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TAKING STEPS

Exploring College Predispositions in College Track, Oakland Youth

By Katherine Zepeda-Arreola

I. Introduction

The preceding is a clip from the 2011 College Track Bay Area graduation where Keynote Speaker, Will.i.am, describes his life as a young adult in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles.¹ Despite growing up in the projects, on welfare, and seeing his friends being shot and using drugs, the musician, songwriter and entrepreneur explains that the encouragement and influence that he received from his mother allowed him to ignore these distractions and succeed. His story relates to those of College Track students who live in the Bay Area's inner cities and make up the urban poor but have pledged to continue their education in colleges and universities all over the United States.

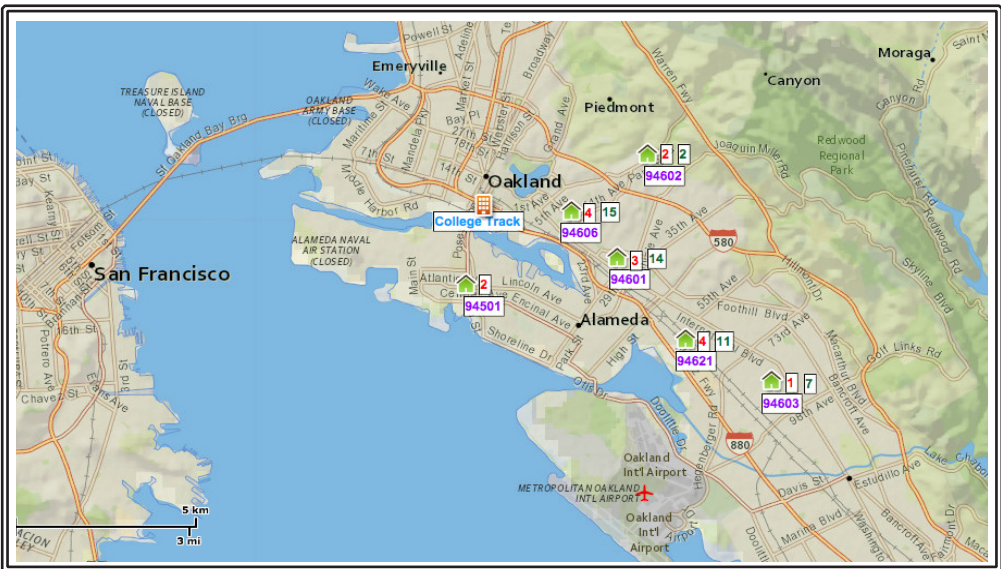
The subjects of my research are rising 9th grade students recently admitted to the College Track program in Oakland, as the class of 2016 cohort. To gain a better understanding of this population and their everyday experiences, I created a map of Oakland (by zip code) to illustrate where the students of this cohort live (see Figure 1). The red numbers on this map indicate the number of students who participated in this research study and who reside within that zip code. The blue numbers indicate the number of students from the entire class of 2016 cohort that reside within that zip code. Half of the student participants live in East Oakland Neighborhood, zip codes 94601, 94621, and 94603. Oakland Mayor Jean Quan declared this 100-block stretch as the most violence-ridden where most crime, predominantly homicides, occurs.

1 "Will.i.am Gives Speech at College Track Event," *Youtube* video, 5:35, April 16, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGNxZH8PwrQ>.

My overall project was designed to explore why these rising 9th graders decided to apply to the College Track program. I identified three components of the program: the focus on college access, the supplemental resources (i.e. financial and extracurricular) and the staff. When I began working on this project, I asked myself why students chose to apply to this program. Was it because it is the only one in Oakland? Was it because their parents made them apply? Or was it because they simply wanted to go to college?

To address these questions, it is important to understand the application process for admission into the program. In the months of February and March, program directors travel to middle schools all over Oakland to present the program's four components: College Affairs, Student Life, Academic Affairs, and College Success. Following the presentation, program applications are distributed among interested students. Students are given between 2-4 weeks to complete the application, which includes contact, income and parent information, one long essay, three short answer essays, and at least two letters of recommendation from teachers, mentors, or counselors. If students

FIGURE I



Source: http://education.nationalgeographic.com/mapping/interactive-map/?ar_a=1

meet the eligibility criteria, they are called for a 15-30 minute interview about their family, their interest in the program, and their work ethic in school before they are notified of their acceptance or rejection into the program.

Here, I will focus on how students' willingness to apply was influenced by a network of three different sources: their peers, the school staff, and their parents. These three sources were instrumental in providing positive feedback to reassure students of the benefits of the program. The aim of this project is to produce data that will assist educators and organizations to better support students' educational choices.

II. Methods

Data for this study was collected at the College Track site in Oakland over a period of three weeks. Fifteen student subjects were recruited for interviews from the incoming 9th grade class. At the time, this cohort was completing the Academic Summer Advancement Program (ASAP) required by College Track. Two other students who also sat through the College Track presentation but did not apply to the program were recruited for interviews via snowball sampling. Interviews were semi-structured and conversational, lasting between forty and eighty minutes in length. Parental permission and student assent forms were collected for every subject in this project. All students were provided pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

III. Conceptual Frame/Background

I will be using portions of Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory of the Ecology of Human Development for my analysis. Bronfenbrenner's Ecology of Human Development discusses how human growth occurs through five systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. I will be discussing only the *microsystem* and *mesosystem*.

According to Bronfenbrenner, "a *microsystem* is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular and material characteristics".²

2 Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiment by Nature and Design*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 22.

Essentially, the microsystem is what the subject sees or experiences in their immediate environment. I will introduce the *mesosystem* later in this talk.

IV. Peer Influences

Peers are an important part of the microsystem because they make up a majority of relationships experienced by the individual in school settings, for example. Importantly, 73% of my subjects mentioned that their peers encouraged them to apply. This process of student interactions in the classroom resulted in the student applying to the program in the following ways.

Some students applied simply because their friends applied. Vanessa explained, “in the end, she was like you *need* to come cause I’m going to be the only one there. And I was like okay, [laughs] I’ll go” [emphasis mine]. Vanessa applied for this program because her friend persuaded her to turn in the application, not because she thought about what the program had to offer or how she perceived the program could help her. This is something that Andrew also noticed among his peers. “They said if others go they would go and [they] think they’re supposed to go just cause your friends went.”

Another way that subjects were influenced to apply to the program was through encouragement from their peers once they explained the program’s resources. Jose explained how his friend’s experience in the program motivated him to apply; he explained, “Well, I could see that he was a really good student. He averaged like a 3.67 GPA, and he applied to many programs and got a lot of scholarships and got accepted to a really good college. So just seeing that and coming to the program makes me want to go [to College Track], too, because doing all that, I mean, I could probably do it too.”

The last type of interaction that resulted in subjects applying to the program occurred when they worked in groups to complete their applications for the program. Trinity explained, “we always meet at this private spot during lunch time, and we said ‘oh are you guys going to CT?’ and I said ‘yeah, well I want to come because there is free food and I could apply to different scholarships.’ So I applied with my friends.” These group sessions were also guided by teachers who looked over the students’ applications.

Non-applicant subjects did not mention encouragement or interactions with peers regarding the application process when asked during the interview. For example, Ayana mentioned that she talked to her friends, and some admitted to applying although she was still deciding on whether or not to apply. Another student, Lulu, commented that one of the reasons why she did not fill out her application was that many of her friends were not applying. This suggests that peer influence can either inhibit or promote certain behaviors, such as filling out the program application.

V. School Teachers and Staff Support

The second source of support was by the school staff. Seventy-three percent of my subjects explained that they were encouraged to apply by a faculty staff member at their school. Karina explained, "I remember the teacher, on Thursdays we would end early and go to his class and he would help us write the essays and everything... he helped us edit them." Teachers maintained a very influential role when motivating students to apply to the program because they knew the student's strengths, weaknesses, and work ethic. Thus, teachers are able to effectively advise students on important decisions. For example, Aracely said, "My teacher told me that I should apply for it because there was a good chance that I might get accepted."

Counselors were also important in letting the students know about the program. Jayson recounted, "My counselor told us it was a good program. They help you get through college, and they also offer you money." Counselor support is important because counselors are aware of the student's educational trajectory via their class schedules and grades. The non-applicant subjects did not receive as much information or encouragement from school staff. One of the non-applicants discussed how she only talked to her counselor when she inquired about the application deadline. Lulu explained, "She said that today was the last day and [asked] if I could take it to the CT office, but I didn't have time that day."

Principals did their part as well; a few students mentioned that their principals encouraged them to apply to the program. Louie described, "He told me that it was the program that he was the director of, and that he highly recommends it for me because he wants me to

go to college and reach my goals.” Non-applicants did not talk to their principals about the program or the application.

VI. Parental Support

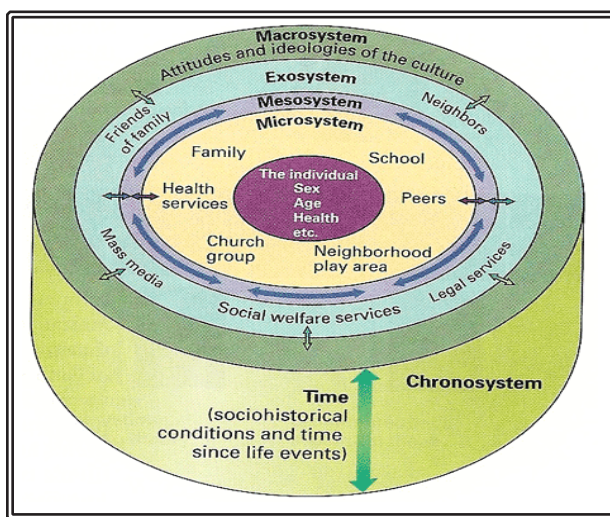
A third factor within the microsystem is family. Aside from the school environment, children spend most of their time in the home, under the care of family members. Therefore, the interactions between my research subjects and their family members were important to examine. For the most part, with the exception of two students, the custodial parents wanted their children to apply to the program. However, their demonstration of this support was manifested in different ways.

Gaby described conversations with her mom regarding the importance of attending college. “My mom didn’t go to college and she’s working in a factory. She told me that if I keep studying, then I won’t have to work as hard as her [physically], but if I go to college I can get an education and do something easier.” In this case, the parent demonstrated encouragement to her child by reminding her of their socioeconomic status and the better financial prospects that can come with a college education. Four other subjects discussed the high frequency of college-related conversations with their parents. This is an important part of the microsystem because being in an environment where college is constantly a topic of discussion allows students to internalize the importance and value of a college education. Fania described, “I can’t have a normal conversation with my mom without her bringing up college.”

Parental involvement in the subject’s application process was another area of interaction. Some parents drove to the College Track site to check on the status of the student’s application, made phone calls to verify interview dates, and wanted to understand the program from their student’s perspective. Jojo explained, how his mother was very happy about his acceptance into the program and wanted to know more about the orientation where she later learned that this was a “good program” for her son. Both non-applicants discussed how parents considered college to be important. When Lulu talked to her parents about the program, her mom answered by saying “you better do that cause you’re gonna need all the help you can get when you get to college.” As Lulu’s grades began to worsen in her eighth grade year, the tone of Lulu’s mother seemed

less encouraging and less confident in Lulu's abilities to go to college. The tone of her mother's words was more desperate, as if she needed something that would help her daughter go to college despite her loss of focus in academics.

FIGURE II



Source: <http://lorilynnyoung.edu.glogster.com/urie-bronfenbrenners-human-ecology-theory/>

VII. Discussion

Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory of the Human Ecology (see Figure 2) states that microsystems are these environments in which one-on-one interactions occur between the developing person and, in this case, peers, school staff and parents. As quoted in Huebner and Mancini's "Shaping Structured Out-of-School Time Use Among Youth: The Effects of Self, Family, and Friend Systems," "Eccles and Barber (1999) found that youth that participated in prosocial activities had more friends who planned to attend college and fewer friends that drank or used drugs than their peers who did not participate in prosocial activities."³ Therefore,

³ Huebner, Angela J., and Jay A. Mancini. "Shaping Structured Out-of-School Time Use Among Youth: The Effects of Self, Family, and Friend Systems." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 32, no. 6 (2003): 456

in the classrooms of some of my research subjects, Bronfenbrenner's microsystems model exemplifies how interactions between certain students eventually resulted in their development of similar interests in the program, thereby motivating them to apply.

The school staff was a crucial element in the student's decision to apply to the program. The students spent an entire school year with these teachers and three years in a middle school, where counselors and principals observed their achievement. Altogether, the students' aspirations to continue their education were strengthened because the school faculty knew the students' potential and were able to make recommendations about educational opportunities.

In regard to parental support, Professor Lisa García Bedolla analyzes the difference in opportunities in education as a result of policies and structures affecting students in poverty and explains how literature demonstrates that family is often cited as an important resource for at-risk youth.⁴ In this research project, 80 percent of students mentioned parental support when discussing the application with their parents. 40 percent of those students described their parents' involvement in the process of gaining admission to the program.

However, one cannot examine these settings individually. Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem concept allows researchers to analyze these sources *together*, as opposed to individually. According to Bronfenbrenner, "A mesosystem comprises the interrelations among two or more setting in which the developing person actively participates."⁵ In this study, 100 percent of the research subjects in the program had at least two influences from different sources (i.e. from peers, school staff, or from parents). The mesosystem shows that having these support networks constantly remind the teens about college reinforced the college predispositions that he/she may have or may be developing. This results when children receive those messages from multiple sources in their immediate environment.

This is further proven through the interviews with the students who did not apply. They only mentioned receiving support from their parents but not from any school staff member or friend. With more support from the people in their environments, perhaps they would have turned in their

4 Lisa García Bedolla, "Good Ideas are Not Enough: Considering the Politics Underlying Students' Postsecondary Transitions," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* 15, no. 1-2 (2010): 15.

5 Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development*, 25.

application for the program as well. While education is facing continuous budget cuts, it is important to be strategic about the ways to ensure the success of youth, particularly those in poor cities and neighborhoods.

Developing ways to ensure that youth are being supported in all aspects of their environment not just in the classroom or the home can yield positive prospects for a fruitful future.

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