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Right Directions, Wrong Maps: Understanding the Involvement of Low-SES African American Parents to Enlist Them as Partners in College Choice

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"Right Directions-Wrong Maps: Understanding the Involvement of Low SES African American Parents in Order To Enlist Them as Partners in College Choice"

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Abstract

While research extols the benefits of parent involvement in college choice, low SES African American parents are increasingly less able to match the efforts of wealthier parents. A qualitative methodology is used to explore the lives 5 urban African American single parents whose low-SES parents encouraged education for postsecondary advancement. The study found that the high school diploma was the normative credential for upward mobility in their communities. Their parents used narratives of struggle to encourage their children while utilizing maps that helped navigate the road towards a high school diploma. It concludes that a high level of involvement already exists in these families albeit for different goals than those of mainstream America. It suggests that in order to convert postsecondary planning into college choice participation the Academy must assume that these parents want their children to use education to succeed, must bring them into college choice long before their children enter high school, and must simultaneously deliver critical college knowledge by co-constructing maps of all the necessary college preparatory protocols, college benefits, and a description of financial aid.

WORKING CLASS AND LOW SES PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN ARE INCREASINGLY MARGINALIZED IN COLLEGE CHOICE

Access to selective four-year colleges and universities (admitting less than 50% of all undergraduate applicants) has become a highly contested game where parents pull out all stops to insure that their children have the opportunity to attend the most prestigious institution possible (McDonough, 1994). In this highly competitive climate for admission into the "best colleges" the children of working-class and low socioeconomic status (SES) parents are increasingly marginalized lacking the economic and social resources to help their children compete in the college admission game (McDonough 1994, 1997; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989;Terenzini et al, 1996; Terenzini et. al 2001; Berger, 2000; Walpole, 2003; Lareau, 1987; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000).

All students benefit from parent involvement in college choice, but when low SES Black and Latino students are successful in preparing for, gaining access into, and graduating from four-year colleges and universities, this involvement was a critical component (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1998; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). However, working class and low SES parents are not as engaged in their child's education when compared to high SES parents according to those who have explored the larger topic of parent involvement in education (Moles, 2000; U. S. Department of Education, 1998). An important question to ask is whether these parents are truly uninvolved or if what is defined as a lack of involvement is merely a reflection of the investigator's dominant culture, mainstream American frame of reference. Researchers who employ critical perspectives suggest that this may be the case and that such descriptions are a byproduct of the way mainstream American culture constructs race, family structure (especially

concerning single parent, female led households), gender and the "normative" paradigms for parent involvement in education. Normative perspectives on parenting are unkind to low SES African American parents but are especially critical of low SES single parent, female led households. These single mothers are characterized as absent from the K-12 and postsecondary education planning process which implies, among other things, a lack of interest in their child's future. Poverty level African American single parent families have been derided as dysfunctional units that are "disorganized, pathological, and matrifocal" (Burgess, 1995, p. 23). Such assumptions typify a paradigmatic point of view that interprets "differences" as "deficits" (or cultural deficit) and characterizes low SES African American families as "abnormal" and in some ways "deviant" when compared to the two-parent, middle class or higher, "mainstream" Anglo-American family (Staples & Johnson, 1993). Policy-makers have used this framework to draft intervention programs designed to pull these families closer to what they envisioned as the American mainstream making their children more "normal" and better functioning (Washington & Oyemade, 1987; Steiner, 1981; Bowler, 1974; Kenniston, K & The Carnegie Council on Children, 1977). Culturally deficit perspectives not only informed legislated public policy for the poor, they led school administrators and teachers to believe that low SES African American and Latino parents did not value education. Even though they realized the benefit of parent involvement for all students, they designed parent involvement programs under a set of assumptions that supported participation of middle and upper income parents while placing lower income parents at a disadvantage (Chavkin & Williams, 1985; Davies, 1989; Winters, 1993). For example, parent events often take place on campus during evenings in the week when working poor parents are

unable to attend for reasons ranging from transportation scheduling to needs related to other children.

Researchers who view involvement from a culturally sensitive and critical perspective assert that these low SES parents are "normal" when defined by ethnically and culturally relevant descriptors. According to ethnographic studies of low SES Latino parents it was determined that, although struggling financially, they had post secondary educational goals for their children that often include college attendance (Perez, 2000; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, 1992, 1994a, 1994b). It is therefore inaccurate at best to conclude that such parents are not concerned about their children's education, and it does not require a giant leap of faith to conclude the same for low SES African American parents. Unfortunately, while we know much about the economic, social, and even psychological conditions that go along with parenting in the context of urban poverty, not much research has helped us understand how low SES African Americans are involved in education. We are only left with the notion that for many reasons they (especially single parents) are less involved in their children's education.

Comparing such parents to dominant culture, mainstream American parents brings to mind an important question: is the perception that low SES African American parents are uninvolved conflated with the fact that their involvement targets postsecondary goals other than college; a goal that varies from the "mythical normative" (Lorde, 1984) Anglo-American family? This study attempts to add to the literature that seeks to understand the involvement of impoverished African American parents in the postsecondary choice process.

Before moving forward, I would like to make two important conceptual points about parent involvement in college choice versus postsecondary choice. Parent involvement in college choice typified by Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper's (1998) conceptualization of this process includes activities that would lead to preparation through appropriate curriculum, application via the three-stage process (predisposition-search-choice) and enrollment and eventual graduation. Using Hossler et al. (1998) as a framework, I define parent involvement in postsecondary choice as parent-generated school and home-centered activities that collectively contribute to a student's ability to prepare for life after high school all contingent upon the parent's experience and appreciation of the relationship between educational preparation and work. For low SES African American parents involvement includes help with or discussion about homework, participation and encouragement for co-curricular or extra-curricular activities, assistance in negotiating important relationships with teachers and staff, and scaling the many barriers that often keep out and marginalize low-income students of color. Whether college is the end goal or not, parent involvement describes the process by which they help map out an educational plan and communicate a dependable protocol that their children must follow in order to be successful.

Secondly, it seems to me that preparing children for postsecondary choice requires following a metaphorical "map" that includes roads, paths, or pathways that require critical information to be useful as a navigational aide. The metaphor of roads, paths, and pathways will be used throughout this paper as I believe parents must be able to help their children interpret postsecondary choice maps and to help them arrive at the desired location. For low SES African American parents maps that outline roads to any number

of vocational options are easier to read and make more sense than those that lead to college. As I learned in conducting prior research, they experienced college choice maps in a manner similar to a puzzle with "hidden" pieces that were hard to locate or difficult to decode (Smith, 2001).

This study considers the childhood memories of urban, working class, low SES African American single parents whose parents wrestled with the issue of education and postsecondary planning for their children while enduring the strains of low wage employment. I begin by framing the study with what scholars have said about parent involvement in low-income families, then explore the elements of parent involvement in postsecondary planning using Hossler's conceptualization for this involvement for college choice.

LITERATURE: PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN LOW-INCOME, AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

As noted in the introduction, the literature tells us much about how parent involvement benefits children, but it also points out a noticeable absence of low-income Black parent participation especially when compared to the normative, middle-income (or higher), two-parent, White family. This comparison often leads us to conclude that low-income Black parents care less about education than do their middle-income, White counterparts. Additionally, such a conclusion is essentially a critique of what is considered an inferior (compared to mainstream) set of values about education held by low SES African American parents and their culture. The first objective of this literature review is to consider how contemporary research has challenged the notion that this inferior culture exists along with the "unconcerned poverty-level African American parent." Secondly, the difference between encouraging a child to earn a high school

diploma or a law degree has much to do with how much college knowledge is at a parent's disposal during the critical "predisposition" years of postsecondary or college choice. Finally, a discussion of low-income African American parents must include what has been said about their marginal status relative to the K-12 power structure.

Eurocentric Analysis & The Myth of the Uninvolved Parent:

It is important to question any culturally deficit descriptions of low SES parent involvement and in so doing consider alternate explanations that embrace culturally sensitive perspectives. A deeper conversation of involvement for low-income African American parents is quite often a conversation about of the involvement of African American single mothers since "31% of all persistently poor households [are] headed by non-elderly Black women" (Wilson, 1996; p. 91). In the midst of this discussion, we must acknowledge that much of the research on single mothers is embedded with Eurocentric values and analysis that do not fully expose the poisonous influence of intersecting oppressions Hill Collins (2000) described as race, gender, social class, and nationality. Therefore what we interpret as absence in scholarly literature might better be described as a residual effect of structural barriers and resource inequities that make mainstream-like involvement impossible (Delgado-Gaitan 1994, Finders & Lewis, 1994, Lee & Bowen, 2006; Smith, 2001). Structural barriers can be anything from inflexible work schedules to limited public transit access, either or both disallow low SES African American parents and especially single mothers from making after-school parent meetings with their children's teachers on campus during weeknights. Resource inequities are most often financial and could take the form of inadequate access to electronic media or the inability absorb the loss in pay that could be a part of participation

in formal parent involvement programs. The literature cautions us to not assume that because these parents are not able to help with education or are absent from participation in sanctioned in-school parent activities, they do not support their children's education or college aspirations. In fact literature tells us that low-income African American and Latino parents are involved in ways that fit within their structural constraints and limited knowledge of higher education options. While they may not attend college admission fairs, parent-teacher conferences or other on campus activities, studies have shown that these parents are involved through their use of narratives infused with culturally informed perspectives and born from their own life experiences in the attempt to inspire to their children to succeed in education (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994a, 1994b; Lopez et al., 2001; Smith, 2002; Solorzano, 1992).

The Undeniable Influence of College Knowledge

    "College knowledge" is a term connected to pursuit of a bachelors degree that represents familiarity with the ways, purposes, and pathways that expose students and families to the social, psychological, economic, and experiential tools for accessing and achieving success in our higher education system (McDonough, 1994, 1997; Vargas, 2004). Low SES African American parents lack the necessary levels of college knowledge to help their children become successful college preparatory students in high school or competitive college applicants as 12th graders. An important part of college knowledge is recognition of the specific, health-related, financial, and lifelong affective values of a college degree relative to other post-secondary options (Bowen, 1977). Within the African American community this recognition is framed by notions of utility that make the value of earning a college degree different than the mythical normative,

Anglo American, middle class community (Lorde, 1984; p. 116). In the African

American community if it is perceived that financial benefits accrue shortly after earning

a college degree then college attendance will be encouraged. But if this cost-benefit

analysis reveals negligible short-term financial benefits, then college attendance will be

discouraged and other postsecondary options will be encouraged (Freeman, 2005). With

improved college knowledge there is an increased probability that low SES African

American parents might develop a more accurate perception of the value of a bachelor's

degree and thus could become more involved in and have a better understanding of

college preparatory protocols, positive parenting style changes (towards college choice),

and increased college aspirations and readiness (Chavkin, 1989; Chistenson, Rounds &

Franklin, 1992; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Hornby, 2000; Proisise, 1990).

Structural Barriers That Reinforce Exclusion

An important structural barrier to discuss is that represented by the blue collar or

hourly-wage service sector jobs held by low SES African American parents (Smith,

2001). These jobs are characterized by inflexible schedules and hours of grueling

physical labor that virtually eliminate opportunities to have even the most fundamental

discussions about college after work (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Leitch & Tangri, 1988;

Smith, 2001). This structural barrier is one that low SES African Americans share with

all low-income parents who find that the physical and psychic demands of hourly, service

sector or blue collar labor exacerbate incongruities between the low SES social world

(home and work) and middle class SES social world (schools). The incongruity between

the social worlds excludes while simultaneously creating a distance that estranges low

SES African American parents from the American K-12 system and ultimately higher

education (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Pena, 2000; Leitch & Tangri, 1988).

If we accept the notion that our K-12 school culture is reflective of and congruent with the dominant culture of middle, upper-middle, and upper class, two-parent, European American families, low SES, African American, single parent families are excluded by the same metaphorical border or boundary their children negotiate every day (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). While low SES students may be more skilled at crossing these borders on a daily basis they lack institutional access through social networks, gatekeepers, and important institutional agents provided by their parents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). These agents are from the same cultural background and serve as cultural interpreters and guides who are essential to decoding opportunities and appropriate behaviors in order to advance (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Without institutional agents the borders or boundaries create "moments of exclusion," in the form of institutional racism that further marginalizes these parents and discourages them from becoming more involved in on-campus parental involvement activities (Lareau & McNamara-Horvat, 1999; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Auerbach, 2004; McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown, & Lynn, 2003). The literature tells us that educational parent involvement is wholly beneficial; that low SES African American families are comparatively less involved, and presents several reasons that range from cultural to structural to explain this behavior. What models exist that can help us become familiar with what could be considered optimal involvement? Many models exist for involvement, but only one is specifically related to college choice; as such it is useful for understanding postsecondary choice.

HOSSLER'S PARADIGM FOR PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN COLLEGE CHOICE

The present study concerns low SES African American parents and their involvement in the education and postsecondary process of their children and Hossler's model of college choice helps us visualize where and how involvement occurs. His research on admission and enrollment management yielded a three-state model that includes: 1) predisposition (K-9th); 2) search (10th-11th); 3) choice (12th) (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). Predisposition denotes the time in between birth and approximately the 9th grade where students develop a taste for or disposition towards college. Search takes place in and around the 9th and 10th grades; during this time students explore institution types and college possibilities, creating what is referred to as a "choice set" or list of options. The final step is choice, during which a student engages in a reduction process, whittling a large list of choices to a manageable and realistic final choice set for application.

Within this three stage model is an additional conceptualization of how parent involvement, a process that contains three broadly defined parental activities: setting aspirations, providing encouragement, and active support (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1998). The first, setting aspirations, involves five "signals" parents give that place children on a college choice trajectory: 1) college predisposition; 2) direction setting; 3) education cost-benefit analysis; 4) determining desired proximity or acceptable distance away from home; and 5) defining desired institutional prestige. The second activity, encouragement towards college attendance, falls into three categories: attitude, consistency, and congruence. Attitude connotes a parent's willingness to do whatever necessary for the child's college preparation, application, and enrollment process. Consistency describes the constant, measurable messages delivered about post-high

school plans and whether the messages support college aspirations. Congruence defines the balance and match between a parent's aspirations and the child's educational goals. The final component, parental support, is defined as any tangible, action-oriented activity parents engage in to support their child's college aspirations. These represent tangible financial activities such as establishing savings accounts or trust funds, as well as college visits, summer camps, or investments of time such as helping their children fill out admission applications or financial aid forms. It may also take the form of mining social networks (activating social capital) for information they may not have; church members, colleagues at work, professionals from whom they seek service and even employees at grocery, retail or eating establishments frequented by the parents.

As noted earlier, Hossler's models give us the opportunity to visualize where parents might fall along a continuum of involvement that varies from passive to aggressive regardless of the end goal. In doing so we can better understand how these parents are already involved so that we might make more informed evaluations about when college knowledge should be imparted to convert aspirations from high school diplomas to college degrees.

What follows is a cross-generational exploration of a group of urban, African American single mothers who have college bound, high school aged daughters and who were asked to reflect on their experiences as low SES, potential first generation African American students. It takes a close look at how involved their parents were during what is called the predisposition stage of college choice. Accordingly, three questions guide this inquiry: 1) what messages do low SES, African American parents send their children about the value of education; 2) what is the nature of their involvement in the

predisposition stage of postsecondary involvement; 3) how might the study's findings

inform more effective outreach to low SES African American students and their parents.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

This study of 5 urban working class African American single mothers emerged from

a larger ethnographic study of how 12 urban, African American mothers of college-going

teenaged daughters in Los Angeles, California experienced the college choice process.

The parents were identified through purposeful and snowball sampling of African

American single parents whose daughters were enrolled in targeted high schools

identified through lists provided by the outreach office of the university that sponsored

the study and follow-ups to these solicitations were made through high school counselors.

Such sampling is generally considered appropriate for qualitative studies with a small

number of participants (Wong, 2008). The 5 single mothers[1] chosen for this study were

themselves raised by low SES, minimally educated parents that moved to California or

encouraged their children to move to California as a way to escape a life of poverty in the

South, East or Midwest. The 5 selected parents had children enrolled in three high

schools located in demographically matched clusters in West Los Angeles formed from

the University of California All Campus Consortium for Research on Diversity

(UC/ACCORD) Indicators project in 2002-2003. An index from these data called the

College Opportunity Ratio (COR) produced several workable clusters of similar high

schools chosen from California legislative assembly districts matched by median

household income and having a population of no less than 20% African American. The

high schools chosen were carefully matched in the following dimensions: 1)

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[1] The 5 single mothers will be alternately referred to as "the Five" for the remainder of this paper.

socioeconomic (average household income levels in the community); 2) ethnically (at

least 20% African American); 3) geographically (within a 5 to 10 mile radius). All of the

high schools had excellent college placement histories when compared to other public

high schools within the Los Angeles Basin.

Data were collected by way of 34 transcribed audio taped interviews, audio and

written field notes, and a variety of memos (daily, reflective, analytical, theoretical)

driven by a protocol designed to capture generational attitudes about college choice

(Appendix 1.0). After the interviews were transcribed and analyzed member checks and

analytical memos were used to triangulate findings and monitor subjectivity. The

interviews were semi-structured with probes when appropriate to evoke descriptions of

how they were guided by their parents along the path through high school towards their

own postsecondary school life choices. In order to identify emergent themes, categories,

and patterns, the interviews were analyzed using grounded theory utilizing the constant

comparative method where data are divided into en vivo or open codes, then reduced to

axial and selective codes that create new theory about parent involvement in college

choice (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

GOING BACK A GENERATION TO LEARN ABOUT TODAY: OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

The African American single mothers of this study shared many things in common

including the fact that they were the children of poverty level parents who were often

single.[2] Another commonality between the Five is that most of their parents had limited

education and almost no exposure to the world of higher education and that made them

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[2] Although most of the women I interviewed were raised in homes lead by single
mothers, many had occasional contact with their natural fathers.

first generation high school graduates.[3] Given their collective history, it is accurate to

state that these women were potential first-generation college students (see Table 1.1)

and their stories could add to our understanding of the complex issues facing the children

of low-income, urban, and single parents. A study such as this is especially prudent at

this moment in time where the gap between rich and poor in college access has made four

years of college appear a privilege of the wealthy. Recently Gandara, Horn, & Orfield

(2005) wrote that, "skyrocketing tuition, shrinking capacity, and the demise of

affirmative action in some states have all taken a toll on the hopes and dreams of many

youth who are low income and minority" (p. 255). This trend is especially frightening

when we consider that current data show too many Black children grow up in poor single

parent homes; 5 out of every 7 African American families are likely to be headed by a

single woman (compared to the 3 out of 6 overall) and 36% of all Black children grow

up poor as defined by the U. S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) calculations

for poverty threshold (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007).

   The recollections of the Five add to our collective awareness of how marginalization

shapes the specific messages poor and working class parents send their children about the

utility and value of postsecondary education. Findings from a previous study indicated

that the pressure of participating in the college choice process was especially complicated

for low SES African American single parents who often speak of this dilemma with

palpable sadness and frustration (Smith, 2002). Finally, we may learn about the specific

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[3] The Five reported contact with 10 parents including fathers not living at home, but of
these only 2 had earned high school diplomas.

road maps, expectations, and goals, guidelines these parents use to guide these children along the path to adulthood.

The strongest finding of this study was that during the predisposition stage, the parents of the Five explicitly used narratives of their hard and often brutal life experiences to encourage their children to complete their education and avoid their life circumstance. They spoke as if to tell them in this facet of their life "don't be like me." Attached to these narratives was the belief that a high school diploma would provide a decent life, an attitude that was bolstered by their life experience and well within their postsecondary planning comfort zone (see Chart 1.0). Finally, from this comfort zone, the parents of the Five guided their daughters with maps of educational pathways they understood and could comfortably explain. Of course, these maps were designed to navigate the path towards a high school diploma.

"DON'T BE LIKE ME!" SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION TROUGH A NARRATIVE OF STRUGGLE

As noted by many scholars, under-represented students have parents who appreciate the idea that a formal education can open doors and want to do whatever they can to make this possible including participating in their child's education (Chavkin & Williams, 1993). This was the experience of the single mothers I spoke with who shared their stories about attitudes their parents held towards education during the years they were K-12 students. In most cases their parents did not have high school diplomas so they encouraged high school completion as the terminal (final) degree for their children (see Table 1.1). As children the Five were exposed to mainstream ideas about education consistent with the low SES African American communities where they resided.

Lena, who works as an administrative assistant in the entertainment field, made her parents proud by finishing high school and enrolling in college (she did not finish). In the 1950s her father moved the family from Louisiana to Los Angeles as a way to pursue economic opportunity and better education for his children. Lena's parents required that she and her siblings obtain the level of education sufficient to earn wages that would make it possible to maintain a living wage and raise a family:

> But my dad always new that education would take you anywhere in life you wanted to go and uh that was his uh he wanted that for all of his kids; all 7 of us. And um, so my dad was my biggest influence on school.

> I remember when I came out of high school, business administration [i.e. secretarial work] is something women sought after. Well this is just the generation I grew up in; I think all the neighborhoods felt the same way back then.

Lena's parents made it clear that education was something that would adequately prepare her for the world and believed a lifetime of employment was possible provided they earn a high school diploma. While perhaps different compared with mainstream European American families of the day who encouraged college enrollment, this level of educational aspiration was considered normative for her community and possibly for her cohort of low SES African American teenagers nation-wide.

Kim works as a manager for an agency that provides services to physically abused, low-income, urban women. Her mother understood that with more education came more opportunity, and a life free from the backbreaking jobs she was forced to work. She told Kim that education was the way to escape a life of brutal, manual labor in the cotton fields of Mississippi; a life her mother lived due to a 3rd grade education. In her mother's family, every able-bodied person needed to work in the cotton fields in order to

contribute for survival. In order to not replicate this process for her children, she moved

the family to California and it's superior (at the time) public K-12 system. Once in

California, she insisted that Kim and her siblings earn high school diplomas in order to

escape the drudgery of low-skilled, manual labor. Her exhortation is similar yet slightly

different to what Freeman (2005) described as when college-bound, African American

teenagers exercised agency and self-motivation with an intentional "avoidance of a

negative role model" (p.18). Freeman (2005) described how poverty level, college bound

African American students countered the lack of support for their education from their

parents and family members by using their bad example as an inspiration towards their

college goals. In Kim's case, her mother invoked narratives of an often brutal and

thankless working life to explicitly encourage the all of her children to earn a high school

diploma. Kim shared that:

> Her [Kim's mother] main focus [for us] was graduating from high school. You
> know, so you just make sure that you get a high school diploma. She really, she
> really, she felt it was important. Because she wanted to go to school and couldn't
> because she had to work in the fields and different things like that so, so she
> wanted us to make sure that we took advantage of it.

Rather than passively hoping her children would take a different path towards education,

she aggressively pushed education and empowered her children to believe that they could

"do anything that we [the children] want to do." Kim told me that, "education as far as

college, that wasn't a big thing in the house; just [the] high school diploma." With

respect to postsecondary planning Kim's mother was headed in the "right" direction, but

if college choice were used as a standard of comparison she was using the "wrong" map.

Nevertheless, like Lena and her siblings, Kim and her siblings were taught that education

was their ticket out of poverty and to a life of higher paying work.   Kim's mother

understood the road to completing a high school degree and had visible and concrete

proof of the diploma's financial and experiential pay-offs that made her parenting highly effective for this goal.

An administrative assistant for a Los Angeles high school, Kathy heard similar things from her father and mother. Like Lena and Kim, Kathy's parents inspired her to be a high school graduate. She was told to work hard in school so that she could earn the right to work under more desirable conditions, with better pay, and less physically strain. Her mother and father worked grueling hours in a rural Indiana industrial factory.

> Well, my father, he always told us to make sure we finish high school because he did not want us in a factory…like him. And that's what we did. Well, they just; they never really spoke about college. Again, they just always told us we would have to complete high school. We would have to get that diploma no matter what. That's all they talked about, finishing high school.

Her father and mother pushed education because they understood that their own limited work opportunities were a result of their never finishing high school. "My father quit his education as a fifth grader and my mother, she ended her education as a tenth grader in high school . . . that was really the main reason they were telling us to 'complete your high school, complete your high school' because, you know, you're gonna end up in a factory [if you don't]." Here is another perfect example of aggressively promoting education by using harsh life experience to expose the dire consequences of not finishing high school. But like Kim, Kathy's parents never mentioned college as it seemed a far away dream as she explained, "college was so expensive they knew they were not able to afford college so they just wanted to make sure we completed high school." In retrospect, this is particularly painful because during this time the most generous federal, need-based grant support was available for low SES undergraduates as the result of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Education Amendments of 1972.

Regina's parents were immigrants from Barbados who settled in a poor area of New York City. According to Regina, "when I was a kid I guess their concern for education was low" but this is all changed when her mother divorced her father and she was forced to earn a G.E.D. (high school diploma) at a local community college to qualify for work that paid enough to raise her children as a single parent.

> When my mother started going to school and learning and I guess she realized what she had been missing all along. By this time we were already in I guess middle school, so we was already in junior high school when she started going back to school. So then she started putting the focus on school and you know its important education and complete your high school.

It could be argued that her mother's initial reluctance to promote education may be a carryover from her Caribbean upbringing where high school education may not have been the only avenue to vocational opportunity. It is more likely that after experiencing the hardships of single parenthood, she delivered the message that in order to be successful in life it was imperative that her children finish high school. Why high school and not college? According to the maps at her disposal a high school degree equated to a better life, and the concrete, tangible benefits Regina's mother observed made encouragement towards this goal a sensible strategy.

Marietta's mother also shared life narratives about the life of poverty that came with little formal education in the hope that she would finish high school and enroll in college. While raised by her mother, she had occasional contact with her father who was exposed to high SES, White professionals during his work as a tree-trimmer for the City. Through conversations with many highly paid college graduates during his workday, he was able to gain a modicum of college knowledge, understanding the importance of particular degrees (such as the JD) to financial success. She explained to me "that he had lawyers that were friends and they were all successful financially and I think that's one area that

he felt that I could handle and that he would like to have seen me go into." So with this bit of college knowledge, he along with Marietta's mother encouraged her do well in school and did whatever it took to see her complete high school and possibly enroll in college.

> My mom specifically always told me that education was the key to success. We grew up poor in the South and it was like in order to get out of this particular situation or this type of environment, education was the key.
>
> She just always wanted me to make sure that I studied and ah, didn't really allow me a lot of time to socialize kind of thing. It was like study, study, study, study, study, study and that's pretty much what I did although during my last couple years in high school

Her mother's encouragement was so successful Marietta attended a 4-year college for 2 years although she did not finish for a variety of reasons she did not disclose. Even without finishing college, she has maintained a productive work life as an administrative assistant to a local city politician. It is important to note her that her mother and father had access to a slightly different map of postsecondary destinations compared to the other four single parents I spoke with. They had a higher level of college knowledge from exposure to those who had benefited financially and socially from particular types of college degrees, therefore that Marietta attended college should not be surprising especially if we assume that both parents wanted to do whatever it took for her to have a better life than theirs.

For all of the women of this study a high school diploma was the acceptable level of academic achievement and job preparation in the eyes of their parents. Additionally, education was promoted as a way to avoid a life of heavy labor and low wages. Since all of the women I interviewed are high school graduates who have gone on to full employment and single-parenthood, their parent's efforts could be considered a success

given what they understood about the relationship between educational preparation and work.

POSTSECONDARY PARENT INVOLVEMENT: HOSSLERIAN ANALYSIS OF LOW SES AFRICAN AMERICANS

Findings from this study support other empirical research that addresses the way families influence the college choice process. It supports studies that explore how African American parents encourage their children to "go beyond their own level of schooling" (Freeman, 2005, p.17) during the predisposition stage of college choice when the seeds for postsecondary options are first planted. Thinking about how the Five interacted with their parents during the K-12 experience, the end results were not dissimilar from Hossler's model for parent involvement in college choice with the exception of the end goal; the high school diploma. To this end the parents of the Five were highly involved in postsecondary choice and, in some cases, college choice as evidenced by their aspiration setting, encouragement and support.

Setting Aspirations

Aspiration setting involves five "signals" that include college predisposition, direction setting, education cost-benefit analysis, consideration of proximity, and consideration of institutional prestige. Of the five signals, the Five received very strong predisposition, direction setting and cost-benefit analysis signals towards high school graduation and subsequent employment rather than college.   The exception was Marietta whose parents wanted her to be a lawyer; she received very strong direction setting for college that resulted in her eventual enrollment. The rest of the Five noted that college rarely came up in conversations and when it did, prohibitive costs (or their perception of these costs) made the parents believe that college was something that only the privileged

could afford. The use of life narratives, monitoring of academic performance, and the willingness to change geographic locations for better educational opportunity indicated that their parents indeed set directions, nurtured predisposition, and weighed the costs and benefits of high school completion.

Recent work from Lee & Bowen (2006) found that of all the variables that influence academic achievement, parental involvement as expressed by high aspirations (predisposition and directions set) were the most important even after considering multiple demographic and economic factors. This held true for the Five who where all expected to finish high school at the urging of their parents who did so with vigor. For example Lena told me that, "there were no such things as "D's" or "F's" in her family and "you couldn't bring those into the house" so it is no wonder that the parents of the Five who experienced a good deal of success as all of the Five graduated from high school. Marietta's parents wanted her to attend law school and made their way through college choice with maps provided by the high SES lawyers her dad encountered at work. This meant that she had to forgo social activities for doing homework and tending to her studies, a recollection she shared with me:

> I was raised by my mom for the most part. She just always wanted me to make sure that I studied and ah, didn't really allow me a lot of time to socialize kind of thing. It was like study, study, study, study, study, study and that's pretty much what I did ….. she was very hard, she was very strict and education was her main thing, yeah.

Her parents expected her to earn good grades and raised her (at least her mom) in a disciplined way so that she would enter college and eventually graduate (she did not finish). Again, I need to stress that it is especially significant that the Five and most of their siblings graduated from high school because only two of their parents did the same!

Providing Encouragement

Each woman received constant encouragement for high school completion in the form of the aforementioned use of narratives to positive, self-esteem building exhortations that the women could accomplish whatever they could imagine. For most of the Five, college was considered unrealistic and outside of the rational boundaries of expectations because of what McDonough and Calderone (2006) describe as "distortion" of college costs where low SES parents believe that they will have to pay for the entire college experience. This assumption points to a complete misunderstanding of how student aid packages for low SES students could help dramatically reduce costs especially at private institutions. Similar to findings in several studies, these attitudes can be part of an entire community's perception of college which is something Lena refers to when she says "this is just the generation I grew up in" when explaining attitudes about possible jobs for high school graduates.

The only unfortunate aspect of these misunderstandings about financial aid is that the parents of the Five reached their conclusions in an era where need-based aid for college was most available due to the very generous Pell and SEOG programs. Instead of taking advantage of available financial aid, most of the Five absorbed negative messages about college attendance that could be described as "college discouragement" which is an inversion of "encouragement" as described by Striplin (1999). College discouragement results in actions that cause parents to withdraw from the college choice process simultaneously leaving the child to negotiate the process on their own with whatever outside resources they are able to locate. All but Marietta's parents withdrew or were never a part of the college choice process and they were fortunate to have a modicum of

college knowledge gained from the father's work networks; knowledge that made her a competitive college applicant.

Providing Active Support

Active support for college choice comes in the form of tangible activities that encourage college consideration, application, and eventual graduation. The strongest evidence of such preparation and sacrifice comes in the form of relocation risks and expenses borne by the parents of the women interviewed. In almost every case their parents moved to California to take advantage of a public school system that in the 1960s and 1970s was the envy of the nation, free of charge, and far superior to those in their communities. The parents of the Five understood that moving presented the best opportunity to send their children on a different trajectory than their own; it represented the best chance for them to "do better than me."

At the K-12 school level, active support is greatly enhanced when secondary institutions open their doors to parents and provide a school climate that is inviting and welcoming (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In the case of the women I spoke with neither the high schools nor higher education institutions made efforts to bring their parents into the college choice process at any point amplifying the incongruity between home and school environments. As noted earlier, this incongruity intimidates, marginalizes, and quite often excludes low SES African American parents from participation in parent events (Geenan & Powers, 2001; Coleman & Churchill, 1997; Moles, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999). In the main, parents of the Five were never able to traverse the borders and

barriers between the school and their lives at home in ways that would make them a part of the college choice process.

ANSWERING RESEARCH QUESTIONS: Maps, Messages, Involvement, & Improving Practice

Three questions guided this study, namely what messages did the parents send about education, what was the nature of their involvement, and finally how might findings inform future outreach practice. Most of the parents operated with a set of road maps that had employment for their children as the end point after high school and their messages and guidance flowed from where they were most comfortable. For example, the messages all of these low SES African American parents sent about the value of education embraced its potential to increase earnings and a keep a person from poverty and life of hard labor. Education had value primarily for its most utilitarian purpose of vocational preparation or its potential to produce a certain level of pay. Although these parents may have understood that college had value, for most it was a distant reality and required a roadmap that was foreign and the privilege of other people. One of the most striking references to this distance from the college experience came from Karen's parents who believed college was so expensive it could not be realistically considered. Further, it was evident that not having college knowledge suppressed any consideration of how college may have broadened career choices for their children through actual course content, classroom experiences, co-curricular experiences with classmates, or exposure to rich social networks whose value increases with time. Finally, with the exception of Marietta, none of the Five noted that their parents discussed or understood the idea of a college education representing a long term investment whose principal value comes with the accreditation, flexibility, and fluidity required to skillfully participate in

our rapidly changing, information based economy. The maps the parents of the Five used were constructed from their own life experiences with education and educational preparation for work and supported their involvement within a bounded comfort zone.

That messages were sent on a consistent basis was evidence of a kind of involvement that is different from the mythical normative middle class family but yet not detrimental. While their parents were not participants in any school based parent involvement programs, college-preparatory activities, or financing or financial aid workshops, they intentionally invoked narratives that encouraged their children to avoid their fate. They may not have helped with homework, but were determined to make sure their children maintained the necessary grades to earn a high school diploma or in the case of Marietta enroll in college. Most of the Five had no experience with college preparatory programs so it is clear that the maps their parents used to help them navigate their K-12 experience were based on their children completing a general or basic high school program. This is important because it represents an endpoint the parents could be comfortable communicating to their children and thus creating a space where they could be involved.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OUTREACH

The findings of this study are most relevant for those who wish to outreach to this group of parents and their children with the hope of transitioning high school dreams into college aspirations inspiring a new generation of first-generation undergraduate students. It is clear that the parents of the Five wanted their children to succeed by finishing high school but college was considered an unrealistic option. As workers within the American higher education system the question we should ask ourselves is, "how badly do we want to reach out, embrace, and become advocates for low income African American parents

and their children?" When it concerns college choice, the fate of this group of parents and their children depends on how aggressively the academy reaches out and provides support in the form of easily understandable descriptions of college benefits, financing, preparation, and application.

Becoming advocates for low SES African American children means embracing their parents as teammates in the postsecondary choice process which could become the college choice process if effective maps are used to impart college knowledge not within the parent's existing family and social networks or their life experiences. The first step in becoming advocates and partners is to begin by assuming that these parents *want their children to succeed in their educational endeavors*. Next, we must resolve to begin the process of educating parents about the value of college and the path their children should begin to trod *very early in their children's schooling* which will reduce the level of fear of cost that makes college appear an unrealistic aspiration. Finally, *we have to provide better maps* that clearly outline the pathways and steps to arrive at the destination of college admission, enrollment, and eventually graduation.

FURTHER RESEARCH & CONCLUSION

The preceding study used Hossler's conceptualization of parent involvement in college choice to understand how low SES African American parents are involved in the postsecondary planning process of their children. It found that these parents were involved in an area bound by their comfort zone, understanding of the relationship between educational preparation and work, and their ability to provide tangible support. Future studies could further deepen Hossler's conceptualization about parent involvement in the predisposition stage for all low SES parents by exploring the link between

understanding, experience, and attitudes about what is needed to prepare for a life of productive work. Additionally, more could be done to investigate how intersecting oppressions (race, class, gender, nationality) impact involvement for low SES, African American, single parents particularly in the area of philosophies about what is considered the appropriate levels of education to move out of poverty.

No matter which directions are taken, it is clear that in order to convert high school diploma expectations to college degree aspirations, the Academy could work as a concerned collective to intervene early and often in the lives of these students and their parents. Interventions should include a steady delivery of college knowledge and a commitment to co-construct usable maps and in so doing allow low SES African American parents to become partners in the college choice process.

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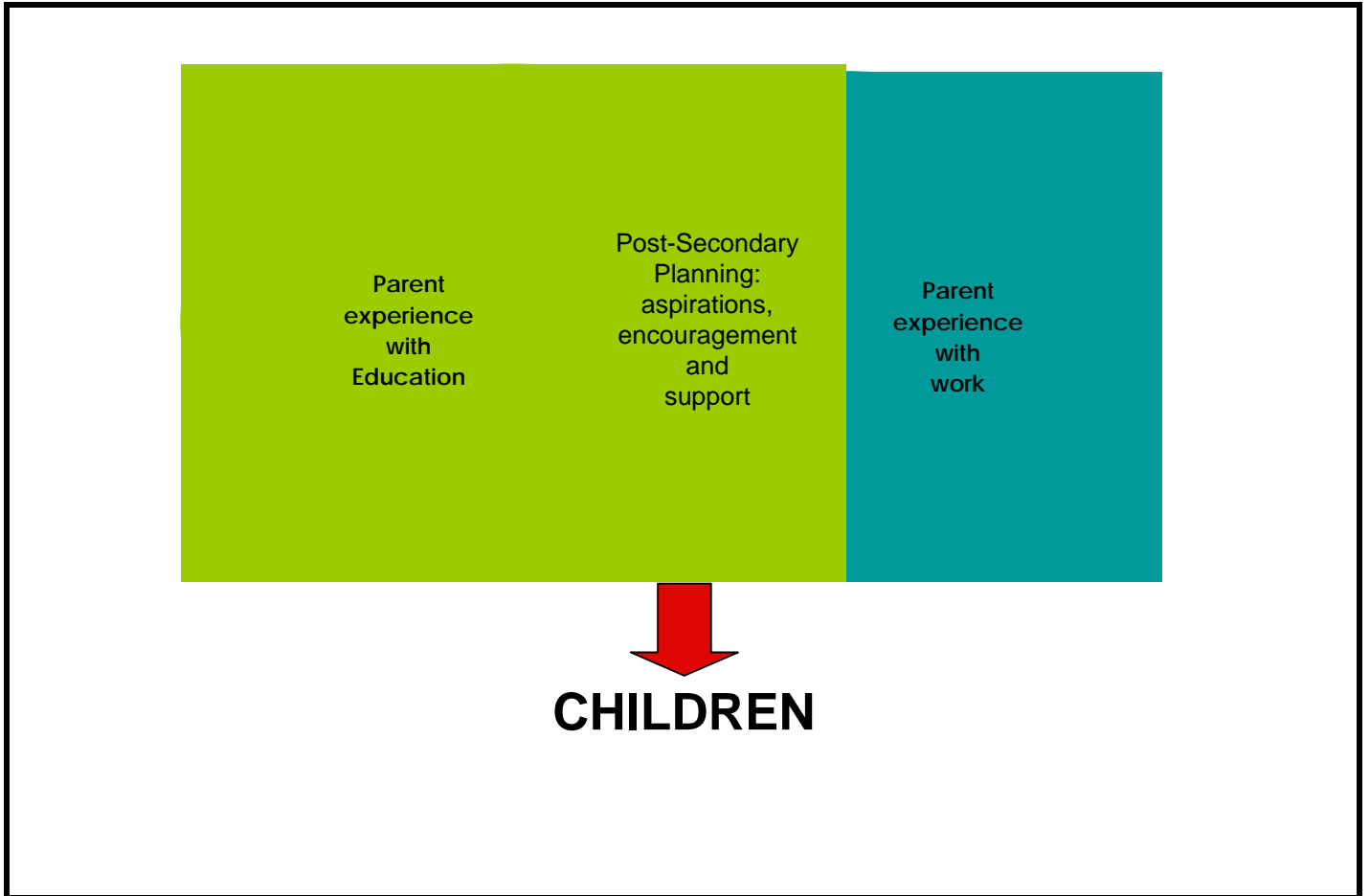
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Chart 1.0   The Comfort Zone: Predisposition Low SES Parent
             Involvement in Postsecondary Choice

Parent
experience
with
Education

Post-Secondary
Planning:
aspirations,
encouragement
and
support

Parent
experience
with
work

CHILDREN

Appendix 1.0: Protocol for Educational Interactions W/Subject's Parents

1. Why did your "people" come out to California, or how did you get to California? *[Probe: Black migratory patterns in L.A.]*

2. What did your mother and father tell you about education? What are some of the core values you learned from your parents about education or the value of education? *[Probe: Level of your parent's education]*

3. Is education the only way to achieve success in America? *[Probe: Value of college degree vs. other degrees or types of certification]*

4. What are other acceptable ways of achieving success in America? *[Probe: Value of college degree vs. other degrees or types of certification]*

5. How did your parents feel about academic African Americans in general; did their feelings differ for boys and girls? *[Probe: Childhood exposure and interactions with African Americans or anyone with college degrees]*

6. What did your parents teach you about the difference between common or wit sense and book learned knowledge?

7. What college experiences did they deem the most important?

8. Did they ever talk about how much education is enough? What are some concrete examples they gave you to support their points? *[Probe: Fears and attitudes about education as well as conceptualizations of the "educated"]*

9. Do you think that these values were flawed in any way and if so how have you amended them for your children?

10. Regarding your parents, which of their attitudes and values about education were learned from their neighborhood, friends, family, church, media or popular press, or through spouses and significant others?

Table 1.0: Education Attainment of The Five Women and Their Parents

MOTHER'S NAME	MOTHER'S CHILDHOOD FAMILY	WHERE RAISED	MOTHER'S HIGHEST EDUCATION ATTAINED	HER PARENT'S EDUCATION LEVEL
Kathy	1 parent (dad involved)	Rural Indiana	H.S. Diploma	10th grade (mom) 3rd grade> (dad)
Kim	1 parent	Urban California	H.S. Diploma	3rd grade (mom)
Lena	2 parents	Urban California	H.S. Diploma	5th grade (mom) *12th grade (dad)*
Marietta	1 parent (dad involved)	Urban California	H.S. Diploma	*12th grade (mom)* 11th grade> (dad)
Regina	1 parent	Urban New York	H.S. Diploma	11th grade>

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