



“To Get Somewhere in Life”: Family Support and Persistence in School

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Abstract

This study explored educational persistence in the narratives of students re-engaging in secondary school, specifically relating to the messages they received from their families motivating them to succeed in school. Framed in Yosso’s (2005) theory of community cultural wealth, students described the methods their families used to support them that largely diverged from traditional methods of academic family involvement. In the midst of educational reform discourse that takes a deficit view of students and families who do not follow institutionally recognized norms of family involvement, this study seeks to challenge the notion that families who use non-traditional forms of support do not care about their children’s education. In fact, student narratives show that the community cultural wealth they received from interactions with their families was integral in motivating them to persist through obstacles in school.

Keywords: *community cultural wealth; cultural capital; qualitative methods; critical theories; parent involvement*

Introduction

Education is viewed as a preventative measure from poverty and disenfranchisement (Furstenberg & Hughes 1995; Stuit & Springer 2010). It is believed that formal education provides skills and knowledge needed to succeed by granting access to institutional norms and resources (Bourdieu 1985, Bourdieu & Balazs 1999; Brisson 2009; Coleman 1988; Dika & Singh 2002; Helliwell & Putnam 2007; Portes 1998; 2000), thus increasing earning power and social influence. There are two problems with this belief system. First, the norms and resources granted by educational institutions adhere to dominant, that is, white, male, middle-class, heterosexual norms, marginalizing many (Yosso, 2005). Second, not all students receive equal quality of education. Inequity is endemic in schools, realized through access to high quality teachers, extra-curricular opportunities, supplies and technology, and post-secondary preparation (Sanders, 2000; Blanchett, Mumford & Beachum, 2005). Furthermore, while statistics suggest that schooling is positively correlated with success, it does not, in fact, guarantee increased social and earning power, a fact that is embedded in racial and economic inequities within and outside of school. Students who suffer the consequences of inequities in opportunity are often described pathologically as “at risk,” which, as Franklin (2000) argues, focuses “on risk and vulnerability, not promise, protection, and resilience”

(p. 3). By labeling students and families in this way, institutions evade critique as the perpetrators of inequity.

Schooling institutions emphasize family involvement as integral to student success. They often perpetuate a limiting, school-centric view of how parents can and should be involved. Traditional involvement is often defined as communication with educators, academic assistance on homework, and attendance at school events (Jeynes, 2014; Bower & Griffin, 2011; Boutte & Johnson, 2014). In this work, I explore the question: how can we learn from student narratives about the factors in their lives that may be invisible to us in schools? In particular, how might we learn more about the strengths they draw from their families and communities, especially the cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) that students receive from their families as they navigate difficult spaces in school? Through these student narratives, I argue that using a cultural capital framework can help us better understand family involvement, particularly involvement that occurs outside of the institution. The stories of the students highlighted present a model of involvement supported by literature in cultural wealth and asset-based views of families, particularly families of color (Yosso, 2005; Altschul, 2011; Ceballo, et al. 2014; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Martínez-Cosío, 2011). This model of family involvement, which features storytelling, emotional and motivational support, and caring has been shown to have an impact on the ways that students who have been marginalized persist in school.

Literature Review

To contextualize my argument, I compare traditional theories of social capital relating to family involvement with critical theories on community cultural wealth and cultural capital. These two areas of the literature around family involvement and social and cultural capital present contrasting views. Traditional literature (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998; 2000) presents a positivistic view of the knowledge and resources gained through social capital, arguing that everyone must somehow acquire certain skills and knowledge in order to be successful in social institutions like education. While several theorists (Bourdieu 1985, Bourdieu & Balazs 1999; Lareau, 2011) present critiques of the hierarchical and exclusive systems that function as gatekeepers for acquiring social capital, they do not challenge the validity of aspiring exclusively to dominant norms. In contrast, critical theories (Yosso, 2005; Altschul, 2011; Ceballo, et al. 2014; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Martínez-Cosío, 2011) on social and cultural capital argue that communities, particularly those subjugated by dominant culture, have vast amounts of community cultural wealth that members draw on to navigate dominant institutions. These forms of capital often go unrecognized by institutions leading to a deficit-oriented perspective on such communities (Yosso, 2005).

Within traditional literature, Bourdieu (1985; 1999) defined social capital as access to institutional resources and knowledge through interpersonal relationships. As the quantity and quality of relationships increase, so does the success of an individual as he or she gains social power. Groups and institutions that facilitate relationships aid in increasing social power. Like Bourdieu, Coleman's (1988) framework emphasized the inherent value of social capital being the transmission of human capital through relationships. This transmission is mediated by community, educational, and family sources. Coleman argued that the human and social capital transmitted as parents teach children how to adopt the institutional norms would lead to success, particularly in school.

Traditional theories such as Coleman (1988) posit that social capital is gained through the family, and when family capital is decided to be unavailable due to factors such as poverty or cultural differences, social capital can be gained through schooling. Thus, there has arisen a

bifurcated view between what students receive at home, and what they receive at school. Furthermore, traditional definitions of family are often dictated by racial, class and heterosexual norms, excluding extended relatives and community members—“kinship ties”—that can play a significant role in the lives of children, particularly in communities of color (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Educational research using Coleman’s framework has been interpreted as arguing that it is the parents’ responsibility to teach children to adopt the institutional norms that will help them to be successful, and the extent to which their attentions are focused on the child influences how effectively those norms are transmitted (Dika & Singh, 2002). It follows then, that the extent to which parents are familiar with and adept at navigating institutional norms is an important factor of transmitting this type of social capital (Coleman, 1988).

Coleman (1988) argued that all parents, regardless of academic experience and economic status could participate in traditional social capital transmission. He exemplified this claim by describing immigrant parents who, when school curriculum exceeded their own educations, would buy an extra textbook and study academic material alongside their children in order to reinforce their learning. As such, schooling institutions often use family involvement as a way to teach and reinforce institutional norms, as Bower & Griffin (2011) found. They argue that “...traditional definitions of parental involvement make demands of parents to help facilitate the success of the school, while reciprocal demands are not made of the school to ensure the success of their families” (p. 78).

This traditional model of family involvement identifies some families, e.g. those that can access institutional knowledge and resources, who are effective at transmitting social capital, and others who are not. Lareau’s (2011) longitudinal work comparing family practices across economic spectrums found that upper and middle class parental involvement aligned with schooling’s “rules of the game” (p. 311). Subsequently, their children struggled less with academic material and earned higher grades. Lareau noted that children from working class and poor families exhibited independence, peer-to-peer relational skills, and creativity that children in middle and upper-class families did not. However, those skills did not keep students from struggling within educational institutions, as seen by lower academic performance, and ultimately, less educational attainment.

Bourdieu recognized that the expectation of adherence to traditional norms could be an exclusionary force and a tool of perpetuating dominance through access (or denial of such access) to institutional resources (Bourdieu 1985; see also: Martínez-Cosío 2010). However, despite his institutional critiques, the ways in which subjugated populations, particularly families of color are portrayed positions them as essentially *lacking*; in access to resources, and in knowledge of norms (Yosso, 2005; hooks, 1994). Within this frame, their hope lies in learning how to leverage dominant social capital to access the knowledge and norms of the institution: the only currency that is accepted. While Coleman and Lareau both attempt to highlight and praise activities of poor and immigrant families, both analyses contain some problematic aspects in how capital is valued. Coleman’s example in particular ignores the rich cultural wealth that comes from immigrant families, who often speak several languages, navigate multiple societies, and operate within layered and rich family structures. Instead, in this view, their strength lies solely in their ability to acquire practices of educational norms, such as reading textbooks.

Research framed in Critical Race Theory, Counter-storytelling, and Cultural Capital (López, 2003; Yosso, 2005; Mena, 2011; Lareau, 1987) challenges this notion by problematizing the system that only supports dominant knowledge, skills, and experiences, and acknowledging that the cultural capital that exists within families of color is rich, valuable, and something from

which we can all learn. Delgado-Gaitan’s (1994) work with Chicano families revealed the ways in which parents advise their children, named *consejos*, encouraging them to persevere in school. *Consejos* builds on networks of extended family, cultivating *educación* (Valenzuela, 1999), which pertains to the family’s role in helping children develop personal responsibility, social awareness, and skills to successfully navigate institutions and systems. While *educación* relates to its English cognate implying formal education, “it is first a foundational cultural construct that provides instructions on how one should live in the world” (p. 21). *Educación* through processes like *consejos* involves rich cultural capital, and also frequently exposes children to the ways in which systems oppress those without dominant social capital, through low educational attainment often resulting in low-wage jobs and social instability (Altschul, 2011; Ceballo, et al. 2014; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). This exposure thus seeks to motivate children to succeed in school in order to avoid these difficult outcomes. Families of color and economically struggling families are put into difficult positions while navigating social institutions. While developing and transmitting valuable cultural capital, they are also forced to show their children the ways in which this cultural capital is devalued by institutions, leaving them struggling for economic security and social acceptance without institutional support.

Theoretical Framing

I draw from Yosso’s (2005) framework of community cultural wealth, which critiques traditional frameworks of cultural capital and their influence in education: that a positivistic definition of valuable capital exists and is possessed by economically and racially dominant groups, tasking education with *giving* this form of capital to subjugated groups to promote their success. As Yosso argues, this definition privileges the white middle class as the norm to which all people must aspire leading to a deficit-oriented perspective of families of color. This positions the system of education as fundamentally contradictory: “wherein schools most often oppress and marginalize while they maintain the potential to emancipate and empower” (p. 74). This marginalization often occurs in the classroom with a banking model of teaching (Freire, 1973 as cited by Yosso, 2005) based on the assumption that students of color are lacking in knowledges and skills. This deficit-based model extends to families as well, assuming a banking model of parent involvement wherein families are expected to learn the norms of school in order to be involved in their children’s education.

Yosso’s framework of community cultural wealth challenges this deficit-based model of classroom learning and family engagement. Furthermore, her use of the term “wealth,” challenges the limited scope of capital, arguing that the assets resources, and lived experiences of people of color are varied and expansive. In other words: “community cultural wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77).

Yosso defines six forms of capital: Aspirational, Familial, Navigational, Social, Linguistic, and Resistant. I look at narratives of young women of color who were re-engaging into school after having experienced difficulty and lack of support, arguing that within this frame students’ stories about struggling in school are not stories of personal or family failings, but of the rich cultural wealth that they draw from themselves, their families and their communities as they persevere through schooling institutions that have not been designed to support them. This frame allows us to look more critically at the institutions themselves, interrogating structures that serve to oppress people of color and people struggling economically.

Student narratives represent three forms of Yosso's (2005) cultural capital: Aspirational, Navigational, and Familial. Aspirational capital, the practice of upholding ambitions and hopes for the future even in the face of barriers such as racism and cycles of poverty creates a "culture of possibility" (p. 78) within families and communities who aspire for success for their children that may even exceed their own. Familial capital encompasses the historical, cultural, and community knowledge that is cultivated within family structures. Familial capital challenges the normative definition of family, "acknowledging the racialized, classed, and heterosexualized inferences that comprise traditional understandings of 'family'" (p. 79). As such, Familial capital can come from multi-generational and extended family, as well as community members, chosen family, and ancestral family. Navigational capital contains skills and knowledges of navigating social institutions, particularly those, such as the educational system, that were designed to uphold white, middle class, male, heterosexual values, marginalizing everyone else. As Yosso describes, "Navigational capital thus acknowledges individual agency within institutional constraints, but it also connects to social networks that facilitate community navigation through places and spaces..." (p. 80)

While outlining six forms of capital, Yosso describes community cultural wealth as varied, complex, and expansive, not limited to just six forms. During the course of this study, several students reflected on the strength and inspiration that they drew from young members of their families such as siblings, cousins, or nieces and nephews. These young children inspired students to be role models as they imagined the benefits they could bring to their younger family members through their own success. These narratives presented as similar to, and perhaps derived from, both Familial capital and Aspirational capital, but with qualities that were unique. With regards to familial capital, these descriptions struck me as unique in that this cultural wealth is derived specifically from interactions with younger family members, such as siblings, nieces, and nephews, whereas familial capital predominantly involves peer or older generational interactions (e.g. Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; 1992). While Yosso includes modeling in her conceptualization of Familial capital, it is with the perspective of those receiving the lessons of "care, coping, and providing (*educación*)..." (p. 79) in mind. Within the narratives of the young women in this study, the perspective of the capital derived from the people providing the modeling was centered. What made these narratives unique from Aspirational capital was a reciprocal quality: these young people created a "culture of possibility" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78) both for children in their lives and for themselves by acting as role models. While they aspired for the children in their lives, they themselves were young people in the process of completing their education, motivated by the very children who they were trying to uplift. I have come to call this form of support "caring capital." While there is robust research that explores care in education through high expectations, (De Jesús & Antrop-González, 2006), moral development (Noddings, 1988) and authentic cultural support (Valenzuela, 1999), it is the reciprocal nature of this form of care—students were both motivating and motivated by the children in their lives—that leads me to believe that this form of capital is distinct.

The concept of community cultural wealth has a particularly important application to family involvement, challenging the institution-centered norms of what families *should* look like and do to promote school success. Viewed through this framework, family involvement takes on many rich, unique forms both in and out of school, all of which serve to support students.

Methods

The narratives for this paper emerged from a larger study that explored hopefulness and identity in students who were re-engaging into school, enrolling in Cityscape High School¹ after struggling in traditional schools. I had been working in a non-classroom supportive role at the school for six years when I began this study. I had long been fascinated by the ways in which Cityscape’s students navigated the societal norms and structures of education after having struggled, and in many cases suffered, in previous schools. As I explored cultural capital frameworks, I saw this site as a space for rich exploration of students’ experiences, since students who leave school do not always re-engage and thus their stories are not often heard.

Emerging from the data were student reflections on their perseverance throughout negative schooling experiences, speaking about support they received from communities and families that bolstered their will to succeed despite unsupportive school environments. These narratives are rich and significant, particularly because the narrative surrounding these students was that they persevered *despite* having families who were seen as uninvolved. Student narratives made it clear that they persevered despite their schooling experiences *because* of the rich community cultural wealth that helped them navigate schooling institutions and hold on to their aspirations and motivation.

Setting and Participants

The original study from which these data emerged was open to all students who were newly enrolled in Cityscape, an urban alternative school. Here, I define “urban,” a term that is fraught with coded perceptions of race and class (Milner, 2012), as being located within a large metropolitan area. Cityscape identifies itself as alternative by using a non-traditional curriculum that serves as a second-chance space, recruiting students who experienced difficulty in school leading to low attendance, disengagement, and dropping out. Students enroll in one of three programs that span different hours of the day at one of four points during the year. The majority of its 350 students are people of color (48.6% African American, 35.3% Latinx, 10.3% White, 1.4% Asian), and 84.8% of students are identified as low-income.

I recruited students at orientations and contacted interested individuals to schedule interviews. The only requirement for participation was that students were new to Cityscape and had been previously disengaged or unsatisfied with school.

Eleven young women chose to participate in this study. Students self-identified as African American (4), Latina (4), biracial (2), and West Indian (1) and were 16 to 19 years old. Each student gave two 45-60 minute interviews, one before beginning classes, and one after attending Cityscape for six months.

Interviews were professionally transcribed and for this paper, transcripts were coded claim-by-claim for any mentions of family. These claims ranged from brief mention of family members, for example “my family is big on school,” to longer, more complex narratives that grappled with family relationships, values, and histories. Although the original study looked for differences in narratives over time, the emergent data on family support did not appear to be time-dependent. Therefore, claims relating to family support were not coded based on whether they came from first or second interviews. Once all claims relating to families were pulled out, I built seven categories; one for each of Yosso’s (2005) types of cultural capital, and one for claims that appeared to reference forms of capital that seemed significant, but not aligning with one of Yosso’s six forms. These

1. All names and places in this paper are pseudonyms.

categories were not mutually exclusive; many claims housed multiple forms of capital. In constructing the vignettes (Fecho, 2001) for this paper I chose narratives from students that appeared to highlight more strongly one form of capital so as to build a strong connection between Yosso's (2005) framework and narratives from students.

Semi-structured interviews sought to elicit narratives of how each young woman was building her identity as a learner and how her family played into this process. Because themes of class and race in education are fraught with inequities, especially in the deficit perspective in which many families of color are viewed in terms of their abilities and aspirations in school, I relied heavily on Paris' (2011) framework of "humanizing research" both in developing interview protocol and analyzing data. The process of humanizing research seeks to create a dialogue based on mutual dignity and respect for both researcher and participant. Given the deficit perspectives that pervade images of students and families, it is crucial that critical frameworks and methods are used not only for analyzing and inferring from data, but in the way the researcher approaches and receives the gift of qualitative narrative from a participant.

My intention of working at creating humanizing spaces and stories began in my understanding of and grappling with my own identities and positionalities as a white woman working with young women of color in this study, particularly how they impact the way in which I would hear and share their stories (Alcoff, 1991). I strove to approach this research with a deep awareness of the power and privilege that my racial, economic, and educational identities brought into all of my interactions with participants, and committed to use critical methodological and analytical frameworks to uncover and address these imbalances. Furthermore, I grappled with the complex position my research was putting participants in, since I was an agent of a school where they had enrolled under the promise of a second chance environment that would contrast their previous negative school experiences. This school constructed an identity as a beacon of hope and recruited students within this frame. For many, this school was seen as a place where they would finally have the schooling experience they had hoped for but had been denied in their previous schools.

In this effort to explore and put into practice my intentions of entering into a dialogue with each young woman that would not only help us understand each other better, but would create an empathic space for participants to reflect on the stories they found meaningful to them, I designed the interview protocol working with an advisor whose own work is framed in critical theories who could challenge the assumptions that were inevitably embedded in my questions. I designed the protocol to be as open-ended as possible and to minimize assumptive questioning. An example of a question I asked was "do your parents tell you stories of what school was like for them?" In asking about the stories told within families, I attempted to honor family truths and experiences, whether positive or negative, rather than gain so-called empirical information such as, "did your parents graduate from high school?", which not only contains an assumption that parents would not have received high levels of schooling, but could also communicate an alliance with the schooling institution by reducing schooling to a binary (graduated, or not graduated), ignoring the complex and subtle inequities that make schooling problematic.

In my efforts to uphold a humanizing space during the interview, I chose not to withhold empathic responses as my participants told stories of racism, sexism, and oppression in their academic and personal experiences. This was both to create a relationship with each young woman and also to make public my stances and commitments relating to school. While my professional stances are complex given my employment within schooling institutions, in the work I attempt to do my professional and personal loyalties align with students and families, not schooling institutions. This was a decision with which I struggled particularly, not wishing to succumb to "Ay

Bendito Syndrome,” described by De Jesús and Antrop-González (2006, p. 282) as falling into cycles of superficial pity and subsequent low expectations of youth who have experienced trauma; but also resisting the concept of the “detached, neutral researcher” (Paris 2011, p.139), which has historically been seen as the way to maintain the rigor of qualitative research, but risks neutralizing powerful stories, potentially leaving participants wondering if they had really been heard.

Furthermore, I struggled with whether my participants would be producing narratives heavily influenced by my responses, as noted in some critiques of the rigor and validity of qualitative research (Peshkin 1993). However, as Paris (2011) argues, entering into a space where both the interviewer and participant’s humanity is forefront not only can protect participants against objectification, but also allows for a reflective space that can produce richer, more truthful narrative, thus enhancing the validity of the research.

The aforementioned methodological approaches that I took represent my ongoing grappling with what it means to do research that both follows a process that is humanizing and empowering for youth and their families, and produces data that challenge dominant discourses. For this paper, I analyzed the parts of student narratives concerning their families: particularly their interpretations of how their parents felt and talked to them about school. My findings are organized into four representative vignettes, three aligning with one form of Yosso’s (2005) cultural capital, and one describing caring capital.

Findings: Contextualizing Capital

Each young woman in this study had dropped out of school and then decided to re-engage. They grappled with the identities that came with having struggled in school, often blaming themselves for not being able to keep up with coursework and for losing interest in school. However, while these young women did not shy away from reflexivity when reflecting on their disengagement, each one described her school environment as uncaring and unsupportive. Examples of interactions within the schools align with conceptualizations of micro-aggressions (Allen, 2012; Allen, Scott & Lewis, 2013), which, as Allen, et. al. (2013) describe, “communicate hostile, derogatory, denigrating, and hurtful messages to people of color” (p. 117). Micro-aggressions can manifest subtly, both verbally and non-verbally, and serve to invalidate lived realities, making students feel inferior (Allen, 2012). In particular, Allen et. al.’s (2013) descriptions of zero-tolerance policies and tracking as environmental micro-aggressions, as well as teacher perceptions and dispositions as teacher-level micro-aggressions are recalled in participants Aurelia, Melissa, and Rachel’s descriptions of their experiences in school. Aurelia described school-wide discipline that ended up forcing many students out for what she felt were minor infractions:

...some [students] got expelled because of how many times they were suspended, and it could be for little things...they suspend them to the amount of times that they need to be suspended before they need to get...all schools do it just to get the worst students out...I was thinking, like, am I going to be the next to get kicked out because I’m not doing so good?

Melissa described receiving messages that appear to relate to Allen et. al.’s (2013), conceptualization of tracking, where students identified as lower skilled are not given support or opportunity to prepare for college, but are pushed towards vocation training: “I feel like they told me to take a

year off, what's the point of having a high school diploma, that's what one of [the teachers] said.” In relation to Allen et. al.’s (2013) teacher perceptions Rachel explained,

...my humanities teacher...she just never came through to help. But if someone else would call her, like the “good” student, she would go...So it was just like, what’s the point, I just stopped going to class, I just skipped that class and just was walking around the halls and leaving early, cause I'm not going, forget it. So it was just terrible.”

While students did not use the term micro-aggressions while describing their experiences, they were aware of the racialized contexts of their experiences. As Graciela said, responding to a question about her thoughts on dropout statistics “[the statistics] make us feel like Spanish people are dumb. And white people are smart...that's what we was told as young kids...it's like, why can't you give us Spanish people a chance?” Deja’s reaction to looking at the statistics was similarly poignant: “I just think back to our slavery days. Because how the white people was beating on the Black people, I just felt like they're still trying to beat the Black people.” Several young women felt that their schools also received less support than those in wealthier communities. Aurelia explained that her school was closed due to low performance, and felt “if they had schools there, like more white communities, I wouldn't think they would shut them down...”

While this study is limited to the narratives of these young women, and therefore cannot triangulate any data on the micro-aggressions that students described, in the context of the effectiveness of cultural capital, it is less important to ascertain whether schools and teachers were intentionally negligent or disparaging. Rather, it is the students’ interpretations of these school environments that gives us a sense of just how important and effective community and cultural wealth really is. Each young woman in this study reported feeling invalidated, and therefore unconfident in their academic abilities and their futures because of messages that they interpreted from schools and teachers. However, each young woman also reported that because of the cultural capital they received from family and community, they were able to return and persevere in the very system that caused them this pain in the first place.

Framed by this context—dropping out of school due to lack of support and re-engaging because of family support—which all participants shared, each of the following vignettes presents an example of students’ described interactions with their families members that aligned with Yosso’s (2005) conceptualizations of cultural capital, predominantly Aspirational, Navigational, and Familial. Graciela’s story narrates her mother’s Aspirational capital through statements such as “I don’t want you...to live how I lived...I just want you to have like, a good job and get what you want” creating, as Yosso describes a “culture of possibility” (2005, p. 78) for her children beyond what she herself experienced. Vanessa described Navigational capital she received from her aunt, who advised her about succeeding in college, saying “sometimes your professor or your teacher isn’t going to listen because they’re busy with something...my aunt tells me that it’s a part of being independent...but when you do need help, you need to get that help...” Yosso (2005) describes Navigational capital as “skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (p. 80), as Vanessa’s aunt is seen coaching her through potential scenarios of advocating for herself in college. Deja’s story highlights Familial capital, as she describes her multi-generational family: nieces, nephews, siblings, parents, and grandparents offering advice, support and insight, describing what Yosso (2005) refers to as “expand[ing] the concept of family to include a more broad understanding of kinship” (p. 79). Finally, Sandra’s vignette highlights what I have called caring capital; the reciprocal motivation from and desire to motivate a younger family member, as Sandra

described her sister: “I just tried to do my best in school and try to do good for me and her.” Building on Familial, and Aspirational capital, the caring capital exhibited in this vignette emphasizes that Sandra’s motivation to persevere in school comes from the loving desire to motivate her sister by succeeding herself. While the full stories of each young woman are rich and complex, exhibiting many different forms of capital, I have chosen for each vignette to highlight one form in an attempt to pair narratives of students to Yosso’s (2005) concept of cultural capital forms.

Aspirational Capital: Graciela

Graciela, a young Puerto Rican woman, was 18 when she enrolled in Cityscape. She had been disappointed by the realities of her classrooms, noting classes that were too large for her to focus and a social environment that was not supportive of school: “...everybody’s worried about what kind of sneakers you have...” Graciela was also experiencing significant struggles in her personal life. Graciela and her family had been evicted from their apartment and were forced to live in a shelter. Her social worker had given her various options for finishing high school, a few of which would separate her from her mother and siblings. She chose to stay with her family.

Graciela spoke of her mother encouraging her and her brother to continue in school: “...my brother still doesn’t go to school and we been telling him to go back...like, ‘go back, you have to go back...You’re not going to become anybody if you don’t.’ So my mom pushes both of us...” Graciela’s mother had left high school and planned to re-enroll once Graciela’s young sister was older. Graciela and her mother talked about her homework. “...I ask her if she remembers some questions...or I’ll actually sometimes teach her like about math and she’s like ‘wow, all them letter confuse me and stuff.’”

Graciela’s spoke of her mother’s representation of her own struggles as an important motivational factor. When asked why she didn’t give up on school altogether after becoming frustrated in her previous school, Graciela answered:

My mom, because she had a rough childhood...she used to literally cry when she talked about it. Like, she was like “I don’t want you guys to live how I lived. I suffered a lot and I have what I want but I want more...I want y’all to be able to get things without going through welfare and all that. I just want you to have like, a good job and get what you want.”

Graciela viewed school as the way to “become somebody,” a message that she continually impressed on her brother, and internalized for accomplishing her own goals:

...I feel like you can’t become nobody [without] education. At first when I was in high school and just a whole bunch of friends and stuff, I’d think like they were lying, most celebrities became who they are without education, but the background is false information. You really [need] your education to get somewhere in life.

Graciela described her mother as having a significant impact on her perception of the importance of succeeding in school. Experiences with homelessness and her mother’s candid descriptions of her own childhood and current life without the benefits of higher levels of education (high school and postsecondary) seem to have solidified the belief that education was the way she would attain a life that would bring her financial and social stability.

Graciela described her mother as frequently making clear the desires she had for Graciela's wellbeing and future: a marker of Aspirational capital. Her aspirations for Graciela exceeded her own circumstances; she envisioned a life for her that did not contain the hardships that she herself had suffered. These important conversations took place outside of school and it is unclear whether Graciela's mother was also involved through contact with teachers or attendance at school events. Whether or not she participated in school-centered involvement however, Graciela found her encouragement to be immensely valuable in motivating her to persist.

Navigational Capital: Vanessa

Vanessa, an 18-year-old African American young woman, had been close to graduating from her previous school and had already been accepted to a four-year state college despite several problematic experiences with school. Her academic progress had been derailed by a pregnancy with health complications. During her absence, she described requesting support, which was not given: "the doctor faxed papers, everything. I went to the school complaining because they didn't give me a tutor and they told me that they misplaced my papers." When she returned to school after her son was born, she had failed a semester and found that she could not make up the work and graduate within a reasonable time frame. Vanessa also described a striking incident from elementary school: "I got something wrong two times, so [the teacher] hit me with a ruler..." Vanessa's mother requested a meeting that the teacher was reluctant to attend, and as Vanessa described: "[the teacher] didn't get in trouble."

Vanessa described her mother earning a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and attending some college. She also described her mother participating in academic certification programs to further her career. When Vanessa disengaged from school after her experience with medical absences, her mother was insistent that she return and helped her find Cityscape.

Especially powerful in Vanessa's life was her aunt who was completing a Master's degree, and was an important role model: "...she's a big influence in my life...she's actually studying what I want to study, psychology...hearing her come home and be like 'oh this is what we did today...'" Vanessa's aunt talked about her experiences in graduate school, giving her a sense of what college would be like:

[my aunt tells] me that it's going to, sometimes it's going to be boring; sometimes your professor or your teacher isn't going to listen because they're busy with something, but that they, my aunt tells me that it's a part of being independent. You have to work for what you want, you can't always depend on anybody else, but when you do need help, you need to get that help...

Vanessa's aunt took steps to prepare her for college norms, and also involved her in the academic work of her program: "...I just love [her homework]. I help her write her books...she takes ideas from me...I just like it...she comes over to my house, "Want to read this? Want to read that?" It'll be like 15, 20 pages..."

Vanessa's aunt and mother appeared to convey Navigational capital in the ways that they prepared her to traverse schooling institutions. When she faced significant obstacles at her school, her mother helped her find an alternative environment. Her aunt gave her advice about advocating for herself in college. This source of support is reminiscent of more traditional strategies of socializing children into the dominant norms of schooling institutions (Lareau, 2011). However, as a

family of color, this support may go deeper than simply navigating institutional norms. While Vanessa did not describe overt racial discrimination in school, she brought up two instances that were troubling: an incident of being physically disciplined by a teacher as a young child, and her high school claiming to have misplaced her medical note that would have secured a tutor during maternity leave. It is well documented that young people of color face harsher penalties and receive less support in school (Torre & Fine, 2006; Fine, 1994; Davidson, 1996; Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010). Therefore, it is possible that as a young African American woman, Vanessa experienced both the violence and lack of support that manifests as a result of structural racism. Thus, her mother and aunt’s attempts to both to help Vanessa navigate her current environment and prepare her for the next (college) could in have been intended as resources to navigate the structural racism embedded in schooling institutions.

Familial Capital: Deja

Deja is a young African American woman who was 17 when she enrolled in Cityscape. She felt unsupported by most of her teachers at school, but described a large family supporting her in different ways:

I can honestly say my nieces and my nephews are my support system. Like just looking at them they’re like “Oh Auntie how’s work, how was school?” and my little brother he’s four, he’s like “Oh I want to be just like my sister when I grow up.” So I feel like they are my support system...

Deja lived with her mother, who cared for the children during the day and worked nights, her older sister, nieces and nephews, and her younger brother. She cared for her nieces, nephews, and little brother.

It’s like my nephew, I guess we raised him like from the time he was born because my sister was working, going to school and it was just a lot and she because a single parent and it was like I stepped in because of her baby’s father didn’t want to do anything. I still watch him Tuesdays and it’s like I help, I changed the Pampers, I fed him, I bathe him, I clothe him it’s like, I thought of him more as mine and that is a lot of work, it’s very hard.

Deja described a close relationship with older siblings and aunts and uncles who did not live with her. In particular, Deja’s older brother encouraged her to do well in school, highlighting his own struggles.

My brother, he struggled a lot during high school, during middle school, and he will always tell me “Put your best foot forward. Don’t give up, don’t quit, don’t do this, don’t do that, just do what you can do and don’t say I can’t.”

In addition, Deja described her grandfather motivating her to believe in herself:

my grandfather...don’t say you can’t in front of him, because “can’t” should not be in your vocabulary. So I felt that they pushed me...that “can’t” word, I don’t know how to do it, I can’t, I give up, like those were those words they did not like, and they pushed me

because...I struggled a lot in 3rd grade...and I was just getting over dyslexia because my B's and D's were just all wormed up and when I said I couldn't do [a standardized exam] I didn't understand anything...then when I got my test scores back it was proficient. And so he was like "You can't do what? You can't do it, you just did it. You proved to yourself that you can do it." And from then I have been doing what I can do.

Deja's family was not uncomplicated. One of her brothers was incarcerated, and she had lost four family members to violence, two of them close to her age. With each loss, Deja struggled with being in school through intense grief. During her first six months at Cityscape, Deja's sister abruptly moved out of state, leaving her feeling betrayed. Despite the difficulties Deja and her family went through, however, Deja beamed as she described her family, especially her nieces and nephews:

When I think of success I think of my nieces and nephews. I honestly do because it feels like if it wasn't for them, I would probably be like "Okay whatever. School is school." But with them I honestly think they're, they would be young, they were like two to three but it felt like they're pushing me more and more and more each day. Like when I see them you know what "Oh have a good day Auntie" or "I'll see you later Auntie" or "I'll call you later Auntie," I felt as if they're my goal, that they're my reason why I'm still breathing like they're the reason why I wake up. I just think they're my support.

The obstacles that Deja's family was struggling to overcome were significant and indicative that Deja needed spaces both in her school and community where she could process and heal from trauma. However, as with students who are labeled "at-risk," (Franklin, 2000), the danger with emphasizing family risk without also accentuating strengths and assets is that families shoulder the blame for academic difficulty without acknowledgement of the valuable cultural capital that youth like Deja receive from their relationships with multiple family members. Risk rhetoric can eclipse the ways in which these relationships help youth to persevere in school. Deja cited her family as the reason she had persevered in school, both from her older brother and grandfather giving her advice and support, and the love from her young nieces and nephews. Without her family, she did not feel she would have been motivated to persevere in school, especially in an environment where she did not feel cared for by teachers. This Familial capital (Yosso 2005) appears to have been crucial in Deja's decision to dedicate herself to school.

Caring Capital: Sandra

Sandra is a young African American and white woman who was 17 when she enrolled in Cityscape. Sandra's steadiness and loyalty was apparent in the way that she talked about caring for her younger sister who was born with a serious illness:

...my freshman year, I just wanted to leave school for good, because my sister was born, and she has cerebral palsy, so that really messed me up...Actually, I was just going to drop out, but my principal recommended [Cityscape]...I was like, I think I'm actually going to do good here.

In addition to the trauma of her sister’s condition, Sandra was bullied at her previous school by students and teachers. She described feeling like a failure, causing her to avoid going to class. She became depressed and skipped school to support her mother through the traumatic time. However, what began as a factor pulling her away from school eventually helped her motivate to persevere:

my sister got older, and then I started thinking, why am I being mopey and stuff? Like, I’m being a bad role model, so I just tried to do my best in school and try to do good for me and her.

Sandra’s father was studying for a GED and planning on entering a trade school and her mother had completed some college: “My mom went to college for two years, but then she got pregnant with my fourth, yeah, my fourth sibling and then she tried to go for a third year but she couldn’t handle it...”

Sandra described several ways in which her mother was involved in her schooling that follow traditional methods. During her first six months at Cityscape, Sandra experienced difficulty in school, specifically her enrollment in the evening program:

...lately I’ve been having anxiety attacks because I hate walking home late...especially by myself...and plus some guys, they tried to like, stealing my phone from me a few weeks ago, so then like, my mom finally contacted my advisor and she said “okay, we’re going to switch it over to day [hours].”

Beginning early in her schooling, Sandra’s mother leveraged resources both in and outside of school on Sandra’s behalf, communicating with her teachers, contracting tutors for her, and monitoring which classes she took and how she was progressing. Sandra also described her mother worrying about her decision to attend a non-traditional school, fearing that without traditional high school credentials Sandra would have difficulty getting into a four-year college. While these strategies follow more traditional forms of involvement, the form of support that Sandra talked about with the most passion, and with more frequency was the motivation she got from her little sister, for whom she wanted to be a role model. While the support and monitoring of academic progress at home and through tutors may have helped Sandra academically, those factors did not seem to help when her school environment became unhealthy, as she responded by disengaging and stopping attendance in class. However, her caring relationship with her sister motivated her to persist, finding an alternative, and by her own agency making a new start at a different school.

Discussion

While the story of each young woman was put forth to engage one form of Yosso’s (2005) cultural capital framework, each student described support that aligned with multiple forms intersecting to increase their motivation to persevere in school. Each student described a similar process: disengaging from school due to school-related and personal factors, receiving various forms of encouragement and support from their families, and subsequently re-engaging. Much of this motivation came from older family members offering advice on navigating school, warning of the consequences of not succeeding in school, and supportive confidence-building. However, several young women also described motivation coming from the desire to be a role model to younger family members, which I have called caring capital. Sandra, in particular, described her sister with

love and compassion and cited her as the motivating force to go back to school, as she noted previously, "...I just tried to do my best in school and try to do good for me and her." Sandra wanted to succeed in school not only for herself, but for her sister as well. Additionally, Deja wanted her young nieces and nephews to be proud of her.

As outlined by student narratives, looking at family involvement through a cultural wealth framework has important implications within two main points. First, it gives educators who are situated outside the home a sense of what ongoing practices of support may be taking place outside of school, the absence of which could reinforce the belief that there is no support at all. Second, Sandra's vignette gives us an insight that is important to explore further: when Sandra struggled in school, community cultural wealth and cultural capital within her family was more effective in motivating her to persist than more traditional forms of involvement, such as parental presence in school and out-of-school academic support.

To the first point, the narratives of these young women supporting a cultural wealth framework directly contradict existing deficit-oriented perspectives that families who are not involved in traditional ways are not involved at all, or do not care about education (Boutte & Johnson, 2014; Bower & Griffin, 2011). Exposure to more narratives such as these is crucial for schooling institutions to broaden their understanding and respect for different forms of family involvement, both in the ways that schools accept and encourage involvement from families, and how students are viewed in the classroom. As Boutte & Johnson (2014) describe, schools' resistance to models of support and involvement that they do not understand to be healthy practices serves as a marginalizing force to families. It is often the case that families of students who are marginalized in school have been historically excluded themselves (Noguera, 2001). Schools' tendencies for limiting their definition of healthy and effective family involvement to school-centric activities (Bower & Griffin, 2011) present a model of aesthetic, not authentic, caring for students and their families (Valenzuela, 1999). That is, they prioritize conformity to institutional norms over authentic expression of cultural capital and community cultural wealth. This has dangerous consequences for students whose families practice forms of involvement through community cultural wealth and are not involved in traditional ways.

While the majority of families practice forms of cultural capital, that is, upper middle class and white families also practice story-telling for motivation (e.g. Lareau, 2011), white and middle/upper class families also enjoy positions of power and privilege in schools, visibly navigating legal, linguistic and academic structures that recognize and uphold their status (Lareau, 2011). For families whose primary forms of support are non-traditional the perception perpetuates that parents are uninvolved or uncaring. Research suggests that when educators believe that students and their families devalue education, expectations of their abilities and progress may be lowered, leading to less support from teachers and hindering progress in students (Hauser-Cram, Sirin & Stipek 2003; Benner & Mistry, 2007). As crucial as the transmission of cultural capital has been shown to be for motivation and perseverance, this support must go hand-in-hand with caring academic support from teachers and school leaders. Therefore, it is critical that educators develop an understanding of the ways in which parents transmitting cultural capital are doing a great service to their children, helping them stay motivated.

Towards the second point, the narratives of these young women show that cultural capital transmission within communities and families was not only crucial in building motivation to re-engage into school, but may in fact be more effective in times of crisis than more traditionally recognized forms of support alone. Sandra described receiving both traditional academic support, and caring capital in her relationship with her sister, but she attributed her re-engagement not to

the conferences her mother had with her teachers, or her academic tutor, but to wanting to be a role model, effectively creating a “culture of possibility” for herself with the goal of inspiring her sister. In Sandra’s case, whether or not her sister was able to provide support beyond the simple fact that she was a beloved member of her family is less important than the projection that Sandra put on her; that she would want Sandra to be happy and successful. It is unclear what communication Sandra had ever received from her due to her disability. But the fact that Sandra loved her was enough to provide the motivation through Caring Capital to be a successful role model.

It is likely that both traditional forms of support as well as forms of cultural capital helped Sandra persevere in school, as traditional academic assistance outside of school helps students achieve (Hong, 2011; Bower & Griffin, 2011; Jeynes, 2007). However we cannot assume that school-centric involvement such as disciplinary-specific support and attendance at school events is sufficient to attend to the socio-emotional support and encouragement that is needed to persevere in school, particularly for students who are marginalized.

Within the many intersecting influences that cultural capital has on student motivation and perseverance, literature suggests that a healing process must exist for students to be able to succeed within the structural inequity of schooling institutions (e.g. Ginright, 2015). The young women described many of their family interactions as expressions of deep care, saying things like “[my parents] want to see their kids going to college, going to school, finish...get a nice job,” and “[my mom] thinks school is really important, and she’s there for me” and “my mom pushes us and like, me and my mom are really close.” While these phrases relate the importance of school within families, they also show how students interpret these phrases as parents being there for them. While traditional academic support can also be interpreted as a deep care for students, it seems that the care that was expressed through cultural capital within the family provided the support that students needed to continue navigating a fraught space.

Conclusion

The narratives of these young women show that they drew from multiple forms of community cultural wealth in order to navigate and persevere in school. In cases where families conveyed both traditional and non-traditional capital, students described cultural capital as being more effective in motivating them than more traditional forms of academic support.

Strategies for student success are developed largely without family and community input, and families are often blamed when students struggle, which decreases the prospect that parent involvement will be reconceptualized in a meaningful way (Boutte & Johnson, 2014). This is not to say that there aren’t many caring teachers who may reach out to families in service of better supporting their students. However, for Sandra, and the other young women in this study, any support they received in school referred to individual teachers or counselors that were not representative of their school environments as a whole. For these students, the cultural capital received at home was the deciding factor in whether these students persevered in school.

Families are doing their part of encouraging children to persist in school, often upholding faith that the very institution that failed them will provide for their children. It is our duty as educators to work towards becoming the institution that parents aspire to for their children; institutions that close access gaps, reject power structures that perpetuate domination, and work to respect and uphold cultural wealth.

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