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"I want something better for my children": Familial, aspirational and social capital of mature students at a satellite campus

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Research Domain: Access and widening participation (AWP)

Abstract: This paper presents the transition experiences of mature students at a satellite campus of an English higher education institution (HEI). Twenty students who were over the age of 25 and fit various widening participation criteria were interviewed at four points during their first two years of study at a higher education centre. Three aspects (familial, aspirational and social) of Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth emerged as key themes in students' experiences of transition. Students benefited from instrumental and emotional support from their families of origin. Their aspirational capital extended to their aspirations for the children, creating additional motivation for success. They also benefited from assistance from a wider social network by staying within their home community, a town in a borough with particularly strong, traditional community ties.

Paper:

"I want something better for my children": Familial, aspirational and social capital of mature students at a satellite campus

This paper presents the transition experiences of mature students at a satellite campus of an English higher education institution (HEI). The study captures how these students moved into and took up their place at university and engaged in study during their first two years of study. Twenty students who were over the age of 25 and fit various widening participation criteria were interviewed at four points during their first two years of study at a higher education centre in a geographic area traditionally underserved by higher education. Three aspects (familial, aspirational and social) of Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth emerged as key themes in students' experiences of transition. Students benefited from instrumental and emotional support from their families of origin. Their aspirational capital extended to their aspirations for the children, creating additional motivation for success. They also benefited from assistance from a wider social network by staying within their home community, a town in a borough with particularly strong, traditional community ties. The study makes an original contribution by extending critical race theory to white mature students in English higher education, thereby challenging traditional interpretations of cultural capital

(Bourdieu, 1984).

This study found, through the use of Yosso's Community Cultural Capital framework (Yosso, 2005), that these mature student participants had various interconnected forms of 'cultural wealth' including familial, aspirational and social capital. Findings from this study challenge traditional interpretations of cultural capital in terms of cultural poverty and what is a 'good student'. They also show the ways in which familial and aspirational capital are tightly connected and can work to support students' persistence in HE. Locally based foundation degree and degree level study make HE more geographically accessible to students, particularly mature students who must combine work or family commitments. Locality, flexibility, support and links to employment are particularly important to over 25s, as the choice of institution is often heavily influenced by family and work circumstances (Bowl, 2003). A satellite campus was an ideal study site because, by staying in their communities, students can benefit from their community's cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Consequently, the study documents the impact of a national policy for encouraging participation in HE 'cold spots' on the experiences of traditionally under-served students. The participants were all undertaking an applied social science degree at a satellite university campus of a post 1992 institution in England. This degree programme was selected due to the high proportion of mature students in the cohort; 26 out of 38 full time students were aged over 25 years. A total of 650 students (280 over the age of 25 and from under-represented groups) studied at this satellite campus on a variety of degree and foundation degree programmes. This study, highlights the assets mature students bring to their higher education experience. In particular, to understand the lived experience of students who entered HE at age 25 or older attending a satellite campus in an underserved community. Mature students can also be defined by a host of issues related to social class, family pressures, part-time study or access issues, time poverty, commuting, and childcare and household responsibilities. These pressures often are exacerbated for women given historical and cultural assumptions about gender roles. This study is situated within a satellite campus, established in 2006 as part of a HEFCE initiative to widen participation in higher education. As a result of that policy, 4 new satellite campuses were established in HE 'cold spots' across England, locations with low higher education participation. Now, many of those universities are withdrawing from those satellites.

HEIs need to consider the capitals that mature students bring with them to their studies and how those support persistence. The participant's familial, aspirational and social capitals were often inextricably linked in students' narratives, That is, families and friends not only provided resources of time and labour for students' studies, but also fed their aspirations. Jill's account illustrates this entanglement, *"She [mother-in-law] helps me out a lot ... as she takes them [children] to school, this has helped me ... She understands why I am doing this and what a good life for her grandchildren.... my biggest aim is for my family to see me graduate, not just the children but my mother-in-law as well. I think that graduation will make her think, 'Well I helped her do something that was actually quite big'."* Students were aware that they were a role model for their families. Their strong identities as parents and siblings fuelled their motivation to be successful because their accomplishment had consequences that extended beyond themselves to their loved ones. Thus they depended upon family encouragement to support their aspirations through the challenges:

"If anyone at home was against me going to the uni and studying at home, even the kids, it would be impossible for me to do a degree. You need a lot of support, kind of permission and encouragement to say it is okay. You need them to show understanding about the demands of studying and having to

juggle stuff.” (Tina)

By returning to higher education, students were building up favourable middle class cultural capital related to higher education, which can have a positive effect on their family’s educational aspirations (Davies, Qiu & Davies, 2014). To the extent that families recognised this contribution, students had solidarity through a shared goal. This study found, through the use of Yosso’s Community Cultural Capital framework (Yosso, 2005), that these mature student participants had various interconnected forms of ‘cultural wealth’ including familial, aspirational and social capital. Thus, findings from this study challenge traditional interpretations of cultural capital in terms of cultural poverty and what is a ‘good student’. They also show the ways in which familial and aspirational capital are tightly connected and can work to support students’ persistence in HE

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