

Educational Experiences That Matter to Seniors Graduating From an Urban Early College High School

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Abstract

Preparing underrepresented students in urban settings for college and career is the focus of this study: Nine students graduating from a diverse, urban early college high school describe their experiences. Using narrative inquiry methods, conversations from nine students are examined to uncover crucial points of convergence: all nine engaged in self-awareness, developed relationships with people, looked toward the future, embraced school as a place of learning, and experienced school as “family.” Powerful experiences unique to each student are also highlighted. From students themselves, researchers and educators can learn what it takes to graduate high school ready for college and career.

Keywords

high school, programs, early college, college access, urban education, college and career readiness, narratives, narrative research

A persistent and seemingly intractable question that researchers, educators, and policy makers grapple with is the following: How do we prepare underrepresented students in urban settings for college and career? This question

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provides the impetus for our study. Enlisting the help of nine underrepresented students graduating from an Early College High School (ECHS) in an urban setting, we ask them to tell us their stories of living and learning over 7 years in a school that embraces and promotes the idea of college and career readiness. Foregrounding students' voices and their stories places them at the forefront of reform. What can researchers, policy makers, and educators learn from students' experiences? With their voices guiding us to explain what matters, we can move closer to understanding and perhaps addressing some of the persistent issues facing diverse students in urban high schools. In this way, we aim to contribute to the conversation focused on better preparing underrepresented students for college and career.

Dropping out of high school, for example, is a persistent problem among urban youth; dropout rates have continued unabated despite a national focus and call for reform (Balfanz, 2009a; Marvul, 2012). "Dropping out" is a process with a trajectory that begins in middle school (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010; Burks & Hochbein, 2015; Farkas, 2011; Langenkamp, 2009; Long, Monoi, Harper, Knoblauch, & Murphy, 2007). Poor preparation in middle school can leave vulnerable urban students to begin high school academically unprepared and unmotivated (Balfanz et al., 2010; Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Long et al., 2007), thereby facilitating the "dropping out" process.

The experiences of urban high school students are complicated by the fact that many of their schools lack the high-quality resources students need to understand their post-secondary options. Such resources include an adequate number of school counselors, challenging coursework, and career preparation (Balfanz, 2009b; Owens, Simmons, Bryant, & Henfield, 2011; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coco, 2009). Additionally, students in these schools have fewer opportunities to access social and cultural capital important for college readiness—including the human and material resources to help with college knowledge and preparation for admission (Cilesiz & Drotos, 2014; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hill, Bregman, & Andrade, 2015; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Owens et al., 2011; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

As researchers, educators, policy makers, and the larger public community highlight problems in urban schools to help create a sense of urgency for research and reform, they risk characterizing all high need urban high schools as places consumed by dangers and deficits. The repeated mantras and statistics of poor outcomes related to high need urban students in high schools tends to paint a sad and depressing portrait of the state of secondary urban education. In fact, a focus on deficits and challenges can work to create a set of parameters that perpetuate the very structures that researchers and educators work against. As Heck and Mahoe (2006) point out, ". . . approaching

categories of social difference as if they were fixed parameters can perpetuate a myth that this is a ‘natural order’”(p. 423). Further, Harper (2015) writes, “. . . research on urban high schools and young men of color focuses almost entirely on problems and underachievement” (p. 141)—resulting in what he calls “deficit narratives.” By focusing on urban communities’ “deficits” and by highlighting the programs and funding needed to help students overcome seemingly intractable obstacles, we risk blaming our most vulnerable students for failure when programs do not result in improved graduation rates. Given the amplification of deficit narratives and negative assumptions related to urban high schools and their students, we suggest that this research, constructed by and with diverse urban students’ voices, opinions, and ideas, can contribute to a very small yet urgently needed body of literature that provides a counter to the deficit narratives of high need urban high school students.

In the narratives presented in this study, students themselves open a window into their high school experiences and illuminate ways that they navigate challenges and develop capacities to counter and overcome problems. Looking across students’ narratives, we illuminate points of convergence among students’ experiences to locate factors that help all nine become self-aware and focused on a future that includes college and career. Students’ perception of their experiences provides important details about what they found helpful. What factors do *they* identify as related to persistence and resilience? What can we learn from *them* about what it takes to be college and career ready? Their answers provide the kind of examples of instructive practices that we need (Harper, 2015) to help us challenge negative statistics and stereotypes.

While the students selected for this study are successful in the sense that they are graduating high school with some college credits and experiences, their stories should in no way be considered “victory narratives.” These students are candid about what they perceive as their shared successes and all locate aspects of the school that helped or did not help contribute to their success. To gain insights and knowledge into students’ experiences, we ask, “What are students’ perceptions about their experiences attending a small, ECHS for 7 years?”

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical grounding for this narrative inquiry is derived from understanding that the experiences, or stories, that people tell are important sources of knowledge and understanding (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). This ontological and epistemological position is situated in a Deweyan theory of experience; Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) argue convincingly that Dewey’s pragmatic

philosophy provides a transactional understanding of experience that may be illuminated through narrative inquiry. Dewey rejects the “dysfunctional dualisms” (Berding, 1997) that characterized much of the philosophical thinking of his time, (i.e., “the child vs. the curriculum . . . the individual vs. social culture”; Dewey, 1902/1990, p. 183) in favor of a more holistic understanding. Instead of positioning the child as separate from the school curriculum, for example, Dewey sees the educational process as a transaction: He writes, “. . . subject-matter never can be got into the child from without. Learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within” (p. 187). The resultant learning comprises the felt reality of that child’s experience—a result that is not final, but transitional and internal, providing students with what Dewey calls a “standpoint” or “outlook” (p. 199).

Examining the whole of experience at a significant point in its transition is germane to the methods of narrative inquiry and to understanding the experiences of students as related to the research goal of this study. Here, nine students (see Appendix A for a brief description of each student) were asked to reflect upon the whole of their experiences at an ECHS at the time of graduation. Dewey (1916/1997) regards this kind of cultivated reflection as “thinking” and says, “All thinking is research and all research is native, original, with him who carries it on” (p. 148). The resultant narrative is a form of representation “that describes human experience as it unfolds through time” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 40). Grounding our understandings of experience in what students say they perceive as important honors, values, and gives voice to underrepresented populations; amplifying these students’ voices builds on the work of theorists who strive to highlight underrepresented students’ achievement and focus on their success and persistence (Harper, 2015; Reid & Moore, 2008).

To understand the experiences of nine students at an ECHS, we asked them to narrate the story of their life and learning in the school. Their narratives can help us learn about life (Bateson, 1989) in and out of an ECHS, and provide us with a more fine-grained understanding of what students took away from their school experiences (Chan, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Coulter, Michael, & Poynor, 2007; Moss, 2004; Schaafsma, Pagnucci, Wallace, & Stock, 2007). We use grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000) to develop cross-case descriptions of nine students’ experiences of school as told through their narratives.

Method

Setting and Participants

This research took place in an ECHS located in a high need, urban environment. In keeping with Milner’s (2012) framework that identifies and describes

“urban,” our research setting can be classified as “urban intensive,” that is, a large metropolitan area with a dense population exceeding one million people.

ECHSs partner with universities to enroll high school students in dual-credit courses, helping them earn up to 60 college credits upon graduation from high school. ECHSs offer systemic college-focused programs to students who are low-income, students of color, English Language Learners, students requiring special education services, and students who are first generation college-going.

Of the 500 students in this diverse, combined middle-high school (serving Grades 6 through 12) which we will call the “Inquiry School,” 50% speak another language at home, 25% receive special educational services, and 65% qualify for free or reduced lunch. The school began in 2005 with one grade of 81 sixth-grade students, four teachers, one part-time school counselor, one principal, one administrative assistant, and one college liaison. The school strived to provide students with a college-going culture that included career development, academic support, college counseling, advisory, and peer supports—characteristics closely associated with the general mission of ECHS (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). A middle school was included as part of the high school model to address readiness concerns articulated in many studies of vulnerable students in middle schools who graduate eighth grade academically unprepared for high school (ACT, 2008; Balfanz et al., 2010). The nine students participating in this study were part of the first graduating class of the Inquiry School and were graduating with a number of college credits ranging from 15 to 46. At the time we conducted this research, all nine had been accepted into 4-year colleges.

It is important to note from an ecological perspective that both authors of this study were also founding members of the school and deeply involved and invested in its ongoing operations. M.B. (first author) was the college liaison, responsible for connecting the partner college and the school to facilitate college readiness. Working with the school principal before the school even began, she helped conceptualize challenging literacy experiences and programs. She organized the school’s advisory program and worked closely with the college administration and professors to build opportunities for interaction and experiences. For example, in 2006, 1 year after the school began, M.B. created the College Immersion program for seventh-grade students. In this experience, the entire seventh grade, all 81 students, attended college for one full week. The following year, she created a 2-week College Immersion experience for eighth graders. These two college-going experiences gave students authentic knowledge about college life, work, and expectations (Schaefer, 2014; Schaefer & Rivera, 2012, 2014) while still in middle school, and the programs continue to exist and thrive in the school today.

L.M. (second author) was a professor of counselor education in the partner college and joined the planning committee for the Inquiry School about a year before it opened. Working with the principal, the college liaison (M.B.), and colleagues on the school's planning committee, she argued that staff for the first class of the Inquiry School should include a school counselor, and explained that career development should be an integral part of the nascent school's culture: Career development, under the guidance of a professional school counselor, would help students begin to imagine the relevance of the college classes they would start taking in the ninth grade, and help students in Grades 6 to 12 think about their future and how their interests and abilities might figure in that future. A systemic engagement with career development, L.M. argued, could help students become ready for college and career as one process. L.M. enlisted the help of M.B., an experienced curriculum developer, and the school principal, to create a sketch of the Career Institute, a school-wide programmatic career development effort designed to take place during advisory class for a 6- to 8-week period. Working with the school counselors and providing ongoing professional development for teachers helped ensure that students would experience meaningful, integrated career development for each of the 7 years they attended the Inquiry School.

Data Sources

After acquiring necessary permissions from M.B.'s and L.M.'s university Institutional Review Boards (IRB) and from the Department of Education's IRB, we wrote a letter to all graduating seniors explaining the study and inviting them to participate. The letters were disseminated through the school's ongoing advisory program. We welcomed the first set of students to submit their consent letters, and then with recommendations from the school principal and from teachers, we personally reached out to certain students to gain a representation of students with a range of school experiences—both “successful” students (i.e., students who accumulated 30 or more college credits prior to graduation) and students for whom regular and college classes remained a struggle. In all, we asked the nine graduating seniors to tell us the story of their life and learning over 7 years. Specifically, we asked all nine students to describe what stood out in their minds over the last 7 years. We asked them to describe themselves as learners, explain what they thought about going to college when they began school in the sixth grade, and describe what they thought about going to college now. We were interested in gaining their reflective perspectives, ideas, and understandings of what mattered to them in this ECHS (see Appendix B for interview protocol).

We initiated reflective conversations with the nine students over a 6-week period (May, 2012 through early June, 2012). The conversations were facilitated by the fact that each of the students engaged in conversation was familiar with the researchers; most seemed quite comfortable talking, even in the presence of a recording device. Each “purposeful conversation” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) lasted from 30 to 60 min, and both researchers were present for all interactions. The conversations were flexible and exploratory (M. Ely, personal communication, September 20, 2012; Merriam, 2009) with “story prompts.” For example, although we had a set of open-ended questions, we asked probing questions to gain deeper understandings of a thought, idea, or event that seemed important to the student, as we do here in this conversation with David when he mentions “caring” as important to his achievement:

David: Ah, so I guess, coming to this school as a bad student, having a fourth-grade reading or fifth-grade reading level is pretty bad. But now I get 99s on my English regents, I get average SAT scores, I have a scholarship for college already . . . Going from that bad student who really didn’t care about anything, who scored bad grades, to a student now who I guess is sort of average—maybe sort of a little above in certain subjects.

L.M.: You mention “not caring” and then moving from sort of not caring to taking responsibility. Um, what could you tell me a little more about that and what helped with that change, that process?

David: I guess, so, it had to do with the teachers. And even the principals, Ms. R and Mrs. O. They had this sort of informal care . . . that . . . to their students like we were their family. I was like, I don’t know, Mr. G’s nephew, or something

By probing more deeply into “caring” as a concept, we discover that David learned to “care” about his grades (academics) but the idea of caring went much deeper: By probing David’s answer, we discovered that he also responded personally to the care he received from school administrators and teachers.

Analysis

Following each audio-taped conversation, we wrote reflections explaining and exploring what we heard and what stood out for us. These “observer comments” (Merriam, 2009, p. 172) threaded through our data analysis. We co-transcribed the audio-taped conversations in this way: After dividing the tapes, each of us transcribed a conversation in its entirety and sent it to the

other, who also listened to the tape and reviewed the final transcript for accuracy. We wrote analytic notes after each transcription, noting trends and asking questions. Our reflective notes were used in the first run of open coding. We then compared our analytic memos, reflections, and codes with the goal of developing categories and themes (Ely, 1991; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We wrote reflections on analysis as well as reflections on method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), aiming to ground our understandings of how participants made sense of their world and experiences within it (Merriam, 2009) in the data.

Trustworthiness

Our analysis had two stages: First, we analyzed each student's narrative independently by case, mining each transcript for particular understandings and experiences. Then together, we began a cross-case analysis, building a general explanation that cut across all cases (Yin, 2008). We sorted codes into categories and stopped generating categories when all pertinent data were "exhaustive" (Merriam, 2009), that is, all pertinent data were assigned a category or subcategory. During our first conversations about our codes and notes, however, we realized that our perceptions and perspectives were deeply reflective of the roles we had in the Inquiry School and the knowledge we had of individual students. To address the subjective inclinations related to our analysis (Tracy, 2010), we engaged the services of a graduate student interested in practicing qualitative methods. Without any prior knowledge of the school or of its students, he coded the narratives and wrote his own analytic memos. From that point forward, the three of us met weekly over a 6-month period to negotiate understandings of students' experiences in the Inquiry School. Each theme was created in our group of three after reaching 100% agreement on codes, categories, and themes.

Findings and Discussion

The following themes, constructed from analysis of students' narratives, provide a description of students' lives as they were lived in an ECHS and gives us an understanding of the complexity of factors related to successful high school graduation and college and career readiness. While each student tells a different story of his or her experiences at the Inquiry School, six themes threaded prominently through their narratives. Knowing the importance of experience (Dewey, 1916/1997) as it relates to theory, we were sensitive to the overarching picture that emerged: All nine students found support for the development of their college and career readiness skills and also talked about

these skills, ideas, and personal experiences in a way that struck us as self-aware and agentive. Students evinced keen awareness of their own hopes, dreams, ambitions, skills, and learning preferences, and all nine exuded confidence in their own agency. Even the one student who expressed uncertainty about doing well in college believed that her future, her fate, and her destiny were in her own hands. A fine-grained analysis of students' narratives yielded themes that underpinned this strong sense of agency and college readiness.

While students demonstrated agency and readiness for their next steps in life, the themes were also infused with students' ideas of the importance of forming critical relationships in school. Relationships mattered to students, and they mattered a lot. Although we constructed the idea of relationships as one of six main themes, it threaded through all of the themes presented here. Students (a) engaged in self-awareness; (b) developed relationships with people; (c) looked toward the future; (d) embraced school as a place of learning; and (e) experienced school as "family." A sixth theme was identified as "Weighty moments," where we attempt to capture powerful experiences unique to each student.

We thread our discussion of the nine students' narratives with literature related to other ECHSs, urban high schools, and small schools in general. Contextualizing our findings within related literature serves to illuminate understandings of the experiences and successes, as well as the problems, narrated by a cohort of the first graduating class of high need urban students from an ECHS. Through such illumination, we address Harper's (2015) call for "production and amplification of instructive practices" (p. 164) while also identifying systems of academic and social practices that were problematic for some or needed improvement.

Students Engage in Self-Awareness: "I Am Aware of Myself as a Learner"

Students speak with knowledge and awareness of themselves as learners. While most discuss the conditions under which they feel they learn best, David, who began the Inquiry School with over 80 absences each of his first 2 years, articulates how the awareness of a goal, of something *he* could reasonably achieve, set him on a path to academic success:

So that was going to be my goal so I guess what sort of drove me into wanting to be successful was having that goal in mind . . . even though it's already the end of May and we're almost graduating, most kids would just go down the toilet with their grades and stuff like that. But I actually want to be better, I want to better my art work, I want to be better in my school work because I

know that if I am, I will get to my goal. And I will do what makes me happy, which is fulfilling my career. I cannot wait to get dressed and get out of there and go and do what I love doing. So I guess pretty much having a goal in mind actually sort of drove my education.

From the first year in the Inquiry School until Grade 12, students are encouraged to think about their future as relates to goals for college and career. Students engage in developmentally appropriate career development activities and interventions in advisory, through the ongoing Career Institute (see Participants and Setting). David's experience with goal-setting reflects a process that began to matter to him in high school, when he began to understand how what he was good at and what he liked to do could figure in a future that he looked forward to with anticipation and "love." This awareness of self in relation to future work encourages him to seek out support for academics in a way that helps "drive" his education. This kind of career development has been shown to help motivate students to achieve high school graduation in anticipation of meaningful work opportunities (Moody, Kruse, Nagel, & Conlon, 2008).

Students are also keenly aware of *how* they learn, as Xi describes:

I think I'm a visual learner. I like to see things, like, maths [*sic*] is really easy for me because I just see it . . . 'Cause last year in science class it was like a lecture where he just talked throughout the whole thing and I like, I couldn't take notes while he was talking because I couldn't like, write fast enough, I couldn't process it either, so I always had to copy N.'s notes . . .

Xi understands how she learns best, and knows that to prepare for college lectures that lack visuals, like the college-level science she took in high school, she will have to work with a partner to get notes, or find another way to compensate. Knowing this about how she learns is the kind of self-understanding and reflection that will help her develop ways to persist and cope in college (Burks & Hochbein, 2015). Xi's self-understanding about learning is gained during her exposure to college classes. Students with limited exposure to challenging coursework in high school may find themselves at a disadvantage (Balfanz et al., 2010) when they begin to take college classes. The early college exposure gives Xi the opportunity to understand what she needs to do when she enrolls in college.

Sometimes students did not do well in their dual-credit classes. Interestingly enough, Peter accepts the blame for his low grades. A self-described "slacker," he points out ways in which his teachers and professors gave him chances to make up work and do better. He explains,

The school gives you so many chances . . . that's a good thing . . . they give you chances to do better and better . . . if you're the person who struggles a lot and enjoys slacking, I think this is the right school for you because they're going to keep pushing you to do well.

Peter understands that the struggles he faces as a student are not shared by everyone, but advises others who “enjoy slacking” to attend the Inquiry School. Peter appreciates the support and encouragement he receives, and highlights the role that teachers and professors play in his achievement. The critical role of school faculty, staff, and administration is explored further in the next theme that describes students' emphasis on the importance of their relationships with people.

Students Develop Relationships With People: “I Matter to the People Here”

In a small school, there are many opportunities to build relationships, not only with teachers, but also with other students, staff, and the school principal. In this theme, “mattering” to people means more than having someone ask about your day, or inquire about your family, or notice a new outfit. In their narratives, students often mention particular teachers, staff, and peers by name. The relationships that students build inside of the school helps them feel secure and attached. While research has pointed to the smallness of the school as an enabler of these relationships (Gregory, 2000; Huebner, Corbett, & Phillippo, 2006; Ilg & Massucci, 2003), other concepts related to the Inquiry School's design may have also facilitated the development of care, concern, and trust. For example, in an effort to support and nurture students through the rigorous college coursework, the school instituted an advisory program. Although implemented differently in different schools, in general, an advisory period is a responsive support system (MacIver, 1990) designed to address students' social and emotional well-being by scheduling regular meetings during the school day with small classes and one caring adult (Wood & Hillman, 1992). It was during advisory that programs such as Bullying Prevention and the Career Institute were offered.

Building relationships that matter in this small school also means that care is shown in ways that demonstrate respect for students and a belief in their skills and abilities. In this part of her narrative, for example, Inez talks about how she felt listened to and empowered when she works with a peer to create and implement an anti-bullying program for the sixth grade:

They [teachers] always try and get everyone's input . . . Like we used to hear the teachers complain about [the sixth grade] . . . So we decided to come out with a program to like help them. And we did like a whole bullying program, but it was more than just bullying. Whereas, if we went to a "normal" school, they probably wouldn't care that we came up with a bullying program. They would have been like "oh wonderful" and they wouldn't allow us to actually do it. But, with the program we were actually allowed to sit down with teachers, talk to teachers, have the teachers' input. And from what we hear, the sixth graders took it very seriously and they began to change over the course of the year. But if we'd gone to a normal school, that wouldn't have happened.

Here, Inez and another upper classman feel entrusted enough by teachers to offer to build a bullying program to address issues in the sixth grade. Inez feels listened to, she knows her opinion, voice, and experience matter, and she and a peer have the opportunity to collaborate with teachers in a way that truly exemplifies the "flat hierarchy" (Gregory, 2000) that characterizes many small schools. It also provides an example of how relationships can enhance or facilitate a "family" feel and sense of a close-knit community: Inez has a long-standing relationship with the school principal and with a sixth-grade teacher, and builds on these relationships to initiate the creation of a program that not only helps the sixth-grade teachers, but also shows that Inez and her peer are concerned about the future of the school and invested in its legacy.

In other studies on small schools, the idea of relationships was woven into the concept of "care" (Shiller, 2009), a notion grounded in Nel Noddings's (1984) foundational work that differentiates between aesthetic care (ensuring students follow school policies and achieve good grades) and authentic care, which focuses on building genuine interest among teachers and students in learning about each other's communities and families and building a sense of trust (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). While a regularly scheduled advisory period ensures that students meet daily in small groups with one adult for the purposes of engaging in non-curricular conversations and relationship building, much of the teacher-student relationship building occurs in content area classes around academic concerns. Care as part of the student-teacher relationship is individualized and personal, as Stephanie explains:

I feel that, um, I was able to talk to the teachers about almost anything, like, if they're easy to approach. Like, you know, especially Ms. W. and Ms. R. When I have issues, um, internal and external, because I did fall on my face, and so they were always there for me, [and] . . . really supportive, they were really proud of me and stuff . . . so that's why I felt like I'm actually proud of myself, that I actually like made other people smile because of my accomplishments.

Stephanie separates internal issues (social and emotional) from what she calls external (academic) to illustrate the range of support and strength that she drew from these school relationships. She also talks about how the internal and external combined to help her become intrinsically satisfied (“I’m actually proud of myself”) and happy for extrinsic rewards (“people smile because of my accomplishments”). Both matter to Stephanie and she attributes these relationships as having helped her achieve and thrive.

Students Look Toward the Future: “I Feel Good About My Plans”

Students who have a sense of hope and optimism for the future tend to have better outcomes in terms of high school achievement (O’Brien, Dukstein, Jackson, Tomlinson, & Kamatuka, 1999). In their narratives, students express optimism and hope for their future. John, who struggled in his early years of high school, began to focus on learning and academics when he began to think about his interests, abilities, and future goals:

I set goals for myself. Ah, I you know, I put in my head that I wanted to become a lawyer, I wanna be able to do something, make a difference . . . stand out. And I guess that would be the main focal point of me coming to terms with, uh, who I want to become instead of who I am . . . It’s the drive, I want to better myself. I don’t wanna, I don’t wanna be stuck in a rut . . .

The hope that John expresses in his future is quite specific in its focus, and his self-understanding, his “drive,” reflects the kind of resilience and persistence closely associated with high school achievement (Cilesiz & Drotos, 2014; Heck & Mahoe, 2006; May & Copeland, 1998). Interestingly, persistence and achievement in school has been correlated with the development of positive relationships with teachers (Langenkamp, 2009; Marvul, 2012; May & Copeland, 1998; McHugh, Horner, Colditz, & Wallace, 2013; Milner, 2007), a construct also associated with the small school environment in urban communities (Conchas & Rodriguez, 2008; Gregory, 2000; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Huebner et al., 2006; Raywid, Schmerler, Phillips, & Smith, 2003). John attributes the start of his quest for self-fulfillment in part to one of his teachers, “Ms. W.”

L.M.: OK, um, was there anything in particular about your experiences here that sort of moved you to that sense of wanting to have a goal, cracking down, of wanting to um, accomplish something, make a difference?

John: Definitely the staff. I mean, I've always, since the seventh and eighth grade I've been writing. And I always kept it to myself, I really didn't share it with anyone, ah, cause I didn't think it was really any good. Uh, then uh, one day I was writing in class and . . . Ms. W. picked it up and she thought I was, you know just, just not paying attention, I didn't really want to be there, she picked and um, it was actually a poem I wrote and it actually brought her to tears, um, it moved her that much and she told me, she entered me in some contest and other things like that. It motivated me to write. You know, not just for myself, but for others.

For John, feeling good about himself, his work and his future could be traced back to a pivotal moment in the classroom—a moment where he felt encouraged to write for himself and for others. Students' relationships with their teachers animate their stories and ideas.

Although some students express anxiety about their future, for example, going to a new school after spending 7 years in the same place, most of them exude a sense of hope in their future and confidence that they will succeed in college. Students also seem aware that the relationships they enjoy now in high school will not be there for them in college, which also contributes to some anxiety. In Stephanie's words, we see a blend of confidence and fear:

I'm a little scared still, because, um, because my friends aren't next to me anymore. And so but I'm scared and excited. Cause um, I'm excited that it's a new environment and I will be able to learn more new things. And actually, you know, be a part of college and, um, I'm scared, because, um, I have no one to share it with that is from here. It won't be easy anymore. But yeah. That's a part of going to college so I'm excited about that too.

While Stephanie looks toward the future with hope and optimism, she senses how the college environment will be different for her, and this difference is mainly focused on people. Having been with the same students, teachers, administrators, and staff for 7 years, she understands that while she is looking forward to new experiences and to learning "more new things," the offset will be the personal support that will have to be reinvented. Relationships matter to Stephanie, and they matter to the nine students selected for this study. Stephanie's relationships with people in the school have helped scaffold her next steps, so although she expresses fear, she also expresses excitement for the future. The next two themes revolve around what students say matters to them when they think about their school and the people in it.

Students Embrace School as a Place of Learning: “I Think If I Went Anywhere Else, I Wouldn’t Be . . .”

In their narratives, students often discussed specific aspects of the school that helped push them to become better people and more versatile learners. The size of the school certainly played a role: while researchers have pointed out that small schools, generally defined as having fewer than 400 students, by themselves do not guarantee that relationships will be forged, caring will be initiated, and student achievement will improve (Schneider, Wyse, & Keesler, 2006; Shiller, 2009), small size can act as a facilitator for relationship building, caring, engagement, a sense of community, and a culture of high expectations and achievement (Ancess & Allen, 2006; Conchas & Rodriguez, 2008; Garth-McCullough, 2007; Murdock, Anderman, & Hodge, 2000; Weiss, Carolan, & Baker-Smith, 2010). At the Inquiry School, even before the school opened its doors, the first set of teachers, professors, staff, and administration discussed the need to infuse a strong social-emotional component into the academic program of the school, so that the whole student was attended to, not only during advisory classes, but in subject areas as well. Common planning time was built into teachers’ programs to ensure that they met regularly with each other to talk about students.

The nine students talk about how they felt supported and nurtured in their subject area classrooms. Peter, the self-described “slacker,” says that teachers at the Inquiry School “give you chances.” These chances don’t only extend to allowing students to make up work. The chances also extend to classroom participation. For example, even when students feel uncomfortable doing what is asked of them, they continue to feel supported and nurtured in their risk-taking, as Stephanie explains:

And um, the teachers would encourage you to talk. And so every time I talked my face would turn red. And I would just breathe so hard to myself—But um, that was just in the beginning, and after a few years, like I got more used to it . . . After I started participating I felt like I was more involved in the classroom too, and so that was beneficial for me . . . I also liked group work, sharing your presentations, um, studying together with other people, and um, talking with the teachers because um, the teachers were able to help me. And so they knew my weaknesses and strengths. And so after all of that, um, I became more comfortable talking.

Stephanie’s participation in classroom activities helps her become a more confident and assured learner. Students at the Inquiry School are often expected to express this confidence and assurance when they lead visitors on

school tours, or found their own clubs, extracurricular activities, and sports teams. In larger schools, often clubs and teams abound. In smaller schools, students often need to take the initiative to create teams and clubs that are of interest to themselves and others, and are encouraged to seek out supportive teachers to help lead and guide these endeavors. Although some students lament the lack of choices in sports and clubs, the idea that they themselves could create such options was something they found engaging, empowering, and directly related to learning. In her narrative, Marie articulates how the smaller, more personal aspects of the school mattered to her:

Because I know I wouldn't have gotten the same opportunity as I did here, anywhere else, and at a bigger school, um, it wouldn't have been as personal. Which I think is what gotten me to pass, like I don't think if, I think if I went anywhere else I wouldn't really be graduating this year.

Marie's admission here is important: She had the lowest number of earned college credits upon graduation (15) and her narrative contained far more negative comments than other narratives (i.e., "I feel like in a bigger school I may have been able to connect more with people"). She struggled academically from middle school through high school. She had an especially hard time with English classes, and even though she loved to read, she wrote almost nothing for class, and the teachers worked with her constantly to help motivate her to do the work, to do it well, and do better. She expresses doubt about finishing college, describing herself as "a very lazy person" and "something I still have to work on." She ends her narrative, however, with the following admission:

L.M.: Did you ever consider going to a different high school when you had the opportunity to apply to high school?

Marie: It did, but my mom wouldn't let me . . . And I'm kind of happy she didn't.

For Marie, a self-described "outsider," the smaller school was not a place where she felt comfortable. The "family feel" that most students felt drawn to was an anathema to her. At the same time, as explored in the next theme, the family feel ultimately mattered a lot to her experience and success in school.

Students Experience School as "Family"—A Place of Belonging: "I Found a Place Here"

While it might be argued that the idea of forging school relationships and the idea of school as a "family" should combine to form one theme,

students expressed these concepts differently. Relationships built with teachers, peers, staff, and administration appeared to be important, but a construct that was individualized (e.g., important relationships with . . .). The idea of “family” was somewhat different—it was a more diffuse feeling that students used to describe and define the culture of the school. It is also important to note that all nine students used the words “family” and “family feel” to describe and portray deeply positive feelings and experiences that they had with members of the school community. Their sense of family as supportive and nurturing, therefore, is how we understand the idea of “family” in this work.

Positive student–teacher relationship building can be obtained inside of any school where there are caring, nurturing adults. Creating a family feel as part of a school culture is a more cumulative endeavor, yet important to students and factored in their experiences of school success. In a selected section of his narrative, Pedro explains first how the concept of family is different from relationships, and then goes on to attribute the family feel to the longevity of students’ experiences of schooling in one place:

Um, well everyone’s like a family, like a, a real family here, it’s not like everyone’s um separate from like it’s just, teacher-student, um,—strict relationship . . . um, it’s a friend-to-friend relationship with the students and teachers here. Like I’ve known everyone for so much . . . so long, and I’ve been so close—I can go to anyone in this building and go to them for advice and they’ll help me out with anything, no matter what it would be.

“Knowing” each other is a feature of the small school that figures prominently in students’ stories. Students feel connected to and a part of each other’s lives, much like a family. Pedro can “go to anyone in this building . . . and they’ll help me out.” John adds a layer of importance to this idea when he differentiates between “family” and “friends:”

‘Cause I’ve know most of these people since the sixth grade . . . I can tell you everyone’s name in my grade . . . I’ve really grown close to those people . . . I definitely consider them more family than friends.

The family feeling is seen as a support and something to honor and love. Alyssa says, “I definitely loved being here . . . Um, I think being such a small school, it becomes much more than a school, especially in twelfth grade, I feel like everyone’s like family.” Alyssa clearly feels comfortable inside of this family, and this familiarity is echoed by Xi. For Xi, having a family feel means that she always has someone to talk to:

I think it's the fact that we're all really close, um, like we can just go up to each other and have a whole conversation. Even though we might not have our classes together anymore, and we're not as close to like, the other grades, we can still talk to each other.

Creating a family feel inside of a school is a process enabled by the school's smaller size (Conchas & Rodriguez, 2008) and perhaps facilitated by other factors related to school size.

The early college focus may also play a role in the building of a culture of family. In a report that examined the graduation rates of new small high schools created in New York City in 2002, authors Huebner et al. (2006) note that students reported being able to perform at higher levels than expected "because of the support they received at school" (p. 9). Other studies have shown that students' need for support in this model, where rigor, stress, and challenge are constantly present, helps create a close-knit community of learners with common goals (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; McDonald & Farrell, 2012).

Marie recognizes the "family feel," but does not embrace it:

I'm looking forward to getting to a more diverse group of people, because I've been with the same people for pretty much 7 years now. So it's kind of like, I've known these people for a long time, I know how they are, so it will be nice to be around different people.

For Marie, the longevity related to attending a 6 to 12 school is problematic. She has trouble connecting with the students in her class, and mentions that in a larger school she might have found students who were more like her. Marie's "family" is outside of school, with her friends who share the same taste in music. Still, she understands the ways in which "smallness" and relationships may have worked in her favor: "I liked how the teachers all like—we had kind of a personal relationship with the teachers, where I know that if I went to a bigger school or something that wouldn't have happened, 'cause there's too many kids." Marie knew she mattered to the people at the school, and without them, she "wouldn't really be graduating."

The "Weighty" Moments

While the five previous themes were ideas that cut across all students' narratives, there were other moments in the narratives when students expressed a powerful, but unique idea. David, for example, expressed a personal response to the school, one that was deeply influenced by his home and community:

[Dropping out] happens so much in the Latin community, especially where I grew up. There were so many kids who either got pregnant, got someone pregnant, went into drugs and just stopped going to school. I guess every year I just sort of thought that in my mind, I'm not going to make it to the tenth grade. I'm not going to make it to the 11th grade. I am, there's no way I'm going to finish all my credits . . . I still in mind, in my head, I'm still like doubting graduation. Even though I know it's going to happen. I just—it's, it's scary knowing about the future, knowing that you can't control it. But I guess in this school they sort of just kinda of taught us that we can control what's going to happen in our futures—and I'm just getting teary . . . [laughs] . . . I guess the reason why I love coming to this school, going from hating going to school to love coming every day is just because I love coming to . . . such great people who care about you so much.

David's integration into the school community was a process that did not begin well. In his first two years of school, he struggled with attendance and failed most subjects—effectively putting him on a trajectory that gave him only a 10% to 20% chance of graduating high school on time (Balfanz, 2009a). He “hated” coming to school. The staff, principal, college liaison, and teachers made concerted efforts to talk to David throughout his middle school years. David gradually came to believe that the people in the Inquiry School truly cared for him. He mattered to them. When an art teacher was hired while David was in eighth grade, he began to really feel that he had found a place—a place where he could improve on his artistic skills and talents and begin to imagine a future where he could practice art and earn a living. At the end of senior year, David was awarded a full scholarship to a prestigious university in the Midwest. Although he says, “It's scary knowing about the future,” he also illustrates the kind of agency that we found in all nine students. With some confidence, he feels that he “can control what's going to happen in our futures,” and for David that future includes college and a career that includes art.

Pedro's “weighty moment” relates to his understanding of his own changes in perspective. His answer to what stood out in his mind over his 7 years here at this school was the following:

Well, when I came here in sixth grade I wasn't open-minded . . . Now, I've encountered so many ethnicities, so many . . . other religions, I'm like, wow, why am I only open to this point, not all these other point of views, so that's helped me change and realize ok, that I'm not the only person here that's probably like, with this narrow point of view . . . when I was little I was thinking in childish ways . . . I wasn't thinking really of what would happen later on in the future or how would that affect me. And later on as I've grown, I'm growing

up and realizing ok, I need to start doing things more seriously. I've noticed that everything that I've been doing now in the present will somehow affect me somehow later on in the future.

In Pedro's words, we see how the diversity of the urban school worked to expose him to different possibilities and ideas about life, religion, and culture. Pedro's sense of agency also comes through here. He recognizes that he is the authority on and of his own life; he understands that the choices and decisions he makes now will have an impact on his future. The sense of power and ownership that Pedro feels comes across as liberating. His point of view has expanded: Pedro is the pathmaker and pathfinder of his future.

Significance

The narratives presented here illuminate some of the inside ways that a supportive school culture works to help students strive, succeed, and envision achievable, desirable goals with hope, optimism, and confidence. Combining the themes helps us understand, explain, explore, and elucidate students' felt experiences as members of the first graduating class of an ECHS—what they found important, inspirational, and germane to their success in graduating high school and becoming college and career ready. Forming and forging relationships that felt familial and supportive was an important aspect of students' success, whether that success was simply graduating, as was the case with Marie, or if the relationships helped propel students toward honors, scholarships, and entry into competitive colleges, as was the case with David. The “family feel” that students spoke about appeared to help make risk-taking safe and facilitated efforts to improve grades and sense of self. The next section highlights the structures that facilitated supportive and positive relationships.

Flat Hierarchy

Students talked about being “guinea pigs.” Some said it with pride, others with derision, but the fact remained that this first graduating class did share in much of the decision-making around school events, including class trips, play productions, and school programs. When Stephanie wanted a volleyball team, she had to create one. Pedro helped found a music club. The students in this study talked about feeling comfortable with their teachers and supported in their endeavors. Although “small” by itself can provide easier access to shared decision-making, small by itself is not enough (Gregory, 2000; Fine, 2005). In the Inquiry School, students created programs and as “guinea pigs,”

gave feedback on school-wide efforts. The flat hierarchy present in this school was cultivated through this shared decision-making.

Supportive Programming

As an Early College school, the academic program was rife with rigor: Students' first college class, Spanish 101, a four-credit course stretched over 1 year, was taken in ninth grade. College professors came to the school to teach the course to students during the day, and students received dual credit for their work. They also earned their first college grade. The idea of a transcript was new to many students, and stressful for most, but the programs that were already part of the school helped support students. In advisory, for instance, students had many opportunities to talk about career development and how college would figure in their aspirations and goals. The small group atmosphere gave teachers the chance to speak to students about their first college class and offer academic support as needed. In fact, before and after school tutoring became available for students at their request. This kind of responsive programming helped students understand that teachers' care was not an abstraction, but something that translated into literal support.

Relationships

When students attributed relationships with others as a key ingredient to their success in graduating, they did talk about specific teachers, but they also mentioned their friends, the school principal, an assistant principal, a school counselor, and staff members. For example, when David spoke about his art work, he talked about going to the school secretary and the parent coordinator for advice and feedback. In the flat hierarchy of the school, all opinions and ideas mattered. From students' narratives we learned that when hiring staff, teachers, and administrators, a key interview question should be around how potential hires feel about the concept of advisory, about talking to students before and after school, about being mentors for high school clubs and coaches for sports teams. Students in this study show and tell us how they think and feel about school matters, and it is the people in the school who create that culture of family, support, and belonging.

Implications and Conclusion

Recent reform initiatives have focused on transforming educational opportunities and trajectories for urban high school students, and many of these have shown promise in raising graduation rates (Balfanz, 2009a) and improving

overall achievement (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Systemic programs, such as Middle College High Schools (MCHS) and ECHS serve students who are low-income, students of color, English Language Learners, students who require special education services, and first generation college-going. These programs introduce students to college coursework in high school. Bolstered by a design that includes a small school size and a comprehensive support system for students, these schools have generally shown small, but real positive impact on the lives of high need students in urban communities (Edmunds et al., 2010).

However, research has shown that simply forming small high schools for high need students is not enough. In this study, using student voices, we present a glimpse into the types of experiences and opportunities that students found to be helpful and supportive. Students graduating from the Inquiry School were optimistic about their future and about their chances of completing a 4-year degree tailored to helping them obtain desirable careers. They expressed a sense of agency about their future, confidence in their abilities, and hope in their dreams. Students cited relationships with teachers, staff, and administration as forces that supported this agency. Greater efforts to provide a sense of community, to work collaboratively (students with teachers and students with students), and to attend to students' social and emotional concerns in urban educational settings are needed to provide educational experiences that matter to underprepared urban high school students. The results of this study present some ideas for moving in that direction.

Appendix A

Participant Profiles

- Alyssa: Identifies as White; she struggles with shyness in middle school, and finds her “voice” in high school. There she begins to participate in extracurricular activities and do well academically. She graduates with 25 college credits.
- David: Identifies as Latino; he struggles in Grades 6 to 8 with attendance and grades. He experiences a turn-around in attitude and achievement in high school, a transformation for which he credits caring school staff. He graduates with 18 college credits and a scholarship to a prestigious college in the Midwest.
- Inez: Identifies as Black American; she adjusts quickly to life at Inquiry School, becoming a social leader and academic success. She likes to lead group tours and arrange trips and school spirit activities. She graduates with 39 college credits.

- John: Identifies as American; he begins the school as a mediocre student until Grade 10, when he suddenly finds a passion for writing (for which he credits a teacher) and zest for school work and activities. He succeeds academically and graduates with 46 college credits.
- Marie: Identifies as White; she struggles in school both socially and academically. Her passion is for a certain kind of music—a passion not shared by any other student in the school. She graduates with 15 credits.
- Pedro: Identifies as Hispanic; he finds his passion in music and claims that this passion fuels his academic interest and success. He aspires to become the next music teacher in the Inquiry School. Graduates with 23 college credits.
- Peter: Identifies as Chinese; he did not want to go to Inquiry School and struggles academically. A self-described “slacker,” Peter appreciates the pushes he gets from teachers to complete his work, but resents the work itself. He graduates with 31 college credits.
- Stephanie: Identifies as Chinese; she credits school staff with “saving” her during an extremely difficult and personal issue. Already she is looking for ways to give back to the school community. She graduates with 36 credits.
- Xi: Identifies as Chinese; she explains that she feels pressure from her family to achieve and take over the family store. She plans to study accounting in the future and graduates with over 40 college credits.

Appendix B

Research Protocol

- Please describe what stands out in your mind about your 7 years here.
- Please describe yourself as a learner over the past 7 years.
- What did you think about going to college when you began here?
- What do you think about going to college now?
- What impact has the Career Institute had on your preparation for college?

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