Navigating and Negotiating Pathways for Success:
Capturing the Life Experiences of Urban Youth and Their Caregivers

Too often, when shaping their futures, young people (and their families) are taken out of planning their own development. Rather than participating in the decisions that affect their lives, they are given educational, remediation, and enrichment opportunities in which they are supposed to engage willingly.[1] Frequently, young people are not empowered and supported to determine their preferred path. Youth want to take part in activities that are aligned with their interests or, on a basic level, that they consider fun.[2] However, particularly in low-income communities, youth are given a small selection of choices.

We propose that young people and their families should be empowered to take an active role in youth development. They should be supported by communities to learn how to navigate pathways to academic success and negotiate barriers and opportunities with which they are confronted. Navigation is marked by goal-setting and developing a pathway to achieve those goals; while negotiation involves enacting strategies to get around barriers and accessing opportunities along the paths to achieve goals.[3]

Young people should be taught how to set goals; consider which opportunities they need to access to achieve their goals; and also learn how to overcome the inevitable barriers that they will encounter.[4] For example, if a young woman's goal is to graduate from high school and go to college, then she might figure out which benchmarks she needs to meet along the way (e.g., getting good grades, taking the SAT), which experience she must have (attending school, getting involved in extracurricular activities, taking part in service projects), and which

people she should connect with at school and in the community (e.g., school counselors, mentors, college role models including graduates and current students) who can facilitate her engagement in the programs, activities, and other experiences that will help her reach the benchmarks on the path to her goals.[5] In this way, navigation and negotiation are essential to youth being producers of their own development.[6]

While youth continually set short- and long-term goals, they do not pursue these goals in a vacuum. Instead, youth are embedded within an interconnected system of developmental supports in their home, schools, and throughout their community. We call this system of supports a youth system.[7] When these supports are aligned with the needs and strengths of youth, youth are likely to thrive academically, socially, vocationally, and civically.[8] In too many communities in the United States, young people do not have access to a breadth or depth of quality developmental supports. To resolve this disparity in opportunity, comprehensive community initiatives have been launched to bolster and coordinate and/or integrate the assets in families, schools, and the broader community. The work reported in this brief examines methods for facilitating the navigation and negotiation process within communities. The findings suggest ways that communities, including parents, can help their youth navigate and negotiate the opportunities in their communities to achieve their goals, people, programs, and services they use within their youth system, and what happens when they align or do not align.

This brief is a summary of a manuscript entitled, 'Navigating and Negotiating Pathways for Success: A Thematic Analysis of the Life Experiences of Urban Youth and Their Caregivers.'

Research Methodology

This work is part of a larger study of how communities come together to support young people, and how young people[9] and their families navigate and negotiate those communities to succeed academically and vocationally, and engage civically. For this study, we conducted two rounds of in-depth interviews, approximately six months apart, with 47 pairs of caregivers and youth[10] in four urban communities in the Northeast and Southeast United States. The questions explored the ways that youth and their families navigate and negotiate their communities to attain their goals.

The participants in our sample lived in communities with a high concentration of poverty and with residents who were primarily Black and Latino, many of whom spoke English as a second language. All of the youth attended either traditional or public charter schools in their communities. The youth were in middle school at the time of the first interview and most lived with both parents or with only their mothers (see Table 1 on page 6).

Key Findings

All of the parents we spoke with have great hopes for their children, but the parents do not mention the exact strategies they need to employ to navigate towards achieving their goals.

Young people talked about their goals, showing that they were goal-oriented, but for the most part, these goals were long-term and abstract (e.g., wanting "...to be a doctor or maybe a CSI;" "an NFL player...;" to "become a soccer player;" to "be drafted into the NBA"). While these goals are fueled by the youth's current interests and values, the abstract nature of the goals make it difficult to plan effectively for achieving them.

Parents in these communities, like most parents, love their children and want their children to succeed.

"I want my kids to wake up every day to think that they can be free and go and do whatever they want to. They can achieve anything, and then feel love and feel they're secure. My hopes for them is for each of them to be very successful in what they choose to be and who they are... they [kids] just need the guidance from parents to help them achieve."

These caring and hopeful parents act as advocates for their children, turning to others in the community who can offer support that parents understand as necessary, but don't have the capacity or expertise to provide this type of support. Families interact with various community and school programs in an effort to support their children's success; in particular, these caregivers turn to teachers for help. However, the interactions caregivers describe with teachers are more often reactive than proactive.

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Navigation & Negotiation

Navigation is goal-setting and developing a pathway to achieve one's goals; negotiation involves enacting strategies to get around barriers and accessing opportunities along the paths to achieve goals.

Building Navigation and Negotiation Skills in the Community

DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA

The East Durham Children's Initiative (EDCI) recognized that parents and children living in their 120-block target area of East Durham needed support to navigate and access various school and community-based services.

To facilitate this process for families and support parent engagement in their children's education, EDCI hired parent advocates who work one-on-one with families at school, at home, and in the community. EDCI parent advocates focus on building relationships with parents and adapting their services based on family needs and strengths. *For more information, visit http://edci.org*

"I know of his teachers, they know me and my husband. If they have an issue or I have an issue, like I just went to school Tuesday because [child's name omitted for confidentiality] was telling me he didn't have homework. And I was like, he hadn't had homework for quite a while. So I went to the school, and they said he has homework, these are the assignments that he's missing...."

Teachers often provide assistance to youth that goes far beyond their job description. However, they do not appear to be facilitating the growth of navigational skills for parents to help their children, as this comment from a parent illustrates:

"Rarely [does my child ever need any help with homework after school]. She thinks she's smarter than I am, so... Rarely. But if she don't understand something, she has all the teachers' phone numbers. Because, that way, the answers come out the same, but the way we were taught is different from the way she was taught. I guess I'm doing it the long way and they teach them the short way. They have up until 9 o'clock to e-mail and contact their teachers. If she really is stuck, then she'll call..."

Similarly, youth report that their teachers push them to do well, and reward them when they do so. However, based on the reports from parents and their children, teachers do not appear to support explicitly the development of strategies necessary for youth to negotiate the challenges and opportunities that they face on their course to academic success.

Given this disparity, caregivers indicate that they reach out to a cultural broker — a trusted member of the community who acts as an informant and navigational aid, helping families build their navigational skills — as well as others in the community like members of religious groups.

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They look to these individuals for support navigating the pathway to their child's goals and negotiating the opportunities and barriers throughout their varying contexts. In sum, caregivers and youth report turning to teachers to assist young people with building the necessary academic skills to attain success, and they reach out to cultural brokers and other community members to facilitate the building of their own navigational skills.

While the caregivers with whom we spoke may not have the necessary skills to negotiate an academic context, they appear to be capable of negotiating the risks in their community, buffering their children against the possibly detrimental effects of those risks. The stories from these families communicate the belief that family must take care of its members, no matter what the circumstances. This is particularly the case with children. One caregiver told us, "And I always tell her, 'Don't go outside by yourself!' I tell her that all the time...she was coming back to the house, the girls, they don't like her friends...and just try to jump her and pull her legs and do all kinds of stuff...So then after that, she went outside again on the porch. And I go, 'Why are you on this porch by yourself?' So she have her sister go out there, 'So, that way if you have your little sister out there with you, somebody can run to tell us. Instead of you being out there alone, just anytime. Even at the church...'"

Caregivers and families indicate that they have high aspirations for their children, voicing that not only do they want their children to graduate from high school, but also to attend college, have a family, and be happy. Caregivers excel in negotiating relationships with others in their community. However, although families advocate for their children in their goal pursuits, they have not necessarily developed the strategies to plan for their children's success, and they therefore seek out people in the community with more expertise in achieving these goals, like teachers and cultural brokers, to assist them along their path.

Building Navigation and Negotiation Skills in the Community

PORTLAND, OREGON

Self-Enhancement, Inc. pairs youth identified as needing additional support with a coordinator who not only helps the young person navigate their academic and social lives, but also builds nurturing relationships, taking on the roles of teacher, mentor, and parent.

Together, youth and the coordinators construct and implement an Individual Success Plan that creates a roadmap for success.and adapting their services based on family needs and strengths. *For more information, visit http://www.selfenhancement.org*

Youth Systems

An interconnected system of developmental supports in a young person's home, school, and throughout their community.

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Implications

Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCIs) have developed in many communities in the United States as a means to coordinate and/or integrate assets present in families, schools, and the broader community, supporting the development of youth systems. Given this coordinated focus, CCIs should consider how they might better support families' abilities to navigate toward their children's goals and negotiate the opportunities and barriers that they inevitably face along the paths to their goals. CCIs should see families as resources to capitalize on — parents have aspirations for their children and advocate for them, but parents do not necessarily have the tools to help youth plan to pursue these aspirations successfully.[11]

Thus, to achieve alignment between community assets and those of young people and their families, CCIs should partner with young people and their families. Too few communities provide supports to help young people navigate to their goals, and negotiate the barriers and opportunities to reach their goals, but also do not help youth build these competencies. We do find communities that are employing community members and others to assist youth and families with negotiating available resources, whether social services, health care, or enrichment opportunities. However, these community navigators are not necessarily assisting the youth and families in developing the navigational strategies needed to build their individual capacity, empowering them to negotiate their own life course.

More programs or higher quality programs are valuable, but not enough. Comprehensive Community Initiatives should remember that young people are not only the recipients of supports — they are also producers of their own positive development. Supporting them, and their parents, in creating this development should be a central goal.

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Notes

1   Cooper, 2011

2   America's Promise Alliance, 2006; Dawes & Larson, 2011

3   We recognize that adults and institutions throughout a community also need to be empowered and equipped to help youth and families navigate and negotiate (Maniar & Zaff, 2011). However, that topic goes beyond the scope of this brief.

4   See Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008

5   Cooper, 2011

6   Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008

7   For learn more about youth systems, see "America's Promise Alliance (2013). Developing Youth Systems: Creating transformational change for our nation's young people. Washington, DC: Author; which can be accessed at http://www.americaspromise.org/~/media/Files/Resources/Center%20for%20Promise/CfP_Developing-Youth-Systems.ashx

8   Center for Promise, 2013; Zaff, 2010; Zaff & Smerdon, 2009

9   To learn more about how communities come together, see "America's Promise Alliance (2013). Impact Models: Comprehensive Community Initiatives. Washington, DC: Author, which can be accessed at http://www.americaspromise.org/~/media/Files/Resources/Center%20for%20Promise/CfP_Impact-Models_Comprehensive-Community-Initiatives.ashx.

10 Parents/caregivers and youth were interviewed separately.

11 Cooper, 2011

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Table 1: Participant Demographics

Youth

Female	24	
Male	23	
Ages	11-15 years (Avg. = 12.7 years)	

Caregivers

Female	45	
Male	2	
Age	29-53 years (Avg. = 40.5 years)	

Family Structure

Married	22	
Single Parent	13	
Extended Family	5	
Cohabitation	4	
Divorced	3	

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