The Gifts of the Stranger
Learning From Others' Differences

Susan Bernheimer and Elizabeth Jones

THE UNITED STATES IS DEALING WITH AN UN-precedented rate of change, given the increasing ethnic diversity of our population, the one in five American households that relocate every year, the growing number of single-parent families, the increasing number of immigrants and refugees, and the fact that

most mothers work outside the home (Steele & Sheppard 2003; Laughlin 2013). Some of these changes mean that families place their trust in strangers—that is, early childhood professionals—instead of relatives or neighbors to care for their children.

By 2010, 64 percent of mothers of children younger than 6 were in the labor force, and 61 percent of mothers of children younger than 3 were working outside the home (USDOL 2011). In 2011, 12.5 million (61 percent) children under 5 and 51 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds were in some

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type of child care setting (Laughlin 2013). Early childhood programs are creating a new kind of community for families, one that can bridge the gap between their private and public lives (Couldry 2004). Professional training provides students with basic teaching knowledge, but developing the sensitivity needed to build trusting relationships across multiple differences is a more complex process.

Staff might feel confused and overwhelmed when working with children whose families, cultures, religions, and socioeconomic statuses differ from their own. Mary, who has been a preschool teacher for six years, works in a program serving diverse families, including immigrants from several countries. She spoke of her unease during a discussion in her college class:

> I just want to take care of children. But it's feeling really complicated and I'm not sure what to do anymore. I never expected to be dealing with parents battling over their children, people who don't speak English, children dealing with trauma, and coworkers who get angry every time I try to do something creative. I know what children need. I feel so stressed out trying to get this across to families, and even to some of my coworkers.

Mary's background and training have not prepared her for the complicated issues she faces in her work. Making friends with strangers—including children, families, and colleagues—is a necessary skill. Teachers need practice cultivating skills and dispositions such as empathy, risk taking, and welcoming differences to provide high-quality care and education.

Can college classrooms become places where students such as Mary actively engage in learning the many skills required when caring for others (Jones 2007)? The shifting nature of today's college population may hold a key to this important new level of teacher preparation.

Who goes to college?

Just as modern living has created circumstances that take families into a world of strangers, colleges are experiencing a similar shift in their student population. Colleges now enroll many students who, by earlier standards, are nontraditional—students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, English language learners, working students, parents, immigrants, and older adults. These students now make up 73 percent of all US college and university undergraduates, and 38 percent of them are over 25 (Choy 2002; Snyder & Dillow 2010).

Early childhood education is a popular field for many nontraditional students. Almost everyone can relate to child rearing on a personal level: through childhood experiences, parenthood, or having cared for the children of friends or family. This fits well with the supportive nature of the field. It also presents both challenges and opportunities for teacher educators.

Effective teacher educators view students' diverse characteristics as strengths.

Some teacher educators may face challenges when the students they teach have different languages and cultures, lifestyles, and socioeconomic statuses from their own. Effective teacher educators view students' diverse characteristics as strengths, craft learning experiences that connect with students' lives, and create a place where shared learning is valued. Fostering a nurturing environment can enhance the level of education for all students. And it can be a model to encourage them to do the same for the children in their care.

Learning from our differences

We (Susan and Elizabeth) have spent many years exploring ways to create adult learning environments that support everyone, including nontraditional students (Jones 1986, 2007; Bernheimer 2003, 2005; Exposito & Bernheimer 2012). Our journey has brought us important insights into creating inclusive learning communities. We have discovered four critical factors needed to build communities for mutual learning:

- A nurturing environment
- Story sharing
- Reflective practice
- Open dialogue

A nurturing environment

The first college class I (Susan) taught was part of a program serving inner-city students who witnessed daily violence and lived with extreme economic hardships and unstable family lives. I realized that my standard teaching methods were not reaching the students. Almost everyone

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seemed anxious and uncomfortable being in the class. When I tried to give a lecture, the students seemed disconnected and withdrawn, or they talked loudly among themselves. My initial response was to blame the students: I had valuable information to give them, and they just didn't seem interested.

One day while lecturing on "healthy" families, I looked out at the class. Everybody appeared down and restless. Wanting the class to become more engaged, I asked them to share stories about healthy families they knew. Nobody raised a hand. Nobody would make eye contact with me. Looking around the room, I sensed the sadness and defeat they were feeling. Their lives and families did not fit our common definition of *healthy*.

My usual way of teaching was alienating the students. Within the confines of standard definitions and theories, there was no place for them to see how both hardship and positive experiences can contribute to growth and learning. Taking a new approach, I asked, "How have you grown from a painful experience?" and "How have you grown from a positive experience?" These questions brought the class back to life. They could now share the truth of their lives as a valuable part of the learning process (Bernheimer 2003; Palmer 2004; Exposito & Bernheimer 2012).

Getting to know the students

Bringing the students' lives into classroom learning became a priority. I began by asking questions: "What are your concerns for your children? What problems are you going through as parents?" Their responses were immediate. They became interested, paying close attention and expressing themselves. One morning, Jamie shared the following:

> My son is 8 years old. I watch over him all the time. I make sure he comes home every day right after school and does his homework. I'm scared all the time that he'll end up in a gang. And it's just too dangerous where I live to let him go out and play. I can't even take him to a safe park. But I'm worried that he isn't growing up right, just being inside all the time.

I acknowledged the importance of exploring the kind of issues Jamie shared from her life. Other students joined the conversation, telling their own stories and expressing empathy about her situation. Jamie's story had provided a way for them to connect personally with the educational process, validate their varied experiences, and be part of a supportive learning environment where all students could make a contribution (Belenky et al. 1986; Noddings 1991; Palmer 2004).

Responsiveness to multiple realities

By encouraging differing perspectives to become part of our learning experience, we all grew and learned from each other. The students' stories showed us that there is more than one right answer. The classroom was becoming a place where students could feel respected and understood. We were no longer strangers.

Just as children need a nurturing environment in which it is safe to grow, adults need the same in order to learn. Maslow (1968) recognizes that new learning always requires taking the risk of letting go of the safety of previous conceptions. All human beings need acceptance and safety when faced with this risk. When students can safely express their experiences, we are preparing them to understand others with differing perspectives, styles, ideas, and attitudes (Bernheimer 2005; Exposito & Bernheimer 2012).

Skills in caring

A nurturing environment does more than provide the conditions for learning; it provides the basis for practicing the skills of caring. Noddings (2003) states that caring cannot be learned as theoretical information. It must be practiced in the classroom, using the communicative skills fundamental to caring relationships: listening, empathy, and being responsive to the needs of each person. Through empathetic listening and sharing of personal experiences in the class, we were all learning critical relational skills that early childhood educators need (Noddings 1991; Brownlee & Berthelsen 2006).

In our current educational climate, with increasing degree requirements and performance-based standards for teachers, it is tempting to eliminate time-consuming aspects of a curriculum such as sharing personal stories, reflecting, and carrying on a dialogue. Dale (2004) expresses his concern that teacher preparation is based more

on utilitarian calculations, creating a mindset in which we do not see the full humanity of others and the complex mysteries of life. Students' personal stories include many hidden dimensions of experience, such as the memories, feelings, and circumstances of their lives.

I (Susan) began selecting key topics from readings and designing the curriculum around students' stories. From our introductory exercise to specific course content, classroom activities, and homework assignments, sharing personal stories brought new levels of active participation and emotional connection (Noddings 1991; Bernheimer 2003).

Introductory exercises

These exercises create a sense of familiarity among students. In a class focusing on children and diversity, I asked students to introduce themselves by sharing the story of their names. Their stories ranged from funny (being named after a cat her father had as a child) to complicated (hyphenated names mixing multiple cultures) to painful (named after her father who was killed in a war). An atmosphere of caring and respect among students and across cultures, race, and ethnicities began to emerge, and it grew with each story. For example, I watched a new awareness of cultural differences and of the often unseen struggles of immigrant children grow among the students as Lupita, an immigrant from Mexico, shared a story about her name. Her parents gave her a long and difficult-to-pronounce name. Typical of her culture, she was always called by a nickname. When she started kindergarten, the teacher called roll every day using her full name, but Lupita never recognized it and did not answer. Her parents and teacher got angry with her for not responding to her name. She remembered feeling invisible to everyone. By sharing these stories, we were taking our first steps in becoming a community.

Story sharing

The early care and education field offers many opportunities to include personal stories as a part of understanding the complexity of people's lives and development (Brownlee & Berthelsen 2006; Exposito & Bernheimer 2012). For this same course, I created a group activity that included describing students' families while growing up: positive and negative ways their family affected them, and how their families

were alike and different from one another's. I combined this with an outside assignment asking students to do a case study of a family they considered very different from their own. Discussions from these assignments became very lively as they realized the vast differences in how children are reared and what is considered a family.

Allowing real-life issues to surface enabled students to look at patterns, contradictions, and inconsistencies in their lives and work (Wood 2000). For example, Mirabel shared about a 3-year-old child, Jorge, who would not eat because his family always spoon fed him. Teachers kept trying to change this mealtime custom and became angry with the parents. Mirabel had become sensitive to cultural differences from our class discussions and decided to work with Jorge to bridge the cultural gap. She sat next to him during meals, feeding him some and letting him slowly begin eating by himself. The students were learning to break through cultural barriers and deepen their understanding of differing histories and life choices.

Rosa, an immigrant from Guatemala and an English language learner, describes her experience of sharing and listening to stories:

> It is a big difference of listening from everybody, from everybody's heart, from somebody's heart and tears, than reading it in a book—those learnings, you cannot get them through the book. Because there is [only] so much you can picture in a book. You can read about your pain. But you will never see pain in those faces. And there was a time when somebody said, "Hey, you guys are doing great by trying hard." But the

book will never tell you how hard you work. It won't ever say what is right in the book, because those people didn't write the book for people who speak some other language. (Bernheimer 2003, 72–73)

Reflective practice

Early childhood educators respond to complicated and unexpected occurrences as part of their work—relying on their judgment rather than on prelearned answers. This skill requires much practice with multiple levels of learning, including self-awareness and understanding the often hidden reality of other people's lives (Brookfield 1995). Reflections ranging from "the story of your name" to "how your family disciplined you" brought up surprising similarities and differences among the students. Most important, this process helped them learn that they can honor their own background while understanding and accepting those who are different.

For example, toddler teacher Ernesto knows the value of sand play for this age group, so the children he teaches spend much time in the sandbox. One mother, who is African American, was very upset that her daughter was in the sandbox and told Ernesto to never let her go in again. He tried to explain the importance of sand play for her daughter. The mother said that if she went in the sandbox again, she would withdraw her daughter from the program. Shocked and confused, Ernesto didn't know what to do. Then he remembered a story shared in class about how difficult it can be to get sand out of African American hair. He suggested putting a shower cap over the girl's hair when she played with sand. The mother agreed.

When I realized that the textbooks and information from my lectures did not resonate with the real stories of the students' heroic journeys to this classroom, I created reflective assignments that invited them to examine and honor all their experiences. Such reflections allowed them to make positive use of their life experiences (Bernheimer 2003).

Sharing their opinions gave students opportunities to take risks.

I asked students to make observations in neighborhood parks, laundromats, schools, and their homes to give them practice in carefully observing the ways that many factors influence parent–child interactions, including beliefs, culture, circumstances, and temperament. Within these familiar environments, they observed various aspects of children's and parents' lives, such as temperament and discipline. They were learning to see positive and negative interactions between parents and children, and the effects of these interactions.

Open dialogue

Early childhood educators engage in many dialogues every day, with children, parents, and coworkers. Open dialogue as part of a college curriculum provides an opportunity to develop this important skill.

Class discussions focusing on topics that are relevant to students' lives promote their ability to accept ambiguity and see new possibilities in their perceptions of others. They were moving away from the need to lay blame, and looking with greater depth at the needs of the person before them (Wood 2000; Brownlee & Berthelsen 2006). For example, in a group discussion of challenges in communicating with parents, students shared their frustration with parents who do not come to parenting meetings or teacher–parent conferences. Listening to their complaints, Marita added a different perspective: her mother never went to these meetings because she worked two jobs and could not speak English.

Most important, sharing their opinions gave students opportunities to take risks. This kind of risk taking is an essential trait for teachers of young children: "Teaching is a risky business. You never really know what will happen" (Jones 2007, 42). Teachers must be observant and reflective, and be able to work with ongoing assessment to determine whether their teaching practice is effective, and if so, how effective (Brookfield 1995; Jones 2007).

During a literacy class for Head Start teachers, I observed the importance of dialogue among students. We were discussing setting up a lending library for parents. Martha said, "We have a large number of extra books to lend, but none of the parents will take them. They just don't seem interested in helping their children." Several class members added that they had had the same experience.

I asked the class, "Why do you think parents are reacting in this way?" A lively discussion and varied opinions came forth: "They do not want to sign their names on anything official with the school," "They are exhausted from working, commuting, and taking care of children, and don't

want anything else to deal with," "They may not be able to read English and feel threatened." It was Irene who said, "Many do not want to sign their name because they cannot write. So I use stickers for them, so they will sign in as well as borrow books. Now they are using my lending library." This brought a wealth of ideas that teachers could use to make families feel comfortable using a lending library. Through this kind of mutual exchange, students expand their perspectives and build skills for solving problems (West-Olatunji, Behar-Horenstein, & Rant 2008).

Conclusion

College classrooms can be ideal environments for students learning the skills needed to make friends with strangers. They are comprised of people from differing backgrounds who come together for a common purpose. In a supportive learning environment with active learning and reflective practices, the changing nature of the student population becomes a gift that adds to everyone's learning experiences.

Teacher educators can modify their teaching practices to be responsive to the background and life experiences of nontraditional students. When teachers ask students to share their stories, students teach us about the many important dimensions of learning and about their strengths, while validating them as capable learners (Bernheimer 2003; Exposito & Bernheimer 2012). Early childhood educators in Reggio Emilia, Italy, apply this same principle to children. By emphasizing the strengths found in any group of children, they have been powerful advocates for the rights of the child. Similarly, Paulo Freire (1998) became an advocate for oppressed adults in Brazil by teaching literacy using a pedagogy that acknowledges and builds on learners' diverse life experiences.

Adult learners, like young children, will be successful if they aren't expected to conform to a single set of teaching practices that might not be a good fit for who they are. The early childhood education field is built on the principle of inclusivity for all children. Incorporating the voices of student teachers as part of the learning process brings this inclusivity to nontraditional students. "Our role as college instructors isn't to screen people out of the early childhood profession. Our role is to invite them in, discovering and building on their strengths" (Jones 2007, 129).

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