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Pushing Education: Parental Engagement, Educational Aspirations and College Access

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Pushing Education: Parental Engagement, Educational Aspirations, and College Access

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the counterstories of educational engagement experiences for five parents who have a high school student in a college access program that is designed for students with a financial need and/or no family history of college. This study uses the ecologies of parental engagement (EPE) framework to explore family engagement in traditional academic settings but also nonacademic settings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and one focus group. Their counterstories challenge the notion that parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and/or no to little family history of college are disinterested or disengaged in their student's education. The data reveal that the family members are highly engaged in their student's educational experiences in academic settings, nonacademic settings (home, community organizations, and neighborhoods), and in the college access program. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the college access program serves as an alternative space for family engagement.

Keywords

college access program, counterstories, parental engagement

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Family engagement research in education has come far from the early days when it was concluded that parents, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or parents of color, who did not participate in traditional activities such as parent teacher conferences and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, were not interested in their students or involved with their education. Instead, research has highlighted the many barriers that groups based on class and/or race/ethnicity may experience when navigating more traditional methods of engagement (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). Family engagement research has begun to acknowledge that families are not involved in a vacuum; that is, their beliefs regarding education and their efforts at engagement are subject to many factors, including their own educational experiences, their understanding of the school system, and how parents are invited to engage in their schools (Barton, et al., 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Additionally, more current research has discovered that families can be engaged in their student's education in ways both academic (asking about homework, volunteering in the classroom) and nonacademic (support for their extracurricular and community activities; Auerbach, 2007; Barton et al., 2004; Kiyama, 2010). Acknowledging that engagement can take place outside of the classroom and outside of the ways often prescribed by schools is particularly important for marginalized families who may be presented with barriers to accessing educational information through traditional methods of engagement, particularly information about the college process.

One way family members can gain information regarding college is through

college access and preparation programs. A common understanding of college preparation programs is that they are designed to increase access and information related to college for underserved students through programming that is designed to complement their public school education (Tierney & Jun, 2001). The research has shown, however, that without valuing the cultural and personal background of families, efforts at outreach and guidance will be ill-received and likely ineffective (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Mattingly, Prislun, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). A part of valuing students' culture and background means involving families. Researchers have concluded that family engagement in college preparation programs is critical when trying to help students access postsecondary education (Corwin, Colyar, & Tierney, 2005; Rueda, 2005; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). In many college preparation programs, however, interaction with families is minimal and may include only superficial activities, such as signing paperwork (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Furthermore, limited research has investigated the role of families in college preparation programs (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005).

The purpose of this qualitative, single case study was to add to the conversation on family engagement in college access programs. The following question guided this research: How do parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and limited or no family history of college engage in their student's education? There were two sub-questions: (a) How do parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and limited or no family history of college engage in their student's education in academic and nonacademic settings? (b) How do parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and limited or no family history of college

¹ The terms family and parent are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript. The researchers are inclusive of parents, guardians, siblings, grandparents, and other family members who have a role in raising children when using both terms.

² The terms college access programs and college preparation programs are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript.

³ The researchers use the term underserved students to represent students with no family history of college, students from a lower socioeconomic status, and/or students of color.

perceive the role of a college access program in engaging in their student's education? Each question is embedded in the context of understanding the experiences of parents who have children in a college access program that was designed for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and/or students with limited or no family history of college

Review of the Literature

Researchers have agreed that having families actively engaged in their student's education produced positive outcomes (Jeynes, 2007; Jun & Colyar, 2002; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Jun and Colyar (2002) found that students had higher grades and were more motivated to do well academically when their families were actively involved in their school while also being supportive, yet demanding, of academic excellence. Although the benefits of family involvement in education are understood, what is not always understood is how to adequately engage families to maximize student success, particularly those families from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, the question remains as to whether traditional methods of evaluating involvement are biased and do not account for ways in which underrepresented families engage with their student.

The literature has remained rather consistent over time as to what activities are considered or measured as it pertains to family involvement in education. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) summarized involvement as generally falling into two categories within the literature, academic activities that are home-based and those that are school-based. Those actions occurring within the home may include communication about school activities and assignments, helping with and/or reviewing homework, and maintaining contact with the student's teacher, and those within the school are typically prescribed opportunities set forth by the school, such as attending conferences, family programs or

meetings, or volunteering in the classroom or at larger school functions (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). A more recent meta-analysis of parent involvement literature by Jeynes (2007) continued to find that the most frequently measured constructs of parental involvement included communication about school and homework activities, attendance at school events and programs, and frequency of checking homework in the evening. Similarly, Crosnoe (2001) made use of a student self-report measure used elsewhere in the literature (Steinberg et al., 1992) that asked students to rate each of their parents or guardians on engagement with five involvement behaviors, which again fell into the traditional categories of home- and school-based activities, such as attending school activities or helping students with homework when asked. There has been some expansion in the definition of involvement in the literature to account for influences of parenting style and role construction (Auerbach, 2007; Steinberg et al., 1992) and communication of academic expectations and aspirations (Stage & Hossler, 1989), but the majority of the other variables examined in the literature remain consistent (e.g., participation in activities related to homework and school functions; Jeynes, 2007).

Parental involvement in education has been measured in the literature in various ways, including surveys of school teachers, staff, and administrators (Ferrara, 2009), purely student or parent perspectives (Auerbach, 2007), as well as reviewing large sets of data from national studies (Muller, 1998). What is common among the literature has been the tendency to reduce parental involvement to quantitative data, a limitation recognized in some of the literature (Perna & Titus, 2005). Jeynes' (2007) meta-analysis, in particular, has yielded new and relevant data about the impact of family engagement on typically underserved students, but it also has pointed to the dearth of understanding about family involvement in education beyond the traditionally accepted

variables. However, some scholarly literature has acknowledged that a more complex understanding of involvement is necessary (Ferrara, 2009; Perna & Titus, 2005; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996), particularly in order to understand the engagement practices of typically underserved groups (Barton, et al., 2004; Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lopez et al., 2001).

The traditional home-school partnership model did not view students and families in a broader social context and, by doing so, minimized or ignored completely the inequities embedded into the school system and educational involvement model dominated by White, middle-class standards (Auerbach, 2007; Yosso, 2005). Mattingly et al. (2002) examined 41 parent involvement programs designed to increase student academic outcomes. They found that many of the programs did not account for the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of families, and program goals largely focused on trying to change parents' behavior rather than altering the mindset of the teachers and schools. Structuring programs in this way, without regard to family background or composition and without acknowledging families' preexisting strengths, contributes to marginalized groups feeling both unwelcome in the schools and that their experiences and efforts at engagement are invalid. Schools and other programs hoping to partner with families must truly understand their population and any special needs (and strengths) associated with that if they expect their outreach efforts to be successful (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found that even well-intentioned invitations to become involved may falter unless parents felt that their involvement was going to make a significant impact on their child's success.

With narrowly defined expectations for involvement that have not accounted for individual, familial, and cultural differences and strengths, many underserved families have been unable to or uncomfortable with

engaging with the schools and have been characterized as unwilling to participate or uninterested in their student's academic success (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lightfoot, 1978; Lopez et al., 2001; Yosso, 2005). Although these families may have faced actual barriers ranging from job constraints to language differences (Tierney, 2002), the burden of involvement fell solely on the families in this traditional view, without regard to the potential reasons for their perceived disconnection from the academic environment. Increasingly, researchers and practitioners have become aware of the need to structure the academic environment in a manner that invites participation from all families. Tierney (2002) pointed out the continued disconnect between research that showed how important families are to academic success—particularly college acceptance and enrollment—and practices that deterred family participation. Families with limited types of capital, such as economic capital, are still more likely to be at a disadvantage, even when teachers and schools structure their environment to invite participation (Barton, et al., 2004; Carreón et al., 2005). Structuring academic environments to be more inviting and equitable to diverse populations remains a work in progress.

In an effort to address this, Tierney (2002) called for a "bidirectional sense of engagement," a view in which families, schools, and community agencies worked together to incorporate and affirm a student's cultural background (p. 599). Lopez et al. (2001), in their work with migrant families, found that schools were most successful in engaging families when they were cognizant of the unique challenges facing this population and worked to address all of their many needs (e.g., health care), not just those concerning education. Furthermore, understanding and affirming students in the context of their families and their communities and valuing the capital they bring from these areas can be critical to academic success for underrepresented students and

to supporting and welcoming families into the academic space as partners (Auerbach, 2007; Tierney & Jun, 2001; Yosso, 2005).

Valuing a student's life outside of school by learning about the family's "funds of knowledge," including their practical knowledge and life skills that are shared with one another through their culture and personal histories, expands the opportunity for richer classroom experiences and teacher-student exchanges (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, and Moll (2011) found that examining funds of knowledge and capital together led to a richer understanding of how families of underserved youth can translate their particular funds into tangible educational benefits. Carreón et al. (2005), in studying the engagement experiences of immigrant parents, argued that there were forms of capital that were ignored and minimized when examining parental engagement through a traditional lens. However, many families were not aware of how valuable their funds of knowledge can be and how they can be mobilized for the benefit of their student's education (Kiyama, 2010).

Accessing available resources becomes particularly salient during the college search and selection process for many students. Families from lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to have extensive support networks with educators, other parents in the school, and other professionals (e.g., lawyers, doctors) to address issues around schooling (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). As understanding grows about the special needs of first-generation college students, college preparation programs designed to provide information and guidance about college and related topics (e.g., standardized tests and financial aid) to marginalized high school students have attempted to ameliorate the inequity of access to college (Tierney & Jun, 2001). Unfortunately, such programs are not available to all families who need critical information to navigate the college process, and as Tierney

(2002) points out there are often significant structural and cultural barriers to marginalized families accessing this information within the typical school structure. As a result, low-income and students with a no family history of college are operating at a disadvantage in the college search process.

Much of the college choice literature has pointed to specific family characteristics as key factors in a student's postsecondary outcome, and most of these characteristics have been skewed toward White, middle-class standards. Among those frequently cited are parents' communication of educational expectations, family financial savings for college, and level of parent education (Stage & Hossler, 1989). A student's decision to pursue postsecondary education can also be positively affected by a parent maintaining frequent contact with their student's school about academics, as well as regular conversations about college between parent and child and discussions with friends about college (Perna & Titus, 2005). Targeting marginalized families in meaningful, culturally relevant ways to partner with them as they progress through the college search process has proved successful in the research (Auerbach, 2007) and provides a goal for all schools and programs that hope to make an impact with underrepresented students.

Theoretical Framework

The ecologies of parental engagement (EPE) framework (Barton et al., 2004) guided this study. The EPE framework was developed as a result of a study about parental engagement in urban schools. Drawing on cultural-historical activity theory and critical race theory, the framework uses an ecological perspective to understand parental engagement in relation to activity networks (Barton et al., 2004). Barton et al. (2004) argued, "Social organizations, such as schools and community-based organizations, are embedded with cultural values. These val-

ues manifest themselves in recurring social practices and their artifacts that give order, purpose, and continuity to life in that social organization” (p. 4). However, within these social organizations or activity networks, “individuals are not positioned equally” and do not receive the “same kinds of benefits” from the network (Barton et al., 2004, p. 4). In addition, race, language, and social class shape an individual’s positionality in these organizations and networks (Barton et al., 2004). The EPE framework offers a critical perspective to explore the activities that family members choose to engage in by considering the act of engagement as an interactive process instead of mere participation in traditional school settings..

Barton et al., (2004) presented three assumptions, that help to frame family or parental engagement as an interactive process:

- **“Parental engagement is the mediation between space and capital by parents in relation to others in school settings”** (p. 5): Instead of exploring parental engagement from a stance of involvement (e.g., attendance at school meetings), the EPE framework is based on understanding parental engagement through exploring the context of space and capital. Parental engagement can be understood as the juxtaposition of parents’ actions in school settings in the context of their own capital (human, social, and material) and the values or norms in the space (i.e., school- or home/community-based space). The EPE framework, unlike traditional models of parental involvement, does not seek to understand parental engagement as an outcome. Instead, the EPE framework seeks to understand relationships and actions within the context of a space. Therefore, Barton et al. (2004) argue for the examination of parental engagement as an interactive process between capital and space instead of the static notion of participation in parent-teacher meetings, PTA, and other organized school events and meetings.
- **“Engagement as mediation must be understood as both an action and an orientation to action”** (p.5): Barton et al. (2004) understood action as “acts, processes, or forms of doing something” (p. 8). However, they “also describe how actions exist within and help to shape the relationships and practices of schooling” (p. 8). The orientation to action refers to the notion that action is always driven by something, such as the drive to make changes within a school setting or the drive to help one’s child prepare for college. The EPE framework understands parental engagement through two types of action: “how parents activate the resources available to them in a given space in order to author a place of their own in schools and how they use or express that place to position themselves differently so that they can influence life in schools” (p. 8). In addition, the authors challenge the traditional notions of capital (e.g., financial resources) and discuss how individuals may leverage various forms of capital (e.g., resilience) to author spaces and position themselves within those spaces.
- **“Differences in parental engagement across different kinds of spaces in urban schools are both a micro- and macro phenomenon”** (pp. 5-6): Barton et al. (2004) discussed three types of spaces: school-based settings; school-based, nonacademic settings; and community/home-based settings. These spaces are framed by micro contexts (individual classroom settings) and macro contexts (educational policy, financial resources). The authors discussed how parental engagement was shaped in each setting by micro and macro contexts but also by open communication with parents, perceived

capital, and perceived ability to activate their capital.

We used the EPE framework to understand how and why parents became involved in their student's education. In addition, we explored the activities that the family members chose to engage in by considering the act of engagement as an interactive process, which was framed in the context of space (academic and nonacademic), life history, beliefs, and the capital (Barton et al, 2004). We focused on a group of parents in one college access program designed for students and families with a financial need and/or no or limited family history of college. We also sought to understand their experiences in the college access program and how they perceived the program in engaging in their student's education. Consideration of the families' engagement in the context of their background informs the conversation on how families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds engage in spaces, both academic and nonacademic, leading to a more strength-based perspective.

Method

Our research sought to expand the understanding of involvement in education by allowing the type and location of engagement activities to evolve naturally through life narratives and consideration of unique personal variables. In this way, we sought to foster a more strength-based perspective and lend support to the growing understanding of the need for more broadly defined constructs of engagement. We were particularly interested in narratives around higher education, college access, and college preparation from parents who had a child in a college access program designed for families with limited or no history of college and/or families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Counterstories

The researchers chose a method that allowed family members' experiences to be adequately situated in their cultural and environmental context in order to truly achieve the strength-based perspective for which the researchers strived. Approaching their life histories and current experiences of educational engagement, both in academic and nonacademic spaces, from a counterstory perspective allowed the researchers to fully evaluate their experiences. Counterstories originated from critical race theory, a theory that examines how racism is embedded in U.S. social institutions and structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002). Counterstories are the stories told by individuals who are marginalized by societal systems and structures; their stories offer a counter voice to the majoritarian voices that often rely on stereotypes to describe the lives of marginalized people (Bell, 2003; Yosso, 2006). Counterstories add a critical layer of information to the public discourse by helping to illuminate, acknowledge, and center the experiences of marginalized groups (Bell, 2003; Carney, 2004; Yosso, 2006). For this study, we extended the notion of counterstories to offer a counter voice to the rhetoric about how parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds engage in their student's education.

The Role of the Researchers

The qualitative researcher serves as an instrument for data collection (Creswell, 2007; Mertens, 2010). We brought our individual social and cultural lens to this study. Two of the researchers were administrators in the college access program, and two of the authors have children. From our distinct and unique positionalities, we worked together to draw conclusions from the counterstories of the five participants in this study. We also were often asked questions regarding the college admission process, which occurred both during and after the interviews. We saw our roles as re-

searchers who still had the responsibility to acknowledge (and respond to) the requests, needs, and questions presented to us by the participants. Although some may see our roles as a limitation, we believe we had the obligation to truly hear and recognize the counterstories of the participants because of our relationship with them and our roles as staff members in the college access program, individuals who have raised children, and as individuals who were the first in our families to attend college.

Site and Participant Selection

The Lakeside Academy, a pseudonym, is a university-based college access program for academically promising high school students with a financial need and/or little to no family history of college in one south-eastern county. The Academy’s mission is to inspire academically promising students who are often underrepresented on college and university campuses to pursue higher education. The students remain in their own high schools, but they participate in year-round programming through the Lakeside Academy. The Academy has a strong family component throughout the summer and academic year, including workshops, a family council, and special events for families.

All parents and guardians of the students in the Lakeside Academy were invited to participate in the study via a flyer in the mail or a flyer given to them during one of the family programs. Interested family members contacted the principal investigator (PI) if they wanted to participate in the study. The PI or another research team member reviewed the consent form with interested family members, and then the family members signed the consent form if they decided to become study participants. Five family members completed the entire study. The five family members were all women and mothers of students in the Lakeside Academy, and they were given pseudonyms (see Table 1). They all identified as having some

type of financial need. Two family members had students in a public charter school, but the other family members had students in traditional public high schools. The study has two major limitations. There were only five participants, and the racial diversity of the participants does not represent the diversity in the program. The participants’ voices, however, do shed light on educational engagement challenges and opportunities for parents of students who may be the first in their family to go to college or who have a financial need.

Table 1

Study Participants

Name of Participant	Race	Student’s School Type
Angie	White	Public High School
Cathy	White	Public High School
Jessica	White	Public Charter School
Joy	Black	Public High School
Susan	White	Public Charter School

Procedures

The five family members participated in two one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with a research team member. The participants had an option to participate in a focus group or complete a third one-on-one, semi-structured interview, and two participants chose to participate in the focus group. The first one-on-one interview focused on the participants’ life history, educational history, and past experiences in academic and nonacademic settings. The second interview focused on the family members’ engagement in their student’s education, their student’s pathways to college, and their experiences in the Lakeside Academy as family members. The focus group and third interviews were an opportunity to reflect on the responses from the previous two interviews, while providing an opportunity to do member checking with participants regarding emerging themes.

Data Analysis

All interviews and the focus group were professionally transcribed. The three members of the research team independently read the transcripts and developed a list of emerging codes through an open coding process. The researchers then worked together to develop a codebook and independently applied the codebook to code one transcript. The researchers met together to have a conversation about disparities and refine code definitions before coding all the interview transcripts. The coding process led to categories and then eventually themes for the study. The researchers worked together to challenge any assumptions that arose as they analyzed data to ensure they were recognizing and acknowledging the voices of the family members in this study.

Findings

The counterstories from this research revealed powerful evidence of engagement and involvement in the college search process by families from lower socioeconomic status. Specifically, it revealed the engagement experiences of families, their long-held and unwavering beliefs in the importance of education, and the scope of the family members' future goals for their child. The counterstories presented by the families also revealed that the Lakeside Academy served as a space to engage in their student's education, a space where, not only they felt they belonged, but also where critical engagement occurred between themselves and their student.

Counterstories of Family Engagement

For the participating family members, it was often the lack of encouragement toward education (specifically education in formal school settings) in their own childhood homes, as well as their own personal, negative experiences with education, that sparked their desire to make college acceptance a primary goal for their own children.

Indeed, the narratives of these families did not support a fixed status for educational aspirations and attainment based on the educational ideologies of their familial social network. Susan commented:

Quite honestly, I was embarrassed of my parents, because they had no education. They were alcoholics, and so I said I want to be exactly opposite of them. They could care less about school. Being in school was unimportant, and they thought it to be unimportant to me. So I was doing the exact same opposite thing. [I] thought, "Okay, I'm going to make [school] number one"... Because my mom and dad did not go to college and I will never forget, and as ugly as it sounds, I was ashamed of them for their lack of knowledge and lack of education. And I always said I would be exactly opposite. I will have an education, my kids will have an education because I never want them to be ashamed.

Susan's own upbringing, with a lack of focus on education through formal school settings, strengthened her desire for school to be important to her own children, and for it to be an enjoyable experience. She noted, "It absolutely is so important to me that the kids have what I did not have. And have a good educational experience."

Similarly for Cathy, her parenting style and engagement in her child's education was a result of her own regret that her family of origin did not push her toward greater educational achievements. She stated:

I don't want to be that mom that, you know, he's 30 years old and says, "Well, I wish my mom would have pushed me." Because I say that about my mom. You know? I wish my mom would've said, "No Cathy, you are going to college."

Desiring improved educational experiences for their own child, these families worked toward that goal by starting early to consistently verbalize the importance of education

and, more specifically, higher education. Angie stated:

Well one thing I've told her is, you know, just explain to her why, why it's good to make her grades in school and, you know, go to college, even if it's just a community college. You know, and I've told her before if she goes to college, she gets the degree no matter what the degree is.

These families, despite not having a long family history of higher education attainment, were instinctively utilizing one of the most important factors to encourage their student toward higher education, that of sharing their aspirations.

Unwavering in their determination to see their child succeed, several parents spoke about "pushing" their child academically and what that meant for them. Susan said, "You know, I always think I push too hard. That's always a fear, you know...especially with [my daughter] and that whole class rank." Cathy also echoed this, "Because until he gets that four-year degree I probably can't let up on it." Families "pushed" their student by consistently asking about their coursework and grades, talking about the necessity of a college degree, going to the school to speak with teachers, and, for one family, creating financial stipulations in their will according to college attendance. For first-generation families with the resolve to increase their family's educational mobility, unbridled pushing of their student appeared to be based both in desire to see their child succeed and in fear of what would happen if they did not maintain that pressure on their student.

Raising their child with an intense focus on education as the main ingredient for success meant that these families expected their child to complete a four-year college degree as the minimum level of education. Joy commented:

My hopes for her education. (sighs)
I just want her to be up there. I don't care what she does. I don't care what

degree she gets. I just need her to go. It would be lovely if she went as far as a doctorate degree. But my goal is just for her to see what's out there and pursue it, whatever it may be.

Cathy was adamant, "I hope he can go to at least a four-year college. I just don't want him to go to a community college." This preference of attending a four-year college may have stemmed from their involvement in a college access program, which encourages students to focus their applications on four-year institutions. Joy commented, "My goal is for her to go to at least a four-year college, and I believe you guys [Lakeside Academy] are instilling that in her as well."

Families' insistence on educational achievement was not only rooted in their desire to move away from the educational expectations of their own childhood, but also in the hope of preparing their child for future success. Angie stressed to her daughter how a college degree could lead to personal and financial independence. She commented:

You know that's [a college degree], that's making sure that she can take care of herself when she gets older. And you know, I've told her before she doesn't wanna have to depend on anybody. She wants to be able to, to do something she enjoys.

Similarly, Angie felt that higher education would ensure that her daughter did not have limited career choices, as she felt her own career has been restricted due to minimal education. Cathy saw a college education as a necessity for her son to be competitive with his peers: "It's really important for me for [my son] to go to college, you know... So, I think that's what he needs is the four-year—four-year deal. And in today's world he really needs it, you know." Families viewed education as the key component in ensuring their child could successfully function as an independent adult, with the necessary skills to compete with their more affluent peers.

Not all of their aspirations for their child were education- and career-related. Several participants expressed their desire for their student to simply be happy in their life and use their knowledge to benefit others. Overall, these families felt confident in their student's ability to achieve their goals, both academic and personal. However, they also commented on several possible factors that could influence their student's achievement potential and educational goals, including finances and standardized tests. Angie commented:

I don't want our limited finances to hinder her in any way. [We] joke around with her and say, "Well you better get good grades while you're in school 'cause I can't afford to put you through college."

Additionally, she commented:

I'm excited about [college], especially for her because I know she's smart. And I know what her potential is or could be. So I'm just kinda interested to see how she's gonna be able to prove it on her testing.

Their access to college knowledge through participation in a college access program may have given them the understanding of how these factors can influence educational goals. Despite this knowledge, the families overwhelmingly verbalized positive outcomes for their student, indicating that despite their socioeconomic background, these families were indeed rich in aspirational capital, and the college access program of which they are a part should value their experiences and insight.

The participants in this study not only verbalized their educational expectations and aspirations, but they were determined to actively engage in their student's education and provide their knowledge and support as their child navigated every stage of their schooling. Their counterstories demonstrated that educational mobility is not fixed by childhood upbringing, and lack of familial educational attainment does not equal lack of educational aspirations for themselves and their own child.

Counterstories of Engagement in Noneducational Spaces

Families in this study utilized engagement strategies that went beyond the traditional family-school dyad of engagement. Ostensibly, families capitalized on their resources at home, in their neighborhoods, and within community organizations that helped propel their student in the college planning pipeline. Capitalizing on a multisystem approach of engagement, families interviewed for the study did not view engagement in schooling from an isolative lens. Instead, they realized that engagement in schooling was representative of the symbiotic transference of knowledge, positioning, self-reflection, and capital from the various networks in which they had membership.

Family engagement in the home. Parents in this study displayed high levels of engagement at home with their student. As discussed above, traditional literature has prioritized and focused on family engagement that takes place in schools. Thus, our finding represents a counterstory to that narrative as all of the families practiced various forms of at-home engagement. Families employed discussions, modeling, coaching, storytelling, and support and safety to enhance their engagement in school success while carrying out daily household tasks like cooking dinner and grocery shopping.

The following excerpts underscore the various at-home engagement modalities used by the families:

That's the momma in me, I'm sorry. I'm just always like you know it's going to be a tough year, you've got a lot of things to do, you've got a graduation project, you've got to keep your grades up, and you've got all your deadlines that you've got to meet for [Lakeside Academy], and I'm always saying that to him. (Cathy)

And I get home and you know, while I'm fixing supper, you know, we're just

kinda relax[ed] and [I] ask, “Did you have homework? What kind of homework did you have for what classes, did you finish it?” (Angie)

In these statements from the participants, a dialogue begins to emerge that supports the important role that at-home engagement plays in fostering a counterstory.

Family engagement outside of school. In executing parental engagement in their student’s education, many of the family members discussed how engagement in organizations outside of the school helped to prepare not only their student for college, but also developed their student’s sense of resilience, awareness, volunteerism, and a sense of self within the society. Cathy explained how being involved in the Ronald McDonald House Charities provided her son with a sense of positioning and self-reflection:

We’ve been [to the Ronald McDonald House] twice now, and we’ve volunteered, me and him. We went and cooked for them, and all. We went and bought all the groceries. We went up there and cooked. And now he’s getting all his friends involved in it because he loved it. He seen them little kids that were sick, you know. And it was so sad, you know. But to know that you’ve went in there and you’ve helped them, and you done something to make them feel better.

In Cathy’s quotation, educational engagement manifests itself through the practice of volunteerism and collective action. Essentially, this mother was able to engage herself in activity that not only engaged her son but his friends as well, thereby broadening the definition of engagement and learning as something that also happens in nonschool settings.

Likewise, Angie discussed the important role of Girl Scouts in the lives of her daughter and husband. For this participant, engagement in outside of school organizations created an extended family and a sense of

belonging. Angie stated, “[Girl Scouts] is really good. They’re a smaller group, so the girls really get along. The family members are great. It’s like they’re extended family.”

Family engagement in the neighborhood.

In the same manner, parents’ engagement in the educational lives of their student was also taking place in the neighborhoods in which the families lived. Through different counterstories, families revealed the importance of engagement that not only focused on academics and school success, but also taught social responsibility, altruism, and advocacy. Importantly, neighborhood engagement allowed for discussions of college to emerge in a naturalistic manner with neighbors.

Jessica and Cathy discussed the role of neighborhoods as vehicles of engagement in the college pipeline:

I have a neighbor that’s 96. Her son was actually [a] professor years ago and he’s retired now. And they were like us, they didn’t have the money. So, I’ve talked to her, how did you do it? You know, and things were different back then. So she’s encouraging in the sense that you’ve got to keep pushing [my daughter] to do all that she can to find what she can to make it a reality. (Jessica)

One of his mentors is his friend, [Mindy]. She graduated from Southeast University, and they talk a whole lot. I think she’s going to be there to help him. I’m sure she will. I’ve heard her and [my son] talk about doing the college application. (Cathy)

Individuals in the neighborhoods of the participants served as important resources and support networks as they worked collectively to encourage their children on the college-going process.

**College Access Program:
An Alternative Space for
Educational Engagement**

The participants in the study, specifically the participants who had a child in traditional public schools, described several barriers to their own personal engagement in their child's schools. Many family members described the difficulty of getting to know their student's teachers. The most ideal time to do so was during the school's open houses, which was a time for family members to meet with teachers. However, a few family members described the challenges associated with open houses:

When I go to my son's teachers for the meet and greet and talk about how they're doing, you're standing in line outside, there are twenty people outside, and you get three or four minutes with that teacher....I would sit there and talk to them for two hours if they would let me. (Cathy)

Yes, the open house. It is still hectic. It's crazy. It's no personalization. It's just the way it's set up, it's crazy. You come in whenever you come in and the teachers in there are talking to one person, one parent and then she's trying to take these things [and do them] 50 to 60 different times. It's not personal at all, but that's the way they did it...It was like five minutes because you have a whole lot of people waiting and talking to teachers. It is something else. (Joy)

This was not only a traditional public school phenomenon. Jessica, who has a daughter at a small charter school, described having overall positive experiences with family engagement at her daughter's school. However, she described the relationships as being less personable when compared to the Lakeside Academy.

The participants' descriptions of the program indicated that they saw the Lakeside Academy as different from other traditional education spaces, like their child's school. They saw the Lakeside Academy as a space where the program staff formed an extended family and where both students

and families had opportunities for growth. The families and students also viewed the program as a place where they could access knowledge and resources not readily available in their own schools while remaining in a supportive environment. The families felt comfortable sharing their ideas with program staff and one family member felt like she had an avenue to be engaged in the program through its family council, a group of family members from each cohort of students in the Lakeside Academy that provides oversight and input to programs and services provided by the Academy.

Family members were initially attracted to the program for the opportunities it presented to learn more about college. However, the Lakeside Academy became an extended family for the participants, an alternative space where their families would be welcomed and where people would be invested in their students' educations. Angie said, "You know, it's just nice to see people taking that much of an interest in kids and knowing that you've got that support system." The program also provided a space for families to work alongside people who were different from them. Cathy discussed her experience working with the staff in Lakeside Academy:

I think I felt very included in [Lakeside Academy]. Every staff member, every teaching member...they've always been friendly. You're kind of intimidated a little bit when you come into [the program]. There are always professors and you've got all these important people all around the [program], and it never fails; every single meeting, every single time we see you, everyone's open and talking and they remember your name. You could see them at the grocery store and they'll remember who you are.

Cathy had the initial perception that people may be "snotty" because of their educational background, but she described being included instantly in the program.

Jessica also described how the program

allowed her to have more interaction with families from different racial/ethnic groups. She described her connection with a Latino family in the program:

I don't know her parents' name (the parents of her daughter's roommate during the summer program), but we always, now when we see them on Saturdays, "Hey! How are you?" And, I'm not sure if the mother speaks really English or not...But, you feel connected to them.

The families saw the Lakeside Academy as a personal vehicle for growth for not only students but for family members and future generations of students:

[The Lakeside Academy] is a blessing that I can't even begin to imagine. We would be honored enough to get in. What it's given [my daughter], what it's given our family...and you have given me doors and opportunities to let her have her dream. (Susan)

My role [as a parent] hasn't changed, but [the Lakeside Academy staff] have made it 20 million times easier and provided so much information. (Joy)

I went to [community college] for a while, and my ex-husband didn't go to college. And just knowing that times are changing and that the family is growing in a different area, so if [my son] goes to college surely hopefully his young'un will go to college. And maybe it's a new start in life for the whole generation of change. (Cathy)

One family member described the program as the "icing on the cake." Families saw the program as a significant opportunity for growth and development.

Family members and their students saw the Lakeside Academy as an avenue to gain knowledge and resources not easily accessible in their own high schools:

There are people within [my daughter's school] that absolutely care about the

kids and care about what's going on and care about the scholars. Perhaps their knowledge level isn't as great as Lakeside Academy, and so this is a whole lot better experience from that side of it. Yes, we get the support, but we get more knowledgeable support from Lakeside Academy. (Susan)

If it was up to [my son, he] would not probably even go talk to the guidance counselor [at his school] that much. And he doesn't do it a lot, and he just didn't think it was that big of a deal... And I think it's because he has Lakeside Academy. (Cathy)

Joy added to this by discussing how she turned to the Lakeside Academy when gathering information instead of utilizing the resources available within the school.

The participants turned to the Academy for academic resources, college planning resources, and resources regarding financial aid. The families believed the program helped their student improve their writing and organizational skills. Families expressed satisfaction with having access to free tutors for their student through the program. The families also discussed the knowledge gained about financial aid and scholarship opportunities, as well as the help they received from the program on college planning:

Just having someone to guide him is such a big thing. Because I didn't go to a four-year school, and I do not have the first clue on how to guide him and what to do and where to go. And just all the things that we've learned about college. (Cathy)

We could've done blind Internet searches, I guess, and there's no way that that information would have been anywhere near the quality of information that we've gotten from the Lake Academy. (Susan)

A few family members went from receivers

of information to givers of information. They had taken the information learned in the program and shared it with other family members, friends, and others in the community. They had become not passive receivers of information but individuals who wanted to share their college knowledge with others.

Discussion

The current literature on family engagement has challenged the notion that involvement should be equated with attendance at PTA and parent-teacher meetings. Researchers have shown that family engagement must be expanded to include environments that are outside of the school context, and to consider how families use non-traditional methods of school engagement as well.

This study adds to the literature on family engagement in several ways. First, this study further challenges the notions that the families from lower socioeconomic classes do not care about the education of their student. The counterstories indicate that family members in this study approached their child's education with passion and concern. Many family members described "pushing" their student to achieve their goals, specifically the goal of pursuing a postsecondary education. Interestingly, several of the family members discussed how their approach to their child's education was intentionally different than the approach their parents and guardians took with them. Several family members described how education was not important to their families growing up, but it has now become a top priority as they raise their children. Future studies should explore the relationship between current family engagement and life history narratives of family engagement in education.

Although researchers have explored family engagement in nonschool settings, this study expands on the EPE framework by highlighting the various spaces where fami-

lies are engaged in their student's education. Of particular interest are the manners in which families utilize neighborhood and community resources, as well as college access programs (like the Lakeside Academy). Several participants in this study discussed how they turned to neighbors and the Lakeside Academy college access program as forms of social capital to support their student's education. This is of great importance, as future research should continue to examine the complexity of nonschool settings for family engagement.

Finally, this study adds to the national conversation on the critical topic of access to postsecondary education by exploring the experiences, voices, and stories of families who have a student in a college access program. Overall, the family members described using the resources available to them through their involvement in Lakeside Academy as their primary method of engaging with their student in college-going discussions, as they reported facing multiple barriers to traditional school engagement, such as lack of access to teachers and school administrators during sanctioned school events. Family members described how they felt that college-going information was more readily available in the college access program than in the schools.

This study points to the possibility that college access programs can serve as an additional space for family engagement. However, many college access programs continue to only involve family members minimally (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Of important consideration is to further explore how families can find and create spaces for educational engagement within "traditional settings," such as schools, and how college access programs can partner with families to mobilize their experiences and knowledge to create this space.

Conclusion

The topic of family engagement is critical

for researchers in the field of higher education to understand if we are to truly address concerns of college access for underserved students. This study has several implications for higher education, specifically for college access programs. For college access programs, it is important to move the roles of family members from individuals who sign paperwork to individuals whose roles are essential to the success of the program. Research has demonstrated that family members are an important resource to help underserved youth access postsecondary education. However, college access programs, K-12 education, and higher education must be careful when designing programs and services for family members. It is important that these entities do not take a deficiency approach to working with families and instead recognize the strengths and talents that families of underserved youth bring to our programs, schools, and institutions. When educational settings, including college access programs, offer opportunities for families to choose how and when they want to be involved, families are better able to mobilize their capital to contribute to the program in meaningful and authentic ways. In working toward a better understanding of the students and their family's funds of knowledge, a natural inclination to serve them in strength-based ways should develop.

Finally, although college access programs may not be situated to directly impact the systemic challenges related to the financing of higher education, programs should work with families early and often to help them better navigate the financial aid process and college expectations for their students. As spaces where families' life experiences can be valued and their unique histories mobilized for the benefit of their student, college access programs are uniquely positioned to fully support students and their families as they navigate the college admission process.

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