized racism and the intentional creation of an educational system preventing non-dominant groups from access to education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2011), that chasm in student success is present. Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014) identified an intervention that highlights student achievement at the core of their being—their family and cultural experiences—to elevate those experiences as keys to academic achievement rather than fissures that can widen into an abyss of psychosocial distress and academic catastrophe. Featuring this important domain often bypassed as too difficult to address, or, more accurately, too difficult to measure has created an opportunity for faculty and administrators to examine non-cognitive factors in an academic exercise. Stephens et al. (2014) studied the impact of non-cognitive factors such as social class, engagement, and mental health on student persistence to graduation and motivation to achieve. They also incorporated the tenets of multicultural counseling theory (Sue & Sue, 2016), self-affirmation approaches (see cognitive behavioral therapies [Hyland, Maguire, Shevlin, & Boduszek, 2014] and rational emotive behavioral therapies [Ellis, 1994]), stereotype threat theory (Steele, 2010) and ideas about academic motivation, particularly as related to social class, to identify ways to bridge the achievement gap that exists between NM students and non-NM students. The Narrative Project studied here also examines these factors as central to identifying the cognitive dissonance students face when their experiences are devalued (DeGruy, 2005).

The Narrative Project (NP) takes place yearly as a signature event of the High Potential (HP) Program. HP is a comprehensive support program for first generation and/or low income students. The Narrative Project coordinators recognized that while HP students studied the narratives of other first generation and low-income college experiences (Davis, 2010), nowhere were they asked to write their own. Recognizing the transformative power in narrative writing, faculty from the MFA department, the School of Education and HP staff designed a course that instructed, mentored, and supported students as they wrote their own narratives. Multiple sections of the course were offered. Each section was taught by MFA graduate instructors and consisted of four or five undergraduate students, keeping the student to instructor ratio low to allow for personal and constructive writing feedback and mentorship.

Each week, students read published writers' personal narratives and analyzed the techniques of the writers. Then, students emulated the techniques in writing their own narratives: using concrete detail; creating memorable characters; lingering in a scene; focusing on a significant conflict; offering clear and concise summary; and writing in a natural as opposed to stilted voice. Students alternated between discussion and reading their draft narratives aloud. By the end of the course, students had six rough drafts of new essays, one of which was revised by the end of the semester and read at the culminating event, a public reading.

As in the Narrative Project, Stephens et al. (2014) lauded student stories, engaging and educating incoming students about how their life-stories matter and influence their experiences. Outcomes demonstrated an increase in NM students' propensity to connect with college resources and improved grade point averages. The narrative intervention also enriched students' psychosocial outcomes such as mental health and connection to the college. Stephens et al. emphasized that NM students must learn to value their experiences prior to college, as those experiences generate resilience, perseverance, and hope. The authors urged colleges to implement interventions to underscore NM student awareness of the positive characteristics—non-cognitive as well as cognitive—that can positively impact their academic

and psychosocial experiences. In the study presented here, these tenets were introduced and early outcomes are producing similar outcomes. Anecdotally, students who participate in the project have commented on how learning to tell their stories has helped them to build confidence around their families, their peers, and their teachers.

Study Methods and Data Source

A qualitative study, narrative participatory design, is being conducted. Data collection began in spring 2015, when the first course launched. As of May 2018, four semesters of the Narrative Project have been completed. In total, 5 narratives were constructed in 2018, 25 in 2017, 12 in 2016, and 17 in 2015, providing a significant number of narratives to include in the study. In addition, HP and MFA staff conducted informal assessments in spring 2015 during the pilot implementation of the HP Narrative Project. Data analysis is occurring in summer 2018, and an ambitious schedule is planned with the hope that findings can be presented by the spring of 2019. Anecdotal evidence of the program's success has been gleaned from preliminary research, demonstrating positive outcomes and encouraging student feedback.

The authors will investigate and evaluate the effectiveness of the Narrative Project, and refine its aims to better support students' success, operationally defined using variables that are associated with successful persistence and graduation as well as positive academic and psychosocial outcomes: social connectedness, self-efficacy, and resilience. Findings will serve to improve the effectiveness of the program, and student participants are likely to strengthen their identities as college students, expand their sense of well-being, and contribute more to the well-being of the entire campus community.

Narratives will be analyzed by looking for themes, extracting them, and then creating rubrics where common themes will fall and be tied to theoretical constructs described in the literature review, and expected outcomes. The focus will be on examining the development of students' success as expressed through narratives, extracting key variables of social connectedness, self-efficacy and resiliency as students reveal their experiences, and of course, highlighting where students might have spoken to traumas and situations that brought forth their strengths and resiliency. Narrative provides insight into experiences, a way to understand identities, lessen cognitive dissonance, and learn to use voice to express thoughts, feelings, and perspectives (Ochs & Capps, 2001). In addition, narrative provides a way to understand one's experiences and reflect on them in ways that demonstrate growth both in terms of socio-emotional outcomes and identity, demonstrating power and confidence (McCabe & Bliss, 2003). Narratives of personal experience give authors a rich source of data through which to examine patterns of development in outcomes that affect student success. Moreover, the narratives will be used as a way to examine students' confidence in writing, which can then be examined in juxtaposition to their growth and success. Finally, authors can review and present student performance. While it will be impossible to tie student performance directly to the Narrative Project, follow up surveys and interviews can extract whether participation in the project had an impact as described by the participant.

Method

Qualitative research will be conducted by examining final drafts of the narratives. A research team configured of persons who do not interact with the students who have been a part of the HP program, along with the authors of this paper will be reading the narratives. At least two members of the research team will read each of the 59 narratives, and meet regularly to construct a coding method that will inform how the extracted themes will be discussed and presented in the research (Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since qualitative research is designed specifically to provide authors and readers with a glimpse into the experiences and worldviews of study participants, the methodology aligns

with the intent of the narratives in the first place, and the importance of bringing voice to those who have had theirs silenced. Authors will keep notations of their impressions and the themes extracted from each narrative; Charmaz (2006) suggested the process of documenting reactions to themes that have been identified can contribute to separating the authors reactions from the intent of the authors of the narratives.

Preliminary Results and Conclusions

Early outcomes from informal assessments indicate that supporting collectivist approaches to student success such as validation of narratives of NM students increased student self-efficacy and performance in these ways:

- NM students who have opportunities to share their narratives can explore intergenerational trauma and how it has impacted their educational journey;
- NM students will recognize the strength and resilience demonstrated by their ancestors as they explore their histories while writing their own;
- Strengths based and collectivist approaches that recognize student experiences and the impact of IT move institutions/higher education personnel from traditionally promoted deficit-based frameworks;
- Harper's Anti-Deficit Framework (2010; 2012) can include student perspectives of positive reframing as a way to capture their resilience and capacity to move beyond challenges to succeed;
- Validating the realities that institutions of higher education were not designed for NM students and implementing approaches aligned with collectivist methodologies can result in increases in retention, performance, and graduation of NM students.

Study Significance

As stated by the executive board of the Association of the Study of Higher Education (2017), "In higher education research, power determines whose epistemologies are valued, which methods are legitimized and rewarded, and what counts as evidence." Authors in this study pursued a counternarrative including "'participants' expertise on their experiential realities", validating their "'historical origins of powerlessness,'" and disrupting "'power asymmetries'" to provide a foundation for institutions to move from exclusion to inclusion. The paper:

- Influences the landscape of higher education by recognizing the chasm that exists between traditional deficit based approaches to student success and strengths-based approaches.
- Considers IT as a circumstance to be acknowledged rather than as a characteristic of NM students.
- Separates IT from pathologization of NM students and instead consider it a way to build on innate strengths also passed through the generations.

Conclusion

Taking the time to understand more about how students process life experiences in the context of intergenerational and/or historical trauma can aid in creating institutional policies and interventions that are relevant to NM students. Validating the life experiences of NM students and involving them in learning to share their stories emboldens them, and provides an opportunity to continue the exploration through participation in student activities that align with those life experiences. Research in this area is necessary and long overdue.

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