Understanding Educational Interventions that Enhance Social Capital among Black

Urban Parents and College Students: A Comparative Case Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to understand how educational interventions enhanced the social capital of Black urban parents and students in order to navigate dynamic educational environments. The authors present two case studies in which relationships and the acquisition of new knowledge, resources, and skills emerged as critical findings that enabled the participants in each educational intervention to reach their desired goals. The first case study examined a parent empowerment program that teaches participants how to identify and select high quality schools in an urban K12 school choice environment. The second study explored a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) enrichment program designed to support the transition of first year college students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Findings revealed that bonding capital (i.e., internal homogenous social networks), an element of social capital, was especially helpful for establishing and leveraging resources, knowledge, and experiences that empowered participants. Implications for future research are provided.

Introduction

Due to systemic inequalities, some Black urban parents and students have limited social capital, which makes it difficult to understand and navigate the complexities of dynamic educational environments (Noguera, 2001). There are three primary components of social capital: (1) social relationships and networks that make up the social structure, (2) social norms that govern the relationships and networks, and (3) the value that exists within the social networks and relationships (Haplern, 2005). Consequently, many low-income, urban parents and students from underserved communities have limited access to the social networks and awareness of the norms and values consistent with the dominant, European American middle class and reinforced by the educational system (Coleman, 1988; Lareau, 2003).

Although research shows all families have elements of social capital (Khalifa, 2010), families who possess characteristics that align closely with schools benefit to a greater extent than those whose characteristics are not as aligned (Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988). White, middle-class families possess social and cultural capital that align greatest with, and that is valued most by the educational system in the United States. This advantage is one of the reasons why White, middle-class parents and students are more successful when navigating educational settings (Coleman, 1988). Success may encompass access to vital resources and information, better relationships with teachers, and better academic and socio-emotional outcomes for students. According to Lee and Bowen (2006), social capital is the advantage gained by middle class educated European Americans from knowing, preferring, and experiencing a lifestyle congruent with most schools within the United States.

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to understand how educational interventions enhanced the social capital of Black urban parents and college students and enabled them to navigate dynamic educational environments in order to achieve

their desired goals. Black urban parents and students, in the context of this paper, are defined as low-income individuals from underserved and under resourced urban centers. The goals varied among the participants who informed this paper, but, in general, parents were seeking quality schools for their students, and the students were interested in earning degrees in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. This paper fuses two studies about urban populations to show how a variety of educational interventions facilitate individual and collective success.

Literature Review

Parental Social Capital and K12 Contexts

Establishing meaningful relationships among parents is a critical aspect of garnering social capital. In an experimental study exploring social capital emergence, Shoji, et al. (2014) found that low-income, Latino parents experienced increased social capital from participating in a school based program. Specifically, shared experiences emerged as an important form of social capital for the participants. Parents were able to see and interact with other parents, which contributed to an increased sense of belonging and decreased social isolation.

Research shows students and parents with valued social capital fare better in school than those with less valued social capital (Coleman, 1988; Lareau, 2003). For example, Coleman (1988) discovered that greater amounts of social capital led to lower incidences of students dropping out of school. He argued that parents and students vary in the amount of social capital that they have access to which influences their knowledge and understanding of the norms, social controls, and authority that govern educational systems. Consequently, parents from middle-class families have access to more social capital than parents from working class and low-income families, influencing their children's educational outcomes. These studies show the

importance of leveraging social capital in educational contexts and interventions to support

participants with reaching their desired goals. The current paper builds on these studies and

contributes to an understanding of such practices relative to class and race.

Social Capital and Marginalized Groups in Postsecondary Education

Within the last twenty years, scholars have increasingly utilized social capital as a

theoretical framework to investigate student experiences and outcomes in postsecondary

education (Musoba & Baez, 2009). Much of that work has focused on first-generation and low-

income college students (Aries & Seider, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini,

2004). Pascarella, et al. (2004) found that first-generation college students with similar

academic credentials and motivation fared worse than their legacy peers. These students often

enrolled in fewer academic credits, worked more hours per week, and had less involvement in

extracurricular activities and interactions with their peers. Aries and Seider (2005) uncovered

similar findings in their investigation of low-income students at elite institutions. Interview data

revealed that low-income students felt intimidated, discomfort, and deficient. Institutional

artifacts and practices reinforced perceived inadequacies in their competencies, immaterial

knowledge, linguistic skills, and inabilities to secure internships and summer employment

(Aries & Seider, 2005). Because Black college students are disproportionately first-generation

and low-income, when compared to their White counterparts (NCES, 2012), these findings have

implications for how to structure educational interventions aimed at bolstering the social capital

of such students. Some of which will be discussed in the findings of the current paper.

Of the studies that have centered on the experiences of Black collegians and practices

that increased their social capital, many have looked exclusively at Historically Black Colleges

and Universities (HBCUs). For example, Palmer and Gasman (2008) concluded that the mission

and history of HBCUs contributed to Black students acquiring more social capital.

Relationships with faculty and peers afforded opportunities to acclimate to the academic and social demands of postsecondary education. In predominantly White institutions (PWIs), special programs and educational interventions have provided substantial access to increased social capital (Le, Mariano & Faxon-Mills, 2015). Most notably, the Meyerhoff Scholars Program (MSP) has produced a substantial number of graduates in STEM from underrepresented backgrounds (Maton, Hrabowski & Schmitt, 2000). Their multipronged approach provides students with meaningful relationships, resources, knowledge, and skills to deal with the academic and social challenges in postsecondary education (Maton, et al., 2000). The current paper adds to the growing literature using social capital as an analytical lens to explore the experiences of Black collegians in educational interventions at PWIs.

Research Questions

The purpose of this comparative case study was to examine how educational interventions enhanced the social capital of Black urban parents and students in dynamic educational environments to achieve their desired goals. The following questions guided this study:

1. How do Black urban parents and students describe the types of relationships that support and enable them to navigate particular educational contexts?

2. What types of knowledge, skills, and resources can be acquired through these relationships?

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in a conceptual framework that draws on Bourdieu's (1986) seminal work, Putnam's (2000) bonding capital, and Coleman's (1986) reconceptualized definition. Social capital encompasses two elements: the social relationships that allow the individual to claim resources possessed by the collectivity and the quantity and quality of

those resources (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1986) also emphasized structural constraints and unequal access to institutional resources based on class, gender, and race and describes social capital as a tool of reproduction for the dominant class. There are two types of social capital: bonding and bridging. For the purposes of this comparative case study, we focused on how the educational interventions aided participants in establishing social networks that were inward looking and between homogenous groups (Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital connects individuals with high degrees of homogeneity (e.g., similar socioeconomic status or demographic characteristics) to support their individual and collective needs (Putnam, 2000). The bonding capital is important, because it helps to cultivate trust, cooperation, and collective strength among similar individuals (Putnam, 2000).

Coleman's (1988) conceptualization of social capital stresses the role of social capital in communicating the norms, trust, authority, and social controls that an individual must understand and adopt to succeed in educational environments. According to Coleman (1988), social capital is social structures that facilitate the actions of the actors in the structure leading to increased productivity. Persons or actors vary in the amount of social capital that they have access to which influences their knowledge and understanding of the norms and social controls that govern the system or structure. Individuals with access to more social capital can accomplish much more than individuals who lack access to the same social capital (Coleman, 1988). Coleman's (1988) conceptualization allowed the authors to explore the types of knowledge, skills, and resources that could be garnered from networks within the educational interventions.

Methods

This qualitative comparative case study is based on the findings of two larger case studies exploring two distinct Black urban populations: (1) parents in a school choice environment, (2) college students in STEM programs at a PWI. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context and is often used to illustrate detailed events (Yin, 2003). A comparative case study examines two or more cases and emphasizes comparison within and across contexts (Yin, 2003). Study 1 explored the Community Reviewer Program (CRP) in Detroit, MI to understand how parents became more informed and knowledgeable about institutional options in a school choice environment. In Case Study 2, the Comprehensive STEM Program (CSP, pseudonym) at Jefferson State University (JSU, pseudonym) was investigated to determine how it addressed college readiness and retention among its participants. Using both studies in this paper allows for a more holistic understanding of educational interventions occurring across the K16 spectrum relative to Black and urban groups. It is our hope that these findings may be useful in informing policy and practice.

Study 1: The Community Reviewer Program

Study 1 examined a novel parent involvement program in Detroit that sought to empower parents by training them to assess and evaluate the quality of schools through the use of citywide school visits and evaluations. The program was developed as part of the *Detroit School Scorecard*, a larger effort to increase accountability and improve access to information about school quality. The *Scorecard* assessed and compared all of the city's schools against the same standard, and rated schools with an A-F grade. Most of the factors included in the *Scorecard* were state mandated test scores. Skeptical of test-based accountability, parents and school leaders called for alternative measures, and in response to the demands, CRP was created to include parent and community voice in the *Scorecard*.

Study 2: The Comprehensive STEM Program

Study 2 explored CSP, a STEM enrichment program at JSU designed to retain students from academically and economically disadvantaged backgrounds in the STEM disciplines. The program was established in 2007 with support from the National Science Foundation's Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (NSF-LSAMP). CSP contains eight program components: summer bridge program, residential housing, tailored university math courses, weekly recitation sessions, peer mentoring, academic advising, freshman seminar, and an undergraduate research experience. The program capacity was 50 students.

Data Collection and Procedures

We addressed the research questions by synthesizing data independently collected by the coauthors of this article. Both studies used semi-structured interviews in the data collection process (Glesne, 2011). Scholars have acknowledged the benefits and challenges of combining multiple qualitative data sets (Doyle, 2003). Doyle (2003) argued that cases are unique to the context and the participants' perspectives, yet comparing and synthesizing them can lead to new understandings and richness of the data.

Study 1 took place between November of 2013 and May of 2014. Participants for the study were recruited with support from the CRP program administrators during the initial CRP program training sessions. The researcher discussed the study with all participants at the training and followed up with those who were interested in participating and who met the study criteria (Black, first time participants in CRP, legal guardian with children in K12 schools in Detroit). The sample comprised of eight parents including two fathers, five mothers, and one grandmother (who is the legal guardian of her grandchild). Seven participants were African American, and one was biracial.

Data collection for Study 2 took place from June 2013 through April 2014. The study's

participants were recruited with support from the CSP program administrators and other program

participants. Email notifications and personal communication were used to recruit participants.

Twenty Black students from low-income, urban communities informed this paper. There were 12

male and eight female participants, and 15 of them were first-generation college students.

In both studies, all interview participants agreed to sign a consent form and have

interviews audio recorded. Participants were also informed that pseudonyms would be used

in place of actual names.

Comparative Case Study Data Analysis

We conducted data analysis for the current paper by rereading and recoding interview

transcripts, documents, and observation field notes. We utilized the study's conceptual

framework as the basis for coding the data. Our analysis focused on understanding what types of

relationships and forms of new knowledge most supported and enabled our study participants to

navigate their respective educational settings and achieve their desired goals. Next, we compared

and discussed the similarities and differences across the data sets. This discussion served as a

basis for the development of emerging themes and peer debriefing.

<div align="center">**Limitations**</div>

There are several notable limitations. First, combining qualitative data sets is an

unconventional approach. However, it is not an uncommon research method. It is often used to

strengthen the richness and generalizability of the individual data sets (Griffin & Reddick,

2011). Though we communicated about research design and analysis early in the research

process (conferring about methods, research questions, and emerging findings) our respective

populations and educational contexts are different. The first study generated data from Black

urban parents in a K12 school choice environment. The second study utilized data from Black

urban college students in STEM. Second, it should be noted that the findings of this study may not be generalizable to the experiences of all Black urban parents or college students navigating new educational environments with the support of interventions.

Findings

Both studies revealed the importance of relationships and resources that enabled Black parents and college students to achieve their desired goals as they navigated new and dynamic educational contexts. Two primary themes emerged from the study's analysis that will be discussed further: (1) the development of bonding capital and (2) the knowledge, skills, and resources gained through participation in the educational interventions.

Bonding Capital Manifested Among Intervention Participants

Black parents and students possess social capital that is often not valued or recognized by educational institutions (Khalifa, 2010). However, these educational interventions recognized and valued the resources and existing social capital possessed by Black parents and students. The programs created mechanisms to "bond" the participants' individual capital to build collective capital.

In Study 1, CRP demonstrated the value of the parent's capital such that they created a program to leverage and utilize their voices to assess and evaluate urban schools. Through participation in the program, parents reported gaining new relationships with other parents. For example, Tanesha described her experience interacting with other program participants by stating, "It was a great situation because I got to know parents from other schools. It was cool to know that other parents share the same interest as you have you know and just getting different ideas and things of that nature." Tanesha's comments illuminated that the program gave her access to new opportunities to meet other parents. The new relationships with parents with similar interests, issues, and goals were a validating experience for Tanesha and many of the

other participants. Consequently, the parents began to recognize that their capital mattered and that they had "power" and a "voice" as a group. For example, one participant stated, "It's like something that had fell asleep in you woke up and you realized that your voice has power. And you realized that your voices together has even more power." The voices and perspectives of urban black parents in K12 school systems are often marginalized and not valued. The CRP created a counter space where participants began to regain power and voice about the quality of schools in Detroit, in part, because the program included their perspectives in the revision of the Detroit School Scorecard.

In Study 2, participants gained access to other Black students who had similar disciplinary interests and struggles navigating a PWI. For instance, Chris explained, "[We were] just like a group of students coming from inner cities that was there for each other. From the first day at [the summer program], we all kinda grew a bond to each other. Like everybody were friends with everyone." Gay (2002) contended "many students of color grow up in cultural environments where the welfare of the group takes precedence over the individual and where individuals are taught to pool their resources to solve their problems" (p. 110). This idea is reinforced in the design of student services and activities within CSP. The peer relationships grow because of continuous interaction, and program staff use this natural evolution to bolster successful student outcomes. Another student, Omari, shared:

> [CSP] helped give me a connection with people at JSU already. From that, just kinda helped me smoothly transition into school. So like I take the same classes as some of the students. We try to set up our schedule [in a] similar [way], you know, live in the same area. We stay together and help each other out...we tend to study like our math and sciences together. Go through the college experience together.

Omari identified several strategies that students in the program utilize to capitalize on the academic and social support from the program. Taking courses together and living in the same campus residence hall strengthened their sense of belonging in the STEM disciplines. Throughout the interviews, friends and their support in the college experience emerged as an important aspect to student success. Consequently, students in the CSP program outperformed their nonparticipating counterparts in first year GPA, retention, and graduation rates.

Knowledge, Skills, and Resources Gained Through Participation in Program Interventions

In Study 1, an overwhelming majority of the participants of CRP indicated they learned new information about school culture. The program trained them to utilize the program tools and rubrics to assess and evaluate the quality of schools. Due to the intentionality of the program model, all the participants reported they had a better understanding of how to assess the quality of schools. Tanesha, a single parent of four children, spoke about what she learned about assessing school quality from the program. She stated:

> My experience [with the program] was good because it let me know the different rankings as far as the [schools'] test scores, cleanliness, and staff and you know different insight on how to look at some different things when it comes to schools. Like this one may be thriving but this one may not but why this one ain't, you know.

The new knowledge about how to assess school quality also caused the parents to reflect on the quality of their children's schools. When asked if participation in the program influenced the way she sees her children's schools, Tamika, responded, "Yes. In a lot of ways I thought they were doing a fantastic job [my children's school] but looking at what I saw [during the program] they can do a lot more, a lot better." It also caused Tamika to reflect upon her prior school choice decision. She stated:

I should have done more research. I shouldn't have took someone else's word for it. I shouldn't have been blind-sided by the newness [of my daughters' school] and when I saw constant turnover in teachers, I should have asked more questions then. Because now I see that it was something going on with the way they were operating her school.

These quotes illuminate that participation in the program improved the parent's knowledge of school quality and school options, gave parents resources to utilize when making school choice decisions, and helped parents develop improved skill sets for selecting schools for their children.

In Study 2, many of the program participants were first-generation college students. Some of the students indicated that the first time they visited a college campus was when they moved into the residence halls for the summer bridge program. Unlike some legacy students, they could not easily rely on parents and other family members to tell them about college life or how to successfully navigate it. Thus, the staff used CSP to communicate information about institutional policies, practices, values, and norms.

CSP also aided students in streamlining the process of accessing resources and knowing what is needed throughout their college career. Students noted that being a part of the program helped them to simplify the large, decentralized college environment. Students benefitted from the abundance of resources at JSU, but they also felt overwhelmed. CSP helped students determine what services they needed and where and how to access them. More importantly, CSP was a one-stop shop for services and referrals. As Collin stated, "another immediate impact is them getting comfortable with campus and where the resources are should they need help in various types of situations."

Finally, CSP provided $1000 book scholarships to actively engage program participants. In addition to the book scholarships, CSP maintains a loan system for common STEM texts and laptops that can be accessed on a temporary basis. Other students mentioned that CSP was

instrumental in them receiving scholarships from alternative sources such as Fortune 500 companies. These relatively small sources of financial support are critical to minimizing the overwhelming feeling of being disadvantaged. An inability to deal with these relatively small but significant setbacks can disproportionately affect the academic and psychological wellbeing of Black students (Sedlacek, 2009).

Discussion and Implications for Future Research

Educational interventions may be instrumental in bolstering the social capital of some urban Blacks. The current paper showed that, under two different sets of conditions, Black urbanites were better able to navigate the educational contexts due to access to new forms of social capital. Access to social capital can be gained through participation in formal and informal networks and is theorized to enable people to gain access to other forms of capital as well as to institutional resources and supports that may enable them to achieve their desired goals (Coleman, 1988). These interventions generated and brokered opportunities for the parents and students to "bond" their individual capital into collective capital by creating a space where homogenous peers could share and exchange knowledge, encouragement, and resources.

The current paper adds to the literature concerning the benefits of social capital to educational outcomes (Coleman, 1988; Gasman & Palmer, 2008). Interventions that support marginalized groups in bonding their social capital by connecting them to others—with high degrees of homogeneity—should be utilized as a strategy to achieve both individual and the collective goals (Putnam, 2002). Through participation in the interventions, discussed in this paper, participants enhanced their social capital, which positively influenced their experiences and enabled them to achieve their desired goals.

Those with more valued social capital are better able to successfully navigate educational settings than those who lack such capital (Coleman, 1988). This study also contributes to the

literature concerning the experiences of Black urban communities who, due to systemic

inequalities, lack the social capital valued by schools and universities (Khalifa, 2010). Black

urban communities possess social and cultural capital that is often viewed as a liability rather

than an asset (Noguera, 2001). Consequently, they experience more barriers when navigating

access to valuable social capital such as resources and information that allowed them to feel less

alienated and more empowered and confident when navigating educational settings.

Future studies should further examine the process and benefits of bonding capital to

participants in educational interventions. Many of the participants in the programs that we

studied would not have had access to or awareness about each other had it not been for the

program infrastructure. Thus, future studies might want to look at how these interventions help

individuals connect or organize. In an era of declining state and federal funding for educational

interventions (Le at al., 2015), finding alternative ways for similarly positioned people to create

and sustain mutually beneficial relationships to navigate new and dynamic educational

environments may be helpful for maximizing the resources in these programs. Another area

that requires further research is a more in-depth exploration of how educational interventions

facilitate more connectedness to educational institutions. In the current paper the participants

discussed significantly how the program connected them to other parents or students, but they

had less to offer about how the interventions strengthened their ties to the educational

institutions.

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