A Cycle of Anxiety

A Phenomenological Study of ELL Students and their Experiences with Anxiety in Higher Education

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Overview

- Student Engagement and ELL Challenges in Higher Education
- Identity, Connection, and Agency
- Study
- Cycle of Anxiety
- Breaking the Cycle
- Questions and Discussion
Kuh’s Engagement Theory

• Student’s role
  • What do the students bring to the college?
    • Willingness to connect physically and psychologically

• Institutional role
  • What does the college do to support the students?
    • Advising
    • Collaborative learning experiences
    • Mentoring
    • Validation
ELL Students in Higher Education

• Academic Challenges
  • Placement testing
  • Conversational fluency vs academic proficiency (BICS/CALP)
  • Western style of teaching
  • Prior educational background

• Social Challenges
  • Family and work responsibilities
  • Family support and expectations
  • Cultural conflicts
ELL Students in Higher Education

• Institutional Structural Challenges
  • College processes
  • Appropriate advising and counselling

• Institutional Cultural Challenges
  • Marginalization and deficit attitude towards ELLs
    • Stigma, silencing, peripheralization
Anxiety and Identity, Connection, and Agency

• Academic Identity
  • Enhanced by a feeling of belonging in the classroom and college
  • Diminished by watered down curriculum and deficit attitudes

• Connection
  • Encouraged by positive interactions with classmates and professors
  • Discouraged by a perceived lack of language proficiency and shaming

• Agency
  • Strengthened by easy access to needed resources
  • Weakened by difficulties with identity and poor connections
Phenomenological Study

• Interpretative
  • What meaning do the participants make of their experiences with anxiety?
  • The importance of historicity
  • Bracketing
    • Reflection upon experience, practice, pre-conceptions

• Data
  • Three interviews – historicity, experiences, meaning
  • Journaling
  • Graphic elicitation – Children’s Fear Faces
The Participants

• Five traditional immigrant ELL students
  • Four female, 1 male
  • Two from Middle East, 2 from South America, 1 from India
  • All in the last level of ESL
  • All with previous higher education in home country
  • Mix of academic goals
# Ranking Experiences with Anxiety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Aaron</th>
<th>Deborah</th>
<th>Esther</th>
<th>Leah</th>
<th>Hannah</th>
<th>Ave</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embarrassment</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Powerlessness</td>
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<td>4.3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Unfamiliar</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Threats to Progress</td>
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<td>4.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letting Others Down</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of <strong>BISC</strong></td>
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<td>2.5</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Family Support</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Deriving Meaning from Anxiety

- Anxiety and Identity – Perceived Inadequacy
  - Prior capable Identity
  - Offset by a new, less capable identity
- Anxiety and Connection – Self-Isolation
  - College context – classmates, professors, and the institution
  - Family
- Anxiety and Agency – Helplessness
  - College
  - Family
  - Self
A Cycle of Anxiety

- Perceptions of inadequate English proficiency creates anxiety from being a less capable student.
- Students self-isolate to avoid embarrassing themselves.
- Self-isolation inhibits their ability to access resources, which perpetuates the feelings of inadequacy.
Breaking the Cycle

• Student
  • Self-determination and commitment to family

• Institution
  • Orientation to college and program
  • Transitioning out of ESL programs
  • More focus on developing conversational fluency
  • Developing learning communities
  • Holistic advising and counseling
  • Validation
Questions and Discussion
Selected References


Selected References


