

**The Structure and Culture of
Information Pathways:
Rethinking Opportunity to Learn
in Urban High Schools during
the Ninth Grade Transition**

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Despite efforts to bridge the racial achievement gap, far too many school children continue to fare poorly in our nation's public schools. Oftentimes urban and low income students are negatively labeled as low-achieving, disadvantaged, and struggling. Because of this, such students frequently receive inferior or deficient information from school officials. This study examines the role of high school counselors as distributors of information and the role they play in influencing students' ninth grade success. This three-year case study reports how the structure and culture of schools shapes educational reform, and the importance of "high-stakes" information as a critical strategy in developing students' college-going identities.

The persistent under-achievement of students, especially those in high poverty urban schools, has placed a large number of urban students at risk of school failure (Plank & Jordan, 2001; Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, & Sanchez, 2000). For many urban youth, school failure translates into disengagement from the schooling process. This failure becomes most evident during the transition from middle school to high school, when students who are disengaged from the learning process are pushed out of the educational pipeline altogether (Alspaugh, 1998; Alspaugh & Harting, 1995; Gillock & Reyes, 1999; Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). Studies suggest that by eighth grade almost 40% of African American and Latina/o youth in this country are in situations that cause them to be "at risk" of school failure (Hafner, Ingels, Schneider, Stevenson, 1990). Despite millions of federal dollars invested in "at-risk" research, the National Center for Educational Statistics in November 2001 estimates that each year for the past decade over half a million high school students left school before graduation. As a result, the achievement gap between students attending schools in low income urban areas and those in affluent neighborhoods is widening and postsecondary educational opportunities for urban students are becoming non-existent (Harper, 2006; Obidah, Christie, & McDonough, 2004; Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, & Morrell, 2002; Plank & Jordan, 2001).

While research has thoroughly documented the multiplicity of factors that contribute to the reasons why urban students are struggling within the current educational system, including family background (Noguera, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999), curriculum content (Delpit, 2006), inappropriate assessment (Noguera, 2005; Obiakor, Utley & Rotatori, 2003), unqualified teachers (Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2004a, 2004b), and school leadership (Cooper & Peebles, in press) one factor that warrants further investigation is the Opportunity to Learn (OTL). Opportunity to Learn is not a new concept, but we argue that it has been silenced in the current discourse on how to close the achievement gap. As Gordon (1995) suggested, it is immoral to compare student outcomes before we seriously engage in an investigation of the distribution of inputs – opportunities and resources essential to the development of intellect and competence.

Defining Our Terms

Opportunity to Learn

Opportunity to Learn (OTL) refers to the conditions or circumstances within schools and classrooms that promote learning for all students. It includes the multiplicity of factors that create the conditions for teaching and learning, such as curricula, learning materials, facilities, teachers and instructional experiences. While many of the OTL measures have been developed to examine structural and material differentiations among and between students and schools, this study departs from conventional equity-minded studies by looking at the distribution of information. We argue that the distribution of information is a critical component of the school culture that creates conditions for school-wide student achievement. Broadening the concept of OTL provides us a new framework to better understand the problems students face during the transition into high school: poor attendance, decline in GPA, discipline related problems, and a decrease in extra curricular activities (Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, & Smith, 2000). This paper focuses on how the distribution of information can transform the experiences of high school freshmen.

Types of School Information

For the purpose of our study, we define *information* as the knowledge derived from school adults that can be processed, stored, and transmitted into a set of actions that support and empower students toward academic and social success in the ninth grade. In this paper we use the phrase *high stakes knowledge* to draw a distinction between the types of information that adults in schools can choose to share with students. *High stakes information* leads students to understand the school culture, policies, and practices in ways in which they can access, embrace, and develop a strong academic self-identity. This type of information, i.e. the “hidden curriculum,” provides students with admission to honors and AP courses, access to magnet and Gifted and Talented Programs, and opportunities for involvement in extra curricular activities. It is often reserved only for students who demonstrate a strong academic proclivity in middle school. If students are to be successful in their transition into high school, eventually graduate, and be prepared to matriculate into college, we argue that they have to be presented with high stakes information early and often throughout their high school careers.

We contrast high stakes information with what we call *functional information*. Functional information serves the interest of the institution and focuses on policies, technicalities, and directions that allow the educators to operate a safe and orderly school. While this type of information can prove useful to students, the primary purpose for its dissemination is to communicate institutional norms, expectations, and policies. Examples of functional information for ninth grade students include course offerings, location of lockers, and graduation requirements. While this type of information is critical to the transition process, it is disseminated to serve the needs of the school, not to empower students to be more active in the development of their educational experience.

School transition literature suggests that the extent to which school adults are able to cultivate academic engagement, social adjustment, and college-going identities early in the high school experience—and we argue through

information sharing—will in large part determine the extent to which students persist in the schooling process (Legters, 2000). In this study we explore the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of school adults, specifically school counselors, to illuminate the distribution of information given to incoming ninth grade students to ease their transition into high school. The effects of information distribution on the transition to high school have only briefly been examined. We take as our starting point what several scholars have referred to as the *social distribution of possibilities*, a term used to describe how the unequal distribution of information limits one's opportunities to participate in different social and institutional contexts (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). We use this term to suggest that urban students' access to high stakes information is structured, determined, and disseminated by the adults in their schools. While white middle class students consistently receive and depend upon this type of information to secure their privileged participation in the schooling process in this country, urban students are often not afforded similar access. By focusing on information distribution by school adults, this study broadens educational theory by showing the linkages between access to information and increased opportunities to learn during the high school transition period.

The Transition to High School

While the transition from middle school to high school symbolically represents the coming of age, it is a time in a young person's life that can create feelings of isolation, disconnection, and an immeasurable sense of loneliness (Legters & Kerr, 2001). Research on the middle to high school transition illuminates that some of the negative outcomes associated with this transition can be mitigated with the appropriate level of support and information from school personnel (Kaufman, Klein, & Fraser, 1999). When students are given the appropriate level of support and information they have a greater propensity to demonstrate the skills and behaviors needed to overcome the obstacles and barriers that many urban high school students encounter in the pursuit of academic and career aspirations (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Ceja, 2004). The current discourse regarding the achievement gap

presents a dismal picture and neglects to offer new perspectives or possibilities for educators and educational policy makers (Beachum, Dentith, & McCray, 2004). Concurring with this notion, Perry (2003) asserts that:

The conversation about achievement is problematic because it fails to begin with a careful examination of all aspects of the school, with an eye toward understanding how the school's day-to-day practices participate in the creation of underachievement. (p. 9)

Opportunity to Learn

Why Access to High Stakes Information is Critical

Exploring the role and influence of information distribution during the transition from middle school to high school shifts the focus of understanding the transition period from outcomes to better understanding the process itself. This line of inquiry speaks to the important role educators play in determining the success and failure of ninth graders not only during the transition into high school, but also through their entire high school career. Access to information is an important condition influencing a student's Opportunity to Learn. Since 1988, OTL has been viewed as a viable tool to ensure equity in the distribution of educational resources and learning opportunities (McDonnell, 1995). OTL theory suggests that students' differentiated learning experiences—within and between schools—can be attributed to unequal learning conditions rather than students' abilities to succeed (Schwartz, 1995). Research on OTL has focused on developing better ways to measure how elements of school culture such as school finance, student assessment, and teacher quality are distributed and compared.

While educators have defined OTL in a variety of different ways: e.g., education indicators (Shavelson, McDonnell, Oakes, Carey, Picus, 1987), policy instruments (McDonnell, 1995), and research concepts (Travers, 1993); the question at issue in this study is, How do we assure that all students have equal access to the type of information that can make the difference between dropping out of the educational

process and graduating from high school prepared to matriculate into college? One of the most critical determinants of whether or not a student will successfully navigate through the educational system is the type of information to which she/he has been exposed. Students who are exposed to high stakes information are empowered to make thoughtful decisions. Exposure to high stakes information early and often during the transition period can fundamentally alter the schooling experience of students and increase the number of students who are academically prepared to matriculate to college (Datnow & Cooper, 1997).

Increasing Access to High Stakes Information during the Ninth Grade Transition

The transition into high school has both psychological and sociological components that include being socialized into a new school culture with different expectations, stress factors, and support systems. *How and in what ways* students cope with the changes that come as a result of this transition has lasting implications on their academic achievement and social adjustment. The transition from middle school to high school can be a very difficult process. The large, bureaucratic nature of most high schools challenges students to adjust to new rules and new expectations, while providing them little, if any, adult support and nurturing. As students struggle to fit in socially, poor prior academic preparation in core subjects exacerbates the anxiety associated with transitioning into high school (Legters & Kerr, 2001). For many students these feelings of anxiety lead to self-doubt, alienation, and disengagement from school (Zane, 1994; Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990). In a recent review of school transitions, Legters (2000) reported that ninth grade students have a very difficult time adjusting to the academic and social demands of high school and therefore experience higher rates of academic failure, disciplinary problems and feelings of not belonging than they did in middle school. Students who fail to successfully integrate into the school culture drop out of school as early as the end of the ninth grade (Bryk, 1994).

The research clearly shows that when urban students enter high school, many enter with high academic and career aspirations

(Goldberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001). Many students talk of being doctors, lawyers, and teachers- all professions that not only require the completion of high school, but also college. Although perhaps they are not fully aware of the high stakes information required to enter these professions, these students and their families believe they are capable learners who have the motivation and skills to be successful in their educational pursuits. Unfortunately, by the time these students reach the end of their ninth grade year, the reality is that many of them will be locked out of the courses, skills, and knowledge needed to pursue their chosen career paths. Many of these students will be excluded from the educational process not because they lack motivation or intellectual tenacity, but because they lack the necessary information to successfully navigate and negotiate the educational system and its social distribution of possibilities (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Guidance Counselors as Gate Keepers

Traditionally within the high school setting the guidance counselor is one of the adults charged with the responsibility of providing students with the information necessary to more successfully navigate the complex bureaucratic nature of a high school. The literature is extensive regarding the ways in which guidance counselors and counseling programs are critical in students' schooling process (House & Martin, 1998; Stone & Clark, 2001). According to the California Department of Education (CDE), school counselors are one of the most essential components of student support servicesⁱ. Counselors are called upon to perform services in three informational domains: academic, career, and personal/social. CDE (2007) describes counselors as the "missing link" to greater school accountability, and states, "[Guidance counseling] services and programs help students resolve emotional, social, or behavioral problems and help them develop a clearer focus or sense of directionⁱⁱ" (Pg. 1). Effective counseling programs are important to the school culture and a crucial element in the transition of new students to the campus. As a critical resource for students' academic, career, and personal goals, guidance counselors are significant distributors of information that shape future academic and career possibilities for stu-

dents. If we accept from the outset that all children can learn (Edmonds, 1979), then the fact that so many do not leads us to question not only the students, but also the structures and cultures of the high schools they attend.

Research Questions

Embedded in a 5-year study exploring the academic self-identity of urban adolescents throughout their high school career, this paper investigates school counselors in their role as institutional agents who distribute information pertaining to a successful transition to high school. Two questions guide this research:

1. What are student perceptions of the role of the high school counselors during the transition from middle school to high school?
2. What information do counselors see as important to disseminate to students during the transition into ninth grade?

Method

This study represents a follow-up to 2004 EASE Project's High School Summer Bridge Program, a program aimed at facilitating a positive transition from middle school (eighth grade) to high school (ninth grade). The High School Summer Bridge Program is designed to expose students to information, people, and experiences that help ease their transition into high school. Although the larger investigation is broad in its scope, this study focuses on how high school counselors serve as institutional agents with the potential to increase the social capital of students through the distribution of information during their transition into high school. To explore these issues a mixed-methods approach was utilized.

Participants

Initial data for this paper was collected from a group of eighth grade students just prior to the start of their freshman year at a large comprehensive high school in the greater Los Angeles area: Valley High School. All participants were involved in the 2004 EASE Project's High School Summer Bridge Program. The High School Summer Bridge Program is part of a learning lab aimed at better understanding the transition from middle school to high school (ninth grade). The three-day residential pro-

gram is designed to expose students to information, people, and experiences to help ease their transition. All eighth grade students who attended one of the feeder schools to Valley High School were eligible to participate in the Summer Bridge Program. One hundred and forty-one eighth grade students submitted the initial application, and 119 completed the full application process to participate in the program.

Context

Valley High School is located in the city of Mountain Peak, a community whose population is 95% Latino/a according to the 2000 census. Twenty percent of the residents who live in the city of Mountain Peak live below the poverty level. Notably, 43% of the residents aged 17 and under live in poverty. The dominant language spoken in students' homes is Spanish. Mountain Peak has a high immigrant population with 46% percent of residents born outside the United States. Educational accomplishment is far below the national average with 37% of the adult population completing less than ninth grade, 23% completing high school, and only 4% holding BA degrees or above. Valley High School is a Title I high school with almost 4,200 students, 98% of whom are Latino/a and 34% of whom are categorized as English Language Learners (ELL's).

Data Collection

Drawing from a mixed-methods approach, the quantitative data presented in this paper were gathered through student surveys, using the Multi-dimensional Student Transitional Choice Scale (MSTC). The MSTC is a 25-minute, 85 item self-reporting instrument, assessing the influences and importance of three spheres of influence (family; peer networks; and school structures, policies, practices, and culture) on students' attitudes and experiences during their transitional year in high school (Cooper & Huh, 2005). The scale taps into a range of educational decisions that students must make while transitioning from middle school to high school. The responses on the instrument are on a 5-point Likert scale (extremely important, important, doesn't matter, not very important, and not important at all). We triangulated the qualitative data by looking for emerging themes

as well as themes consistent with our survey categories. Through triangulations between different sources of evidence, we were able to extrapolate the relevant items and determine whether the survey scores were useful to reinforce our analysis of the qualitative data, and vice versa. These steps of analysis allowed us to understand the degree to which counselors influenced students' ninth grade transition as measured by the students' spheres of influences described above.

We used three qualitative data gathering strategies to understand the stories behind our survey results: student focus group interviews, student one-on-one follow-up telephone interviews, field notes, reflection notes, and individual counselor interviews. The study sought to examine the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of both the counselors and entering ninth graders with regard to the transition to high school. Due to this focus, a phenomenological approach was used for this study. As Husserl (1972) defined, phenomenological techniques are used to explore and examine the lived experiences of individuals. This qualitative research methodology seeks to investigate specific and general ideas and information about the day-to-day experiences of the individuals under investigation (Bursch, 1989; Flowers, Zhang, Moore & Flowers, 2004). Kvale (1996) stated that phenomenological studies investigate individuals' perspectives in order to grasp the complexity of their experiences. Employing a phenomenological approach enables a researcher to systematically gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences (Cross, Stewart, & Coleman, 2003). Because the purpose of the study was to explore how the distribution of information was perceived to influence the transition process, the phenomenological approach was deemed most appropriate.

Student focus group interviews.

Twelve focus group interviews were conducted on the second day of the residential program. The students were asked to talk about their academic aspirations and future career goals. They were also asked about the barriers they face in pursuing their educational goals. Each focus group consisted of 8 to 10 students, one univer-

sity undergraduate facilitator, and a university graduate student moderator. The facilitator and the moderator participated in the development of the focus group interview protocols. Each session lasted for 50 to 75 minutes and was recorded and transcribed.

Student individual interviews.

Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with students at the beginning of the second semester of their ninth grade year. Although attempts were made to contact all students who had participated in the Summer Bridge Program, approximately 72% were successfully contacted and participated in the follow-up telephone portion of the research. Students were asked about their transition into high school as well as their overall high school experience. These interviews were approximately 20 minutes in length and were recorded and transcribed.

Counselor interviews.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with school counselors at Valley High School in the spring of 2004. For the purpose of this study, we interviewed four of the school's nine guidance counselors and the school's college and career counselor. These five individuals were chosen as a part of a purposeful sample. We chose these counselors based on availability, years at the school, specific role related to ninth graders, extent of service in the counseling program, and role in assisting students designated as English Language Learners. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and each interview was recorded and transcribed. To increase the accuracy of reporting, field notes were also taken during these interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in a three-phase process that began by generating descriptive statistics of student perceptions of their counselors and the role of the counselor in the transition process based on the survey responses. In these responses, we looked for the variations in students' high stakes information seeking behaviors and compared it to school counselors' information distribution patterns. We coded counselors' distributive patterns by nature, frequency, academic importance, and relevance to

	Counselor 1 Ms. Garcia	Counselor 2 Mr. Barry	Counselor 3 Ms. Brandó	Counselor 4 Ms. Simpson	Counselor 5 Ms. Valencia
Position	Guidance Counselor	Guidance Counselor	Guidance Counselor	Career Counselor	Guidance Counselor
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Female	Female
Race / Ethnicity	Latina	White	White	White	Latina
Years as a counselor	3	18	22	5	2
Years at the school	3	18	27	5	2
Age	28	52	50	30	27
Additional Focus			College Academy Director		Bilingual Counselor

Table I: Demographics of Study Participants

students' immediate and long term needs. The second phase of our data analysis involved coding the counselor interviews. All counselor interviews were coded by the same researcher, avoiding the need to substantiate inter-rater reliability and reliability in the coding process. Using an a priori data scheme developed from previous analyses, the data were coded into three broad categories: transition information, academic information, and social information. We then triangulated the coding with our field notes and our informal observations of counselors in action. Once the data were coded, a matrix was developed to illuminate whether the information provided was high stakes or functional in nature. The third phase of the data analyses involved analyzing the student focus group and follow-up interviews to triangulate the emerging patterns. This analytical approach was iterative and allowed us to draw conclusions that were consistent across various sources of data.

Results

How Students Perceive Counselors

The participants in this study were 98% Latino, 61% female and 65% bilingual in English and Spanish. Less than 8% of the participants reported being born outside the U.S. The vast

majority (96%) of students came from homes where the parents or guardians had a high school education or less. Despite the lack of formal education among the families in the study, over 90% of the students reported having a computer in their home. Consistent with the transition literature (Legters & Kerr, 2001; Legters 2000) over 98% of the students in the study indicated that they had a goal of attending college. Although the students in the study valued education, 84% of the students reported spending less than one hour per week studying outside of class.

Eighty-two percent of the students reported that their mother and father expected them to complete at least a 4-year bachelor's degree. Seventy percent of the students indicated that they tried to show others that they were "good" at class work and 60% indicated that they did not want to look "stupid" in class. Yet over 45 % of students were ambivalent about looking "smart" compared to other students.

Student survey data confirmed the important role of the school counselor in disseminating information. Over 90% of the students in the sample reported that they felt that their school counselor hoped they would be successful and go on to college. In fact, 65% of the students

reported that most of their information regarding college and career options came from their school counselor. However, a contradiction in the data is that only 28% of the students reported that actually going to college is important to their counselor. So while students believed that their counselors hoped they would take advantage of postsecondary opportunities, the behaviors and attitudes of the counselors suggested that going to college is not a realistic part of the futures of these youth.

The data reveal that students have very limited contact with their school counselors. While 43% of the students indicated that they had spoken to their eighth grade counselor, only 15% reported speaking to a high school counselor about their future educational plans by the spring of their freshman year. Of the students who did report speaking to their eighth grade counselor about the transition to high school, 60% were females who tended to have a slightly higher GPA and spent a few more hours a week studying. However, a chi-square test showed there was no statistical difference in students' development of their future goals and aspirations between those who talked to their counselor during the eighth grade and those who did not. There is no indicator that suggests middle school counselors were instrumental in helping students to develop their future goals.

The findings from the student surveys were very consistent with student follow-up interviews during the spring semester of their freshman year. Over 90% of the students reported not having a strong relationship with their school counselor. When asked about the relationship between teachers and counselors, one student stated, "Teachers, I think they have a big influence on us because they push us to do well and to succeed. But counselors, I don't really communicate with mine" (Focus group interview, summer 2004). Another student indicated that the interactions between her and her counselor had been limited to once or twice since arriving at high school. Of the students who reported speaking to their counselor, the vast majority indicated that when they did meet with the counselor it was usually to speak to her/him about class placement.

Class placement repeatedly was identified as the main reason for student interaction with counselors during their transition into high school. When asked whether their counselor was a source of information regarding their transition to high school or preparing for college, students overwhelmingly reported that college and career counseling was the job of the college center, not their guidance counselor. Students frequently spoke of how the guidance counselor had the responsibility of ensuring that they had the "right" classes. Although the students in the survey were well aware of the role and purpose of the college and career counselor, very few reported that they had met with their counselor by the end of their first semester.

Building OTL through Information Sharing

To explore our second research question, *What information do counselors see as important to disseminate to students during their transition into ninth grade?*, we turned to our counselor interviews. When asked about the needs of students during their transition into high school, the responses of the counselors were consistent with student reports. The interactions between ninth grade students and their high school counselor was primarily centered on class placement. While information sharing about class placement and institutional requirements has the potential to increase learning opportunities, this was typically not the case at Valley High School. More often than not, interactions between the counselors and ninth grade students were restricted to problem solving and assisting students with academic difficulties. The counselors attributed their limited interaction with freshmen students to the overwhelming amount of paperwork they are required to complete, as well as the numerous non-student related tasks they are expected to perform such as hall monitoring and last-minute substitute teaching. The counselors were clear to point out the decision for them engage in non-student related tasks was made by the administration and did not reflect their desire to better meet the academic, emotional and counseling needs of students, including the needs of the freshmen students.

Given the size of Valley High School, each counselor had a caseload of approximately 400 students and, not surprisingly, very little attention was given to new students. Despite the fact that the counselors acknowledged that the experience of the ninth graders at Valley High School is consistent with the literature that suggests ninth graders are disproportionately affected by poor attendance, decline in GPA, discipline related problems, and a decrease in extra curricular activities, they spend the least amount of time with ninth graders when compared to the rest of the student population. Although there is consensus among the counselors regarding the importance of the ninth grade year, the counselors indicated spending a disproportionate amount of time with the seniors. Ms. Brando, for example, talked about the importance of working with seniors to graduate:

Recently I was seeing my seniors right and left because I just did a grade check with them...I was seeing my seniors. Other than the students who were sent to me or requested to see me, I was calling in seniors who had a bad grade or two, sometimes three, you know to see what I could do for or to them to correct the situation so they could graduate.

This same sentiment was echoed by Mr. Barry:

I see twelfth graders a lot because I want to make sure that they are on track and they know exactly what the requirements are. I see my seniors about every three to four weeks regularly. You know every three to four weeks I call in everyone of my seniors. Now the ninth graders I don't call them in as regularly. I go through the report cards and see who is failing three of four classes then I will call them in.

The demands of the position necessitate that the counselors ensure the graduation of as many students as possible. With a dropout rate of well over 50%, graduation takes on monumental significance both to the school and to the larger community.

The counselors acknowledged that focusing on graduating seniors in many ways occurs at the expense of the incoming students. They insist-

ed that they are expected to do what is humanly impossible to do. Mr. Barry reported meeting with as many as 60 students in one day! When asked what grade level has the greatest academic and social needs, there was general consensus among all the counselors that it was the ninth graders. Mrs. Garcia indicated that the new students to the school demonstrate the greatest need and if the school is unresponsive to their needs they would continue to drop out and or fall through the cracks. The counselors suggested that there are different informational needs throughout the course of the high school experience; however, information about institutional norms and expectations—functional information—was paramount for incoming ninth graders. Mrs. Garcia, echoing the sentiments of her colleagues, stated:

I think more than anything, the incoming students here to Valley High School need that basic realization that it is not an automatic conveyer belt at this point. If they don't pass their classes or if they don't prepare to pass the high school exit exam, they won't be getting a diploma. Of course they have been ill-served in the past and up to this point because the basically have been able to move on [without care for their academic progress]...The free ride is over; they really need to focus on their studies. I think more than anything, ninth graders need that basic orientation about what they need to do.

Mr. Barry, sharing this sentiment, stated:

I think that something has to be done at the middle school before they get here. I think that we at the high school have to meet with the kids at the middle school so when they get to the high school they understand that they are not going to be able to move from grade level to grade level without passing classes. So many of the students think that just by spending the year in the ninth grade that they will automatically go to the 10th grade. Even though I tell them over and over again that they have to pass eleven out of twelve classes [to pass to the 10th grade] it still becomes a shock when in the second year of school they are still in the ninth grade.

Our data suggests that very little attention was given to equipping students with information or experiences that pushed them to think beyond the ninth grade, and certainly not beyond high school. Although the interactions between counselors and students can be characterized as positive, the counselors did little to increase the social capital of students with whom they interacted. Rarely did a counselor discuss a student for whom their intervention made a significant impact on their long term educational or career trajectory. Unfortunately, not only do our data suggest that the counselors at Valley High School were not serving as agents of social capital, but also that they were failing to enhance the learning opportunities for students. We theorized that positive adult-student relationships would result in more students being given access to high stakes information and would translate into enhanced learning opportunities. However, our data suggest that while positive adult-student relationships are necessary to create enhanced opportunities for learning, those relationships are insufficient if the adults are not intentional about disseminating high stakes information.

High Stakes Information and Increased Opportunities to Learn

Although all counselors agreed that high-stakes information is critical to a student's smooth transition into high school and ultimate graduation, there was less agreement on the future of students beyond high school. Counselor responses were inconsistent with regard to their aspirations for students to attend college. Counselors varied in their responses when asked about whether all students should go to college. Surprisingly, it was Mrs. Simpson, the college and career counselor, who was the most adamant that not all students at Valley High School should be offered a rigorous academic program that would prepare them for college. When asked about course placement for ninth graders she indicated:

I don't believe that every kid should go to college. These kids are from families where they have little to live on and the best thing for many of them is to get a job...Look, I need my car mechanic and if everyone goes to college, then where am I

going to get my mechanic? And so what if that person did not go to college but can do a damn good job on my car? I have a student right now, Miguel; he is doing a wonderful job in the car mechanic program and our society needs those people too. If a kid comes to me wanting a job, I will not hesitate to refer them to jobs or technical schools.

This sentiment was shared by several of the guidance counselors as well. For example, Mrs. Brando, the counselor who directs the College Preparatory Program for immigrant students, stated,

When we think that every kid must go to college... I can't imagine what society would do if every kid were to achieve their dream. Now congratulations, every kid went to college and there is nobody to fix the cars, nobody to fix the TVs and VCRs and there are a lot of things that are not going to get taken care of. It's a disservice to the kids to think that every kid should or could go to college whether their ability or interest indicates otherwise.

Although the counselors' aspirations for students at Valley High School clearly include all students graduating from high school, those aspirations do not translate into all students having the same learning opportunities while attending high school. The data suggest that counselors believe course placement in the ninth grade serves to determine not only students' academic experiences in the ninth grade but also their academic experiences throughout their entire high school careers. While all counselors in the study agreed that having academic information is necessary to have a positive transition to high school, they all also acknowledged that academic information alone is insufficient to negotiate the complex systems and bureaucracy of Valley High School.

There was general agreement among the counselors that ninth grade students who are most successful in this transition are those who obtain information regarding one of the many specialized academic programs at Valley High School. As a way of breaking the campus into

smaller learning communities the school has adopted a wide variety of programs or academies. For example, ninth grade students are invited to participate in either Teachers' Academy or Humanitus. Both of these programs offer students the opportunity to "loop" with 175 peers and 3 primary teachers. Although the programs are open to all students, it is the students who are placed into these enhanced learning environments by their counselors that benefit. Only the students who are fortunate enough to get this type of high stakes information will be afforded enhanced learning opportunities.

Our research finds that a weak counselor-student relationship severely limits students' opportunities to learn. Our data suggest that information sharing between the vast majority of students entering the ninth grade at Valley High School and their school counselors is limited to functional knowledge and does not go beyond that due to understaffing. When asked about the type of information students need to make their transition to ninth grade, Ms. Valencia indicated,

One thing I talked about in a recent [counselor] meeting...is that [the students] really need a basic understanding of what they need to do to graduate from high school...they need to know that Ds are unacceptable...But I think more than anything they need that basic realization that...if you don't prepare to pass the high school exit exam, they won't be getting a diploma...I think more than anything else the ninth graders need just that basic orientation about what they need to do...get to the 10th grade, and then the 11th, and then the 12th and to graduate and prepare for college or a vocational school.

Discussion

As a way to better understand the challenges of school reform, our research has led us to introduce the new network-analytic framework of the high stakes information network. The initial emergence of the Opportunity to Learn (OTL) framework was designed as a measure of educational opportunities to counteract student-deficit analyses of academic achievement that failed to account for resource constraints across

the local context. Our study at Valley High School illuminates the possibilities of narrowing the persistent achievement gap by employing this under-utilized framework. The federal No Child Left Behind policy and its intended reauthorization must take into account OTL as a central compliance in its system of accountability so allocations of resources can be ensured to meet the student expectancies articulated. The conclusions drawn from this study challenge us to rethink both policy and practice as they relate to the distribution of high stakes information that students require for academic success.

More specifically, the data from this research suggest three policy/practice recommendations. First, policymakers and the research community should revisit the OTL framework and explore its utility in understanding the distribution of information, but more broadly, the inequitable distribution of resources that contributes to the persistent achievement gap in this country. Although we applaud reform efforts like NCLB that attempt to address the factors that support and maintain the achievement gap, the current test-based accountability efforts are not sufficient when it comes to changing the current situation as they focus too much on outcomes. We must additionally focus on tackling the sources of inequities that exist within and across school contexts. We view OTL as a powerful analytic tool that has the potential to enact the kinds of progressive social policymaking that would transform the culture of schooling for children. We recommend the OTL framework be utilized within the context of reform efforts like NCLB, so that policymakers and practitioners can better assess how learning opportunities are inequitably distributed between and across schools. Such an approach to reform would require the emphasis to be placed on exploring the ways unequal schooling conditions, including the distribution of high stakes information, serve as powerful indicators of the distribution of possibilities.

Second, our data points to the importance of information distribution as a critical element of the school culture. In order for school adults to work with, teach, and counsel students effectively, they must be aware of how cultural, fam-

ily, and social backgrounds affect the transition experiences of students entering the ninth grade. While the counselors in this study were well-intentioned, they failed to provide the students at Valley High School with the high stakes information that would empower them to pursue and achieve their academic and career goals. Counselors, for a variety of reasons, had low expectations for the students at Valley High School, which were reflected in their seemingly non-committal actions. This study suggests that school counselors must develop multicultural competency (Flowers et al, 2004). Based on the work of others in the field (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Flowers et al, 2004), school counselors with multicultural competency are those who can demonstrate three very important attributes: (a) awareness of their own culture, privileges, values and biases; (b) knowledge of other cultural value systems; and (c) the ability to establish meaningful relationships with students cross-culturally. As culturally competent adults, school counselors must understand the unique circumstances that urban students face during their transition to high school. As reported in our study, urban students aspire to college in the face of many life challenges—both in and outside of school—that impede their academic progress. School counselors, perhaps more so than other educational professionals, are well positioned to address the transition process from an advocacy perspective. With administrative backing, school counselors can provide entering students with the academic, social and emotional support needed to make the transition from early adolescent to college-ready young adult.

Third, we suggest adding research evidence to the OTL framework that explores the nexus between social relations and organizational norms to enhance the learning opportunities of urban students. Stanton-Salazar (2004) observes:

If academic success in school were mainly contingent upon individual ability and effort, then there would be no need to entertain theories that focus our attention on the complexities that underlie social relations in organizational life and society. (p.18)

Stanton-Salazar illuminates the important role schools play in constructing social networks and the ways in which students' academic outcomes are relational with the immediate ethos at the school. Therefore, our study of Valley High School suggests that the lack of material conditions and the lack of high stakes information available for ninth graders are relational—each reinforces the other. Valley High School lacks the capacity to support ninth graders with high stakes information and has made the sharing of functional information the default high school transition strategy. This creates the cyclical condition where the culture and structure of the school fails to ensure students receive the high stakes information to succeed. As the student failure rate becomes a persistent problem over time, it diminishes counselors' sense of optimism that students have the ability to develop college-going identities. Future studies on counselors' expectations for students' academic and social behaviors are necessary to help us to further understand how to best disrupt these patterns of lowered expectations and underachievement.

Transitioning from middle school to high school continues to be difficult for many students. As demonstrated in this paper, this transition process is greatly influenced by the adults in authority who have the power to make it less academically limiting through the early and frequent distribution of high stakes information to *all* students.

References

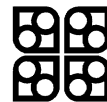
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Notes

- i <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ms/po/policy.asp>
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cg/rh/counseffective.asp>
- ii <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cg/rh/counseffective.asp?print=yes>
- iii The UCLA EASE (Equity and Access Studies in Education) Project is a multidisciplinary research collaborative which engages in research activities that promote greater equality of educational opportunities for urban youth. The primary purpose of the UCLA EASE Project is to conduct and disseminate research that broadens our understanding of issues of equity and access in the K-16 U.S. education pipeline. It is the goal of the EASE project to provide comprehensive data analyses and evaluations that translate new discoveries into effective programs, policies, and practices that result in increased academic outcomes for poor and minority students and facilitate positive institutional change within schools. From its inception in the fall of 2001, the work of the UCLA EASE Project has focused on creating the conditions in urban schools needed to improve educational outcomes so that more students have access to post-secondary opportunities.



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