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Confronting "The Imposter Syndrome" in the Adult Learning Classroom

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The Imposter Syndrome

The imposter syndrome is a phenomenon characterized by an inability to internalize success and achievement, including academic excellence. Many confronting this phenomenon struggle with feelings of self-doubt and a perception of inadequate mastery and competency (Acker, 1997; Bell, 1990; Clance & Imes, 1978; Zorn, 2005; Watson & Betts, 2010). We posit that when the experience of the imposter syndrome intersects with race and class, the result can be a paralyzing existence. How does race impact performance in the adult learning environment? And, how does race perpetuate the "imposter syndrome" among students of color in the educational environment?

Clance and Imes (1978) conducted a study with over 150 highly successful women with PhDs and students who were highly recognized for their academic success and found that women were more likely to project the cause of their success outward to an external cause such as luck and not to inherent ability. Zorn (2005) noted that "the culture of the university makes it difficult to talk about the imposter phenomenon, and those experiencing it often suffer in isolation" (p. 8). While the imposter syndrome is more common among women (Acker, 1997; Acker & Armenti, 2004; Acker & Fluevenger, 1996; Clance & Imes, 1978), it also manifests itself in professional men and students of color and in those below middle class.

Background Information

The term imposter syndrome, was introduced in the late 1970s by clinical psychologists Dr. Pauline R Clance and Suzanne A. Imes (Clance, & Imes, 1978). While working with highly accomplished individuals, they discovered these people had a sense of failure and internalized their accomplishments as being fraudulent (Clance, 1985; Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). Faced with remarkable achievements, many attributed such successes to chance, and good timing. These successful individuals had convinced themselves that they were a fraud and were being deceptive. The auto-ethnographical narratives below embody the experiences of two professors who, in spite of incredible odds, have attained significant success and would be described by many as accomplished academics. Yet, each did not initially internalize their success as a product of their inherent intellectual abilities.

The Purpose of the Paper

In this paper, we reflect on the literature on the Imposter Syndrome and apply the common elements emerging from the literature to the experiences of the two authors of this paper. Our purpose is to understand how the syndrome manifests itself in the learning experiences of adults and to advance strategies that may be used by adult educators to deal with the phenomenon both personally and in their professional praxis. Adults engage in learning for a countless number of reasons (Knowles, 1984; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007) and many of these adult learners struggle with the imposter syndrome. It behooves educators to

understand the correlation between learning and the imposter syndrome particularity with respect to minority students.

Lorenzo's Encounter with "The Imposter Syndrome"

In coming of age as a student and later as an educator, I experienced many instances in which I silenced my outer voice in the erroneous belief that what I had to say wasn't correct or equally as important as what my White fellow classmates had to say and contribute. As a result, in most cases throughout my educational experiences starting with grade school and moving through undergraduate into graduate school (law school, graduate management school, and doctoral studies), I rarely ever raised my hand to answer questions or contribute to discussions. I recall one experience in a doctoral seminar in which the professor called me aside to ask why I wasn't more "verbal" during classroom discussions. He required weekly journal entries for each student that only he read; he noted that I had much to say that he thought would enhance the classroom discussions. Nevertheless, even after this discussion, I found it difficult to actively participate in the classroom discussions.

After completing my doctoral courses and successfully defending my proposal, my dissertation supervisor asked me to co-teach a research course with him. He wasn't aware of the "horror and terror" that he invoked in me. I felt compelled to agree to co-teach the course. However, I questioned my ability to teach graduate students. I challenged my knowledge and expertise. I over prepared for each class. It was only after I encountered the concept of the "imposter syndrome" did I realize what I had experienced. As Zorn (2005) found, I could not talk about my experience with anyone in the university, I "suffered" in isolation. I struggled to minimize my faltering self-confidence, the internalization of failure, the stress of anxiety of over preparing for classes as I sought perfection (Parkman, 2016).

Glenn's Encounter with "The Imposter Syndrome"

My earliest encounter with the imposter syndrome had little to do with race and everything to do with living in a society endemically defined by class and socio-economic standing. With determination and resilience, my life was transformed when family members combined their meager resources and decided to pay at the time what appeared an exorbitant tuition for my high school education. I was jolted by the lavish lifestyles of most of the students. I was suddenly confronted with the reality of my subsistence living. I purposefully denied the reality of my existence and assumed the persona of many of my classmates. Although I lived in an economically depressed neighborhood, my classmates thought I was from one of the more privileged enclaves in Kinston. I deliberately made no effort to correct that perception. In retrospect, I now realize I was silent in many of my high school classes. While I did well academically, I might have had greater success had I not been grappling with the specter of my socio-economic background and the lack of resource. I was experiencing the imposter syndrome.

Several years into my academic career, I decided to pursue my doctorate at an institution in the American South. There I encountered the imposter syndrome from a very different perspective. Navigating the classes, I felt some degree of marginalization as I believed that my thoughts and ideas were considered less significant by some of my white professors and white students. Throughout the four years, I had three Black professors. I felt safe and comfortable in those classes (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000). Self-efficacy became a non-issue in those

classes. I felt confident, empowered and motivated by those professors; I never questioned my abilities to learn and be academically successful in their classes and in their presence.

Ironically, in spite of the expectations of academic achievements, it took me by surprise when one of my Black professors invited me to co-teach one of her undergraduate classes. She eventually became my major professor in my doctoral program. Later in the program, she again invited me to co-teach a graduate class. Unbeknownst to her, there was an internal turmoil. The trepidation was I really capable to handle teaching at a Research One Institution. The “imposter syndrome” interferes with my motivation, self-efficacy, and perception; factors that can ultimately thwart a person’s ability to learn. Nonetheless I prevailed as there were those who believed in my ability and my future; something I began to internalize.

Conclusion and Implications

The reality of the imposter syndrome may hinder learning in students who struggle with the phenomenon. Adult educators must teach with an awareness of the phenomenon and develop effective strategies that aid students struggling with the syndrome to learn. Ironically, one of the things that allowed both authors to develop personal strategies to confront the imposter syndrome was exposure to the existence of the phenomenon. There was power in being able to name and identify the "enemy" within. There is a need for support networks in academia in order to address the reality of this phenomenon. More research is needed in order to fully understand the many ways in which this phenomenon manifests itself among adult learners.

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