# The Distribution of Collegiate Cultural Wealth to Black and Hispanic Students

## By Toni Foster-Irizarry, Ed.D., and Joan Birringer-Haig, Ed.D.

## Abstract

The current phenomenological study explored the emotion-based perceptions of eight Black and Hispanic students' experiences in developmental education classes at two urban community colleges. The researcher utilized a theoretical framework comprised of Critical Race Theory (CRT) with a focus on emotions and Yosso's (2005) model of cultural wealth. The prevalent themes in the study demonstrated the positive impacts of faculty members (1) individualizing interactions with students, (2) motivating students through encouragement and praise, and (3) using emotional awareness. The study also highlighted the negative effects of deficit of thinking.

## Introduction

Participating in a college classroom is an inherently sociocultural and emotional experience between students and professors. Students' emotions can be a window into their cultural wealth, past experiences, and current actions. Professors of underprepared Black and Hispanic students need to be aware of the value of emotions in the classroom to properly share the necessary cultural capital.

Black and Hispanic students are more likely to have attended lower performing highs schools prior to college. They require effective social support, financial support, and mentorship in order to engage with and persist in their college environment (Parker, 2012; Roscoe, 2015). Black and Hispanic students, particularly those who are underprepared for college, are often viewed with a deficit lens because they may lack the academic skill or cultural capital to engage effectively in the college environment (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Parker, 2012). Cultural wealth is knowledge, social connections, language, and behaviors that an individual acquires to signal their status. The value of cultural capital can change based on the individual's environment (Museus & Neville, 2012). An individual's self-perception of status and cultural capital can determine how they respond emotionally in college (Callahan, 2002; Yosso, 2005). In some cases, Black and Hispanic students in community colleges are struggling with prejudice, low expectations, and educational trauma caused by their previous schooling experiences (Jones et al., 2018; Museus & Neville, 2012). These barriers cause Black and Hispanic students to struggle in acclimating to the environment and persisting through college. Educators that consider students' emotional needs and past educational trauma help students to develop into confident independent learners by offering them the cultural capital typically exchanged at their institution (Gabriel & Griffiths, 2002; Lundberg et al., 2018).

Lundberg et al. (2018) and Schnee (2014) found that when students have a positive perception of their classroom experiences, they are more likely to persist through their college career. A student's cultural capital determines how they process their emotional classroom experiences (Gabriel & Griffiths, 2002). The research question guiding this study was: How do underprepared Black and Hispanic community college students perceive and emotionally respond to classroom experiences with educators?

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of emotional experiences and emotional responses of underprepared Black and Hispanic students who attend developmental classes in community college. This phenomenological study expanded on Museus and Neville's (2012) study of institutional agents by applying Yosso's (2005) model of cultural wealth to students' experiences. This analysis helped the researcher identify practices that professors can successfully implement to distribute the cultural wealth of the community college to Black and Hispanic students.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study centered on CRT and Yosso's (2005) model of cultural wealth. CRT focuses on the liberation of minoritized students' voices to challenge deficit-based thinking in the academic space (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Cultural wealth is comprised of aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistance capital. Students of color and those from

marginalized groups share learned experiences, knowledge, and skills, which may influence students' college experiences and emotional responses. Collegiate cultural wealth assumes all students share White middle-class experiences and capital. Without Black and Hispanic students' voices, higher education will remain a space where White middle-class views are upheld and the culture of minoritized and lower income students will remain devalued (Ladson-Billings, 1998). **Figure 1** illustrates the possible outcomes of students who transition to college with their own cultural capital and experiences.

**Literature Review**

The original structure for colleges and universities, which were inspired by the Ivy Leagues, unintentionally maintain culturally exclusive systems for students of color and from marginalized groups (Wilder, 2014). This inherited White pedagogy assumes that students are familiar with the cultural wealth of the college and requires students to learn devoid of any emotions or cultural input (Yorks & Kasl, 2002; Yosso, 2005). This gap in cultural wealth negatively impacts Black and Hispanic students' academic success.

Museus and Neville (2012) demonstrated how social capital impacts minority students' trust and closure in their academic environment. The researchers examined the impact of institutional agents on Black and Hispanic students' social capital and found four common characteristics of effective institutional agents: (1) establishing a common ground with the student; (2) providing holistic support; (3) developing close relationships; and (4) sharing proactive philosophies that the student can apply in college.
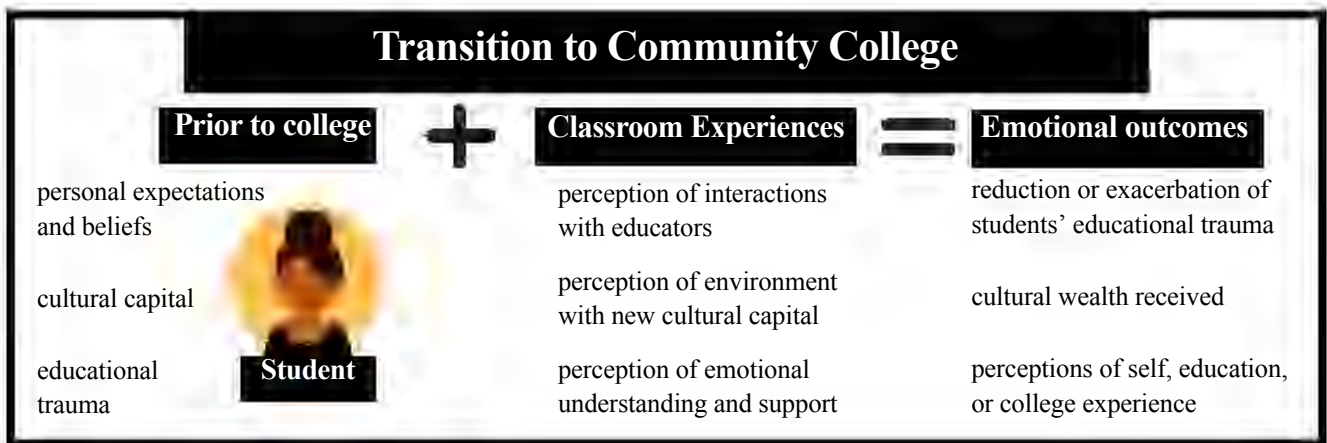
Schnee (2014) conducted a longitudinal study over three years analyzing students' perception of developmental courses, which were offered in the style of a learning community. Schnee found that previously remediation was stigmatized among students. They felt that taking part in remediation identified them as less capable than other students. Once the students took part in the learning community, however, the students felt more engaged and included.

Both the emotional experiences of the students and the faculty are relevant in the classroom environment (Callahan, 2004). Teachers who demonstrated emotional competence in the classroom were more likely to be correlated with students' feelings of enjoyment, pride, and hope in the academic space. Teachers who do not demonstrate emotional competence were associated with negative emotions such as boredom, shame, hopelessness (Mazer, McKenna-Buchanan, Quinlan, & Titsworth, 2014).

Perry (2004) and Gray (2019) described fear and anxiety as emotions that prevent learning. Fear can result in educational trauma, where the traumatic experiences manifest as the person continues through all educational experiences (Perry, 2006). Educational trauma is a result of cyclical and systemic harm caused in an academic context, such as standardized testing, curriculum, the classroom, and teacher expectations (Gray, 2019). Students may experience negative interactions at school and later associate those same negative experiences in college, resulting in discomfort, anxiety, and possibly fear when they are in a learning environment. Students in developmental education courses have stated feeling each of these emotions in relation to college (Lee, 2012, Lundberg et al. 2018). Some solutions for assisting students in alleviating fear and educational trauma includes training faculty to be more emotionally aware and to create a safe space for the students. Engaging students in critical thinking about the content as well as providing their own beliefs and understanding assists students with becoming more autonomous learners (Lundberg, 2018). Zumbrunn et al. (2014) conducted a study of the qualities of student-faculty relationships that impact student persistence, and found that student

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework of Black and Hispanic Students' Transition to Community College*



Transition to Community College

| Prior to college | + | Classroom Experiences | = | Emotional outcomes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| personal expectations and beliefs | | perception of interactions with educators | | reduction or exacerbation of students' educational trauma |
| cultural capital | Student | perception of environment with new cultural capital | | cultural wealth received |
| educational trauma | | perception of emotional understanding and support | | perceptions of self, education, or college experience |

perception of support and belonging impacts their motivation, engagement, and achievement in college in conjunction with academic contextual characteristics.

## Participants

The participants in this study included eight Black and Hispanic students who participated in programs created for underprepared students at two urban community colleges in the New York City metro area. Fifty percent of participants were above the traditional college student age range of 18-24, and 62.5% spoke Standard American English as a second language. The participants were 75% Black and 25% Hispanic.

## Data Collection

The data collected in this qualitative, phenomenological study was triangulated using the following methods to ensure trustworthiness: (1) two-interview series; (2) reflexive journaling; (3) saturation of data through strategic probing questions; and (4) searching for rival thinking, also referred to as "disconfirming cases." The interview data was transcribed and analyzed in Dedoose along with the data from reflexive journaling. Coding evidence was then categorized which led to themes and sub-themes, and alignment to the research questions and conceptual framework.

## Findings

The phenomenological analysis found that underprepared Black and Hispanic students' perceptions of their experiences with professors had an impact on their academic identity, persistence, and perspective on college. Four themes were identified: (1) the presence of individualization; (2) the style of motivation; (3) the use of deficit thinking; and (4) a demonstration of emotional awareness.

## Presence of Individualization

The transition into college was described as challenging by seven out of eight participants. They were not familiar with collegiate cultural capital and uncertain how to navigate the environment. These students presented examples of how their professors shared the type of capital or emotional support they needed, such as (1) individualization that attended to their specific needs, and (2) individualization that gave the student leeway with course expectations and still held students accountable.

Three students, who spoke English as a second language, gained linguistic capital (intellectual and social skills created through communication in one or more language styles) through professors who took the time to help them practice Standard American English in an academic context. Two students who received navigational capital (the skill of maneuvering through predominately White institutions) described professors who helped connect them to resources and departments in the college

that could assist them, therefore helping them navigate the structure of college. Three students received aspirational capital (the ability to maintain hopes and dreams) through a positive perception of their professors' efforts to assist them, which inspired the students to persist. Four students described having challenges in their personal lives that impeded their academic work. They expressed gratitude to their professors for recognizing what they needed in the moment, giving them leeway, while continuing to hold them accountable. Their professors celebrated the students' victories, making strong efforts to understand the students' goals and needs, and acknowledge how students were feeling about their overall academic experience.

## Style of Motivation

All eight participants experienced motivation in the form of aspirational capital, which they perceived in a variety of ways including (1) words of encouragement from professors specific to the students' progress; (2) positive reminders of the class's shared goals, which also included navigational capital; (3) words of confidence in students' abilities; and (4) recognizing and congratulating students on their skills. The students described these experiences saying that the professors "eliminated their fear" and inspired them to "[make] a priority to attend [class]." The students credited the professor's motivation for helping them see themselves more positively and helping them to persist through college.

## Demonstration of Emotional Awareness

All participants perceived emotional awareness from their professors and received aspirational capital from those interactions. Emotionally aware professors were described as people who (1) took the opportunity to understand students' experiences; (2) used their understanding of students' experiences to share applicable cultural wealth; (3) perceived and acknowledged students' emotional states; and (4) shared positive thoughts of students' progress. Students said that they appreciated a professor that "cares and it's obvious in the way he talks." Students felt that their "hard work was recognized." They also felt "confident" and "not afraid" because of the support from their professors.

## Use of Deficit Thinking

Two participants experienced deficit thinking: (1) they were assumed to have deficits based on their culture or race; and (2) statements were made with good intentions but were poorly executed. Race- and ethnicity-based deficit thinking was not exclusive to any race. The participants described instances where they were seen at a cultural or racial deficit by their professors when the students said that "Black and Brown" professors and a "White" professor were "looking down on them" because of their race and accent. Both students who experienced deficit thinking felt "hurt," "frustrated," and "angry" from their experiences. The students felt that these experiences had a negative impact on

their academic experience, caused educational trauma, and a poor academic identity. Students also experienced deficit thinking in their courses. The students perceived that their professors wanted them to succeed. However, their professors threatened them with failing the course to motivate them. Instead, the students had hoped to receive aspirational capital in the form of encouragement or navigational capital in the form of academic resources or advice. They were not happy with the professor's decision to motivate them using "tough love", threats of poor grades, or focusing on their deficits.

## Discussion

CRT and phenomenology both regard participants as the expert in their experience because a person's perception defines how they feel emotions and construct their reality (Ladson Billings, 1998). The students described fear, intimidation, and confusion because of their differences in aspirational, navigational, and linguistic capital from the academic environment. They were appreciative of their professors who helped them to alleviate those negative emotions and encourage them toward their goals of being successful independent students.

The current study's data supports the concept of the "right teacher" Capt et al. (2014), who is defined as an instructor who has patience, emotional awareness, and the affinity for understanding students as individuals. Professors who are not the "right teachers" often have a deficit perspective of students, demonstrate a lack of patience, show less emotional awareness of students' needs, and have little to no ability to motivate students. As shown by the data, professors of all races have the ability to view Black and Hispanic students at a deficit because of their personal biases. Some professors try to motivate Black and Hispanic students using threats of failure and punishment. These interactions with professors who have a deficit perspective can cause or exacerbate educational trauma. Positive motivation and encouragement from a professor to a student creates an exchange of cultural wealth, which increases the students' sense of belonging and positively impacts their persistence.

## Limitations

Selection bias is a threat to the internal validity of the qualitative study. The participants were self-selected which causes issues with generalization of the study results. Further research using other study designs and methods is recommended to verify the results of this study.

## Conclusion

The students' stories challenge the culture of pragmatic standard classroom learning and usher in a new culture devoid of deficit thinking and comprised of safe spaces, motivation, individualization, accountability, emotional awareness, and shared capital. Students benefit from a strength-based lens, reorientation toward their goals, and a space to explore their academic identity. Fear and anxiety negatively impact students' abilities to learn, use resources, or to understand the cultural capital of the college. It is incumbent upon the higher education administrators and faculty members to put practices in place that allow for all students to feel a sense of belonging and wellbeing.

## References

Acevedo-Gil, N., Santos, R. E., Alonso, Ll., & Solorzano, D. G. (2015). Latinas/os in community college developmental education: Increasing moments of academic and interpersonal validation. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 14(2), 101-127. doi: 10.1177/1538192715572893

Callahan, J. L. (2004). Breaking the cult of rationality: Mindful awareness of emotion in the critical theory classroom. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 2004*(102), 75-83. doi: 10.1002/ace.140

Capt, R., Oliver, D. E., & Engel, S. A. (2014). Developmental education: Teaching challenges and strategic responses. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 21(2), 1-9.

Gabriel, Y., & Griffiths, D. S. (2002). Emotion, learning and organizing. *The Learning Organization*, 9(5), 214-221. doi: 10.1108/09696470210442169

Gray, L. (2019). *Educational trauma: Examples from testing to the school-to-prison pipeline*. Palgrave.

Jones, K., Ferguson, A., Ramirez, C., & Owens, M. (2018). Seen but not heard: Personal narratives of systemic failure within the school-to-prison pipeline. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 17(4). doi: 10.31390/taboo.17.4.04

Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11, 7-24. doi: 10.1080/095183998236863

Lee, S. W. (2012). An exploratory study of library anxiety in students in developmental education courses. *Community & Junior College Libraries*, 18(2), 67-87. doi: 10.1080/02763915.2012.726806

Lundberg, T., Conrad, C., Gasman, M., Nguyen, T.-H., & Commodore, F. E. (2018). Practices of developmental mathematics students who succeed in college: A case study of developmental math education at Chief Dull Knife College. *Review of Higher Education; Baltimore*, 42(1), 61-101. doi: 10.1353/rhe.2018.0034

Mazer, J. P., McKenna-Buchanan, T. P., Quinlan, M. M., & Titsworth, S. (2014). The dark side of emotion in the classroom: Emotional processes as mediators of professor communication behaviors and student negative emotions. *Communication Education*, 63(3), 149-168.

Museus, S. D., & Neville, K. M. (2012). Delineating the ways that key institutional agents provide racial minority students with access to social capital in college. *Journal of College Student Development,* 53(3), 436-452. doi: 10.1353/csd.2012.0042

Parker, T. L. (2012). The role of minority-serving institutions in redefining and improving developmental education. *Southern Education Foundation*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED529085

Perry, B. D. (2006). Fear and learning: Trauma-related factors in the adult education process. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 110, 21-27. doi: 10.1002/ace.215

Roscoe, J. L. (2015). Advising African American and Hispanic students. *Research & Teaching in Developmental Education*, 31(2), 48-60.

Schnee, E. (2014). "A foundation for something bigger": Community college students' experience of remediation in the context of a learning community. *Community College Review*, 42(3), 242-261.

Wilder, C. S. (2014). *Ebony and ivy: Race, slavery, and the troubled history of America's universities.* Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Yorks, L., & Kasl, E. (2002). Toward a theory and practice for whole-person learning: Reconceptualizing experience and the role of affect. *Adult Education Quarterly,* 52(3). doi: 10.1177/074171360205233002

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91. doi: 10.1080/1361332052000341006

Zumbrunn, S., McKim, C., Buhs, E., & Hawley, L. R. (2014). Support, belonging, motivation, and engagement in the college classroom: A mixed method study. *Instructional Science*, 42(5), 661-684.

..............

Toni Foster-Irizarry, Ed.D., is a data-driven, adult education specialist who advocates for equity in higher education.

Joan Birringer-Haig, Ed.D., is a full-time Associate Professor at St. John's University, Queens, NY.