

Inclusive Pedagogy in Action
Yale University Faculty Development Series
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I want to thank Dr. Nancy Niemi, Director of Faculty Teaching Initiatives, and her colleagues at the Yale Center for Teaching and Learning, for inviting me to speak with you today. I congratulate Dr. Niemi and Provost Benjamin Polak for creating this series on Inclusive Pedagogy in Action. I also applaud Yale University for taking proactive steps to attract and serve more students from underrepresented populations.

This series on Inclusive Pedagogy is just one example of the campus-wide commitment to advancing an inclusive culture at Yale. It begins with admissions practices. The Yale Fact Sheet notes that 57 percent of your students come from public high schools, more than 12 percent of Yale students are the first in their families to go to college, and 20 percent of Yale students are Latinos or African Americans.

The percentages of women and minorities on the faculty have also increased. The creation of the new Center for the Study of Race, Indigeneity and Transnational Migration is still another example of Yale University's commitment to creating an atmosphere of inclusion on this campus. I am honored to be part of this effort.

I am the third speaker in this series on inclusive pedagogy, so I want to be sure that what I say today complements what has already been said. In thinking about what I could add to the discussion, I looked back to the origin of the word "pedagogy" for inspiration. Here is what I found. As you may know, the word "pedagogy" was first used by the German philosopher and educator Johann Herbart in the early 1800s to describe his conceptual model for a new academic discipline to improve classroom teaching.

But 2,500 years ago, the Greek word on which "pedagogy" is based was "**pedagogue**," which referred to the slaves who escorted their young wards to school. It literally means "**leading a child**" by the hand. Hands-on. High touch. As faculty, we have the opportunity, even with young adults, to provide one-on-one guidance that can positively and permanently impact their lives. The more personal it is, the more effective it can be, especially in the lives of marginalized students.

Each of us has had mentors in our lives. In fact, if I asked each of you privately to name your favorite teacher, the teacher who had the most indelible impact on your life, each of you could name that teacher within five seconds. I have tried this many, many times and it amazes me that everyone—without exception—can think of that special person, quickly. We know who those people are and we think of them often. That is the impact they have had on our lives.

I want to take a few minutes to tell you about my own special teacher, without whose caring and guidance I would not be here with you today. I want to share this story because it illustrates how important it is for faculty to connect personally with students from the margins of society, students who may not have the emotional confidence and intellectual resources to otherwise participate and succeed.

In 1966—50 years ago!—I entered Montclair State College in New Jersey as a freshman. My family had moved to Newark, New Jersey from Puerto Rico when I was eight. From being a child who did not know a word of English, and with the support of my parents, I worked hard, went to a Catholic girls' high school, graduated and enrolled in college.

Dr. Morris McGee was my freshman English professor at Montclair State College. He was a World War II and Korean War veteran who had been injured in the Korean conflict, and was confined to a wheelchair.

He was a Montclair alumnus, a star football player in college, recipient of a Purple Heart, and a Shakespearean scholar. I didn't know it the first day I walked into his class, but I was very fortunate to have Dr. McGee for freshman English. I would not have made it through freshman year, let alone the rest of my college years and beyond, had it not been for him.

At the beginning of the first class, Dr. McGee read everybody's name from the roster. He read names like Maggie Johnson, Cynthia Franklin, and Joe Schwartz, and when he got to my name, he said it with a flourish and the intonation of someone familiar with the Spanish language, "**Elsa Maria Núñez, what a beautiful name.**" For the first time, I heard my name spoken like that by an American, by a non-Spanish speaker. And just by the way he said it, he made me feel valued.

"Elsa Maria Núñez" had a very different sound from William Smith or Teddy Doyle—so my name did stand out. But Dr. McGee was really using this as an opportunity to make me comfortable.

Of course, I was a bit uncomfortable because everybody looked around and it was obvious it was me; I was the only minority person in the room. In fact, I never saw another Latino at Montclair State. But as classes went on, Professor McGee would read my name and over time, I started to like the sound of "Elsa Maria Núñez." I remember thinking one day when he read it, what a beautiful name. Up until that point, I had never thought about my name that way. Here I was, the only Latino on campus, and in one deliberate moment, Dr. McGee was signaling to me and my classmates that I belonged! He was intentionally helping me gain emotional footing in college.

Professor McGee was very good as a teacher, but I was intimidated in class. The other students could all answer the questions. Their analytical skills were quite strong, and they had read a lot of literature in high school. They had read many of the works that we were talking about. I had not. And they were very sophisticated. They were smart and I was daunted. As someone whose native language was not English, I also knew that my writing skills lacked polish and consistency.

When I got back my writing assignment and saw all the corrections, I knew I didn't belong in college. My paper was covered in red marks — you could barely see my handwriting! At the end, it said, "You need to see me in my office." I read that and I thought, "Oh my God."

The next day I went to Professor McGee's office. When I arrived, he said, "Elsa, you are intelligent and you have a lot of potential but your writing is very, very poor. The only way you are going to get through this course is to come to my office every week and work on your revisions."

Thus began my supplemental instruction sessions with Professor McGee, a time when he taught me how to become a better writer. I spent hours during my first semester in college, rewriting my essays in his office. While I was making corrections, Dr. McGee would either be reading a book or correcting papers or writing something himself. I would rewrite the sentences, a paragraph or two at a time, and then he would look up and say, "Are you ready?" He would read what I wrote, comment on it and make me do it again. Every week I rewrote a paper because he assigned one essay each week. So I was in his office all the time.

I would write a paper, receive it back covered with red marks, and then go in to his office and rewrite it. Throughout the semester, Dr. McGee continued to mentor me and encourage me. Without his steady hand and watchful eye, I have no doubt that my college days would have been short lived. Over time, my writing improved and I became more confident that I might actually be able to succeed as a college student.

That was 50 years ago, when I was the only Latin American student on my campus. Much has changed since then in the halls of higher education. But some things don't change. Three questions come to my mind in linking my personal experiences at Montclair State in 1966 to conditions here on the Yale campus in 2017.

First, **why was I dealing with an academic achievement gap as a freshman**, despite the fact I was a high school graduate and a solid student?

Secondly, **why did I react so positively to Dr. McGee's overtures of support?** Why didn't I see them as insincere?

And finally, **what issues of identity was I confronting as an 18-year-old college student away from home for the first time?**

Question number one: What was the nature of the academic skills gap that Dr. McGee recognized? Why were my intellectual skills, especially writing, so far behind those of the middle class students around me? Let me begin by sharing research from the National Assessment of Educational Progress with you. The NAEP is the annual collection and comparison of test data from across our country that has been around since the first national tests in 1969; state comparisons have been collected since 1990.

If you are familiar with NAEP data, you know that urban children are likely to receive lower test scores relative to their suburban counterparts, African American and Hispanic children perform at lower levels than white children, and low-income children from all ethnic backgrounds do not do as well as affluent children. This is not only true across the four subject areas, but the gaps I am describing actually worsen for low-income, urban minorities as they proceed through the school system.

Perhaps none of this is startling to you. Given what we know about the generational cycle of poverty in this country, it would be easy to be fatalistic about the future prospects of our urban poor. But there is another NAEP data point I want to share with you. In addition to aggregating and evaluating test scores of school-aged children, NAEP statisticians have also examined data on preschoolers down to the age of nine months old!

Of course, a nine-month-old infant is not taking a standardized test. But scientists **are** able to evaluate the mental acuity and physical motor skills of babies. Here is what they have found. At age nine months, **there is no statistical difference among children when either mental acuity or motor skills are examined.**

No statistical difference, regardless of ethnicity, whether or not the mother is single or has a parenting partner, her educational background, or whether or not she is working. There is no difference based on any of the social or economic factors we use to compare academic performance in later years.

So at age nine months all children are performing equally. **They were born as equals and they are performing that way.** But NAEP data also demonstrates that **by age two, the impact of poverty and affluence are showing up in the mix.** Poorer toddlers are starting to fall behind, and children of privilege are forging ahead.

Affluent children have more stimulation in the home, more stable households, more nutritious diets, and access to better schools. That is why test scores diverge so quickly and stay that way. Let's visualize those divergent paths. Affluent students have books at home. They have been read to since they were in the womb.

They attend yoga class at night and SAT practice on the weekend. They take family vacations to exotic locales over the winter holidays and go to summer soccer camp.

Students from marginalized populations? Not so much. No books at home. Teenagers working several part-time jobs to help the family pay the bills. Maybe a pickup game of street basketball once in a while, watching out for bullets and drug dealers along the way.

It sounds stark and dramatic, but accurately describes my life in the housing projects of Newark 50 years ago. And it is still the reality for many children in this country.

Some of them, despite all the odds and with the support of others, use their natural talents to achieve in school, and with Yale's financial support, some of them end up on this campus. But their innate intellectual competence, despite being on par with other students, doesn't change some of the other aspects of their ability to learn and succeed.

It is important to reinforce the point that the academic achievement gap I am describing is not based on race, ethnicity, or whether a student lives in the city, the suburbs, or the countryside. **It is based on family income—students from all ethnic and racial backgrounds, living in poverty, including whites, have a very steep hill to climb.**

As Stanford University sociologist Sean F. Reardon noted in a 2012 article in the New York Times, “We have moved from a society in the 1950s and 1960s, in which race was more consequential than family income, to one today where family income appears more determinative of educational success than race.” Reardon’s research found that the gap in standardized test scores between affluent and low-income students had grown by about 40 percent since the 1960s, and is now double the testing gap between blacks and whites.

Certainly many highly intelligent students come to Yale from low-income households. Yet even when students come here with similar intellectual competence, the cultural, social and economic backgrounds of students from places like Greenwich, Connecticut; Scarsdale, New York; Mission Hills, Kansas; and Mill Valley, California, differ widely from those of students from East Los Angeles, South Boston, and Cicero, Illinois.

These social, cultural, and economic differences have a great impact on student academic success.

In “Working Class Minority Students’ Pathways to Higher Education,” Espinoza, Alcantar and Hernandez detail “educational readiness” skills we take for granted in affluent, white families, but which are often missing in working class, minority households. They describe affluent households where there is a prevalence of books and toys to help preschoolers learn letter forms, colors, numbers, simple words, and other skills that serve as a foundation for their later success in school and college.

Espinoza and her colleagues write: “School success requires cultural resources (social and cultural capital) that only middle- and upper-class students have at their disposal.”

Just as it is family income, not race or ethnicity, that impacts academic performance over time, family income is also the determinant in whether or not a student has access to social and cultural capital.

This lack of social and cultural capital is why even the brightest students from low-income families can struggle in college. **National data shows that high achieving students from poor families are 10 times less likely to complete college than low achieving students from families of privilege. Ten times less likely!**

Dr. McGee saw this deficit of social and cultural capital in me 50 years ago and I am guessing you see it on your campus today. He had no research-based knowledge to guide him, but he knew intuitively that he had to intervene if I was to succeed.

He knew I had culturally based deficits in the intellectual resources I needed to be successful. He was unwilling to let me accept my mediocre writing skills. Through his personal tutoring each Saturday over an entire semester, he encouraged me to work harder.

By building “high touch” personal relationships we can give marginalized students the reassurance and comfort of familiarity they need to confront the challenges of a rigorous academic environment that their social and cultural backgrounds has not prepared them for. Isn’t that what Dr. Morris McGee did for me 50 years ago? He

recognized that my skill deficits were culturally based, and he intervened so that I could begin to overcome my lack of social and cultural capital.

This could be anyone's story, and each of you has the potential to be one of your students' Morris McGee. Espinoza, Alcantar, and Hernandez, who I quoted earlier regarding cultural and social deficits that influence learning, point to the power of faculty mentors in bridging the emotional and intellectual gaps associated with learning deficits based on socio-economic class.

As Espinoza and her colleagues note, personal, one-on-one connections with low-income students and students of color that built trust and give students the confidence to succeed. They describe these situations as "intervening adults" and "authentically caring" educators who "work closely with students in a substantive and comprehensive way" to provide "academic and social capital." These deep, trusting relationships provide emotional and moral support, "motivation," and establish "high expectations" for students.

Now for question two. When Dr. McGee called out my name during the roll call that first day of class—"Elsa Maria Núñez, what a beautiful name!"—**why didn't I feel humiliated for being singled out?** I easily could have thought that he was being sarcastic or insincere. The answer is simple and at the heart of my message to you today. **I could feel his intentions . . . and they were authentic, heart-felt, and human.**

Dr. McGee knew immediately when he saw me — the only minority student in his class — that I was emotionally vulnerable, and he was genuinely concerned about my well-being. He could not have found a quicker, more effective way to convey, "I care about you; you matter," than to say my name out loud with such care and authority. I needed personal validation and I received it.

Today's students are no different. Disadvantaged students, especially those from inner-city neighborhoods, have a different emotional base than affluent students living in the safety of the suburbs, one that makes their experience on campus unique. Low-income and minority students living in our cities have developed a set of non-cognitive survival skills to manage difficult life circumstances. They are emotionally guarded, and taking risks, even in the classroom, can be seen as dropping their defenses. Securing their external environment and managing their emotions must occur before they can begin to grow intellectually.

Referring to children growing up in poverty, Paul Tough (rhymes with BOUGH) writes in his book, "How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character":

"Children who grow up in stressful environments generally find it harder to concentrate, harder to sit still, harder to rebound from disappointments and harder to follow directions. And that has a direct effect on their performance in school. When you're overwhelmed by uncontrollable impulses and distracted by negative feelings, it's hard to learn the alphabet."

Marginalized students carry these defense mechanisms all the way to college, and without interventions by faculty to establish personal relationships and build trust, it is difficult to lift that emotional veil.

The trust that Dr. McGee was able to quickly establish with me on the first day of freshman English was the foundation on which I was able to grow intellectually under his tutelage.

I would never have gone to his office every Saturday morning if I had not trusted him. Saying my name with caring was his way to make that happen. There are certainly other ways. We can listen empathetically in class and acknowledge contributions to discussions. We can find ways to validate students' opinions and feelings about issues related to inclusion. We can take an interest in some aspect of their lives. Whatever we do, the key is connecting with students on a personal level. When you build authentic trusting relationships, you can give students the confidence they need to stretch and grow.

Now for my third question: **What issues of identity was I dealing with as a college freshman in 1966, and how can my experiences back then inform today's discussion of inclusive pedagogy?**

When I left for college in fall 1966, many of my friends and family said that I would go away and never come back, or, worse yet, that I would change.

I swore I would never change, and I would always be a "ghetto" girl from the projects. Yet, in my freshman year of college, the questions of who I was and where I fit in this great American society began to haunt me.

One of the social marks among Hispanics is language. Among Puerto Ricans, a marker of class is the way you pronounce words. Swallowing the final syllable of words indicates you are uneducated or part of the lowest social strata. The word *lado*, for example, means "side"; I pronounced it my entire eighteen years before college as *Lao*, dropping the "d." At some point, after a heart-wrenching debate with myself, I decided that I would always, for the rest of my life, drop the "d" when I went home, so when I spoke with uneducated friends or my family, I would show them I had not changed. While my identity as an adult includes an academic career far beyond my dreams of 1966, and the social status that aligns with my role as a university president, I have never forgotten my roots.

To this day, I continue to drop the "d" in the word "lado" in the presence of my family and old friends.

Many students today come to college with similar issues of identity based on class, race, and ethnicity. In fact, while minority and low-income students face the additional pressures of adjusting to racial and class differences, all students are developing their sense of self as it relates to issues of race, ethnicity, social class and gender identity. At age 18, they leave home, most for the first time. Their self-identity is being developed in the face of a new environment and new experiences.

Through impressive studies led by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and others, we have come to recognize that how students feel about themselves and the world around them is central to their motivation and capacity to learn. If identity development is key to a student's well-being and has enormous impact on their learning, what better place to nurture the identity development of college students than in the classroom?

When we talk about identity development on our campuses, we inevitably think about how best to support minority groups, be it based on ethnicity, sexual or gender identity, or their socioeconomic status. We need to continue to do that. But as the literature also clearly suggests, developing healthy attitudes among majority students as well—heterosexuals, whites, and middle-class students—is every bit as important a goal of any programming that we create to support identity development for minority populations on campus.

In the context of “inclusive pedagogy,” any time you spend in class on issues of personal identity is well spent, and benefits all students. It recognizes that all students are developing and refining their sense of self. For marginalized students, it can bring out some of the same issues I have covered in terms of emotional confidence and social/cultural capital.

And taking class time to allow students to talk about identity issues recognizes that identity development is as much a group activity as it is private, because each of us identifies ourselves in the context of the social groups we are members of.

Such group discussions provide you with a chance to personalize the conversation. When you talk about race, take the time to drill down to personal stories. Keep in mind there is no such thing as an “African.” Students from Nigeria, from Kenya, as well as African Americans, have family backgrounds from one of more than 1,000 tribes on that continent. Take the time to let your students research and talk about those personal histories.

It’s the same with ethnicity. There is no “Latino” ethnicity. “Latinos” come from more than 20 Latin American countries, each with a rich history and culture and many with multiple ethnicities. Did you know there are more than 60 tribes or ethnic groups in Mexico?

Again, every student’s personal narrative is much richer and more educational than the clichés of popular culture.

Then there is the issue of social class. A recent study of students at a university in California found that social class, more than race or gender, was seen by students as most central to their identity. Where students live, what clothes they wear, and the cars they drive are all symbols of social class. Only by sharing personal experiences can students address issues of social class — for themselves and within the multiple social environments they live in. It is as important for affluent white students to talk about and form conscious choices about “white privilege” as it is for low-income students to develop a confident self-identity that reconciles their social class.

EXERCISES

Now I want to shift from sharing theory and my own personal story with you to doing something fun and interactive to see how far we can extend the discussion today. I want you to divide up into groups.

Conclusion

Thank you so much for spending time together on what I hope was an engaging and productive group exercise. We will be compiling and documenting your work and will be getting it back to Dr. Niemi for distribution to you. I suspect it will be inspirational and informative!

I hope my comments and our group work today have added to your own ideas on how to enhance inclusion on the Yale campus and in your own classrooms, and how to personalize your relationships with marginalized students.

Let's summarize some of those strategies. In class, take the time to learn and use each student's name. Find out about their personal history and find opportunities to validate it. Recognize and acknowledge their strengths and personal contributions to class discussion. Take them out for coffee or lunch.

Invest a little bit of your time in them; in the process, you will be able to use the trust you build as a foundation for engaging those students as valued contributors to class with unique personal stories to share. Certainly, when appropriate and feasible, individual mentoring can have a transformative impact on marginalized students.

You cannot mentor every student you teach. But even within the broader setting of your daily classroom routine, you can personalize classroom discussions in addition to personalizing your relationship with students. Small group activities can help shy students open up and participate. Peer tutoring is another way to bring students out of their shell.

I continue to believe that the most important aspect of working with students of color and other students who live on the margins of society is to validate their personal identities, while building their trust in a world that has not always respected them and their communities. Once those doors are open, they can believe in their own potential.

Thank you!