



## *Early Reading Experiences: An Artifact of Cultural Capital*

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### **Abstract**

*From the time of birth, children begin learning about themselves and the world around them. Parental aspirations for their children's P-16 educational attainment does not exist in a social vacuum within the United States. In aggregate terms, parents' P-16 aspirations reflect the families' social class standing in their respective communities. Referred to as cultural capital, the process of consciously socializing children to develop social assets including learning to read, seems to be a critical piece of more elite societies. This study sought to uncover first year, first generation students' perceptions and memories of early reading experiences to further the understanding of the challenges first generation students face in attending college. Findings revealed our students did not often have strong role models for reading, although the majority believed reading well was a necessity for college and future success. The impact of cultural capital theory revealed families still have great influence on first generation student success in college and should be of critical concern to higher education for how to best support this new generation of learners. Additionally, we may need to transmit to our students the tools to develop more cultural capital by being positive role models.*

**Keywords:** *cultural capital, first generation college students, social reproduction theory, habitus*

From the time of birth, children begin learning about themselves and the world around them. Much of what children learn during those early years is a result of what their parents or caregivers *pass on* or they see modeled by others. In the broadest sense, generations share their culture and beliefs with their youth who are just beginning their learning journey. Referred to as *cultural capital*, the process of consciously socializing children to develop social assets such as talent, intellect, style of speech, and academic competencies, including learning to read, seems to be a critical piece of more elite societies (Bourdieu, 1986; Harris & Graves, 2010). A measure of elite in today's world is education, and families from lower socioeconomic levels typically do not value or pursue higher education.

Parental aspirations for their children's P-16 (preschool through four years of college) educational attainment does not exist in a social vacuum within the United States. In aggregate terms, parents' P-16 aspirations reflect the families' social class standing in their respective communities (Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, 2008). American society is not a classless society. The American social class hierarchy consists of millionaires, upper middle class, middle class, lower middle class, working poor, and the poor. Social classes have different predispositions toward their children's educational aspirations and accomplishments in the P-16 educational system (Barratt, 2011;

Brantlinger, 2003; Giroux, 2001; Lareau, 2000). In general terms, a disparity in parental aspirations for their children's P-16 educational attainment exists between families from upper classes and families from lower social classes in American society (Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, 2000; Levine & Nidiffer, 1995; MacLeod, 2009). Parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to value P-16 educational attainment, and they socialize their children to meet those expectations (Barratt, 2011; Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, 2000; Levine & Nidiffer, 1995). Certainly, there are outlier families who do not embrace using educational attainment to enhance their social positions (Brantlinger, 2003). French sociologist Bourdieu (1985) stated children's academic performance is more strongly related to parents' educational history than to parents' occupational status. Dubow, Boxer, and Huesmann (2009) found parents' level of education when their child was age eight significantly predicted the child's level of education and occupational success 40 years later.

Additionally, there are intergroup gaps in P-16 attainment between White European majority compared to different racial and ethnic groups like African Americans and Latino Americans (Arnaud-Saint, 2009; Banks, 2014; Brown, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Noguera, 2008). Further, there are intragroup gaps in P-16 educational attainment within different racial and ethnic groups like African Americans and Latino Americans (Arnaud-Saint, 2009; Banks, 2014; Lacy & Harris, 2008; Pattillo, 2008). Furthermore, African Americans, First Nations, and Latino groups' educational attainment have been stunted due to the historical factors of de facto and de jure segregation in America (Anderson, 1988; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Jordan Irvine, 1996; Woodson, 1919). Further, the social class structure of the African American and Latino populations explains some of the variability for the within groups' P-16 educational attainment (Brown, 2011; Jordan Irvine, 1996; Pattillo, 2008). All in all, many Americans have used educational attainment, especially four-year degree attainment, to foster their families' social mobility.

Parents from lower middle class backgrounds educational aspirations for their children's P-12 education consists of wanting them to acquire basic education to become effective citizens and to acquire the minimal educational credentials to obtain a job not requiring a post-secondary education (Barratt, 2011; Brantlinger, 2003; Giroux, 2001; MacLeod, 2009). To be sure, there are parents from this socioeconomic background who swim against the tide of this social class and they have high P-16 educational attainment aspirations for their children. Some students from socioeconomic class backgrounds have had high P-16 educational and graduate attainment that laid the foundation for their upward mobility in American society (Levine & Nidiffer, 1995). These families are the exception to the social classes' expectations for members, and they are not the rule for members within their class.

Consequently, expanding the pool of potential first generation college students who earn a four-year degree should be a key component of a national strategy to create a larger number of Americans who have the frameworks and skills to participate in the globally connected economy (Darling-Hammond, 2010). First generation college students are individuals whose relatives from previous generations have not attended college (Davis, 2010). First generation college students are a heterogeneous group that includes sub-pools of students such as working-class students from different racial and ethnic groups and low-income students from different racial and ethnic groups (Harris & Graves, 2010; Lareau, 2000; Stuber, 2011). Research has shown that college graduates are more likely to be employed fulltime in career positions; participate in civic activities; vote regularly; enjoy better lifestyles, health, and fitness; and involved with their children's education (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); and they most likely have learned that reading is a fundamental life skill (Davis & Davis, 2015) that is vital for finding a good job, developing the mind, discovering new things, and increasing imagination. With our desire to find

better supports for our first generation students, we believed it was important to identify students' early reading memories and how those may have connected to their early cultural capital experiences. We reasoned that if we began with a pilot study in which we asked a class of first generation students at our university about their early reading experiences, we may learn more about their reading connection to their cultural capital background.

At our university in the Midwest, students are required to take a first-year experience course to provide support for new students in achieving a successful transition to college life. Generally, a first-year experience program is a major cornerstone of many universities' efforts to foster freshmen academic and social engagement that spiral into student success as measured in undergraduate degree attainment (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Our program helps students develop skills to engage in the academic community; initiate positive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff; and begin to explore our university's Public Affairs mission of ethical leadership, community engagement, and cultural competence. This course is the cornerstone of the first-year experiences and is a key anticipatory initiative designed to foster freshmen and sophomore retention and academic achievement. To further benefit students, select sections of this course are set aside explicitly for first generation students who initially are prospective PK-12 teachers.

According to Choy (2001), many first generation students "often begin college less academically prepared than other students" (p. xxxi). However, there is an outlier sub-group of first generation students who have acquired a rigorous pre-college education that has prepared them to attend selective four-year universities. Gladwell (2008) defined outliers as individuals whose internal qualities, work habits, and self-discipline allow them to accomplish personal goals in sometimes in different environments. Parents, guardians, and/or a significant person of academically prepared students play a pivotal role in fostering their academic aspirations before kindergarten and throughout their K-12 education (Jackson, 1996; Levine & Nidifeer, 1995). When these parents or guardians shed the cultural capital of their class and assimilate the cultural capital of the upper class, it plays a major role in their efforts to foster their children's academic aspirations. Parents', guardians', and/or a significant person's impact on socializing children for academic success reflects how social classes frequently foster the next generation in their families. This is a prime example of reproduction theory in action.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social reproduction theory is a genre of literature that seeks to describe how social classes in a society reproduce themselves (MacLeod, 2009). Cultural capital and determinism are the two major sub-genres that make-up reproduction theory. Playing a critical role in social reproduction theory is the *value* placed on education. Education allows individuals to transcend their original generational status and move to higher life aspirations. A critical piece of education attainment by first generation students, specifically, may hinge on early and continued reading experiences.

### **Early Reading Experiences**

Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) found that "first grade reading ability was a strong predictor of" reading comprehension, vocabulary, and general knowledge in 11<sup>th</sup> graders (p. 934). They also found "individual differences with print [prior experience] were found to predict differences in the growth in reading comprehension ability" (p. 934). Early reading experiences have an impact on future success in reading (Bojczyk, Rogers-Haverback, Pae, Davis, & Mason, 2015).

Bojczyk et al. (2015) found that the mother's role plays an important role in children's early literacy development. These early reading experiences are often fostered more in those families with a higher socioeconomic status. According to many researchers, there is a strong correlation between reading achievement and socioeconomic status (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Jensen, 2009; Walker-Dalhousie & Risko, 2011). In fact, Cunningham (2011) found that "poverty is the largest correlate of reading achievement" (p. 382). Walker-Dalhousie and Risko (2011) reported about 75 percent of children who are living in poverty score below grade level in reading.

A reason many children in poverty read below grade level is because reading is not valued in the home. Additionally, they are not read aloud to as young children. According to Anderson et al. (1985), "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (p. 23). Ivey (2003) found when students were read to aloud by a teacher, it helped the students understand the subject better and made them want to read independently. Teachers modeling reading through reading aloud is a strong influence on students' learning the value of and respecting the reading process (Routman, 2003). Ogle and Beers (2012) stated, "Reading aloud to students can be a very important factor for providing motivation for reading, building critical concepts about reading, and developing an understanding of literature" (p. 151). These early reading experiences are valuable building blocks for future success. However, they also serve as a component of the social reproduction theory.

### **Theory of Social Reproduction**

Social reproduction theorists are researchers whose theoretical works analyze how social classes in society replicate themselves into successive generations of social classes in different time periods. Determinism and cultural capital are the two major schools that make up different ends of the social reproduction theories continuum (MacLeod, 2009). MacLeod suggested that deterministic models include those researchers who employ a structuralist framework, which identifies the origins of social classes in society that spring from the capitalist economic system. Bowles and Gintis (1976, as cited in MacLeod, 2009) are two prominent researchers who support the structuralist approach of viewing the tension in a capitalist society that is between the owners of the factories, raw materials, and land (means of production) on one hand, and on the other hand, the wage workers who do not own any means of production but possess labor power they must sell to the owners of the means of production. The structuralist approach orients researchers to believe the owners seek to perpetuate their privilege positions in society through the intergenerational transfer of resources and power to their children; while workers (in aggregate terms) seek to acquire employment that allows them to live and foster the generation within their families. Thus, the two social classes perpetuate themselves through the different generations of their families replicating the social status of their parents' generation.

The Bowles and Gintis (1976, as cited in MacLeod, 2009) framework identifies that the educational system does not exist in a social vacuum, but the educational system serves as instrument to support the existence of the status quo. They believe few workers will be able to escape from their wage slavery to become members of the upper classes in Western society. Similarly, Bourdieu's (1985) viewpoint partially recognizes that structuralism has a kernel of truth about the origins of society's stratification, which springs from the capitalist system; however, Bourdieu's cultural capital framework illuminates that some workers can change their social place in society.

## **Theory of Cultural Capital**

Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital approach, like Bowles and Gintis's (1976, as cited in MacLeod, 2009) structuralist model, represents different extremes on the social reproduction theory continuum. The social reproduction theory emerged as a part of a Critical Theory School, which began before WWII in Frankfurt, Germany (MacLeod, 2009). Early critical theorists, like Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, made up the Frankfurt School, and they developed an approach that identified the capitalist economic system as the engine that drives society's development, while they also embraced the idea that the superstructure (culture, institutions, and ideas) plays a leading role in shaping and supporting the economic basis of Western society. Briefly, critical theory describes a school of thought and a process of critique mutually (Giroux, 1983).

Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital and habitus concepts fall under his social reproduction approach (MacLeod, 2009). He argued that cultural capital can manifest itself in several forms: (1) embodied state (long lasting dispositions), (2) objectified state (pictures, books, and machines), and (3) institutionalized state (educational qualifications) (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu defined habitus "as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (cited in MacLeod, 2009, p. 15). In other words, Bourdieu's (1977, 1985) habitus concept explains the invisible tapestry of values, expectations, and practices that exist within different social classes in a stratified society. The family in upper, middle, and lower classes' habitus orients children to follow the pathway and position of their families. Yet, members of families, especially from middle and lower classes, can use their human agency to change their social position in society. MacLeod defined human agency as an individual's reliance on his or her internal motivation and discipline to help navigate the transition from the old social circumstances to an upwardly mobile social position in society. To illustrate, factory wage workers and service workers make up the blue-collar section of the middle class in America (Lareau & Weininger, 2008). This social strata habitus is that they, in aggregate terms, view acquiring a basic high school diploma as the educational credential they need to acquire a job and social status comparable to their fathers and in some cases their mothers. Yet, some blue-collar families create a hybrid habitus (working class and upper classes) that results in their keeping their factory jobs while assimilating the upper-upper and upper classes' appreciation of obtaining a four-year college degree. All in all, Bourdieu's cultural capital model has influenced recent social reproduction theorists like (Giroux, 1983; Lareau, 2000; Noguera, 2008).

## **Inter-generational Transmission of Cultural Capital**

Giroux's (1983) work examined how the educational system is a part of the superstructure in American society and is not neutral, but it serves the interests of hegemonic social classes. According to Giroux, the K-12 educational system is dominated by the upper classes. Upper classes families' habitus is to socialize their children to acquire high academic achievement, attending elite private schools, and generally scaling the heights of society. Whereas, working class families' habitus socializes their children to assimilate conformity values when they attend public schools. Working class students who attend schools dominated by the upper classes frequently have unsatisfactory educational experiences. Thus, students from lower social classes' background inevitably results in their resisting the type of education they are exposed to in the K-12 system.

Giroux (1983), like Bourdieu (1986), synthesized elements of the deterministic and cultural models into his model. Giroux and Bourdieu shared a viewpoint that humans are not locked into the social system, and they have the capacity to determine their life direction in society. According to Lareau (2000), the cultural capital model makes a major contribution to reproduction theory by unpacking upper-middle class and blue-collar classes' habitus about family patterns in educational attainment in the K-16 pipeline and aspire to the habitus of the upper class.

Lareau (2000), seeking to build on Bourdieu's (1986) definition, described cultural capital as how cultures in the American context are inter-generationally transmitted from one generation to another. She provided a web of evidence that shows America's upper classes from the colonial days until now have more strongly cultivated an educational achievement habitus that fostered the inter-generational transfer of social group values and habits to the next generation (Thelin, 2004). Typically, the lower class habitus is transmitted easily as generations repeat the same status as their parents.

Lareau's (2000) work compared and contrasted how upper class, working class, and lower-income families socialize their children to attend and academically perform in elementary school and beyond. She examined how upper-class mothers consciously pursued a practice called *concerted cultivation* that ensured their children absorbed education in school, attended art and science museums, and participated in family vacations and other culture-building activities. Harris and Graves (2010) found that when parents encouraged and supervised artistic activities that it had a positive impact on their child's academic development.

Mothers' reading to children during the pre-school years was designed to foster intellectual curiosity and interest in reading of children before they entered elementary school (Bojczyk et al., 2015). A major outcome of parents' reading to children at a young age is that the experience created what Kuh, Schuh, and Whitt (1991) called an *invisible tapestry* between themselves and their children's school teachers throughout their education. Invisible tapestry is a concept that describes how shared cultural beliefs between faculty and students serve to connect them within an educational context (Kuh et al., 1991). In much the same way, teachers in upper class school districts gravitate to students who display similar attitudes toward education as themselves. Parents' concerted cultivation efforts contributed in creating an implied covenant of mutual expectations between parents and teachers regarding high expectations for their children learning in school (Jordan Irvine, 1996).

Conversely, teachers in working class and lower income districts frequently face challenges creating a comfort zone that attracts different learners and their parents (Korsmo, 2014; Lareau, 2003). Whereas, working-class families and low-income families, in aggregate terms, habitually pursue a parenting practice of fostering accomplishments of natural growth (Lareau, 2003). These parents frequently seek to encourage their children to follow rules and regulations in school. Many students are oriented by parents to absorb the basic education from their P-12 learning before they enter the work force after high school or attending a trade school. Even the parents' attention to behaviors, like a high rate of attendance, seems to aid students in developing the habitus that education as a key to a better future through the passive assimilation process of attending school regularly.

Lareau's (2003) work implies that outlier working-class parents and low-income parents seeking to foster their children's upward mobility frequently adopt the concerted cultivation patterns of upper-class families. Families, and especially mothers, begin reading to their children early in an effort to foster their intellectual development and academic readiness for elementary

school. These families observed from the upper classes that assimilating cultural capital is a longitudinal process that begins before elementary school and continues through high school. Families intentionally build on their child's future success in school and life by reading aloud to them often and involving them in activities such as taking them to the library at an early age to participate in age-based small reading groups. Additionally, parents seek to draw their children into a range of activities like music lessons, dance lessons, and attend cultural events in an effort to help position their children for success in life. Parents' early reading to children before kindergarten is a major artifact of parents' early efforts to consciously create cultural capital for their children.

### The Study

A particular area of interest for us is the early reading experiences of our first generation students. We wondered if it played a role in their aspirations and decision to go to college, and if their background with reading could be a product of cultural capital and habitus within the family. First generation students' perceptions of themselves and their academic reading ability are low (Penrose, 2002; Strayhorn, 2011; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). It made sense then to identify our students' early reading experiences and to look for common connections as a way to offset predisposed perceptions. We began with one section of students as a pilot study to determine if we were on the right course for understanding first generation students' challenges. A researcher-constructed survey was distributed to the class as a routine part of the course work. Questions were primarily open-ended allowing students to discuss the broader issue of their early reading experiences. The class was composed of 20 females and two males, with one female student identified as biracial while the other students identified predominately White. No students in this particular class had reported learning disabilities, and all students were from the state in which the university was located. Most of the students were from middle or lower socioeconomic homes.

The survey revealed three broad themes: 1) students were influenced by a variety of factors to attend college but predominately the desire for a better career and life/future; 2) students' immediate families (parents and grandparents) were the champions of early reading experiences in the home (i.e. reading aloud), if there was support at all; and 3) reading aloud by teachers was fondly remembered but typically only happened in the elementary grades. Other supporting themes were identified and gave us deeper insight into the cultural capital and early reading experiences of first generation students. Those subthemes included students' believed in their ability to succeed in college and graduate, their parents' encouraged and supported their quest for higher education, and they were influenced by positive school experiences and affirming teachers along their educational journey. These subthemes seem to reinforce that cultural capital is a lifetime investment, and that perceptions of cultural capital can be influenced purposefully by others outside our own specific cultural group.

We first wanted to identify the factors that most influenced students' decision to attend college to help us identify the connection to cultural capital. Since cultural capital is transmitted from generation to generation, but fostering reading habits as well as other education benefits could be a basis for cultural capital shifts, then identifying those factors influencing the decision to attend college were important. The respondents indicated a college education was needed for a future career (50%), future life success and bettering themselves (over their parents' position in life) was possible with a college education (49%), and family encouragement to get a degree was a primary motivation (40%). One student revealed that "*not going to college was never an option for me....my parents expected me to go to college and [be the first] to get a degree.*" This was a

repeated sentiment echoed by many of the students. Parents, who have learned the importance of a college education, were extremely instrumental. Another student summed it up stating, “*I decided to attend college because no one else in my family ever has and I think that in order to feel financially secure in the future I will need a degree. Also, I need a degree for the career I want to have.*” On the whole, students’ reflections about their parent(s)/guardian’s early reading to them aligns with reproduction theorists like Bourdieu (1986), Giroux (1983), Laueru (2003), and MacLeod’s (2009) theory of social escalation, where parent(s)/guardian(s) foster early and continuous reading experiences, foster academic achievement aspirations, and foster the pursuit of a four-year college degree.

Next we asked students about their early reading experiences. Knowing that first generation students tend to be less academically prepared (Choy, 2001; Coffman, 2011; Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Weininger, 2008), we wondered if reading was introduced and reinforced in students’ early childhood and if that helped set in motion the point where students’ confidence and expertise with the language began. Data revealed that only 54% of these students reported parents and grandparents reading aloud to them during the preschool years. These students related fond memories of cuddling while reading together and loving the stories. Several mentioned growing up with Dr. Seuss books, even citing the titles of their favorites. Interestingly, only one student definitively said “*no one read aloud to me.*” What was intriguing to us was that 46% of respondents did not recall being read to as young children. While some students may not have remembered being read to in those early years, it still gave us a moment of pause. We reasoned that not being read to and/or not remembering being read to were, in essence, the same outcome in these students’ minds—they believed their early childhood was void of the strong role models for reading.

This perceived lack of investment early in their early reading development connected back to Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of cultural capital and habitus. Research has shown that these early reading experiences are correlated to future reading success (Anderson et al., 1985). When first generation students do not notice early exposure to reading, it may be due to the lack of intentional valuing of reading by the older generation. In other words, families from lower social classes, like families from upper social classes, create a habitus that fosters the reproduction of the next generation in the families. Students’ reflection of their parents’ lack of investment in their early reading development reflects the habitus that parents created in their families. Briefly, we learned employing a conceptual framework (Giroux’s, 1983) of how students from working-class and low-income backgrounds often covertly and overtly resist the school environment that mirrors the image of the upper-class students. Additionally, this upper-class school environment implicitly and explicitly encourages less-privileged students to conform to the dominant student sub-culture in the school.

Our third area of inquiry was first generation students’ experiences in schools with teachers reading aloud. Some students indicated they had teachers from K-12 who read to them, while others reported the only grade they remembered teachers reading aloud to them was in kindergarten. More frequently, these first generation students recollected teachers reading aloud to them primarily in elementary school (40%). Interestingly, less than 10% of the students recalled any teacher reading aloud in junior high/middle school or high school. According to Routman (2003), “Reading aloud—in all grades—has long been viewed as a critical factor in producing successful readers as well as learners who are interested in reading” (p. 20). It made us wonder who the role models for reading were during these academic growth years.

We also wanted to know what these first generation students remembered about their experiences in learning to read. Interestingly, 50% of the respondents either did not remember learning to read or they recalled needing extra help because they were behind their peers. Some expressed feeling frustrated and dreaded reading, especially when forced to read aloud. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (2014) data, 44% of first-year students spent extensive time reading more than 10 books or course pack materials. This amount of required reading is an enormous challenge for students who are slow readers or those who see themselves as below average readers. One student responded, “*I took side classes to get extra help in elementary school and I am still not fully confident but getting there and have gotten better.*” Another student stated “*I hated reading,*” and several students reported they taught themselves to read. If college and future success is predicated on reading achievement, then first generation students who have few early role models are truly at risk for the rigor of academic study.

As a follow up, we also wanted to know how these students rated themselves as readers, how important they believed reading was to their future success in college, and how important it was to their future success in life. Students rated themselves as readers on a scale of 1-6 with 1 as someone who cannot read and 6 as an excellent reader. Of the 22 students in the class, 32% rated themselves a 6 (excellent), 45% rated themselves a 5 (above average), and 23% rated themselves a 4 (close to average). Regarding the importance of reading for college success, 73% provided the rating of 6 as highly important, and the remaining 27% rating its importance as a 5. Most of the students (77%) rated the importance of reading for their future success in their lives a 6, while the remaining 23% rated it a 5. These data would suggest our students had come to value reading ability as a sign of the more *elite culture* or critical for their future success. Along the way, they have identified the ability to read as a social and cultural capital. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) suggested other stakeholders in children’s lives can play a major role in promoting reading, for example, as cultural capital. They examined how people with the desired types of cultural capital (e.g. linguistic) in our schools can transmit those valuable resources to their students to increase educational opportunities.

### Lessons Learned

Willingham (2012) stated there is a correlation between household wealth and school achievement, which has been repeatedly confirmed through numerous studies previously discussed. He cautioned that it is a correlation and not causality, meaning income does not have to define achievement. As Lareau’s (2003) work indicated, students with support from family, teachers, and other personal mentors in their lives can achieve above the mean and defy the correlation. This shift in the messages transmitted through their traditional cultural capital may occur early in their lives and continue throughout their lives. It is important to convey the message to parents and students that education is a tool for positive futures. For our colleagues teaching at universities, we need to constantly reinforce the benefits of lifelong learning and reading. If we take a little time in our classes to reinforce the value of reading and what strategies may help students navigate particular content area texts, we may increase their confidence and skill in reading college-level material. This in turn could assist first generation students in successfully attaining an advanced degree.

From our study, we realized many students do not have strong role models for reading much beyond the early elementary grades. If the students are from lower income families, reading aloud may not have been practiced (Cunningham, 2011). More students reported not recalling

teachers reading aloud to them in middle school or high school. If role models are not seen using a skill like reading, the likelihood of students valuing that skill are limited. Since the strongest educational role models for most students during their school-age years are teachers, it makes sense to call for teachers at all levels to model reading for pleasure and learning. Often this is accomplished through reading aloud to students. Many experts in the field of reading contend reading aloud to students of all age levels is one of the most important activities to develop students' interests and abilities in reading (Cunningham & Allington, 2010; Dorn & Jones, 2012; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Hoffman, 2011; Ogle & Beers, 2012; Routman, 2003; Trelease, 2013; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011).

Because we learned that the transmission of cultural capital can change when alternate tenets are reinforced, parents and teachers can make an impact on the reading achievement if we allow students to witness our reading for multiple reasons and we read aloud to them. This could be a critical point for high school and university professors to consider.

A majority of our students revealed a belief that reading well was an essential skill for succeeding in college. They also believed reading was a necessary life skill. We believe this attitude of seeing reading as a necessity for future success had become part of the cultural capital for these students. Some of them saw themselves as capable readers while others did not. With the high reading demands placed on first-year university students, this lack of confidence in their reading abilities may have added to the stress of learning. For those students who struggle, we wondered if they were internalizing reading as a component of their cultural capital. This begged further investigation on our part.

#### Implications for Practice

Parents from lower middle class and below backgrounds can level the educational attainment playing field for the children like their upper-class counterparts by fostering their children's educational aspirations before kindergarten. Knowing the impact of these early reading experiences has several implications for educators and others concerned about fostering cultural capital through expanding the pool of Americans who attend and earn a four- year degree.

- Parents and children relationships can be enhanced through parents routine reading to pre-school children.
- Parents regularly reading with elementary age children encourages young people to value books and reading.
- Four-year institutions through Schools of Education's Reading Departments should support early literacy development in families through parent and pre-school kids' reading programs held at public libraries and school libraries in the local public and private schools.
- Fraternities and sororities at four-year institutions should develop college student and P-8 reading clubs as a key component of their community service missions. The Greek Letter organizations programs might consider offering their programs at Head Start Programs, YMCA, community centers, community libraries, and public and private school libraries.
- Civic-minded and volunteers oriented independent college students can gain academic credit and experience by volunteer weekly to read books to and with children who attend public and private schools in the shadow of the universities.
- Four-year institutions should partner with private sector entities like Barnes and Nobles to offer discounted books to parents and elementary and middle high school students who regularly read and discuss books together.

### In Conclusion

Students shared with us in their own words how their parents' and grandparents' early reading to them played a major role in their efforts to become academically stimulated and paved the way for their subsequent academic success in school and then later in college. Employing Giroux's (1983) school resistance model provided us a conceptual framework to understand the variation in students' responses to the dominant school environment in a school setting dominated by students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Early reading experiences laid the foundation for the students to develop into self-motivated learners. For us, this was a vivid example of the cultural capital theory. The review of research on cultural capital revealed that parents, especially those of the upper middle class families' cultures, greatly influence the future of their children by intentionally fostering the importance of education and reading (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986; Lareau, 2000).

This study revealed that while some students received this *message* from their families and caregivers, many did not. Especially for first generation students, the intensity of the cultural capital passed to them was often weak. As educators, we need to learn what cultural capital our students bring with them to school at every level. Additionally, we may need to transmit to our students the tools to develop more cultural capital by being positive role models. Future research should seek to learn from first-generation students about their other reflections about their parents' efforts to intentionally foster their upward mobility through emulating the cultural capital practices of upper-class families.

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