The Paraprofessional-to-Teacher Pipeline: Barriers and Accomplishments

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Successive years of immersion in school districts' changing curricula and pedagogical approaches...gave paraprofessionals a unique perspective on what effective teaching means.

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ABSTRACT: *This study examined barriers experienced by veteran school paraprofessionals attempting to complete a 4-year degree leading to public school teaching credentials. The study followed culturally and linguistically diverse, nontraditional student-participants through their 1st and 2nd years as sophomore/junior students in a large urban university. The population exhibited a variety of academic, organizational, financial, and counseling needs typical of developmental learners. With significant numbers of adult learners re-entering baccalaureate degree-granting institutions, the notion of developmental education might be applied to such students; they bring a mix of academic needs and success through resilience based in their cultural funds of knowledge.*

The role of urban school paraprofessionals as "bridge-builders" between the increasingly diverse metropolitan populations and their public schools has been long established (Rueda & DeNeve, 1999). School districts rely on this economical workforce to act as translators for parents of various linguistic backgrounds, to assist recent immigrant arrivals, to help young children transition into school settings, and even to perform the duties of substitute teachers when massive teacher absences so demand (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996). Educational settings are enriched by such paraprofessionals and their *funds of knowledge*: the historically developed strategies, beliefs, and practices that make diverse cultures functional in their own terms (Veléz-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992).

Until recently, in many public school districts paraprofessionals were required to have only a high school diploma and were often inducted into the profession by way of on-the-job apprenticeships (Rueda & Monzo, 2000). For many veteran urban paraprofessionals, successive years of immersion in school districts' changing curricula and pedagogical approaches—as well as observation of novice teachers—gave them a unique perspective on what effective teaching means in a given context. Such status quo was disrupted by the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2002 and its definition of highly qualified paraprofessionals as those holding a minimum of an associate's degree, and preferably a baccalaureate degree. Many veteran paraprofessionals have since re-entered higher education to secure the credentials to maintain their jobs. Paraprofessionals are a desirable force to develop towards filling urban teacher shortages and reaching culturally and linguistically diverse student populations, with a 92% teacher retention rate for paraprofessionals who have completed a baccalaureate degree in California,(Fairgood, 2008), for instance. They also bring experience, maturity and other cultural contributions to the teaching profession.

Utilizing a qualitative approach, this article analyzes some of the barriers urban school paraprofessionals (including early education practitioners, who perform a job similar to paraprofessionals in nonpublic school settings) experience when re-entering college. Those paraprofessionals exhibit most or all characteristics of nontraditional college students (Horn & Carroll, 1996): delayed enrollment, part-time attendance, full-time employment, responsibility for dependents, and high school completion by way of a GED or schooled in other countries. Furthermore, many are non-native speakers of standard English and live in culturally and ethnically segregated neighborhoods. The study is framed by the following research questions: What challenges do urban school paraprofessionals face when attempting to complete a baccalaureate degree and earn teaching licensure? What *funds of knowledge* do these ethnically diverse, developmental students tap to succeed in college?

Developmental Support for Nontraditional Students

Sophisticated institutional structures are needed to support nontraditional students who wish to earn a college degree. Among these, colleges must make developmental education a highly visible and centrally coordinated priority that includes both developmental coursework and support services operating in an integrated manner. The institution must build and maintain structures for early identification of students in need of additional support and hire faculty who are sensitive to and capable of meeting developmen-

tal students' needs (Boylan & Saxon, 2002; Mc-Cabe, 2000; Raftery, 2005; Roueche & Roueche, 1999; Seidman, 2005). Components of effective developmental programs include new student assessment and adequate course placement integrated with nonacademic supports, thorough advising on financial aid opportunities, and periodic program evaluations in which outcomes are analyzed and used to improve coursework and service delivery (Boylan & Bonham, 2007; Perin, 2005). Specific teaching and learning strategies that promote success for nontraditional students include the use of learning theory to inform course design, delivery, and assessment practices; content-specific and holistic pedagogical approaches that are also culturally responsive and effective with speakers of languages other than English; highly structured courses with specific entry/exit skills; close monitoring of student progress; intensive advising; and the use of mentors and tutors (Bensimon, 2007; Berlin, 2005; Boylan & Saxon, 2002; Condelli & Wrigley, 2004; Flippo & Caverly, 2009; Jarvis, 1995; Lucas & Robinson, 2002).

In many higher education institutions, developmental education is seen as an initial and short-lived remediation for students to master the academic skills that facilitate degree completion. When working with nontraditional students from ethnically and linguistically underrepresented groups, developmental education can be conceptualized as a philosophy that undergirds remedial, general education, and pathways to complete an academic major.

Many factors, including insufficient academic skills and being a first-generation college student, exacerbate nontraditional students' hardships while in college (Abbate-Vaughn, 2008; Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005; Pascarella, Pierce, Wolniack, & Terenzini, 2004). The acculturative skill of "doing school," which Pope (2001) describes as working hard but also manipulating the system for the best possible grades, is necessary to successfully navigate the complexities of college. Another notion that is often absent in discussions about adult learners is that of *funds of knowledge*, defined as "the essential bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive" (Moll, Vélez-Ibáñez, & Rivera, 1990, p. 2). The culturally-based funds of knowledge that diverse students bring to higher education settings often go untapped (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002; Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

The Paraprofessional Back-to-School Challenge

Many paraprofessionals cannot earn public school teacher credentials because they (a) have not completed a baccalaureate degree and/or (b)

Table 1
Participants' Academic and Demographic Markers

Student	Prior GPA	Native Language	Age at Admission	Race/Ethnicity[1]	Years of Education-Employment	Children (Aged 12 or Below)
Ariana	3.10	Spanish	32	Wh-Lat	5	2
Barbara	2.90	Cape Verdean	34	Black	3	1
Fernanda	3.16	Spanish	57	Bl-Lat	25	0
Jackie	2.60	AAVE	42	Afr-Am	2	3
Harper	2.48	English	32	White	1	1
Jamie	3.67	Carib English	39	Black	10	0
Molly	3.71	CaribEnglish	58	Black	13	0
Nella	3.58	AAVE	54	Afr-Am	15	1
Nikki	3.20	Carib. English	31	Black	1	1
Silvia	2.50	Spanish	59	Bl-Lat	28	0

[1] *Participants self-identified as African-American, Black or White Latino, and Black (those of Caribbean origin).*

have difficulty passing the states' licensing tests. Yet, they typically outperform novice teachers regarding classroom management skills, diverse parent involvement, and retention in the teaching profession (Clewell & Villegas, 2000). Urban paraprofessionals often possess a wealth of on-the-job experience and stability (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007; Ponessa, 1996). The rich funds of knowledge that stem from consistent teaching practice within diverse communities are rarely validated in the form of accrued college credit. This qualitative research provides evidence through student voices of some of the untapped strengths paraprofessionals apply to successfully overcome barriers and earn public school teacher credentials.

Methodology

Setting
The study was conducted at a large, urban-commuter university in the northeastern part of the U.S. with a 60% nontraditional student population and 40% of undergraduate students from underrepresented groups. The college has competitive entrance requirements similar to 660 other baccalaureate-degree granting institutions in the country (Hess, Schneider, Carey, & Kelly, 2009). However, in spite of multiple resources to address the needs of nontraditional and developmental learners, only 35% of the undergraduates complete a degree after 6 years.

Participants
The participants included 10 undergraduate females. They were selected based upon the analysis of a cold writing prompt required upon admission to a teacher education program. Evidence from the prompt indicated that, despite in GPAs ranging from 2.48 to 3.71 and credit completion rates ranging from 45 to 92, all needed

targeted assistance in writing to meet teacher licensure test benchmarks. Additional demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

Procedure
A qualitative approach was used to identify common themes from participant responses. Responses were analyzed to determine themes that emerged regarding barriers to college completion and cultural funds of knowledge. Participants shared their history, set of cultural beliefs and values, and life events juxtaposed with the intent to complete a baccalaureate degree.

Data Collection and Analysis
Data was collected from surveys, in-depth interviews, and field notes. All were used for targeted triangulation. Additional data was drawn from available demographic records, transcripts and GPA from previous college work, current grades and work samples, and scores on standardized tests.

Participants, identified from the writing prompt, were invited to benefit from the following interventions: one-on-one writing tutoring, an online course to prepare for standardized tests, and on-demand contact with the main advisor. Detailed records of attendance, performance, and use of the supports were kept. Two formal, 1-hour meetings (one for a survey and one for a semistructured interview) were held with 10 and 8 of the participants respectively.

Advising meetings: Advisors kept logs of formal meetings requested by the women and the topics discussed. Informal meetings were recorded as field notes after the meetings.

Survey: The researchers administered a 34-item survey including demographics, work goals after degree, previous coursework, awareness of funding opportunities, technological skills and computer access, as well as six open-ended ques-

tions. Responses to the six open-ended questions (i.e., "What concerns do you have as you begin this program?" or "What should we know about you as a student to best assist you?") provided the substance for the semistructured interviews.

Semistructured interviews: The semistructured interviews were designed to address matters beyond academics. The process included the in-depth discussion of the two short-response questions in the survey listed earlier, and an open format for each of the participants to expand on the issues of their choice.

After gaining an initial understanding of each student from the data, researchers moved on to identify common themes across the cases. Tentative codes, both prefigured and emerging from the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) were then collapsed into categories. Triangulation was incorporated into the process for added validity (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Faculty and staff provided information regarding literacy assessments, one-on-one tutoring, assistance with the online course, and advising. Participant validation was also used to confirm or disconfirm the validity of the identified themes.

Findings and Discussion

Themes emerged from the analysis related to common barriers encountered by the students and the cultural funds of knowledge they drew on to deal with the barriers and move toward their college goals. Verbatim quotes are utilized to illustrate issues in the women's own words. The barriers identified—institutional, academic, and life-contextual—are discussed in that order.

Institutional Barriers: Physical Layout and Customer (Dis)Service

The analysis of survey and interview data consistently documented that students experienced confusion in the large physical plant of the university. They found themselves trying to identify how assistance was to be secured from the registrar's, bursar's, or student services' offices. Silvia was perplexed at the lack of communication between offices:

> I told the Registrar's I paid my admission fee. I only had cash so they sent me to the Bursar's. Then I had to go to class. Then they said I hadn't paid because the Bursar's does send that information to them, they said I had to keep a copy of everything. So now I have a hold and this huge fee and I did what they said.

At the beginning of the 3rd semester (summer) in the program, 60% of the participants still reported difficulties checking their grades online and identifying the appropriate department to challenge undue fee charges. Input from previous institutions at which some participants had experienced success corroborated this finding: "In our building we are simple: We have one large door to the street, 2 classrooms to the right and 2 classrooms to the left. Advising and the restrooms to the back. No one gets lost" (N. Daniels, personal communication, May 21, 2008).

The participants noted a lack of sensitivity to their needs from campus programs and offices. They spoke of the limited service hours of some of the student support offices and the unwillingness of some of the young customer service staff to assist students. Nella articulated how this related to her identity but also indicated that such identity could be used as a barrier or as a solution:

> I'm a grandmother. I should've been done with school long ago. So it's embarrassing to get the looks from these young people in that I should know better than ask that stupid question, say, "why am I being charged for medical if I have medical through the neighborhood

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A high score on the university-based writing benchmark was not a significant predictor of success.

> clinic?" So you go once, twice, get treated like you don't belong, like "why is this loud Black woman asking this again? Well, this loud Black woman is asking you to do your job." I'm not going to let this stop me anymore.

The women attributed their previous failure to complete a baccalaureate degree to the difficulties of navigating the complex web of demands at the university. Seven participants cited what they conceptualized as poor advising to account for having taken untransferable or too many elective credits that did not count towards any major. Yet, the participants also revealed a variety of evidence regarding resources the women did have, such as considerable resilience. As returning students with one and sometimes two college dropout experiences previous to the one under study, they did not allow what they thought of as embarrassment or feelings of nonbelonging to deter them. Barbara expressed the belief that "this time I'm staying till the end. There is so much I shouldn't have paid attention to before... I'd ask for a course and they'd send me to the ESL program, like I couldn't be in a major. Now I know it's up to me, not how others see me."

Developmental students need holistic approaches to succeed in college (Roueche & Roueche, 1999). Evidence of a disconnect between the academic infrastructure and participant experiences, specifically, the absence of sensitivity training from customer service staff, suggests that such infrastructures must use student feedback to provide paths for improved navigation of university systems.

Academic Barriers: Admission Standards, Writing Proficiency, and "Good English"

Although 6 of the 10 women admitted as transfer students from community colleges presented GPAs well above a B average, they had not mastered critical interrogate reading, logically sequenced original term papers, or appropriate citation of others' work. A student services advisor summed up his experience dealing with transfer students: "Well, everyone knows that a 3.5 GPA from some community colleges is about a 2.0 to 2.5 here. We accept a lot of students who don't have the skills. They take a lot to complete; some never do" (T. Smith, personal communication, July 22, 2008).

The unreliable nature of community college GPAs to forecast success on the state's basic literacy and liberal arts background knowledge tests directed the researchers to seek participant data on the standard writing proficiency examination, a university benchmark for undergraduate students completed half way through the junior year. This was the one measure of literacy proficiency and ability to engage "liberal arts thinking" that all students at the university were required to pass. In spite of the availability of a limited data sample, it became clear that a high score on the university-based writing benchmark was not a significant predictor of success on the state literacy test.

Molly, who had transferred in with a stellar GPA from a community college serving 98% minority students and was an aspiring writer of children's books, analyzed the nature of this barrier with unique precision:

> I was used to being the teacher's pet at [previous higher education institution]. I always thought I wrote well. When I flunked the writing state test, I almost died. How can I...? ... The test ... was just about skills ... I just didn't remember some of that stuff, but I'm going to study and take the tutorials next time!

Participants like Molly demonstrated a high degree of pragmatism when analyzing writing genres and standards, and the purposes for each. Yet she and other participants shared the uncertainty of how their academic skills would measure against proficiencies required by the state basic literacy test.

Five participants articulated the notion that students' honest academic efforts needed to be acknowledged even if they did not meet what students believed to be arbitrary benchmarks.

They indicated that their strengths as veteran classroom practitioners were rarely rewarded, whereas students who were proficient writers with little experience on the actual job "got easy As." Fernanda, a 25-year veteran of the early care field and liaison for children with special needs between a Head Start program and the neighborhood public school, stated:

> I understand I need to write well in English. This has been a struggle my whole adult life. But I know what's going on in each course. I see my peers' presentations of activities in class, and sometimes I say to myself, this person has never really taught a 4-year-old because they'd never design an activity like that if they knew. So what I know—pedagogía--I can say this better in Spanish—is not as valued as the person's ability to present something in good English. You know, young kids need both, the good English and the good teacher.

Fernanda questioned the reliance on "good English" as the primary determinant of teaching quality and offered evidence that more was involved in a field she knew well. When confronted with this information, some course instructors noted that students would not be able to secure passing scores on the state tests without higher literacy skills; their emphasis on written proficiency had to do with maximizing teacher credentialing as the outcome of the program.

Berlin (2005) suggests that one way of effectively engaging ESL learners in college is to provide interactive dialogue between instructors and students in which notions of effective instruction are coconstructed. Students like Fernanda believed that their academic strengths as veteran practitioners were ignored in courses that deemed effective teachers as those with mastery of the dominant language; such non-inclusive perspectives can create unnecessary anxiety (McCrimmon, 2006).

Seven of the ten women made use of the academic and student service supports available to them. They willingly participated in orientation, advising, and follow up meetings and consistently scheduled impromptu meetings with advisors to discuss pressing academic and contextual issues. They developed strong relationships with those they understood to be their allies (faculty, support staff) Faculty and staff sensitive to the needs of developmental learners are the optimal providers of support, both academic and general advising (Boylan, Bliss, & Bonham, 1997). Molly said of her two main advisors: "They're my God send. It feels as if they are with me if I fail, with me if I'm doing good. I go their offices like I go to church; no anxiety, no drama, just someone to share what's on my mind."

Life-Contextual Barriers: Finding Time and Balancing Academic Requirements

The two most successful students in the group were able to articulate the awareness that college instructors had a variety of demands and expectations as to what type of work constituted a passing grade, an element of "doing school" (Pope, 2001). They explained how different courses stressed different skills, such as writing, technology, or the synthesis of content. Jamie's explanation illustrated how specific funds of knowledge related to college survival strategies:

> I figure that each instructor is there to teach me something different, so I don't expect that one course will be like the previous one. I've also noticed that what gets me a passing grade in one course may not help me much in the next one. So I make sure I email them or show up during office hours the first few weeks of class, so that I'm very clear as to what the key to pass each course is. See, I wasn't a minority until I came here from my country, so I always

A sobering picture of participants' lives outside of the university emerged in each case and as a theme.

think I have the right to have a good education, and that I have to ask for what I need.

Jamie made explicit an idea often articulated by first-generation immigrants who have enjoyed middle-class status or higher in the homeland and/or who have somehow minimized the effects of racism on their own sense of self. She did not allow her new identity as a "minority student" to impact her progress.

During interviews and informal meetings, half of the women identified the greatest barrier to completing coursework was time management related to family responsibilities; two indicated that with juggling two jobs they had little time to study. As in many culturally diverse groups, the women in this study were heavily committed to their extended families. A sobering picture of participants' lives outside of the university emerged in each case and as a theme. Ariana abandoned her studies during the 2nd semester when two family-related children were literally dropped in her household after an illegal immigrant raid detained and later sent the children's mother back to El Salvador. Securing child care for two undocumented children was beyond the participants' family income. Ariana indicated, however, that she would have been able to continue studying if the program were

offered on weekends, when she could outsource child care to extended family members.

Barbara and Jamie took care of ailing parents, one with advanced Alzheimer's disease. Loyalty and cultural traditions were the main barriers to considering alternative accommodations for the elderly, evidencing a strong allegiance to the notion of family (Rogers & Sebald, 1962). Nella was raising a grandson abandoned by his parents and was not clear as to whether this was a temporary or permanent situation. Jackie had been struggling with depression after her partner was killed. She raised one son along with two foster adolescents in a crime- and drug-infested neighborhood. Harper endured a period of virtual eviction and homelessness, staying at different friends' homes with her young son. Although the participants' family-related difficulties are not unusual, the fact that such challenges occur in precarious economic conditions added to the stress developmental college students typically face. Personal, emotional, and family issues in conjunction with feelings of isolation all represent barriers to minority student retention (Neisler, 1992; Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005).

Developmental Students' Untapped Funds of Knowledge as a Resource

Developmental students do not exclusively attend community colleges; many re-enter higher education at colleges which may not be well prepared to identify and meet their academic needs (Hollis, 2009). This study provides evidence that resilience and analytical skills are strengths the women exhibited at every juncture, highlighting the notion that culturally and linguistically diverse developmental students bring alternative perspectives to campuses that should be used as a resource. But such identification and use of existing resources is often ignored. For example, native speakers of languages other than English bring the added resource of native fluency that foreign language departments could tap into. Student services/development agencies on campus might use diverse students such as these for teaching assistants. They have a mature view of college as a part of their goals. Utilizing developmental adult learners' resources, such as resilience, multilingual wealth, and emotional maturity, promotes a view of such students as an institutional strength rather than a drain on scarce resources (Valencia, 1997).

Conclusion

Much of what stood between urban paraprofessionals in this study and academic progress was directly or indirectly linked to the lack of con-

day; and Merl Wittrock, who introduced me to the world of professional educational psychology and all of the cities where we attended conferences together, and who died too soon. I know that my legacy lies with my students...my work will be overtaken but my students will go on forever through their own generations of students. And they all bring candy to class...

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sideration of less quantitative indications of linguistic skills not measured by the state's licensing test for teacher education. A growing number of careers require degree "validation" by such tests (i.e., nursing or accounting) which impact program benchmarks for student success. Within such context, programs that serve developmental students should consider additional support elements aligned with degree demands. Support programs that are highly coordinated have been shown to be successful (Boylan, Bliss, & Bonham, 1997), and experiences of paraprofessionals in this study illustrate the importance of improving communication across academic and administrative services to make the university system more accessible to culturally diverse students. The next step in delivering effective developmental education at all levels may require even greater coordination with academic majors to maximize retention and graduation of increasingly diverse college student populations.

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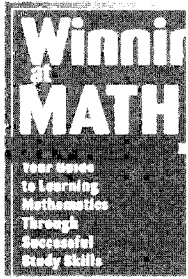
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