

# Crucial Support, Vital Aspirations: The College and Career Aspirations of Rural Black and Latinx Middle School Students in a Community- and Youth-Based Leadership Program

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*This qualitative case study explores college and career aspirations of rural Black and Latinx middle school students in a community- and youth-based leadership program and how various forms of social capital help cultivate and sustain the aspirations of students. Data include student focus group interviews with a total of 14 rural Black and Latinx middle school students; interviews with three adults; and documents, including local school board minutes and local newspaper articles over a six-month period. Findings include how students' career and college aspirations were shaped and supported by various social networks, including family members, teachers, and the community- and youth-based organization in which all student participants were members. In addition, students discussed a commitment to family and paying forward the sacrifices of family to motivate their pursuit of aspirations.*

Despite the growing body of literature on college and career aspirations of Black students (e.g., Freeman, 2005; Jayakumar, Vue, & Allen, 2013) and Latinx<sup>1</sup> students (e.g., Harklau, 2013; O'Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2010; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Pyne & Means, 2013), there is limited research on rural Black students and rural Latinx students and their college and career aspirations. This is surprising given that 10% of rural students identify as Black, and 13% of rural students identify as Latinx (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). The limited research on college and career aspirations of rural Black and Latinx has documented challenges and barriers (e.g., Irvin, Byun, Meece, Reed, & Farmer, 2016; Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016), including economic challenges, low expectations from teachers, and limited social contacts to support the development of college and career aspirations. However, to address educational inequities, researchers and

educators must also pay close attention to the factors that cultivate and support the college and career aspirations of Students of Color (Harper, 2012; Yosso, 2005), including rural Students of Color.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers have described how the various forms of social capital—connections and networks that provide access to actual or potential resources and that promote advantage and social mobility (Bergin, Cooks, & Bergin, 2007; Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988)—of rural Students of Color are critical factors in supporting aspirations and educational experiences, including family members, school personnel, and religious organizations (e.g., Farmer et al., 2006; Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011; Irvin, Farmer, Leung, Thomson, & Hutchins, 2010; Means et al., 2016). However, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have often positioned the forms of social capital of Students of Color, particularly families of Students of Color, from a deficit-oriented perspective and described these families as an educational liability or deterrent for Students of Color (e.g., Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Yosso, 2005). Thus, critical perspectives and frameworks are needed to understand the essential role of the social capital of rural Black and Latinx students.

Additionally, the body of literature on rural Students of Color is primarily focused on high school students (e.g., Griffin et al., 2011; Irvin et al., 2016; Means et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2009). Students begin to develop a predisposition

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<sup>1</sup>Latinx is “an inclusive term that recognizes the intersectionality of sexuality, language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, and phenotype” and is “used to represent the various intersections of gender” (Salinas & Lozano, 2017, p. 9).

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<sup>2</sup>The capitalization of “Students of Color,” “Communities of Color,” and “Families of Color” denotes the “solidarity and representation of collective identities” (Liddell, 2018, p. 1).

toward higher education as early as middle school (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005); this predisposition includes “students determin[ing] whether or not they would like to continue their education beyond high school” (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 209). Additionally, Beal and Crockett (2010) found a strong connection between aspirations or expectations and educational attainment. Thus, research is needed to examine the aspirations of rural Students of Color in middle school and how various forms of social capital help students cultivate and sustain their aspirations, which may provide insights into enhancing educational equity and outcomes.

This research study focuses on rural Black and Latinx middle school students in a community- and youth-based leadership program, and three research questions drive this study: (a) What are the career and college aspirations of rural Black and Latinx middle school students? (b) What forms of social capital do rural Black and Latinx middle school students use to cultivate and sustain college and career aspirations? and (c) How do the identified forms of social capital of rural Black and Latinx middle school students cultivate and sustain student’s college and career aspirations?

### **Literature Review**

This literature review begins with context on college and career aspirations and related systemic challenges for rural students and, specifically, rural Black and Latinx students. The final part of the literature review focuses on social capital and the various forms of social capital that have been used to support the college and career aspirations of rural Black and Latinx students.

### **College and Career Aspirations of Rural Students and Systemic Challenges**

There is growing research on rural students and college and career aspirations and/or college access (e.g., Apostol & Bilden, 1991; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Cuervo, 2014; Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010; Farmer et al., 2006; Griffin et al., 2011; Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012; Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014). Researchers have found that rural students are at a disadvantage for enrolling in higher education when compared to their suburban and urban peers. These challenges include having more financial need, less access to academically-rigorous courses due to budget and personnel constraints, lower parental higher education attainment rates than their counterparts, and having lower educational attainment aspirations (Byun et al., 2012; Johnson & Zoellner, 2016; Kotok, Kryst, & Hagedorn, 2016; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, &

Crowley, 2006; Strayhorn, 2009). In addition, while all rural communities are not monolithic, researchers have found that rural communities have systemically experienced significant poverty due to the limited economic bases (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Williams & Grooms, 2016). This lack of economic bases and employment opportunities can lead students to develop and pursue career aspirations outside of their rural community (Cuervo, 2014; Howley & Hambrick, 2014; Means et al., 2016; Sage & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011).

The limited research on college and career aspirations of rural Black and Latinx students has found that these students perceived there to be more educational barriers for pursuing postsecondary education than their rural White peers (Ali & Menke, 2014; Irvin et al., 2012). Strayhorn (2009) found Black, rural, male students have lower college aspirations than their urban and suburban peers, specifically their suburban peers, regardless of socioeconomic status and academic achievement. In addition, researchers have found that rural Black youth face significant systemic challenges that impede their college and career aspirations: lack of knowledge about postsecondary education, concerns about the cost of higher education, lack of community and economic infrastructures, and lack of social contacts to provide information on higher education (Farmer et al., 2006; Means et al., 2016).

### **Social Capital and College and Career Aspirations of Rural Students**

Researchers have found that the forms of social capital that support rural students’ college access and/or college and career aspirations include families, school personnel, peers, community-based programs focused on college access, and religious organizations (e.g., Farmer et al., 2006; Griffin et al., 2011; Irvin et al., 2010; Means et al., 2016; Morton, Ramirez, Meece, Demetriou, & Panter, 2018). Additionally, researchers have discussed how rural students benefit from tight-knit networks in their communities (e.g., Byun et al., 2012; Tieken, 2014). However, the literature on rural Black and Latinx students and the role of social capital or networks in cultivating and sustaining their college and career aspirations and/or enhancing college access is limited; this is especially true for rural Latinx students.

The limited research on social capital or networks in cultivating and sustaining the college and career aspirations of rural Black and Latinx students has focused on the role of family, as well as on school-level and community-level sources of support. First, research has shown that family members play a critical role in supporting the educational and career aspirations of rural Students of Color (Bhopal, 2014; Means et al., 2016). For example, Means and

colleagues (2016) found that Black rural students had the support of their family members, including parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family, and family friends, to pursue educational and career aspirations.

Second, school-level networks and sources of social capital, such as teachers, counselors, administrators, and coaches, were critical for rural Black students as they developed their college and career aspirations (Griffin et al., 2011; Means et al., 2016). However, Griffin and colleagues (2011) found that Latinx students were the least likely to seek out sources of information to support their college and career aspirations compared to White and Black students. Additionally, Irvin and colleagues (2016) found teachers in rural schools had lower expectations for Black, Latinx, and Native American youth than they do for White youth.

Third, community-level networks and sources of social capital were a critical source of support for Black rural students, including local college access programs and religious organizations (Farmer et al., 2006; Irvin et al., 2010; Means et al., 2016). For example, while researchers have found that rural Black students participated in fewer extracurricular activities than their White peers (Witherspoon & Ennett, 2011), researchers have found that involvement in religious activities was a source of social support and achievement for rural Black youth (Farmer et al., 2006; Irvin et al., 2010).

### Theoretical Framework

Social capital is foregrounded in the conceptual framework of this study. Coleman (1988) described social capital as “not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure” (p. 98). Coleman also described social capital as “productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (p. 98). Social capital is often inherited; advantages privileged groups based on social class; and can be produced and reinforced through “occasions” (e.g., social events where one has the opportunity to make connections), “places” (e.g., schools), or “practices” (e.g., “cultural ceremonies”; Bourdieu, 1986, p. 52). Coleman (1988) also discussed how forms of capital (e.g., financial capital and human capital) are typically reproduced in families through wealth and income, physical spaces (e.g., a space for studying within the home), and parental education. However, Coleman argued that social capital could be related to time and effort a parent devotes to a child’s learning and development and the strength of the relationship between child and parent regardless of the amount of economic resources and parental education.

Researchers have applied social capital to examine issues of college access and/or college and career aspirations

(e.g., Bergin et al., 2007; Morton et al., 2018; Perna, 2006). Yosso (2005) discussed that, in education, forms of capital, including social and cultural capital, have been used to describe educational inequities between Students of Color and White students, focusing on the lack of capital of Students of Color and their families. However, this use of capital rooted in deficit-oriented perspectives and theory undervalues the assets, values, and capital that Students of Color and their families bring with them to education settings and centers “White, middle class culture as the standard” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). To disrupt deficit-oriented perspectives about Students of Color and their families and to “decenter whiteness” (Yosso & García, 2007, p. 154), this study applies a critical approach to examine the college and career aspirations of rural Black and Latinx students in middle school and the forms of social capital students use to cultivate and sustain their college and career aspirations. Specifically, I use Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) as a theoretical framework. Using a Critical Race Theory perspective, Yosso conceptualized Community Cultural Wealth to critique deficit perspectives and oppressive systems and structures and to recognize the assets of Students of Color and their families. Specifically, Community Cultural Wealth includes “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 78).

Community Cultural Wealth includes multiple types of capital, including social capital and familial capital (Yosso, 2005). For this study, Yosso’s use of social capital is foregrounded to examine how various social networks of rural Black and Latinx middle school students help them to cultivate and sustain their college and career aspirations. Yosso (2005) described social capital as a network of people that could not only provide information and resources but also provide emotional support for Students of Color. In addition, Yosso (2005) expanded social capital to include how historically People of Color use the information, resources, and emotional support received from social networks to then contribute back to these same social networks. Yosso’s (2005) use social capital is critical for this study to understand the information, resources, and emotional support provided by students’ social networks and how, if at all, the college and career aspirations of rural Black and Latinx middle school students include giving back to their social networks. Related to social capital, and also foregrounded, is familial capital, which expands the boundaries of family to include extended family and friends and a focus on the commitment to the well-being of family (Yosso, 2005).

In the background of this study, I also examine how the other forms of Community Cultural Wealth are interconnected to social and familial capital and the college and career aspirations of rural Black and Latinx

middle school students. The other forms of Community Cultural Wealth include aspirational capital, linguistic capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). Aspirational capital is the ability of Students of Color to “maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Linguistic capital is the recognition and value of students being bilingual and multilingual or being able to communicate in multiple ways and styles, including music, poetry, and storytelling (Yosso, 2005). Navigational capital reflects one’s ability to negotiate and navigate oppressive systems and spaces, and resistant capital is one’s ability to exercise agency to challenge these oppressive systems and spaces and to resist internalizing racism and other forms of oppression (Yosso, 2005).

### Research Methods

I employed an exploratory qualitative case study design (Yin, 2014) to examine college and career aspirations for rural Black and Latinx middle school students in a community- and youth-based organization and how various forms of social capital support students in cultivating and sustaining aspirations. An exploratory case study examines a phenomenon that has been understudied within a real-world context by collecting multiple forms of data (Yin, 2014). This study was completed in the U.S. South. Given that 90% of rural and small-town Black individuals reside in the U.S. South (Housing Assistance Council, 2012) and the increasing population of Latinx people across the U.S. South, including rural communities (Kochhar, Suro, and Tafoya, 2005), it is a critical region in which to study rural Students of Color and educational equity.

All students attended the same middle school and participated in the same community- and youth-based leadership program, the Excel Program (pseudonym). The Excel Program started twelve years ago to help rural students develop leadership skills and plan for their future, and the program serves elementary, middle, and high school students (please see the case description below for more information on the Excel Program). One goal of the overall study was to provide information to the director of the Excel Program on the efficacy of the program. While the data offer information about the Excel Program, the data also provide critical insights into student participants’ college and career aspirations and other forms of social capital (e.g., family members and teachers). To recruit students, all middle school students in the Excel Program, regardless of race and ethnicity, were given a letter outlining the purpose of the study, a parental/guardian consent form, and a student assent form. The 15 students who returned consent and assent forms were included in this study, including 12 Black students, two Latinx students, and one White student. For

the purposes of this article, the focus is on the college and career aspirations and social capital of the 14 rural Black and Latinx student participants due to the need to increase research and scholarship on these student populations in order to enhance educational equity through practice and policy.

### Data Collection

Scholars have discussed collecting multiple forms of data as being critical for case study research to develop more robust findings on a phenomenon (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Thus, I collected data via student focus group interviews; semi-structured interviews with adults; and documents, including the mission and vision statements on the middle school website, school board minutes, and local newspaper articles over a six-month period. First, data collection included audio-recorded focus group interviews with 14 middle school students (12 Black students and two Latinx students) sorted into three focus groups. Focus group interviews rely on “relatively homogenous groups” (e.g., rural Black and Latinx middle school students) to examine a specific topic (e.g., college and career aspirations; Hughes & DuMont, 1993, p. 776). Focus groups also rely on interaction across participants in each interview to enhance understanding of a specific topic (Hughes & DuMont, 1993). The focus group interviews took place after receiving parental/guardian consent and student assent and each student was assigned a pseudonym. The focus group interview protocol allowed for discussion and interaction among participants in each interview (Hughes & DuMont, 1993), and the questions aimed to gather information about aspirations (e.g., “What are your goals for the future?”) and social capital and other forms of capital used to cultivate and sustain aspirations (“Who or what, if anyone or anything, has helped you think about your goals?” “Do you talk about college? If so, when and where do you talk about college? Who do you talk to about college?”).

To augment student data and to provide context for the study case, I collected data via audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews with three adults: Ms. Thomas, an eighth grade teacher at the middle school, who was mentioned by several student participants as someone who helped students develop their college and career aspirations; Reverend Martin, Director of the Excel Program; and Reverend Campbell, a local community member and church pastor for over 20 years who is heavily involved with supporting youth. Each adult was also assigned a pseudonym. During the semi-structured interviews with adults, I asked questions about school- and community-level factors that might enhance and/or hinder students’ college and career aspirations (e.g., “How would you describe the culture about college-going attitudes and behaviors at the

school and/or community you serve?” “What are some of the support systems on the school- and community-level that help rural students you work with in regards to accessing higher education?”). I also collected data via documents, including guiding documents and mission and vision statements on the middle school website, school board minutes, and local newspaper articles over a six-month period during the academic year in which students were interviewed for the study to provide context for the case study.

### **Data Analysis**

Focus group interview data differ from individual interview data in that the social interaction and dialogue among participants in each focus group influence findings (Hughes & DuMont, 1993; Smithson, 2000). Thus, researchers employing focus group interviews must consider and analyze data at the group level (Hughes & DuMont, 1993). I first analyzed data at the focus group level. Treating each focus group interview as an individual case, I completed an in-case analysis by coding for data that related to the research questions (e.g., college and career aspirations, the development of college and career aspirations, and forms of social capital that played a role in helping students to cultivate and sustain college and career aspirations). This analysis reflected a mixture of direct interpretation, making meaning out of a singular instance, and categorical aggregation, making meaning out of multiple instances, in each focus group interview (Stake, 1995). In addition, I examined group dialogue to understand how social interaction among participants could contribute to responses, which led me to decide to include several instances of focus group dialogue in the presentation of findings. I then employed cross-case synthesis by analyzing data from each focus group interview and seeking patterns across focus group interviews and responses from student participants (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). I considered the patterns, the research questions, and Community Cultural Wealth (primarily social and familial capital, as well as the other forms of Community Cultural Wealth) as I developed the findings (Yosso, 2005).

The additional data (i.e., interviews with adults, newspaper articles, school board meeting minutes, and school mission statement) were used to support, disconfirm, or extend the primary findings as well as to build the context for the case. For example, the newspaper articles and school board meeting minutes provided context for educational challenges (e.g., perceived educational disparities between the public charter school and the rest of the school system) taking place in the community in which this study took place. For the adult interview data, I used in-case analysis to identify perceived individual-, school-, and community-

level factors that may hinder and/or support the college and career aspirations of rural Black and Latinx middle school students. For both the adult interview data and the documents, I identified information from these sources that provided context about the county in which students resided, the school that students attended, and the program in which students participated, which allowed for a stronger understanding of systemic factors (such as poverty) that could have overarching implications for the study. As the researcher of this study, I recognized that my social identities (e.g., Black man who was raised in a low-income family and attended a suburban high school) and professional identities (e.g., college access professional for almost eight years) shape my positionality. To increase trustworthiness of this study, I used data triangulation by collecting and analyzing multiple forms of data to augment and corroborate findings in this study (Yin, 2014).

### **Study Parameters**

There are two study parameters associated with the study. First, focus group interviews may have led some students to feel less comfortable sharing, versus how they may have felt in one-on-one interviews. In fact, I found some students more reserved and some more outspoken during the focus group, leading to an imbalance in engagement in the focus group interview. To ensure the opportunity to hear from everyone, I asked each person to begin by sharing their career and college aspirations and asked prompting questions to encourage all participants to share their thoughts and experiences. Second, students and adults only participated in one interview, which may have shaped the responses of participants to include people and events that were the most salient at the time of the interview. Multiple interviews with each participant or the use of a longitudinal approach may have led to a more robust understanding of how social networks of participants cultivate and support their college and career aspirations.

### **The Case**

Given that researchers have discussed how educators and policymakers cannot understand individuals' pathways to higher education or educational outcomes independently from the places in which they live and attend school (e.g. Hillman, 2016; Morris & Monroe, 2009), this study begins by situating the case within three overlapping school- and community-level contexts: (a) the county in which students reside, Glenson County (a pseudonym); (b) the leadership program, the Excel Program, in which students participate; and (c) the middle school in which students attend, Northwest Middle School (a pseudonym).

### **Glenson County and the Excel Program**

Glenson County is a rural county in the southeastern United States with a population of approximately 16,000 people. The median family household income is about \$42,000 with a 21.2% poverty rate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The adult college degree attainment rate (an associate degree or higher) for the county is approximately 25%, while the national degree attainment rate is approximately 42% (Lumina Foundation, 2017). While the college attainment rate is low compared to the national degree attainment rate, the county appeared to have numerous community-based organizations to support the education of youth in the county based on newspaper articles as well programs and activities sponsored by the school system that support the academic and social success of students. One such program in the community is the Excel Program.

At the time of the study, the Excel Program had been in existence for 12 years. Reverend Martin founded the program for rural high school students to have a place to learn about leadership (e.g., curriculum focused on leadership skills and conflict management) and complete outreach and service projects (e.g., promote cancer awareness outreach events, volunteer at local non-profits focused on poverty). In addition, students learned about higher education (e.g., guidance on college admission process). His goal in starting the program was to inspire “students to learn about their community [and] to take control over their community because they will have to be the elected officials, the educators, the lawyers, the doctors” in the future. Since the beginning, the program has grown to become a regional program that includes elementary, middle, and high school students and meets more often (twice per month). The program serves approximately 140 students.

### **Northwest Middle School**

During the 2015-2016 academic year, approximately 330 students were enrolled at Northwest Middle School with 30 classroom teachers. Northwest Middle School has an International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which gives students and teachers “a bigger and broader range” of educational opportunities. While the county is comprised of mostly White individuals (approximately 62%), the student enrollment at Northwest Middle School is majority Black students (73.9%) followed by White students (13.5%) and Latinx (10.8%). However, the student population at the public charter school is majority White students (81.4%) followed by Black students (approximately 7%) and Latinx students (5%). Reverend Campbell described there being essentially two school systems in one community: a charter school that served primarily White students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds and non-charter, public

schools, including Northwest Middle School, that served primarily Students of Color and students from low-income and working-class backgrounds.

### **Findings**

There are two overarching themes for this study: (a) the career and college aspirations of rural Black and Latinx middle school students and (b) social capital and cultivating and sustaining career and college aspirations of rural Black and Latinx middle school students. These themes are presented below using paraphrases, individual direct quotes, and dialogue from the focus group interviews. Some quotes were altered to remove filler language (e.g., um, like) and provide clarity without changing the meaning of quotes.

### **The Career and College Aspirations of Rural Black and Latinx Middle School Students**

Across the focus groups, student participants described their career aspirations and some of the internal and external sources that influenced these aspirations. While students had yet to develop detailed college aspirations, students described their aspirations for pursuing higher education and predispositions that influenced their college aspirations. The context for both career and college aspirations are explored further below.

**Career aspirations.** Reverend Martin discussed how, historically, many people in the county had career aspirations related to the manufacturing industry because of the long family history of working in that industry, but he also reflected on how “that’s gone; this is a new day.” This sentiment was also reflected in student participants’ career aspirations because no student participant expressed interest in working in the manufacturing industry. Most student participants’ career aspirations were related to the medical or science fields (Adrian, Erika, Jose, Kristin, Melanie, Renee, and Rodney), the arts and entertainment fields (Kelly, Lisa, Tiffany, and Wanda), and culinary arts (Kristin and Wanda). Students also expressed interest in careers as a lawyer (Stephanie), pilot (Maria), the fashion industry (Courtney), and the military (Melanie). While Adrian and Rodney expressed interest in the medical field, their top career choices were to pursue careers in professional sports (NBA, NFL).

Students across all focus group interviews described multiple external and internal factors that cultivated and/or sustained their career aspirations. Jose, Kristin, and Stephanie’s career aspirations were inspired by watching television shows or movies, while Erika, Melanie, and Renee’s career aspirations were driven by their desire to help people. For example, Renee said, “I’ve had that dream [to become a cardiologist] since I was little, because I like

the fact that people are ill and the sicknesses, and how everybody's focusing on the media. We should be focusing on the people that really need help." Students' career aspirations were sustained by a form of Community Cultural Wealth, aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). For instance, the following exchange happened during one focus group interview after students shared their career aspirations.

**Researcher:** Are there any things that may potentially stop you from pursuing your goals or any challenges that you see that may hinder you from accomplishing your goals?

**Tiffany:** Like type of events might stop you or something might happen in your family that make you feel like you just want to give up or something. Or something happens in school or anywhere outside might just want to make you give up everything that you want to do. It just kind of hits you in your heart, and it just makes you just want to stop. But just don't really think about that stuff and just keep going. Just don't really think about the bad things. Just keep thinking about the good things.

**Researcher:** How about other people?

**Maria:** I don't know. I think it's like family problems, and that's what makes you feel down and it is hard to get over it. But I mean, we all have mistakes, and all have challenges. But we can make it through.

Maria and Tiffany described the importance of holding onto dreams despite challenges, including personal and familial challenges.

**College aspirations and predispositions.** While many students had not developed detailed college choice plans, students across all focus groups aspired to pursue higher education and saw it as an important means for helping them achieve their career and life goals. For example, a student in one focus group (Stephanie) viewed college as "the first step into doing what you want to do for the rest of your life," while a student in another focus group (Kelly) discussed how college determines "how your future will really be."

In addition to students believing higher education was an important pathway for achieving their career and life goals, students described higher education predispositions that were interconnected with their aspirations. For example, students across all focus groups described higher education as a site of learning and development that would help them to prepare for future career aspirations, as well as an opportunity to develop independence to begin to work toward future goals. On the other hand, students in all three focus groups mentioned how the expense of higher education

and financial concerns could hinder college aspirations, but there was also a realization among students that they could earn an academic scholarship. For instance, the following conversation occurred during one focus group.

**Researcher:** What comes to your mind when you hear the word "college"?

**Renee:** Finances.

**Researcher:** Finances? Why does that come to your mind first?

**Renee:** Because you have to have money to go somewhere. If you don't have money you don't get there.

**Lisa:** I think that, too. The money. And it's also living on your own. Because when you are in college, you don't have your parents there. So you have to get used to living on your own and developing how you are going to set [up] your life.

**Melanie:** When I hear college, I think like Lisa: independence and finances. But when you really want something, you have to work for it to get it. So college is just another road for you to get to where you want to be, I think.

**Researcher:** For folks who haven't said much recently. What image comes to mind when you think of the word college?

**Wanda:** Independence and grades. Because you have to get good grades in school, and college is expensive. And you can get good scholarships to colleges that you probably want to go to if you get good grades.

Students' higher education predispositions played a role in shaping the imagined possibilities for their college selves, as well developing concerns about the possibility of higher education due to potential financial barriers.

### **Social Capital and Cultivating and Sustaining Career and College Aspirations of Rural Black and Latinx Middle School Students**

Across all focus groups, student participants described three primary forms of social networks that cultivated and sustained their college and career aspirations: (a) family (e.g., parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins), (b) school staff (e.g., teachers), and (c) the Excel Program. The context of these forms of social networks and how they cultivated and sustained students' college and career aspirations are described below.

**Family.** Reflecting familial capital (Yosso, 2005), students' descriptions of family went beyond parents and siblings to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Students described how family members cultivated and

sustained college and career aspirations through inspiring them to pursue aspirations and providing information about these aspirations, having frequent conversations and encouraging them, and instilling into them a sense of familial commitment.

**Family, inspiration, and information to pursue aspirations.** Students in two focus groups shared that their career aspirations were shaped by family members. For example, Melanie expressed interest in pursuing a career in the military before studying to become a pediatrician because of her family's long history of military service. Additionally, Wanda, who was in the same focus group as Melanie, described how her aspiration to become a chef was cultivated through her grandmother, who taught her how to cook meals, and her sister, who went to school to become a chef. Students across all focus group interviews also described receiving access to information about college and/or career aspirations from familial sources. For example, Rodney described how through his father, a nurse, he has had the opportunity to meet other medical professionals working in sports medicine or veterinarians to learn about these career fields. For Adrian, Erika, Tiffany, and Wanda, their information about college and college aspirations came in the form of older siblings who were currently in college or had recently graduated from college.

**Family, encouragement, conversations, and aspirations.** Across all focus groups, students described how family members cultivated and sustained college and career aspirations by providing encouragement to pursue aspirations and by having frequent conversations about aspirations. Students discussed receiving encouragement from family to continue to do well in school or having conversations with family about college and future goals. For example, Maria's brother, aunt, and cousins consistently encouraged her to pursue higher education. Additionally, Adrian and Tiffany, who were in different focus groups, described how their parents' persistent check-ins related to grades were annoying, but they seemed to recognize these check-ins were helpful for continued academic success.

The two young Black men in this study, Adrian and Rodney, were in the same focus group, and they described receiving messages from family members about the importance of education. For example, Adrian shared, "I always knew education comes first... If, if I didn't have As, I wouldn't be playing basketball." Rodney also shared how he learned from family and other people close to him that "education comes first. If you don't have education, then you're screwed." Additionally, Adrian and Rodney described receiving messages from their families about potential setbacks when you lose focus, which they explained in the following conversation.

**Researcher:** So, what have you heard about college?

**Adrian:** That it can be, uh, it can be a downfall. And it can be the next...

**Rodney:** A stepping stool.

**Adrian:** Yeah, a step up.

**Researcher:** So, with college being a downfall, like, what does that mean?

**Adrian:** You can party too much and then get off your focus on what you want to be. And you can hang around the wrong crowd and get caught in a bad accident and it can ruin, ruin your whole career or life. And it can just make your grades slip, you start being late to class and stuff, and you just start going backwards instead of forwards.

**Researcher:** Other people?

**Rodney:** College is harder than high school, and, if you don't put work and effort in, it can just mess up your whole life and then you're just stuck wondering what you could have done to make it all better.

The messages that Adrian and Rodney received were cautionary tales of survival as they pursued their aspirations.

**Family, familial commitment, and aspirations.** Reflecting familial capital and the strong sense of commitment to family well-being (Yosso, 2005), students across two focus groups described how actualizing their aspirations would honor the significant work and sacrifices of their family members. This desire to honor their family pushed students to relentlessly pursue their goals. Courtney and Melanie were in the same focus group and both discussed the desire to make their mothers proud. Courtney said:

I just want to make my momma proud. And to go home every day and see how much my momma works for me is motivation for me to do my best every day. Because I know that I have to make sure she knows that everything she did for me was worth it. And I want her to, like, I want to be able to pay her back for everything.

For Courtney, her payback to her mother was not about a monetary payback, but just the payment of her being successful in life. Melanie then shared:

I would say my mom, my dad, and my uncle [help me with my goals]. Cause my mom, she loves me of course, but like Courtney said, your mom does so much for you, you want to show her how much you appreciate that.

In addition to Courtney and Melanie, Tiffany, a student in a different focus group, shared that her goal was to make As and Bs to show appreciation for her family. This dedication

to academics and future goals was students' way to show their appreciation for their family, which led to a persistent focus on accomplishments and achievements.

**Teachers.** Participants described teachers at Northwest Middle School as an important source of social capital, especially related to developing a strong college-going culture. Teachers were at the forefront of developing this college-going culture in two ways: frequent discussions about preparing for the future and class assignments or opportunities that required students to begin planning for college. Students in two focus groups described frequent discussions with teachers in their middle school about the importance of preparing for college, which also shaped students' positive dispositions about the pursuit of higher education. For example, Melanie described the college-going culture once she entered middle school:

So when I got [to] sixth grade, you hear a lot of teachers talking about it. College, college. And I was like, "Well, they were like it's going to help you with what you want to be and what you want to do in life and everything." And that's when I really wanted to go to college or I really wanted to learn more about it.

Additionally, Courtney, who was in the same focus group as Melanie, discussed how her teachers pushed her to not let "pressure catch" her in high school and to continue to focus on goals. These teachers, through frequent conversations and messages about higher education, helped students developed their own college-going aspirations.

Participants also discussed the college-going culture being reflected in course assignments and other college-related activities. Two students in different focus groups (Jose and Melanie) described teachers who assigned projects that required students to learn more about scholarships through technology apps or to identify colleges of interest. In addition, one middle school teacher, Ms. Thomas, who was identified in two focus group interviews as a source of support and information, mentioned how the middle school did several field trips to colleges and universities across the state, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), the flagship institution of the state, and the most selective public university in the state. She discussed the importance of these college visits given that many families in the rural community had inflexible work schedules that made it difficult for family members to take time off in the evening or weekends to take their students on college visits. Ms. Thomas reflected on how surprised middle school students were during the college visits because they saw college students being "engrossed in their work" during the college tour. She believed students seeing this studious behavior taught students an important lesson about staying

focused and committed to their academic work now as a preparation for college.

**The Excel Program.** Students described the Excel Program as a source of social capital that cultivated and sustained college and career aspirations. For example, students across all focus groups described the Excel Program as a source of support on their pathways to college and career goals. Specifically, students described the program as helping them accomplish their future goals and giving them the leadership skills or self-esteem to accomplish their goals. The following exchange occurred during one focus group interview.

**Researcher:** How about [the Excel Program]? How has [it], if at all, helped you think about college?

**Maria:** Every time I hear "[Excel Program]," I'm kind of like, "Oooh! I am in that."

**Tiffany:** (chuckles)

**Maria:** I want to be in that. And it makes me feel happy that I'm in something that I didn't even try out for. It kind of cheers me up because one of my teachers thought that I would be good for [Excel Program]. And it kind of cheers me up because it is fun. Actually, we went to [name of major city] like two months ago and we did a lot of things there (students referenced college visits during their visit to the major city).

**Jose:** (clears throat)

**Researcher:** Jose, anything else you want to add?

**Jose:** Well, Reverend Martin [director of the Excel Program] always told us things about college. You want to go and ask questions [referring to what you do during a college visit]. Sometimes, we write about our opinion, and it showed us how to be a leader.

**Researcher:** Tiffany, anything you want to add before we finish?

**Tiffany:** Before [the Excel Program], I had a low self-esteem about my grades and stuff, but when Reverend Martin came to our school and he talked to us, talked to us about leadership and stuff, I felt more happy... I knew that I was going to have good grades and I knew that I was going to be a leader someday, and he made me feel proud for myself. Proud and, like, proud about being a leader.

In addition, student participants discussed how college visits sponsored by the Excel Program were helpful on their pathway to higher education. For example, students in the Excel Program visited two HBCUs, which exposed students to various campus environments. Lisa also believed Reverend Martin was teaching students to prepare

for the independence once they began college in order to not succumb to peer pressure.

### Discussion

This study provided critical context in two areas: (a) rural Students of Color in middle school and college access and (b) social capital and college and career aspirations. First, this study sought to add to the body of literature on rural Students of Color and college access by focusing on the experiences of rural Students of Color in middle school who are engaged in a youth- and community-based program, especially since this body of literature is focused primarily on high school students (e.g., Griffin et al., 2011; Irvin et al., 2016; Means et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2009). The focus on middle school students is particularly important because students can begin developing a predisposition toward higher education as early as middle school (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). While most students in this study had not developed detailed college plans, they had developed college aspirations and multiple higher education predispositions through their families, teachers, and the Excel Program. Students described higher education as an important pathway to further learn, develop, and to support future career aspirations. However, students also described concerns about the affordability of higher education even before reaching high school and starting to develop detailed college plans.

Second, while social capital has often focused on connections and networks that provide access to actual or potential resources and that promote advantage and social mobility (Bergin et al., 2007; Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988), this study frames social capital within the context of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) to examine networks and connections that provide access to resources *and* provide instrumental emotional support for rural Students of Color as they cultivate and sustain their career and college aspirations. In this study, students primarily described career aspirations related to the medical or science fields and the arts and entertainment fields, and students described receiving encouragement, emotional support, and information to pursue their career aspirations from their social networks. Using Community Cultural Wealth, this study also revealed two other forms of Community Cultural Wealth were critical: aspirational capital and familial capital. Students in this study relied on aspirational capital to hold onto career aspirations despite personal and familial challenges. This was an internal motivator that was critical for pursuing goals. Students described familial capital by expanding the notion of family to include extended family and by pursuing college and career aspirations as a way to honor the significant work and sacrifice of their family members. The other forms of Community Cultural Wealth

(i.e., linguistic, navigational, and resistant capitals) did not come up during the interviews but should be further explored in research on college access and rural Students of Color.

### Implications for Practice and Policy

This study provides critical insights for practice and policy. I offer three major implications of this study. First, rural educators and educational leaders should consider how to continue capitalizing on support from teachers, family members, and community- and youth-based organizations, such as the Excel Program, to encourage the college and career aspirations of rural students, including rural Students of Color. For example, local educational leaders could develop a comprehensive task force that includes family members, educators, business leaders, students, and community members to develop a comprehensive college and career plan to support students in rural communities. Additionally, rural school districts and communities within proximity of each other could collaborate to share knowledge and bring even greater resources and opportunities to rural students related to college and career planning, such as regional career and college fairs and regional conferences on college and career planning.

Second, educators and educational leaders should consider how to disrupt practices and policies rooted in deficit-oriented perspectives of Students of Color and their families. This study offers insights into how Community Cultural Wealth can be used to reframe social capital to be inclusive of emotional support and to recognize the critical role of families in students' pathways to college and careers. For example, school and district leaders could use Community Cultural Wealth to expand strategic plans and goals to be more inclusive of Students and Families of Color. Additionally, school and district staff training and development could focus on the value of the forms of Community Cultural Wealth in enhancing student achievement and family relations.

Finally, policymakers, educators, and leaders of youth-based programs have an opportunity to rethink college-going curricula to be more robust and comprehensive at an even earlier age. For instance, the Excel Program is an example of how a community- and youth-based program could begin working with students prior to high school to expose them to higher education and to help them develop a college-going identity. In addition, educators and leaders of youth-based programs must consider how to expose students to more college knowledge, including financial aid. For instance, while students will not complete most financial aid and scholarship applications until their senior year of high school, students need to understand the concept of need-based aid as an option to alleviating concerns about

the costs of higher education. However, information and resources are not enough to help students, especially rural students, actualize their college aspirations. Policymakers must consider how to continue to expand financial aid opportunities and reduce higher education costs that may prevent students from pursuing their college and career aspirations.

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