

Pathways to College: The Intersection of Race, Family, and Community on Rural Students' College Aspirations

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Abstract

The Intersection of Race, Family, and Community on Rural Students' College Aspirations, examines the factors shaping rural students' college aspirations, with a focus on racial disparities between white students and students of color. Through a case study of Sadie Foster High School, the research explores how race, family support, and community resources shape students' educational trajectories. Findings reveal that white students often benefit from cultural capital and family advocacy, which help them secure advanced academic opportunities, while students of color face additional barriers, such as limited access to academic guidance and resources. The study underscores the importance of culturally responsive education policies and equitable access to postsecondary preparation in rural schools, which is crucial to improving educational outcomes and fostering equity in college access for all rural students. These insights provide a deeper understanding of how race and community influence the college pathways of rural youth and highlight the need for systemic interventions to address these disparities.

Keywords: Rural Education, College Aspirations, Educational Equity, Race and Higher Education, Cultural and Social Capital, Parental Advocacy, School Tracking, Rural-Urban Disparities, College Choice Process

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Introduction

In the United States, a persistent educational attainment gap exists between white students and students of color, reflected in disparities in college access and academic achievement. White students are more likely to attend college, while students of color often face greater barriers, resulting in lower high school graduation rates and decreased college enrollment (Chang et al., 2014; Grubb, 2013). These challenges are compounded by lower standardized test scores and a higher likelihood of being placed in lower-track classes.

This educational gap is not limited to urban areas; it also affects rural communities, which have been underrepresented in discussions of educational inequality. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in fall 2022, 27% of public schools were located in rural areas, serving 18% of all public-school students in the United States. Despite the significant number of students in rural schools, research on their educational experiences and college access remains limited.

Rural schools face unique challenges that hinder their ability to provide a high-quality education. These schools are often underfunded compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, struggling to provide essential resources such as textbooks, technology, and qualified teachers (Auldrige-Reveles & Tippins, 2021; Marietta & Marietta, 2020). Additionally, rural schools frequently face a shortage of qualified educators, making it difficult to hire and retain high-quality teachers (DeYoung, 2005). Limited access to services like libraries, counseling, and mental health support further exacerbates the challenges rural students face (Marietta & Marietta, 2020). The geographic isolation of rural areas also restricts professional development opportunities for teachers, impacting their effectiveness (Auldrige-Reveles & Tippins, 2021).

The socio-economic landscape of rural areas, marked by higher poverty levels, places additional burdens on rural schools. Economic disadvantage contributes to feelings of isolation among students, which can diminish their academic engagement and aspirations (Marietta & Marietta, 2020). This reality is reflected in standardized testing outcomes, where only 32% of rural fourth-graders score at or above the proficient level in reading, compared to 38% of urban and suburban students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). This trend continues into postsecondary education, with only 54% of rural high school graduates pursuing college within six months of graduation, compared to 64% of urban and 67% of suburban graduates (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023).

The pathways to college for rural youth are shaped by a complex interplay of individual, familial, and community factors, with distinct experiences for white students and students of color. While many rural students, regardless of race, have high aspirations, their access to resources and opportunities is often limited, with students of color facing additional systemic barriers (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). Geographic isolation restricts exposure to diverse educational and career opportunities, influencing rural students' decision-making processes regarding postsecondary education. Students of color, in particular, may face complex challenges due to racial and cultural dynamics in these areas (Corbett, 2007). For instance, Griffin et al. (2011) found that white rural students were more likely to rely on parents or guardians as key sources of information about

future plans, while Black and Hispanic students were more likely to cite teachers and other community figures, such as coaches or religious leaders, as influential.

Parental support and encouragement are crucial in navigating postsecondary pathways, but these can vary significantly across racial groups due to differing cultural, social, and economic factors. The economic status of a family in a rural area can heavily influence a student's ability to pursue postsecondary education, with students of color disproportionately affected by financial constraints and the pressure for immediate employment after high school (Tieken, 2014). Community resources, such as mentorship and guidance from teachers and local leaders, play a vital role in supporting students, but students of color may face additional barriers in accessing these supports due to racial and cultural divides in predominantly white rural communities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Cultural norms around education and employment in rural areas can further shape or limit students' college aspirations, with varying implications for white students and students of color (Howley, Howley, & Johnson, 2014).

Moreover, rural schools often have limited access to advanced coursework, extracurricular activities, and college counseling, all of which are critical for preparing students for college. These limitations may have a more pronounced effect on students of color (Petty, 2014). Despite extensive research on rural education, there is a significant gap in studies examining how these factors evolve over time, particularly concerning racial disparities. By exploring the changing dynamics and specific challenges faced by different racial groups, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the distinct experiences of white and minoritized students in rural areas. This approach highlights the importance of considering both racial and longitudinal perspectives to better understand and improve the educational pathways of rural youth.

While existing research has highlighted the challenges rural students face in accessing postsecondary education, it often overlooks the intersection of race, family, and community. Much of the literature tends to generalize the rural experience, failing to account for the distinct differences between white students and students of color. Additionally, the evolving demographics and economic conditions in rural areas, such as increasing racial diversity, have not been thoroughly examined in relation to educational attainment.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring how individual, familial, and community factors intersect to shape the educational pathways of rural youth, with a particular focus on the differences and challenges faced by white students and students of color. By investigating these nuanced dynamics, this research aims to deepen our understanding of the barriers to college access in rural areas, emphasizing the importance of considering both racial and longitudinal perspectives to improve educational outcomes for rural youth.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay of individual, familial, and community factors that shape the postsecondary educational pathways of rural youth, with a particular focus on understanding the nuanced differences and unique challenges faced by white students and students of color.

Research Questions

What are the key barriers impacting college aspirations among rural youth, and how do these challenges differ between white and black students?

In what ways can familial and community resources support the college aspirations of students in a rural school, and does this support differ for white and black students?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The pathways to college for rural youth are shaped by a complex interplay of individual, familial, and community factors. These influences vary significantly across different racial groups, with white students and students of color experiencing distinct challenges. This literature review explores these factors through the lenses of familial and community influences, multicultural navigators, cultural capital, social capital, and funds of knowledge. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers and opportunities that shape rural students' postsecondary aspirations.

Familial and Community Influences

Educational barriers in rural contexts are deeply embedded in the socio-economic and institutional structures of rural life. Geographic isolation, economic scarcity, and insufficient institutional support significantly impact the educational experiences of rural students (Irvin et al., 2012). These challenges are systemic, reflecting broader structural and relational issues that extend beyond individual circumstances. Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012) introduced the concept of social capital, emphasizing the critical role of both familial and scholastic environments in shaping rural students' educational ambitions. This dual nature of challenges—structural, such as economic adversity and inadequate school resources, and relational, including family engagement and teacher expectations—underscores the complexity of the educational landscape in rural areas.

The family's role is a recurrent theme in the literature, recognized for its potential to both support and hinder educational aspirations. Agger et al. (2018) explored gender dynamics within rural families, finding that rural female adolescents often exhibit higher academic achievements and aspirations, significantly influenced by parental expectations. This gender-specific perspective aligns with Byun et al.'s (2012) findings, which highlight the positive impact of family discussions and parental expectations on students' educational goals.

However, Nelson (2016) offers a nuanced view, suggesting that while familial support is common, it often lacks the specificity required to effectively navigate the higher education landscape. This observation aligns with Byun et al.'s (2012) assertion that both family and school settings are crucial in fostering educational aspirations among rural students. The challenge lies not only in providing support but in ensuring that this support is well-informed and actionable.

Multicultural Navigators

Carter (2005) introduced the concept of the "multicultural navigator" to describe individuals who help students, particularly those from minoritized groups, excel in environments that may not inherently promote equal opportunities. These navigators possess both dominant and non-dominant cultural capital, guiding students in balancing their cultural identities with their aspirations for higher education. This concept contrasts with Ogbu's (1979, 1990, 1995a) theory that involuntary minorities may exert less effort in schooling due to a perceived lack of future opportunities. Instead, Carter (2005) argues that while these students recognize the importance of educational success, they resist sacrificing their cultural identities to achieve it.

Multicultural navigators are particularly crucial for Black students, who often emphasize their cultural and racial identities as sources of pride. However, these traits are frequently undervalued by educational gatekeepers, such as school administrators and teachers (Young, 2011). When gatekeepers perceive a Black student's academic abilities as lacking, they may mistakenly interpret cultural expressions as a rejection of academic excellence (Carter, 2005). Carter categorizes Black students' engagement levels into three groups: cultural mainstreamers, who embrace dominant cultural norms while acknowledging their racial identity; cultural straddlers, who navigate school's cultural expectations while maintaining their cultural identities; and noncompliant believers, who show disparities between their beliefs, school engagement, and achievement.

Noncompliant believers often face academic disengagement due to internalized low expectations from educators, limited exposure to positive minority representations in the curriculum, and placement in lower-level classes. Despite these challenges, Carter (2005) suggests that their commitment to cultural and racial values provides a sense of belonging and a coping mechanism in schools where resources are scarce. Multicultural navigators bridge this gap, equipping Black students with the tools to succeed within the dominant culture while cherishing their cultural roots. This approach fosters a more inclusive and equitable environment, crucial for the holistic success of Black students (Carter, 2005; Hill, 2009).

Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) introduced the concept of cultural capital, which refers to the non-economic assets individuals possess—such as knowledge, skills, and cultural experiences—that can be used to gain access to power, prestige, and opportunities. Bourdieu posited that cultural capital is unevenly distributed in society, with advantaged groups having greater access to it than disadvantaged groups. This disparity perpetuates a cycle of inequality, where those with more cultural capital are more likely to succeed academically and professionally, while those with less struggle in school and are at greater risk of dropping out.

Minoritized students, including Black, Latino, and Native American students, often come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have less access to cultural capital than their white peers. This disadvantage significantly affects their college access and success. Arum and Cohen (2007) and Carnevale and Rose (2004) found that students from families with higher levels of cultural capital are more likely to attend selective colleges, even after controlling for factors such as

standardized test scores and family income. These findings underscore the critical role that cultural capital plays in college access for students of color. Students whose parents are familiar with the college admissions process and can provide guidance and support are more likely to succeed in school and continue to higher education.

Social Capital

Social capital, defined as the resources embedded in social networks and relationships, emphasizes the importance of social connections, trust, and reciprocity in fostering cooperation and facilitating collective action. Coleman (1988) highlighted how social connections and networks contribute to collective benefits, such as educational success.

The interplay between cultural capital and social capital is well-recognized in the literature, with scholars acknowledging that these concepts are interconnected and mutually reinforcing (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Bourdieu (1984) argued that cultural capital is not static; it can be enhanced and transmitted through social networks and interactions. Conversely, social capital can facilitate access to cultural resources and educational opportunities, enriching our understanding of how social networks influence an individual's cultural knowledge and tastes, and how cultural capital influences the formation and maintenance of social networks.

This intersection of cultural and social capital underscores the cumulative advantages or disadvantages individuals may experience, contributing to the perpetuation of social inequality. Those with higher cultural capital are better equipped to navigate and succeed within social institutions, such as schools and the labor market, as their resources and dispositions align with dominant cultural norms. In contrast, individuals with limited cultural capital face barriers and limitations in accessing opportunities and resources.

Funds of Knowledge

The concept of "funds of knowledge" was first introduced by Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) in their study of Latino children's cultural identity construction. This framework has since been expanded to explore how families and communities support students' academic success, particularly among underrepresented student groups (Moll et al., 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005). Funds of knowledge encompass a broad array of knowledge, skills, competencies, and community resources that households acquire through social interactions. These include aspects such as household language, educational values, sociohistorical labor practices, and household routines (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011).

By emphasizing the exchange and transformation of knowledge and skills within social networks, the funds of knowledge framework challenges deficit perspectives that blame academic underachievement on students' households and communities (Hogg, 2010). Research using this framework has shown how teachers can incorporate students' funds of knowledge into curriculum design and pedagogical practices to create culturally responsive and relevant learning experiences (Andrews & Yee, 2006; Gonzalez, 2005; González et al., 2019; Paris & Alim, 2017). Moreover, the application of funds of knowledge has been extended to examine transitions to college among underrepresented student groups, exploring how these funds, when connected to social capital and

community interactions, influence college aspirations and educational outcomes (Bensimon, 2007; Kiyama, 2010; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012; Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2017).

In this study, we adopt a theoretical framework that integrates cultural and social capital with funds of knowledge. According to Rios-Aguilar et al. (2011), combining different forms of capital with funds of knowledge can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the educational attainment of underrepresented student populations. Relying solely on a singular capital perspective risks perpetuating the privilege of dominant groups and fostering a have-or-have-not mentality regarding capital resources. Additionally, focusing exclusively on the funds of knowledge embedded in households may overlook the power dynamics and educational structures that influence educational opportunities and access for underrepresented students.

By integrating funds of knowledge with various forms of capital, our research aims to provide deeper insights into the factors influencing the college aspirations and educational trajectories of rural youth. This approach allows us to explore how students and their families navigate the educational landscape and identify potential opportunities for fostering more equitable educational outcomes. Our goal is to offer a nuanced understanding of how students' college aspirations and educational trajectories may diverge, emphasizing the critical role of funds of knowledge in shaping their educational journeys. Furthermore, this approach addresses systemic inequities by challenging deficit perspectives and recognizing the valuable contributions of minoritized students.

Methods

This study employed a longitudinal qualitative case study design to investigate the college selection process of rural high school students. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex and evolving factors that influence students' educational trajectories over time. By focusing on a single rural high school, the case study method enables a detailed examination of the intersection of race, family, and community in shaping students' postsecondary aspirations.

Research Site: Sadie Foster High School

Sadie Foster High School (pseudonym) was selected as the research site due to its unique demographic and socio-economic characteristics, which make it representative of the broader challenges faced by rural schools, particularly those serving racially minoritized students. Located in a small rural city in the mid-Atlantic region, Sadie Foster High School serves a predominantly Black student population (63.9%) within a district that is among the 30 poorest communities in the state. The school's demographic profile, combined with the challenges associated with rural education—such as geographic isolation, economic scarcity, and limited access to resources—mirrors trends observed in rural schools across the United States, making the findings relevant to similar rural settings nationwide.

Student Body and Socioeconomic Indicators

The student body at Sadie Foster High School ranges from 350 to 400 students annually, with Black students constituting 48.9%, White students 32.2%, and Latino students 16.5%. Approximately 20% of the students have disabilities, and 44.4% qualify for free lunch, highlighting the economic challenges faced by many families.

Academic Track and Achievement

Sadie Foster High School's academic programs are notably divided along racial lines, with White students predominantly enrolled in the Honors and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, while Black students are more frequently placed in the College Preparatory track. This division becomes evident as students enter ninth grade, reflecting broader systemic issues within the school's academic placement processes.

Participant Selection Criteria

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of the student body and school staff, focusing on those directly involved in the college selection process. This sampling method was chosen because it allows for the intentional selection of individuals who can provide rich, relevant data that align with the study's objectives.

Nine students were selected to capture a range of experiences across different racial backgrounds, academic tracks, and achievement levels. The sample included both black ($n = 4$) and white ($n = 5$) students, ranging from ninth to eleventh grade (ages 14-17). This selection reflects the racial diversity of the school and includes students at various stages of their high school careers. Additionally, students from both the College Preparatory and Honors/IB programs were included to capture differences in academic experiences and postsecondary aspirations. The inclusion of students with varying academic performance, from high achievers to those with lower academic standing, provides a comprehensive view of the factors influencing college aspirations.

Three guidance counselors were selected based on their roles in advising students on academic and college-related matters. The counselors were chosen to represent different levels of experience and interaction with the student body, ensuring a broad perspective on the guidance process at Sadie Foster High School. Their insights were critical for understanding how institutional practices and counselor-student interactions influence the college selection process.

Representation of the Larger Student Body

The selected participants are representative of the broader student population at Sadie Foster High School in terms of racial demographics, academic tracking, and socio-economic status. This purposive sampling approach allows for an exploration of the varied experiences of students within the school, providing a nuanced understanding of how these factors intersect to shape college aspirations.

Data Collection

Data were collected over three years using multiple methods to capture a comprehensive view of the college selection process at Sadie Foster High School. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed for the observation of changes and developments over time, providing a deeper understanding of the factors influencing students' postsecondary trajectories.

Focus group interviews were conducted with students to explore their experiences and perceptions regarding the college selection process. These interviews provided a platform for students to discuss their aspirations, challenges, and the role of their families and communities in their educational journeys.

Individual interviews were conducted with guidance counselors and the school principal to gain insights into the institutional practices that shape students' college choices. These interviews allowed for a more detailed exploration of how school policies and counselor practices impact different student groups.

The study also involved the analysis of school data, report cards, and internal school documents. This method provided objective data on academic performance, enrollment in advanced courses, and postsecondary outcomes, which were used to triangulate findings from the interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic coding, a method that allows for the identification of patterns and themes across the data. The process involved multiple readings of the transcripts and documents to ensure a thorough understanding of the material. Coding was conducted with the aid of HyperResearch software, which facilitated the organization and analysis of the data.

Thirty coding categories emerged from the data, reflecting various aspects of the college choice process, including perceptions of counselor influence, parental impact, and individual strategies for navigating postsecondary education. Each participant's data were initially treated as a distinct case, contributing to rich narrative accounts of their experiences. Subsequently, codes were clustered into broader categories, with less frequent themes either merged or discarded to focus on the most salient issues.

Ensuring Quality and Rigor

To ensure the quality and rigor of the data analysis, the study employed qualitative criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and peer debriefing to minimize researcher bias. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research site and context, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other settings. Dependability and confirmability were achieved through careful documentation of the research process and maintaining an audit trail of decisions made during data collection and analysis.

Limitations

While the selected school is representative of certain rural contexts, the unique demographic and socio-economic characteristics of Sadie Foster High School may not fully capture the diversity of experiences in other rural settings across the country. Future research could benefit from including multiple schools in different geographic regions to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

The purposive sampling method, while effective for capturing in-depth perspectives, resulted in a relatively small sample size. With only nine students and three guidance counselors participating, the study may not reflect the full spectrum of experiences within the school. A larger sample could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing college aspirations among rural youth.

The data were collected over a three-year period, which provides valuable longitudinal insights but may also limit the study's relevance over time. Educational policies, economic conditions, and community dynamics can change, potentially altering the factors that influence college aspirations. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the specific temporal context in which the study was conducted.

While the study explored familial and community influences, it primarily focused on academic and institutional factors within the school setting. Other external factors, such as state and federal education policies, local labor market conditions, or broader societal influences, were not extensively examined but could play a significant role in shaping students' postsecondary trajectories. Including these factors in future research could provide a more holistic understanding of the barriers and opportunities facing rural students.

The study relied heavily on self-reported data from students and counselors, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability or recall bias. Participants might have provided responses that they believed were expected or may have had difficulty accurately recalling past experiences. Triangulating self-reported data with additional sources, such as observational data or more extensive document analysis, could strengthen the study's findings.

While the study focused on racial disparities and the experiences of both white students and students of color, it may not fully capture the cultural nuances and intersectional identities within these groups. For example, the experiences of Latino students were included but not deeply explored due to their smaller representation in the sample. Future research could delve deeper into the specific cultural and racial dynamics that influence educational outcomes for different groups within rural settings.

Findings

Undertone of Structured Racial Practices in Academic Placement

The findings of this study reveal an underlying pattern of structured racial practices within the academic placement processes at Sadie Foster High School. This section explores how these practices, which manifest through academic tracking systems and enrollment in advanced programs, contribute to disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes for students based on their race.

Upon entry to Sadie Foster High School, students were placed into either “honors” or “academic preparation” track unless they were inclined to pursue a vocational training. The undertone of structured racial practices within the office of guidance counseling in Sadie Foster high school seemed to significantly impact Sadie Foster High School students’ postsecondary aspirations. Racially marginalized students may face limited access to resources and opportunities, lowered expectations, and insufficient support in navigating the college application process. However, students in the honors class or IB program started their college search process as early as their first year in high school.

Sadie Foster High School received incoming freshmen from four neighboring middle schools within the district. One school was in the city of Sadie Foster and the other three schools were in small rural towns surrounding Sadie Foster. The majority of black students came directly from Sadie Foster Middle School, while the majority of the white students came from the three rural towns in the district. The student population at Sadie Foster High School consistently precipitated over the past couple of years because of the school choice program that allowed approved districts to enroll students outside of the district at no cost to parents. The negative reputation of the city of Sadie Foster became the factor influencing why white parents from the rural sending districts were reluctant to send their children to Sadie Foster High School. The counselors talked about a percentage of white students who were supposed to attend Sadie Foster High School, but the parents decided on other school options because of the reputation of the city and the perceived lack of academic quality of the school. Hazel stated:

Although Sadie Foster is a predominantly Black city, our sending districts are predominantly White; so, at one time the Black population was the minority here. The changes started with the academies, choice, and all of the other stuff...we call it *White flight*. It started with folks trying to go to the vo-tech school; and as the opportunities opened, they could go to more high schools where the diversity wasn’t as great.

The perceived image of Sadie Foster High School as academically low performing school was exacerbated by the school safety issue. Paris explained:

There was a gun issue years ago; a student brought a gun in the school...and of course that had made the paper. Since then, we have boosted up security; we have a resource officer that is a certified police officer. We also have a retired state trooper as a security officer at our front door now, so there is no reason...we have heard rumors that people think that it is not safe here, and that's not the case.

Sadie Foster High School's guidance counselors visited the four middle schools in the district near the end of each school year to register students for their ninth-grade classes. These students were either placed in College Preparatory (no GPA or test score requirements) or Honors (the students must have A's and B's in all their classes and score Advanced Proficient on at least one section of the State examination). The students in the Honors cohort were allowed to enter the IB program for their junior and senior year.

However, there are a disproportionate number of white students who were placed into the *upper level classes* compared to black students at Sadie Foster, primarily because of the test score requirements and the aggressive tactics used by White parents to get their children into the program. White parents also advocated to have their children in the Honors/IB classes to segregate them from students who came from the city of Sadie Foster. Hazel continued, "A lot of times the kids [White] were in the upper level courses because parents felt that there will be less diversity in those classes." Paris also explained that white parents had the perception that students in the College Preparatory classes were less motivated to succeed, so they would advocate to make sure their children were in the Honors/IB program even if they did not meet the academic criteria for the program. The College Prep classes were not for college-bound students; these classes were just ordinary students who were neither on vocational education track nor on college track:

So their kids [White] would be separated in those classes [Honors] from those kids [Black] that were in general classes, because the kids in general are lower...and not as focused; teachers don't work as hard, and the whole nine yards. So, we said, 'If a kid wants to be in Honors, they have to work on that level,' and we have had kids in the middle schools that teachers recommended them for College Preparatory, but the kid wanted honors. We tell them and the parents, 'We will let them take a shot at it...we will put them in even before the test scores come back, but if they find that they cannot hang, we are going to take them out.'

While Sadie Foster had cutoff criteria for enrolling students in Honors or IB courses, white parents often advocated for their children to be placed in these courses regardless of meeting the cutoff. Hazel stated:

We can't tell a student not to take AP or Honors...but if a parent's child didn't make the test cutoff, a parent can say, 'I still want my child to take Honors,' and say, 'The student has all A's and B's and one C.' The parent will argue with principal and say, 'I don't care if my child didn't make the cutoff,' and he will say, 'If you think your child can handle the work,' and he will let them do it because guess what? ... the bottom line is it is their child. The parents argue that 'Yes, my child had a C,' and I've seen it where he let the parents win.

Principals may concede to these requests if parents strongly believed their child could handle the coursework, highlighting that parents ultimately had significant influence over their child's educational placement.

The tracking system and enrollment disparities in advanced programs revealed how institutional practices can perpetuate racial inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes at Sadie Foster. Sadie Foster High School manifested the insidious ways in which racial biases and structured racial practices can permeate process, perpetuating disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes.

Mediating Role of Guidance Counselors

Guidance counselors at Sadie Foster High School played a crucial role as mediators between students, families, and the school system. Their practices and interactions with students and parents differed based on race, highlighting the complex dynamics at play in the guidance counseling process. As potential gatekeepers, guidance counselors incorporated students' and families' knowledge into their guidance practices, which significantly fostered students' college aspirations. However, they rarely engaged in constructive dialogues with Black parents regarding their children's college aspirations or plans. Consequently, guidance counselors may find themselves compelled to reinforce dominant schooling practices that tend to favor White students' and families' demands.

White students entered Sadie Foster High School with a significant advantage, having had access to valuable 'Funds of Knowledge' during their middle school years. Funds of Knowledge refers to the knowledge, skills, and resources that students accumulate through their interactions with teachers, counselors, and administrators. These interactions provided White students with a clear understanding of the process to gain acceptance into the Honors/IP program at Sadie Foster High School.

Middle school teachers and counselors encouraged white students to take advanced academic courses based on their benchmark scores on state examinations. This knowledge allowed white students to strategically plan their high school coursework, such as opting out of or doubling up on certain classes, to better position themselves for acceptance into the IB program and advanced placement (AP) courses, ultimately increasing their chances of admission to four-year colleges. Student J, a White student, explained her plan to take advanced classes in high school:

I took Algebra I in eighth grade, cuz you had like, if you scored a really high score on the Seventh Grade New Jersey Ask Test, then you get the option to take Algebra I in eighth grade. So I took that.

Student A echoed the Student J's comments, "At my old school the teachers always took an interest in their students, ... my teachers [middle school] they would say, 'We are going to put you in this enrichment program.'"

In contrast, black students entering Sadie Foster High School were not advised by their middle school teachers and counselors to take advanced academic courses or put into enrichment

programs as a strategy to enhance their chances of entering the Honors/IB program. As a result, the majority of black students were placed in the less academically rigorous College Prep track. Some high-achieving black students did benefit from “Multicultural Navigators,” individuals who helped them navigate the Honors/IB and college-choice process. However, for many black students, this support came too late to significantly impact their chances of being accepted into the Honors/IB track. Student G said:

I’ll have to agree with her that academics, the rates at this school [Sadie Foster High School] is different districts coming to this school and like Seminole Middle School [rural district] would be on a different level than Sadie Foster for middle school level. Like we learn different things, like we are on different levels when we come to this school and it’s hard to combine all the students in one school, like somebody could be on like eighth grade level and then there is one student could be on tenth grade level and it’s hard to combine all these together.

Guidance Counselors at Sadie Foster High School faced numerous challenges in their daily work, including a heavy emphasis on helping struggling students graduate, which often took precedence over college counseling and other responsibilities. This focus, mandated by the school superintendent, left little time for counselors to provide targeted support to middle- and high-achieving students. Hazel lamented:

The students get multiple opportunities, as many times as they want to start over and get it done...the teachers, principal, and superintendent will work with them. I have found that we have to exhaust every possibility because if you don’t, that one parent will come back and say, ‘You didn’t do this.’ The students are told to ‘go around and see your teachers, get your work,’ and we will let them try it. Some of the teachers might get mad, but they give them all of the work and the kid might come another two weeks and work for another two weeks. The same pattern happens because they just can’t keep it up; the pattern starts over.

The findings in this section underscore the critical role that guidance counselors play in shaping students’ educational trajectories and college aspirations. The disparities in guidance counselors’ practices and interactions with students and parents based on race emphasize the need for culturally responsive and equity-focused approaches to school counseling. Addressing racial disparities in education requires not only examining institutional structures but also supporting guidance counselors in developing the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively serve diverse student populations and promote equitable outcomes.

Ultimately, the experiences and challenges faced by guidance counselors at Sadie Foster High School highlight the urgent need for systemic changes in school counseling practices to ensure that all students, regardless of race, have access to the support, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive academically and pursue their college aspirations.

Student-Teacher Relationships and Academic Support

The quality of student-teacher relationships and the level of academic support students receive play a crucial role in shaping their educational experiences and postsecondary aspirations. At Sadie Foster High School, these relationships were significantly influenced by the students' race and academic track. White students in the Honors and IB programs reported having close, supportive relationships with their predominantly white teachers. These students felt comfortable discussing their college plans and career options with their teachers who provided personalized guidance and encouragement. Student A, a white student in the Honors program, expressed her appreciation for the personal interest her teachers took in her future:

I like it when teachers take a personal interest and when they kind of expect things of me, because it makes me feel like I am not just another student or they are actually caring about what I am doing in my future.

This level of support and individualized attention from teachers was less evident among black students, particularly those in the College Preparatory program. These students often reported a lack of cultural connection with their white teachers, which hindered the development of strong, supportive relationships. Student B, a black student, described the cultural disconnect she experienced with her teachers:

Sometimes, it does [matter if a teacher is White or Black]. Because I haven't had an black teacher since in the middle school, and in high school, it's like a little different. I feel, sometimes more comfortable [with an Black teacher] because it is somebody that's culturally, it's like *connection*.

The disparities in student-teacher relationships and academic support across racial lines and academic tracks had significant implications for students' educational experiences and postsecondary aspirations. White students in the Honors and IB programs benefited from strong, supportive relationships with teachers who actively encouraged their pursuit of higher education and provided guidance throughout the college choice process. In contrast, black students, particularly those in the College Preparatory program, often lacked access to the same level of support and guidance from their teachers, which may have limited their exposure to postsecondary options and hindered their college choice process.

Student-Counselor Interactions and College Guidance

Guidance counselors play a vital role in providing students with information, support, and guidance throughout the college choice process. At Sadie Foster High School, the nature and frequency of student-counselor interactions varied significantly based on students' race and academic track. Black students, particularly those in the College Preparatory program, reported having more frequent and positive interactions with guidance counselors compared to their white counterparts in the Honors and IB programs.

Student G, a black student, described how her guidance counselor regularly monitored her academic progress and steps in the college application process:

Well, my guidance counselor is always on me, he'll call me down, talk to me about my grades, tell me what I need to take. I need to take my SATs on Saturday, he called me down for that...making sure I have my papers in on time, like my grade is low, he calls me down, he's like, you should fix this. You could do better at that.

In contrast, white students in the Honors and IB programs expressed less reliance on guidance counselors for college information and support. These students often felt self-sufficient in their academic journey and only sought assistance from counselors for administrative tasks, such as scheduling classes. Student J, a white student in the Honors program, explained her limited interactions with her assigned guidance counselor, "I usually don't go to the Guidance office a lot because I don't really need guidance. But I only, I usually only go if they call me down or if I need to schedule classes."

Black students, particularly those in the College Preparatory program, benefited from the individualized attention and support provided by guidance counselors, which helped them navigate the complex college choice process. However, the limited engagement of white students in the Honors and IB programs with guidance counselors may have resulted in missed opportunities for additional support and guidance, especially for those who may have needed more assistance in navigating the college choice process.

Parents' Role During the College Choice Process

The guidance counselors described their interaction with parents and how the parents' relationship with the school was often established along racial lines. The guidance counselors pointed out that advocacy was important to parent involvement for their children to succeed academically and navigate the college choice process.

White parents were often described as aggressive advocates for their children to be in the Honors program, which in turn led to acceptance into the IB program during the student's junior year. In some cases, the white students were not academically qualified to be in the program, but the parents understood that by visiting the school and speaking with the school administration including principal, their child had a better chance of being put into the Honors program. For example, Tom stated:

To me it's interesting; we have parents that are all the way overbearing, and we have the ones you never meet no matter what. I would say there is a difference... with the non-minority, there is definitely more involvement it seems. I have some parents from the sending districts [White rural areas] that I just see them all the time.

The counselors commented that white students in the school were willing to take more rigorous courses and want to be in the Honors and IB program because their parents worked vigorously to make sure the students were in the "upper level" programs. These parents believed that the college preparatory program did not adequately prepare students for college-level work such as a drop-off in the curriculum and a lower quality of teaching. The parents also understood that the students need to be exposed to the best curriculum the school provides to be adequately prepared for college admission and academic achievement.

On the other hand, black parents were not described by the Sadie Foster guidance counselors as proactive advocates for their children to gain acceptance into the Honors and IB programs. Tom said, “When we see black students’ parents, it is normally because of a problem. Some of the parents of the city kids you just can’t get them to come in here [school]...well, for regular things anyway...just discipline or attendance issues,” Tom explained the challenges of getting responses from parents despite offering numerous informational events. Paris described a different approach to working with black parents who would not come to the school:

I live in the community so I know some of the families and some I don’t. I try to meet as many of the families as possible and try to get phone numbers. If I see parents at a basketball game or out in the community, I try to introduce myself because...a lot of them don’t come to the school, so if I see them, I try to build a relationship and communicate with the parents. I mention positive news like if their child makes the honor roll.

There was a sense of distrust and antipathy towards the Guidance Department and school officials within the black community in Sadie Foster. This was illustrated by an incident where a highly qualified black student was discouraged by her parent from enrolling in advanced courses due to a lack of trust in the school’s intentions, despite the counselor’s insistence on the student’s academic potential. The Director of Guidance ultimately instructed the counselor to comply with the parent’s wishes, highlighting the ongoing challenges in building trust with the community. The Director of Guidance came over to me and said, “You can’t argue with the parent...if she wants her daughter to be scheduled in general classes...schedule her in general classes.”

The counselors described a process of working in conjunction with the teachers in the school to create an open dialogue with black parents to make sure their children were being scheduled in the best classes that match the student’s ability. The parents were reluctant to have their children take courses that will negatively impact their GPA, although four-year colleges and universities use additional factors (SAT/ACT scores, class rank) to determine acceptances and academic scholarship awards. In describing black students’ desire to go to college, Hazel stated:

I see now that more black students are taking more challenging courses, but what I do find in Sadie Foster...our kids aspire to go to school, and even when failing...when I call them in because they are failing and I ask what do you want to do, they say, ‘I want to go to college.

Despite struggling academically or parental discouragement, many of these students still expressed a strong desire to attend college when asked about their future aspirations. The significant role that parental involvement and advocacy play in shaping students’ academic experiences and college choice processes at Sadie Foster High School. The differences in parents’ engagement with the school and navigation of the college choice process based on race and socioeconomic background underscore the need for more equitable and inclusive approaches to parental engagement and support.

Parental and Community Support

Parental involvement and advocacy play a significant role in shaping students' academic experiences and college choice processes. This theme explores how parents at Sadie Foster High School engaged with the school and navigated the college choice process, and how their involvement and advocacy differed based on race and socioeconomic background. The parents from the rural communities surrounding Sadie Foster seemed to have a shared value and understanding of the importance of education regardless of the income level of the household. Low-income parents were able to interact with aspirational or professional leaders (church, middle school officials, and business leaders) in the community to fill any gaps or questions about the college choice process. Student C's parents did not attend college, but they were able to learn about postsecondary opportunities for her through social networks and the experiences of other parents in the community whose children recently went through the college choice process. Student C explained that her parents pushed her to succeed academically and to pursue post-secondary education because they were not able to.

My dad never went to college, so that's another reason why he wants me to go, because neither of my parents went to college because my mom got pregnant when she was sixteen, so she didn't have the chance. Like she wanted to be a lawyer, but she never got the chance and my dad's now a truck driver... It motivated me to go to college so that I can get a better job, get a better education.

Parents in the rural communities shared information on school choice, the importance of the Honors and IB curriculum for college preparedness, college savings plans, etc., regardless of socioeconomic status and provided opportunities for students to gain career exposure. In addition, when students who graduated from high school came back into the communities from college, they shared information about college workloads, living on campus, and choosing a major. Student A's future career plan was to become veterinarian, and she recalled volunteering at a local veterinary's office to gain exposure to the field, "The veterinary influences would be having [access] to the animals and going to the vet's office and actually becoming friends with them."

Student J, whose mother is a pathologist at a local hospital, explained how she has shadowed doctors to gain exposure to the medical field, "I know that like my mom, a couple of times like, they have this like the shadowing program at the hospital [where] she works. So, like I have gone and shadowed doctors before, just to make sure that's I want to do when I grow up."

Black parents highly value education, but there is a fundamental difference in how white parents utilize various forms of capital and knowledge to help their children access advanced classes, enrichment programs, and experiential experiences in order to further their educational opportunities. The oppositional cultural position of many black parents in the study transcends into not advocating for their children to go into the Sadie Foster High School in the Honors/IB program even if they were academically qualified for such programs. The parents do not fully trust that the school officials in the high school have their children's "best interests at heart." Student B, a black Honors student, explained why she thought her friends at the middle school did not continue in the Honors program once they entered high school:

I'm the, me and one other girl in my history class are like the only blacks and we have about 15 in there [class]. She went on to explain that continuing in the Honors program in high school was mandated by her mother, and maybe some of the other students in the Honors program in the middle school did not have a parent to force them to enter the Honors program whether they wanted to or not.

In summary, black parents recognized the importance of a college education for their children and often motivated them to pursue higher education. Yet, black parents did not utilize different forms of capital and funds of knowledge (i.e., school choice option, the importance of the Honors and IB curriculum for college preparedness, college savings plans or provide opportunities for career exposure), as their white counterparts, to strategically influence the college aspirations and educational trajectories of their children.

The theme emphasizes the importance of parental and community support in shaping students' educational aspirations and opportunities in the rural areas surrounding Sadie Foster High School. The differences in the levels and types of support available to students based on their race and socioeconomic background highlight the need for more equitable and inclusive approaches to parental and community engagement.

Discussion and Implications

This study sheds light on the complex interplay of institutional practices, parental involvement, and community support in shaping the college aspirations and experiences of rural students at Sadie Foster High School, with particular attention to racial disparities. The findings highlight the persistence of systemic inequalities within the school system and offer significant contributions to the existing literature on rural education, educational equity, and racial disparities. The study's findings reveal that academic placement at Sadie Foster High School is influenced by structured racial practices that disproportionately favor White students while disadvantaging Black students. This segregation within academic tracks aligns with prior research indicating that tracking systems often reinforce existing racial and socio-economic inequalities (Oakes, 2005; Tyson, 2011). Oakes (2005) argues that tracking perpetuates educational inequities by limiting access to rigorous coursework for students of color, thereby restricting their opportunities for college preparation and success.

The reliance on parental advocacy in determining academic placement at Sadie Foster High School reflects a broader trend observed in educational systems across the United States, where students from privileged backgrounds have greater access to resources that enhance their academic trajectories (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). This study contributes to the literature by providing a case study that exemplifies how these dynamics play out in a rural setting, where geographic isolation and economic scarcity further exacerbate educational disparities.

The findings underscore the need to reevaluate academic placement policies, as recommended by scholars such as Burris and Garrity (2008), who advocate for more equitable practices that recognize the diverse abilities of all students. Implementing holistic assessment criteria that go beyond standardized tests is essential for disrupting the cycle of disadvantage and ensuring that students of color have equal access to advanced academic opportunities.

The differences in parental involvement and advocacy based on race and socioeconomic background are significant findings of this study, aligning with existing literature on the role of cultural and social capital in shaping students' educational experiences and college choice processes (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Bourdieu (1986) introduced the concept of cultural capital, referring to the non-economic assets—such as education, intellect, and style of speech—that can influence an individual's social mobility. Similarly, Coleman (1988) emphasized the importance of social capital, which includes the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.

This study extends the concept of “funds of knowledge” (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) by demonstrating how White parents at Sadie Foster High School were able to effectively utilize their cultural and social capital to advocate for their children's placement in advanced and more rigorous classes. These parents drew upon various forms of capital and knowledge, such as familiarity with the school system, connections with school staff, and an understanding of how to navigate institutional structures, to ensure their children received favorable academic placements. This aligns with Lareau's (2011) findings that middle-class parents, often possessing more cultural and social capital, are better positioned to intervene in their children's education, compared to working-class parents.

In contrast, black parents faced significant challenges in advocating for their children's educational opportunities, often due to institutional barriers and cultural discontinuities. These parents, while equally invested in their children's success, frequently encountered a lack of access to the same forms of capital that their white counterparts could leverage. For instance, they may have lacked the social connections within the school system or the institutional knowledge needed to effectively navigate the academic placement process. This finding is consistent with research by Lareau and Horvat (1999), who observed that parents from marginalized backgrounds often face systemic barriers that limit their ability to advocate for their children within educational institutions.

The study's findings contribute to a broader understanding of how cultural and social capital, as well as funds of knowledge, operate within rural school settings. They highlight the need for schools to recognize and address these disparities in parental involvement and advocacy. Schools should consider implementing programs that actively engage and empower all parents, particularly those from marginalized communities, by providing them with the tools and knowledge needed to advocate effectively for their children. Such initiatives could include parent education workshops, outreach programs, and the creation of parent advisory committees that ensure diverse voices are heard in decision-making processes.

Guidance counselors at Sadie Foster High School play a crucial role in shaping students' college aspirations, yet the study reveals significant disparities in the support provided to students based on race. This finding aligns with Carter's (2005) concept of “multicultural navigators,” individuals who help students from minoritized groups navigate educational environments that may not inherently promote their success. The study expands on this concept by illustrating how the absence of culturally responsive counseling practices can hinder the college aspirations of Black students in rural settings.

The discrepancy in support between white students in the Honors/IB programs and black students in the college preparatory track echoes findings from Griffin, Hutchins, and Meece (2011), who observed that Black and Hispanic students in rural areas are more likely to rely on teachers and community figures for guidance, yet often receive less individualized attention from school counselors. This study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the need for equitable counseling practices in rural schools, where access to postsecondary opportunities is already limited by geographic and socio-economic factors.

The findings support the call for culturally responsive counseling practices, as advocated by King (2010) and Grothaus et al. (2012), who emphasize the importance of providing guidance that addresses the specific needs of students of color. Schools should invest in professional development for counselors to equip them with the skills necessary to support all students equitably, ensuring that racial disparities in college access are addressed.

The study reveals that student-teacher relationships are a critical factor influencing students' academic engagement and postsecondary aspirations, with significant differences based on race. White students in the Honors/IB programs benefit from supportive relationships with their teachers, which aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of positive student-teacher interactions in fostering academic success and college aspirations (Wentzel, 1997; Goodenow, 1993). These findings contribute to the literature by providing evidence that such supportive relationships are less accessible to Black students, particularly in rural settings.

Conversely, the cultural disconnect experienced by Black students with their predominantly White teachers reflects findings by Howard (2001) and Ladson-Billings (1995), who argue that cultural competence among educators is crucial for creating inclusive learning environments. The study adds to this body of work by illustrating how the lack of cultural competence in rural schools can lead to a sense of alienation among students of color, undermining their educational outcomes and aspirations.

The findings underscore the need for schools to prioritize the recruitment and retention of a diverse teaching staff, as suggested by Villegas and Irvine (2010), and to invest in professional development focused on cultural competence. By fostering stronger, more supportive relationships between teachers and students, schools can create environments where all students feel valued and motivated to pursue higher education.

This study contributes to the broader literature on educational equity and rural education by providing a detailed examination of how race, family, and community intersect to shape the educational trajectories of rural students. The findings align with and extend previous research on the systemic nature of educational inequalities, offering new insights into how these dynamics manifest in rural settings. By focusing on a rural high school with a diverse student population, the study fills a gap in the literature, which has often overlooked the unique challenges faced by rural students of color (Corbett, 2007; Tieken, 2014).

The study's emphasis on the role of structured racial practices, guidance counselors, student-teacher relationships, and parental involvement provides a comprehensive understanding

of the barriers to college access for rural students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. This holistic approach contributes to the literature by highlighting the importance of considering both institutional and relational factors in addressing educational disparities.

Conclusion

This study explored how race, family, and community influence the college aspirations of rural students at Sadie Foster High School. The findings highlight the need for rural schools to reform academic placement practices to ensure equitable access to rigorous coursework and college preparation resources, regardless of students' racial or socio-economic background. Addressing racial biases in these practices is crucial for fostering an inclusive educational environment.

Additionally, the study underscores the importance of involving parents and communities in the educational process. Building trust with underrepresented families and equipping them with the necessary tools to advocate for their children can enhance educational outcomes. By implementing these changes, rural schools can better support the college aspirations of all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.

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