Abstract

This qualitative study examined the college pathways of mostly working-class immigrant-origin youth of color (Black, East Asian, Latino/a) in New York City. Using a thematic analysis approach with Bridging Multiple Worlds Theory and social capital theory as guiding conceptual frameworks, we examined facilitators and barriers that working-class immigrant-origin youth of color encountered in different worlds (, family, school, peers, and community programs) in their college pathways. In our study, most students received emotional but not instrumental support from their parents, notably that their parents wanted them to be happy and pursue a degree that would lead to non-blue-collar work. Students received emotional and instrumental guidance from school staff and many students received help from, and in return helped, their peers. Students who had access to community programs and external resources found them to be helpful in receiving feedback on application materials and perspectives about different career paths. Students also discussed barriers, including family circumstances and immigration status, that hindered their college pathways. We discuss similarities and differences in facilitators and barriers that different racial groups experienced, as well as contributions to literature and implications for removing barriers for immigrant-origin youth of color.

Keywords: immigrant-origin students, college pathways, working-class background college students, youth of color, bridging multiple worlds theory

Facilitators and Barriers in the College Pathways of Working-Class Immigrant-Origin Youth of Color in New York City

Since the Immigration Act of 1965 lifted restrictions on immigration from non-European countries, the number of immigrant-origin children of color in the United States has increased with an influx of immigrants from across Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America (Reimers, 1983). Because many immigrant-origin youth of color face unique challenges arising from their intersectional identities based on their race, ethnicity, and nationality, it is important to understand how these youth navigate a complex, inequitable, and unfamiliar educational landscape (Borrero et al., 2013; Marks et al., 2021). Many immigrant families of color are also from lower socioeconomic class backgrounds, creating additional stressors for immigrant-origin youth of color arising through financial instability and lack of parental educational attainment (Kremer & House, 2020; Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2003; Tienda & Haskins, 2011). Despite the growing number of immigrant-origin students from diverse backgrounds, there is little research comparing the narratives of different working-class immigrant-origin youth who face challenges based on their intersecting marginalized identities. A better understanding of college pathways (i.e., how students and families navigate the education system toward college) for this population is needed given that higher education has been shown to be a pathway to upward mobility in the United States (Espinosa et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2016).

The present research uses a thematic analysis approach to explore how urban working-class immigrant youth from three racialized minority groups (Black, East Asian, Latino/a) in New York City navigate their pathways to college[1]. Specifically, we use the Bridging the

[1] Although there is vast heterogeneity within each racial group (e.g., ethnicity, immigration status, social class, home language, urbanity), past studies and reviews have referred to immigrant students of color by broad racial

Multiple Worlds Theory (BMWT; Cooper, 1999, 2011; and Cooper et al., 2012) and social capital theory as conceptual frameworks to understand facilitators and barriers that immigrant youth of color encounter in their different "worlds" throughout their college pathways. Based on our analysis using BMWT, we discuss potential barriers and make recommendations for how to mitigate them.

Educational Attainment as a Crucial Factor for Upward Mobility

Higher education continues to be a pathway to upward mobility in the United States, as college graduates tend to earn more than those without a bachelor's degree (Ma et al., 2016). Immigrant-origin youth—those who immigrated as a child or were born in the United States and raised by immigrant parents—are increasingly pursuing higher education. In 2018, immigrant-origin youth made up 28 percent of the 19 million college and university students in the United States. Notably, immigrant-origin youth also accounted for 58% of the growth in postsecondary education between 2000 and 2018 (Batalova & Feldum, 2020). Students pursuing postsecondary education are a diverse group, and it is estimated that 85% of Asian and Pacific Islander college students, 66% of Hispanic and/or Latino/a college students, and 24% of Black college students come from first or second-generation immigrant backgrounds (Batalova & Feldum, 2020).

Although there are encouraging trends toward greater participation in postsecondary education among immigrant-origin students, college attendance varies by race, country of origin, socioeconomic status, and the physical and social contexts in which these students live (Baum & Flores, 2011). For example, it is estimated that only 31% of Asian immigrant-origin students, 10% of Black immigrant-origin students, and 9% of Hispanic/Latino immigrant-origin students

groups. We also note that the vast majority of the studies on Asian American students refer to East Asian students (e.g., Chinese, Korean), with a smaller set of studies on Southeast Asian groups (e.g., Vietnamese, Filipino). We note the ethnicity in past literature when available.

complete college degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). These rates are much lower compared to the overall 64% of college graduation rate in 2020 for those entering college in 2014 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

To explain these differences in college degree completion rates, it is important to consider structural barriers that disparage immigrant students and their families. Many immigrant families who are low-income or working-class face additional stressors that can hinder student outcomes (i.e., lack of financial resources and time) (Baum & Flores, 2011). This may incentivize students to work for income to support their families' immediate material needs rather than pursuing college, which often requires extensive financial resources (Sy & Romero, 2008). In addition, many immigrant caregivers lack familiarity with the U.S. education system. Although this could be remedied through a school's outreach efforts, many schools do not have the linguistic resources to support multilingual families (Lee et al., 2012; Stella et al., 2005). Past research on college pathways attended to parental involvement as a critical point of divergence across race and class as parents can often act as a resource, or social capital, for their children (Kao, 2004). However, due to systemic barriers associated with the process of immigration and acculturation, immigrant parents, particularly those who are working-class, lack much of this social capital (Kreisberg & Hsin, 2021; Mishra, 2020)

Social Capital and Parental Involvement in College Pathways

Social capital theory (Acar, 2011; Coleman, 1988) can be used to understand why parental involvement is important for children's educational attainment. Social capital, defined as any structures and actors that promote society to function (Coleman, 1988), can lead to better educational outcomes (Acar, 2011; Coleman, 1998). Children who are afforded higher social capital by their parents (i.e., whose parents can devote more time and attention to them) tend to

attain higher education at higher rates (Coleman, 1988). Social capital often works in tandem with human capital within the family (i.e., parents' education.) This theoretical perspective is consistent with empirical findings that parental involvement is one of the most important driving forces in shaping the educational achievements and college attainment of immigrant-origin youth (Liu & White, 2017). Parental involvement is a wide-ranging construct that encompasses not only school involvement but also having conversations with children about college and providing instrumental and emotional support and guidance around their education (Kao, 2004).

However, studies examining parental involvement (e.g., supporting extracurricular activities, attending parent-teacher association meetings) have focused primarily on middle-class families (see Bower & Griffin, 2011; Love et al., 2021). This, in turn, excludes the experiences of working-class immigrant parents who often do not have the lived knowledge nor an understanding of the U.S. educational system (i.e., social capital and human capital) to provide support. Then, social capital theory and parental involvement alone may not be adept at explaining why some working-class immigrant youth of color succeed in their college pathways *despite* the lack of family social capital. Yosso (2005)'s community cultural wealth model points to other sources of capital that can help explain the success for marginalized students, including immigrant-origin students. Especially, the ability to maintain hopes despite hardships (aspirational capital) and the ability to resist inequality as marginalized students (resistance capital) are relevant in our study. In addition, students exist not only in the sphere of their families but also school and communities, allowing them the opportunity to draw upon capital from these sources.

In this study, we sought to understand college pathways of mostly working-class immigrant-origin youth of color above and beyond family involvement. Specifically, we

examined the types of messages that such youth receive about college, from whom and where they receive them, and whether these messages serve as barriers or facilitators in their pathways.

Immigrant-Origin Students of Color

Common challenges in college pathways across immigrant-origin students (namely, from Central America, China, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico) have been well described (e.g., Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2003). However, the nature of shared and divergent experiences across the racial groups is not well understood. For example, scholars have studied Chinese and Vietnamese American (e.g., Lee & Zhou, 2014; Zhou & Lee, 2017) and Latino/a students (e.g., Baum & Flores, 2011; Pérez et al., 2010) separately, with the assumption that their college pathways are inherently different. Many studies about immigrant Asian American (primarily East Asian American) students have grappled with the "model minority" stereotype of students who are high achieving and successful despite obstacles (Chen et al, 2021; Kiang et al; 2017; Lee & Zhou, 2014; Zhou & Lee, 2017), driven by "tiger parents," who push their children to excel in school. Meanwhile, studies of Latino/a immigrant students tend to focus mainly on barriers to college graduation (Baum & Flores, 2011; Pérez et al., 2010) as well as the importance of aspirational capital from family members on college attendance (Carpenter II, 2008; Bohon et al., 2006; Shelton & Thompson, 2023). Research on immigrant students also less frequently considers the perspectives of Black immigrant students. When they do, they often compare the experiences of Black immigrant students with Black American students rather than with other immigrant student groups (Massey et al, 2007; Mwangi & English, 2017). It is important to understand the unique experiences of immigrant students from different racial backgrounds in their college pathways. However, the distinctive lines of research risk reinforcing the narratives that Asian Americans thrive in education while Black and Latino/a students

flounder because of the differences in social capital and parental investment. This is the case particularly when the experiences of middle-class Asian American students are contrasted with the experiences of working-class Latino/a and Black students of immigrant-origin, which does not consider the intersectionality of race and class on immigrant-origin experiences.

Not only do working-class immigrant youth of color likely have less social and human capital compared to their middle-class counterparts, but they may also be more likely to experience alienation due to negative experiences in the school system as they navigate their college pathways. Alienation, defined as "the negative sense of fragmentation, estrangement, separation" (Newmann, 1981, p. 549), can make students more likely to drop out of school and act out in school. Racial minorities, especially Black, Latino/a, and Indigenous students, may face lowered expectations from their teachers, leading to alienation (Avilés et al., 1999). Further, immigrant students may experience discrimination due to their minoritized cultural identities, leading to less engagement in school with their peers (Göbel & Preusche, 2019). In tandem, students from working-class families may face unique discrimination and barriers due to their socioeconomic status (Gibbons et al., 2016; Purgason et al., 2020). Combined, immigrant youth of color from working-class families may be exposed to more systemic barriers that make them vulnerable to alienation from the school system based on their cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. At the same time, so as to not perpetuate the deficit perspective for understanding immigrant students of color, we need to attend to *resiliency* and *success* that this population of students may achieve in their college pathways despite their vulnerabilities.

In our study, we comparatively examined immigrant youth of color from three racial backgrounds to understand commonalities and differences across their experiences. With respect to epistemology, our approach was aligned with critical epistemology (Cooper et al., 2010),

which seeks to counter the hegemonic deficit-focused assumptions about students and parents of color who are marginalized in U.S. educational contexts. Thus, we used a narrative approach as a methodology of choice based on the premises that individuals organize their experiences of their worlds as narratives, that narratives reflect each individual's past and present in social contexts, and that multiple voices can be heard within an individual's narratives (Moen, 2006). The approach in turn informed our thematic analysis in which Bridging the Multiple World Theory (Cooper, 1999, 2011; and Cooper et al., 2012; see next section), was particularly useful in identifying the multiple voices and contexts (or "the worlds") that shaped each student's narrative.

All of the students in our study were immigrant youth of color from mostly working-class families living in New York City. Most of them did not have parents who attended college in the United States and/or had stereotypically blue-collar occupations. Despite these commonalities, differences existed in participants' nationalities and racialized experiences. Given recent conversations about differences in educational opportunities for working-class Asian American students, and Black and Latino/a students in New York City (Tienda & Haskins, 2011; Zhou & Lee, 2017), it is imperative to understand the commonalities held by students who are often assumed to be different from each other while respecting unique experiences of each group.

Analytical Framework for the Present Research

Bridging Multiple Worlds Theory

Bridging Multiple Worlds Theory (BMWT) examines the cumulative effects of messages that students of color receive from the different "worlds" that they engage in on their academic pipeline (Cooper, 1999, 2011; and Cooper et al., 2012). BMWT considers the impact of families, peers, schools, community programs, sports, and religious activities (i.e., *the worlds* that a

student can engage in) throughout a student's academic career. The messages that students receive can be both resources and challenges to pursue college. In this article, we use facilitators and barriers instead of resources and challenges because we see the resources and challenges that students encounter as serving either as *facilitators* or *barriers* on the pathway toward college. BMWT also considers important factors for the students along their academic pipeline, such as family demographics, youth aspirations, and identities. We argue that this is an appropriate theoretical model for our sample because our study focused on students who overcame barriers and navigated different "worlds" to succeed in their college pathways. The comparative nature of our study adds nuances to how messages may be similar or different across different racialized groups.

We focused our study on a subset of the BMWT model to compare the experiences of Asian, Black, and Latino/a immigrant-origin working-class college students in depth. In terms of the academic pipeline, we focused on the transition from secondary school to college, a critical transition point for later adult outcomes. For the "worlds," our aim was to have the participants narrate the worlds that mattered to them rather than to assume that all the worlds identified in the BMWT were relevant to the participants.

Social capital theory (Acar, 2011; Coleman, 1988) highlights the importance of social capital (e.g., parental involvement, and access to resources) in the family system for college attainment. Thus, we were attuned to narratives about *family* as one of the important worlds for college pathways of immigrant-origin students. In addition, other worlds specified in the BMWT, specifically *peers* and *teachers*, have been found to matter for school engagement. For instance, teacher support and peer support independently predicted higher emotional school engagement among ethnic minority students after accounting for other constructs (Göbel &

Preusche, 2019). *Community programs* are also found to further provide support for immigrant-origin students to succeed (Abo-Zena & Barry, 2013; Purgason et al., 2020; Zhou & Lee, 2017). In tandem with messages immigrant youth of color receive from various worlds, we also examined notable contextual factors, such as undocumented status and work, that could further help or harm their college pathways.

The current study examined the experiences of mostly working-class Black, Latino/a, and Asian immigrant-origin youth of color in New York City in their journeys to college. We conducted a secondary analysis of interviews originally collected by the senior author as pilot data for a larger mixed-method study of STEM trajectories of Asian, Latinx, and Black immigrant public school students. New York City is particularly suited to examine our research question because 40% of the city's population are immigrants (Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, 2021), and it is ethnically and racially diverse.

In comparing the experiences of Black, East Asian, Latino/a immigrant-origin youth in their college pathways, we had two overarching questions:

RQ1: What facilitators or barriers commonly influence the college pathways of Black, East Asian, and Latino/a immigrant-origin youth?

RQ2: How are college pathways different across these groups?

Method

Participant Recruitment

We recruited a total of 30 participants. To be eligible, participants had to (1) identify as Asian, Black, or Latino/a (2) have at least one parent who was born outside of the U.S. (e.g. either first-generation or second-generation immigrants) (3) have attended and graduated from a

public high school in New York City, (4) have been attending either a 2-year or a 4-year college at the time of the interview, and (5) be 18 years old or older.

The participants were recruited largely through snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961). The present study combines interview data from two related studies. East Asian American participants were recruited initially from an Asian American afterschool youth leadership program for NYC public high school students. Black and Latino/a students were initially recruited through graduate research assistants who, at the time of the study, were enrolled in master's programs in higher education or student affairs and who were working with various ethnic minority student groups in local university settings. Participants who completed the interviews were then asked if they knew of others who met the eligibility criteria that they could nominate for the study, and the nominated individuals were recruited by the researchers. The original interview protocol was created based on existing literature on immigrant student mobility in higher education (Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2003) and informed by social capital theory (Acar, 2011; Coleman, 1988).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2018 and 2019 in person by trained interviewers and audio recorded with participants' permission. East Asian American participants were interviewed twice (once shortly after high school graduation, and again after completing their first semester in college)[2]. Black and Latino/a participants were interviewed once while they were enrolled in college and the majority of students were juniors or seniors. We analyzed participants' responses to interview questions that were common across the two studies. Participants received a gift card in the amount of $20 per interview for their participation.

[2] Although students from different groups have spent different amounts of time in college, we sought it appropriate to use them in a comparative narrative as the majority of the analysis for this paper concerns narratives about their pre-college experience or their transition from high school to college.

Demographic information of participants in our sample is displayed in Table 1.[3] Although it was not part of the eligibility criteria, the majority of our sample came from a working-class background based on the parental occupation and experiences that our participants shared.[4] All had navigated their way through an urban public education system and had successfully enrolled in college. However, we note that our sample was not balanced in some important characteristics. First, our participants across three groups were mostly women, though the gender distribution was comparable across Asian, Black, and Latino/a. Second, our Asian sample consisted only of those of East Asian origin, with the majority of them being Chinese. Hereafter, we use the term East Asian rather than Asian to refer to this sample group to note that these experiences may not necessarily be reflective of the experiences of pan-Asian American groups (i.e., South Asians, Southeast Asians). In contrast, there were more variations in ethnicity for the Black and Latino/a samples. Third, the majority of Latino/a students were born outside the U.S., whereas the majority of Black and East Asian students were U.S.-born. Fourth, East Asians in our sample were more involved in community-based programs because of the nature of our sampling.

[3] Students' race was identified during the interview based on self-identification, and ethnicity was coded based on interviewee's responses.
[4] Due to the already small sample size, we made a decision to retain those whose parents have non blue collar occupations.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics (n = 10 in each group for N = 30)

		Black	East Asian	Latino/a
Gender	Women	8	7	7
	Men	2	3	3
Place of Birth	U.S. born	9	7	2
	Born abroad	1	3	8
Ethnicity		2 Nigerian 2 Gambian 1 Ghanaian 1 Triniadian 2 Haitian 1 Grenadian-Jamaican 1 Caribbean	8 Chinese 1 Hong Kongese 1 Taiwanese	3 Mexican 2 Dominican 1 Honduran 1 Ecuadoran 1 Peruvian 1 Colombian 1 Guatemalan
Documentation status		10 Not mentioned	7 Not mentioned 3 Undocumented (Parents)	5 Not mentioned 4 Undocumented (self) 1 Undocumented (parents)
Parental Occupation		6 Domestic work or cleaning 4 Food services 2 Transportation 1 Beauty - 2 Construction - - - - 1 Other physical labor 1 Unemployed 3 N/A	4 Domestic work or cleaning 5 Food services 1 Transportation 4 Beauty 2 Admin - 1 Education - - 2 Other intellectual labor - 1 Unemployed -	3 Domestic work or cleaning 0 Food services 3 Transportation - 2 Admin 1 Construction 1 Education 2 Medical 2 Retail - 1 Other physical labor 2 Unemployed 3 N/A

Note. For parental occupation, we coded for two parents' occupation (N = 60 in total).

Data Analysis

Analytic Approach

We used thematic analysis, which is a method for capturing patterns and themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible tool that can be used to analyze small and large data with homogeneous or heterogeneous samples, and the themes can contain content explicitly voiced by participants as well as latent meanings deduced by researchers through analysis. The goal of thematic analysis is to search across a data set (in this case, interviews with 30 participants) to find patterns of meaning. The six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke consist of the following: 1) familiarizing oneself with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. Importantly, the analysis does not proceed in a strictly linear fashion in which one moves from one phase to the next, but rather, in a recursive fashion, moving back and forth between phases.

The initial step involves reading and re-reading through entire transcripts. Our team of coders engaged in this process by reading through and summarizing each transcript of the 30 interviews and noting down initial ideas using Dedoose (Dedoose, 2021). These observations and ideas led to a collective development of codes, defined as the units of meaning relevant to the research question. This iterative process, in which we developed codes and exemplar narratives of each code through discussion, resulted in a detailed codebook of inductive codes grounded in the interview data. Next, the first four authors coded the interview data following the coding scheme on access to resources, college pathways, family support and dynamics, immigration-related factors, motivation for success, STEM emphasis, and student independence. Because our interviewees were college students, we were particularly attentive to the narratives that tapped

messages from different "worlds" (i.e., family, in-school support, peers, and community programs) in transition from high school to college. To achieve reliability in applying the codes to the transcript data, two pairs of coders went through one transcript independently, and discrepancies in the coding were discussed until there was consensus. Afterwards, each of the four authors coded seven interviews from different groups and participated in the analysis along with the senior researcher (SO). This process often led to further clarification of the codes. Next, we used the coded data to look for broader themes or larger patterns of meaning.

We reviewed the initial themes in relation to the coded narrative extracts across transcripts and identified barriers and facilitators as the central themes for racial minority children of immigrants to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of educational pathways toward college through the largest public school system in the United States. In interpreting the data, we used a theory-driven approach to draw relationships among the codes and themes, using BMWT (Cooper, 1999, 2011; and Cooper et al., 2012) as a guide. We also examined whether the patterns of codes within this broad conceptual framework were similar and dissimilar across the three major racial groups of interviewees. We gave each student a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

We strived for the trustworthiness of our analysis in a few different ways recommended by Nowell et al. (2017). The research team engaged in iterative discussions and exploration of their own positionality in relation to the data as we coded the interviews. The four coders kept detailed records of the research process, which they submitted to audit by the senior researcher. Furthermore the first two co-authors presented the preliminary findings of the analyses in a 1.5-hour workshop at a major multicultural conference hosted by a school of education in NYC and discussed the findings in detail with attendees who were knowledgeable through personal or

professional means about educational mobility of immigrant students of color. The workshop attendees largely agreed that the themes were consistent with their lived experiences or professional knowledge.

Positionality Statements

Following the guidance on exploring the researcher positionality in conducting qualitative studies with communities of color (Milner, 2007), we include here the positionality (at the time of analysis) of the five authors who were directly involved with the data analysis and interpretation. Some members have graduated from their positions since. The first four authors who coded interview data were all graduate students studying different fields of psychology with Asian and Asian American backgrounds. These four authors worked together with the senior author (SO) in the data analysis process. Only the senior author had conducted some of the East Asian American interviews. Throughout the process of data analysis, we attended to each of our positionality in relation to the participants and to the research process. At the time of analysis, AP was a Nepali American doctoral student studying counseling psychology. With experiences of being a low-income immigrant raised in the United States impacting her own college pathway, she is interested in access to education for communities of color. MM was a Japanese doctoral candidate studying political psychology and intergroup relations. As an immigrant herself but from a more secure background, she is interested in better understanding how we can reduce barriers that working-class immigrant youth of color face when navigating their college pathways. CSL, a Korean doctoral candidate in counseling psychology, now identifies as an international student but attended public elementary school in NYC. She has a research interest in immigrant and minority mental health, as well as years of clinical experience with socioeconomically diverse youths and their families in school, community, and hospital settings.

SJ was a Korean American master's student in mental health counseling, with prior education attendance in private, public, and specialized schools in NYC. Her research interest includes motivation and resilience in immigrant youth with experience in college consultations for first-generation and second-generation Asian American youth and their families. The senior author (SO) was a 1.5-generation Japanese American researcher with nearly three decades of experience in ethnic minority psychology research. She attended a public school in Japan through fourth grade and then attended public schools in the South and in the East Coast of the U.S. from fifth through twelfth grade before attending public universities.

As we engaged in the analyses of narratives of working-class students of color, the research team members attended to each of our positionality with relation to the participants in the study, especially with respect to our own immigration histories, educational pathways, social class, gender, and our power as university-affiliated researchers. We were particularly mindful of the potential dangers of interpreting and representing individuals, families, and communities of color in education research (Milner, 2007).

Findings

Thematic analysis suggested that our sample of urban working-class students from immigrant families identified various facilitators and barriers to their educational attainment. We used BMWT (Cooper, 1999, 2011; Cooper et al., 2012) to organize the barriers and facilitators within each of their worlds (i.e., family, peers, school, community programs). Although the original BMWT included sports and religious activities as also relevant worlds to immigrant youth, students in the present study did not identify these as salient contexts for participants. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the findings, and Table 2 summarizes the frequency of each theme mentioned by each group . The four worlds (family, peers, schools, and community

programs) are represented by ovals. Rectangles connected to each world correspond to our first research question (RQ1) on facilitators (+) and barriers (-) in pursuing college pathways for the three racial groups. Overall, we found that students sought out facilitators in a different world if they were not provided with them or faced barriers in one world. Further, urban immigrant students of color reflected upon their family backgrounds (e.g., race, class) and identities as they experienced different worlds. Despite the similarities across three groups, there were variabilities in specific experiences based on students' racial groups (RQ2). In what follows, we first highlight the common facilitators and barriers that students experienced across groups (RQ1), and then discuss nuances and differences across groups (RQ2).

Figure 1

Thematic Map of the BMWT with our samples

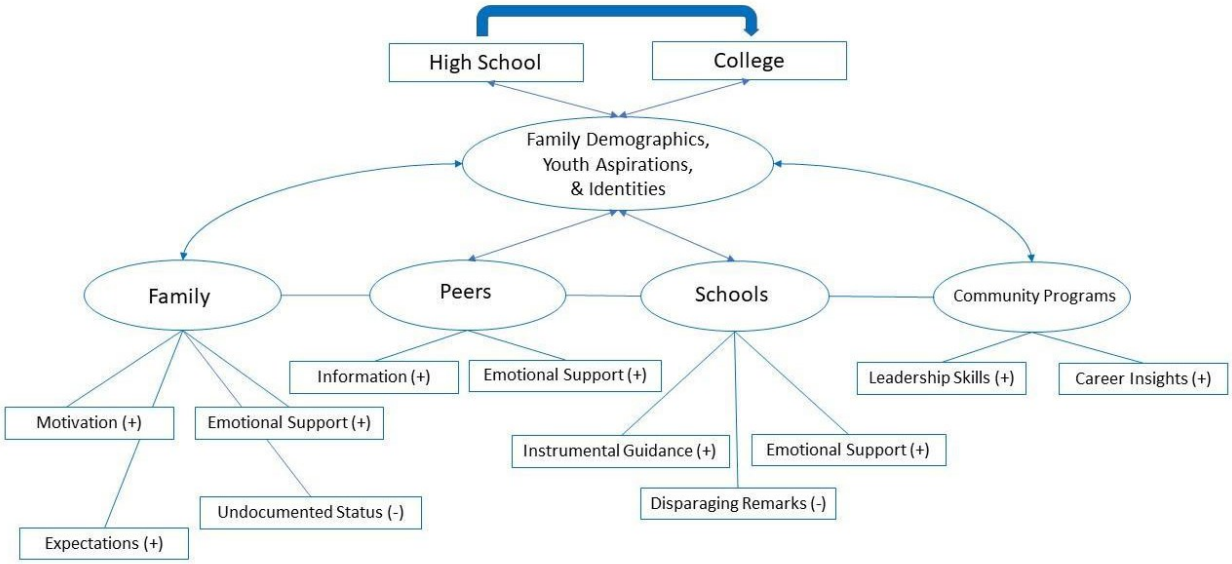

Table 2
Comparative Results Table (n = 10 in each group for N = 30)

		Black	East Asian	Latino/a
Family	Emotional Support	8	9	7
	Expectation NOT to attend college	0	0	1
	Expectation to either attend college or pursue a high-paying career	6	10	7
	Expectation to attend college generally	4	5	1
	Expectation for a specific career	2	3	6
	Expectation to obtain money/prestige	2	3	0
	Family struggles mentioned as motivator	4	2	1
	Undocumented Immigration Status	0	1	4
School	Instrumental Guidance	9	7	7
	Emotional Support	9	4	7
	Disparaging Remarks Noted	5	2	1
	Lack of Resources Noted	2	2	4
Peers	Emotional Support	5	7	4
	Sources of Information	6	5	2
Community Programs	Career Insights	3	2	4
	Leadership Skills	1	2	2
	Instrumental Support	5	4	4

Family: Support, Expectations, Motivation, and Struggles

Facilitators

Prior research has shown that messages received from family can be one of the most important influencers for students towards envisioning a postsecondary future, motivating students to pursue specific opportunities and pathways (Oymak, 2018). With our participants, regardless of racial background, students generally felt emotionally but not instrumentally supported by their parents in their college pathways. Most parents were not able to provide information to students about college, help them with their college applications, or financially support their children's higher education. However, emotional support and expectations that parents provided acted as facilitators for their children to pursue higher education. Moreover, while the majority of Latino/a parents encouraged children to pursue specific careers that often required higher education, more Black and East Asian parents encouraged their children to pursue college generally.

The majority of students in our study expressed that their families provided them with emotional (but not practical) support in making their own decisions after high school (9 East Asian, 8 Black, 7 Latino/a). For the most part, the students were frank in acknowledging that their parents were unable to support them through practical means. For example, Tiffany, an East Asian student reported,

> "*I don't really talk to them about planning my education or what kind of classes because they don't know anything about it. They just can't really help me with that. And I think my mom, she definitely feels bad that she can't help me, but I don't really mind.*"

Despite the lack of practical knowledge parents can pass on to them, three East Asian and two Latino/a students reported that their parents would try to connect with other resources that they

knew about through their own ethnic networks, which also served as a facilitator to attending college. As Luis, a Latino student stated,

> *"So when I said I want to be a doctor she'd be like, oh, I love it. I will support you…There are meager social networks, she'd be like, oh, does anyone have, like, a very old medical textbook for [Luis]?*".

Across all three groups, students heard and/or internalized messages from their parents that they were expected to "do better" than the generation before them, transcend their parents' socioeconomic status, and to prioritize financial security. George, an East Asian student stated,

> *"For [my parents]...a successful life for me is to go to college and graduate, following a nice salary job and then I can marry and I don't need to worry about money. That's their biggest wish for me, that I don't need to worry about money or the price of my life."*

A Latina student, Gabriela, noted about mother, *"she's very hard on me and on herself sometimes. I think it's because she always reminds me that she wants me to be better than her."*

The idea of "doing better" came up frequently throughout all three racial groups but the directness of this message varied−while some students were told explicitly that they had to do better by their families, other students had internalized this message by seeing the struggles of their families. Black students (n = 5) in our study more frequently reported that their family's struggles were a self-motivating factor than Latino/a students (n = 1) or East Asian students (n = 2). As Christopher, a Black male student stated,

> "*Because all I've seen all my life is my parents' struggle, and I guess the only way to not be part of that cycle is to go to school and get my degree and not be in that sort of position or have a profession that wouldn't have me in that sort of position."*

As Amy, East Asian student also stated, *"because my mother is struggling financially right now I wanted to study something where when I graduate I can like get a job and let my mom retire."* The expectations of what a "better" path meant for each family varied across racial groups. Our findings were a departure from existing literature that tend to suggest that only East Asian immigrant parents (e.g., Lee & Zhou, 2015) and African immigrant parents (e.g., Roubeni et al., 2015) have very high expectations for their children's college pathways; we found that relatively more Latino/a parents in our study seemed to hold specific expectations for careers that require a college degree. While 5 of the East Asian participants and 4 of the Black participants noted that their parents expressed that they should go to college "generally" in order to ensure a better future, only 1 of the Latino/a participants noted the same. Meanwhile, 6 of the Latino/a participants indicated that their parents wanted them to pursue specific career paths (e.g. teacher, doctor) that often required a college degree, while only 3 of the East Asian students and 2 of the Black students indicated that their parents wanted them to pursue a specific career path rather than pursuit of a college degree overall. Part of the reason that some of these parents wanted their children to pursue a specific career seems to be the parents' perception that some majors do not directly lead to a career. As Valerie, a Latina student studying Latin American studies indicated about her mother, *"She's like 'I always wanted you to be a doctor, a teacher, and she's just like you're a Latin American studies major, what are you going to do with that?'"* In addition, it was evident that parents who did expect specific career paths from their children did so due to perceptions about income potential. As Thalia, a Latina student said about her father, *"I think he was interested in me going into medicine or law just because immigrant parents, or parents, in general, I suppose with low income that they think if their kids go into that, they'll be well-off."* Participants who did note that their parents wanted them to pursue a specific career path

indicated that their parents had "always" thought this way. For example, as John, a Black student stated about his father, "*that was how he is. He was like 'do it, go to MIT!' I mean from day one they were always like be an engineer, a doctor, a lawyer."*

Barriers

Undocumented status of students or their family members was one of the barriers that came with family in pursuing college. Undocumented immigration status meant that affected students were unable to receive federal financial aid and faced increased pressure to succeed. In our study, reports of challenges with immigration status were most frequent among Latino/a students (n = 4) compared to 1 East Asian student and 0 Black Students.[5]

Undocumented status created more pressure to succeed for students who could not readily afford college. For some students, not being able to receive financial aid or have their parents pay for college meant that they had to rely on merit-based scholarships in order to afford college. As Diego, a male Latino student noted,

> *"I've always been nervous because of my undocumented situation….I always tried to excel…there's no room for failure in a sense….when I apply to college, I needed a scholarship because I wouldn't qualify for financial aid."*

The path to college for Luis, a DACAmented student, was especially long and arduous and he highlights the despair and sense of hopelessness that came from repeated rejections due to his status and the lack of resources available for undocumented students:

> *"So I applied to all my colleges but I couldn't get financial aid…I started to get rejections I'd call the schools and their financial aid office and I'm like hey I'm an undocumented*

[5] Note that 70% of our East Asian American and 90% Black immigrant students were born in the United States, while only 20% of our Latino/a students were born in the United States.

kid, is there any way I can get scholarships or assistance for this? I had DACA since I was 15 or 16 but I didn't realize what it meant….., the answer was always wait. Your process is at a point where we can't do anything to speed it up so you can only wait[….] I started to get a little jaded, a little bitter and ultimately dealt with chronic depression"

School: Crucial for Instrumental and Extra Emotional Support

Facilitators

Students in our study relied mostly on adults in the school system to navigate their college pathways because their immigrant parents lacked knowledge of the U.S. education system. The majority of participants across the three groups (7 East Asian, 9 Black, 7 Latino/a) reported that school was a source of practical guidance on how to navigate high school and the application to college. Much of the support came from teachers, counselors, and advisors, many of whom became trusted mentors to help students through the college application process. However, whereas most Black (n = 9) and Latino/a (n = 7) students in our sample mentioned feeling emotionally supported by school staff, only 4 of the East Asian students mentioned feeling the same level of closeness and support from school staff−showing the racial variation in felt support from school staff. Students spoke of receiving emotional support from school staff by mentioning the importance of particular school staff by name and describing the staff as a key figure for managing emotions and stress, or by speaking directly about how school staff were instrumental for pushing participants academically and providing emotional support through listening, encouraging, and resource sharing.

Resources shared at school were a major facilitator to participants' knowledge about college. However, the students' experiences also varied depending on their teachers' willingness to share those resources and opportunities with students. As Elena, a Latina student noted, *"So*

sometimes a teacher would tell you, it depends what kind of teacher you have... My teacher would always give out opportunities. So really, I had a lot of resources." Students noted that the more teachers and counselors shared additional time and attention beyond their job descriptions, the more students perceived them to be motivators and supporters. These include both instrumental support about filling out specific college applications as well as emotional support. For instance, Michelle, an East Asian American student said: *"[...] my advisor, I love her. She's like a mentor for me, like I always ask her about my problems, and like stress throughout school she would always help me."* Similarly, Olivia, a Black student talked about a specific teacher in a fond manner:

> *"I had one teacher named [redacted], and she like, you know, she would talk to me about different colleges and what college life was like and I guess giving me insight [...]. If no one told me, I would've never gotten in."*

Barriers

Despite many facilitators found in the school domain, some students also reported experiencing microaggressions perpetrated by school staff (e.g., disparaging comments about their abilities) as a big demotivator to attending college. In our study, this appeared more frequently for Black students. Whereas 5 of the Black students reported receiving disparaging remarks, only 2 of the East Asian students and 1 Latino/a student experienced similar microaggressions. For instance, Ayana, a Black student who previously spoke about the importance of having a mentoring teacher noted: *"I was working on the application. I was almost done in a few weeks before the applications are up, and my guidance counselor goes, you're not gonna get into Columbia. Like there's no point in you applying."* This experience was echoed by some other students--teachers and guidance counselors encouraged them to apply only

to schools where the adults believed these students were more likely to gain admissions, or expressed disbelief at a student's desire to attend a more selective institution.

A number of participants (3 East Asian, 2 Black, 5 Latino/a) also commented on how under-resourced and understaffed their public schools were, which served as a barrier to their college pathways. As John, a Black student stated,

> "*I mean, it makes sense because our resources were limited…. Our textbooks weren't new. We didn't get laptops until a certain point in time. We didn't have access to a whole bunch of things... when I try even talk to teachers about it, they would say, 'just google it! And just figure it out,' or whatnot. So, I just stopped asking any sort of questions or anything of that nature because... yeah."*

Peers: Sources of Information and Support

Facilitators

Peers are an important world for students - the impact of peer relationships on adolescent well-being and development is well documented (Liem &Martin, 2011; Moses &Villodas, 2017; Orben, et al., 2020; Williams & Anthony, 2013). Across groups, students mentioned their peers as a source of emotional (7 East Asian, 5 Black, and 4 Latino/a) and instrumental (5 East Asian, 6 Black, 2 Latino/a) support who acted as facilitators to pursuing opportunities and sharing resources that would get them to college. For instance, when students felt that they were not supported by school staff or felt their school staff were overburdened, they turned to their peers. As Naomi, an East Asian student noted, *"I think students were helping each other more with applications because teachers were so busy and the college office like, they had so much work to do, so, they didn't really offer a lot of support."* Among students who reported their peers as a source of support, there was a feeling of camaraderie as they would share information they had

available with other students. Emily, an East Asian student articulated, *"Basically like, whatever information we got, we would tell people."*

In addition to sharing information with peers, students also turned to peers for knowledge about opportunities they could pursue, information that was often not shared with them by teachers or school staff. Noted by Nia, a Black student, *"So I found out through people... I had this one friend, she would tell me about all these programs and I would apply to them."* Patricia, a Latina student, described that it was through her friends who were in the school's honors society that she found out about programs that were available to her but not communicated to her through other sources:

> *"Most of my friends were part of the National Honor Society. I wasn't part of it. They all had high grades. I was in AP classes. So, I became closer to them than the other students….. I found out about [scholarship program] because they were talking about it. They went to….like a separate meeting during school time, and they told me about it and I was like "Oh, that sounds interesting."*

Along with providing instrumental support and knowledge about opportunities, peers also provided emotional support and feelings of community and mentorship that guided them toward college. As Amy, an East Asian student stated, *"So my friends always motivated me, I always motivated them, and I think we have this good connection that was like, you know, if I'm friends with you, we're going to push each other to do our best."* Mentorship seemed to be especially helpful as well, as participants noted the support of peers who had been through the application process and commented on their desire to also provide the same support to younger students. As Amina, a Black student commented,

"So that was really helpful because we had upperclassmen who mentored lower classmen basically and realizing their potential and that they could apply to, like any college… regardless of their background or how much money they have. That was a great experience that helped me become the person I am today."

Community Programs: Inspiring Leadership, Building Opportunities

Facilitators

Another world described in BMWT is community programs, and for the students who mentioned extracurricular community programs (5 East Asian, 6 Black, 7 Latino/a), it was overwhelmingly a strong facilitator for opportunities and learning. The types of community programs that students were involved in varied. While some participants pointed to ethnic organizations that promoted service and leadership, others spoke about resources shared during church, along with programs aimed at supporting minority students. Students who mentioned community programs, extracurricular activities, and external resources overall found them to be helpful facilitators to gain insight into college admissions, understand new perspectives about career paths, and build their own leadership skills, indicating an overall positive effect. In particular, they found that leadership skills could be highlighted for future opportunities. This was the case across three different racial groups.

Participation in extracurricular activities through community programs allowed for students to build their own skills and resumes that they could readily transfer to future opportunities. As Ayana, a Black student noted, *"During the [college] interview….. I talked about …extracurricular activities in high school. My resume is like three pages long. I'm not even kidding. In high school, a few pages long."*

Specialized programming often acted to usher students into careers through skills learned from these programs. As Tiffany, an East Asian student articulated, ".. *I joined a program for... it teaches you entrepreneurship in computer science."* This student went on to later underscore how this program encouraged her to apply to programs in computer science and pursue this career path.

Patricia, a Latina student, mentioned becoming admitted to the college prep program, Upward Bound, and the multiple streams of support that came from her participation.

> *"They helped us get our college essay done...they would look at your grades, your SAT scores and ACT scores and let you know what schools you [could apply to]….They took us on college tours to look at different schools to see what we like, what we don't like. And then when it came to our college process…. they would help pay for everything.*

Participating in community programs also allowed for students to gain leadership skills through mentoring to address issues that were affecting their community. Jerry, an East Asian student said,

> *"I was actually in [mentoring program], and they actually really got me more aware of the social issues surrounding Asian Americans and immigrants in New York City. And just like learning about how underserved we are as a community and that really got me into social activism."*

Through participation in extracurriculars, students were also able to gain insight into career paths other than what they may have previously imagined. Daniel, a Latino student recounted how participating in a debate competition inspired him to change careers:

> *"It was the first time that a bit like I ever spoke in public at all. And it was just amazing and I remember that my mom called me the day. She asked me like, how did it go?... And*

I just like, took out my bag and just like took out the leadership award and the big trophy for the student delegate of the year. And I told her, 'you know what, like I'm not going for engineering anymore'…And I decided….I'm going to work probably for law or like political science."

Discussion

Summary

Our study investigated the college pathways of immigrant-origin youth of color mostly from working-class background across three broad racial groups in order to understand both facilitators and barriers that students face on their pathway to college. BMWT allowed us to capture the nuances of facilitators and barriers that were within each world (family, school, peers, community programs). This means that we were able to highlight similarities and differences in facilitators and barriers in different worlds across different racial subgroups. Overall, we found more similarities in facilitators and barriers than differences across racial subgroups. Of note, parents' expectations for their children's college pathways and careers may be more similar across different racial subgroups than the previous literature may have suggested.

The findings suggest that across the three racial/ethnic groups, children of immigrants—whose families lacked social capital—relied on emotional encouragement from key adults in their families, schools, and after school programs, as well as their peers, to navigate complex and unfamiliar educational systems on their way to college. Specifically, these findings point to the different sources that students can draw aspirational and resistance capital from (Yosso, 2005). In alignment with BMWT, these findings suggest that when students' families lacked social capital, students who aspired for college sought social capital from other sources in their life,

highlighting the importance of community efforts on the pathway to college. That said, Asian students were reporting to have perceived less emotional support from school staff compared to Latino/a and Black counterparts. Instrumental support often came from school, community programs, and peers rather than parents who most likely are unable to provide much social capital unlike parents of non-immigrant children and/or middle to upper socioeconomic backgrounds. Though prior literature suggests that Latino/a immigrant caregivers may be less specifically focused on their children achieving careers that require college education than Black immigrant or Asian immigrant caregivers (e.g., Lee & Zhou, 2015) and that Black and Asian children of immigrants have higher postsecondary educational attainment that Latino/a children of immigrants (Baum & Flores, 2011), our findings suggest that most parents--regardless of racial background−in our sample encouraged their children to pursue college, often as a means to financial stability.

Two key differences across students in different racial groups arise in our study from school experiences−disparaging remarks made about them and perceived emotional support from school staff. In terms of disparaging remarks, Black immigrant students reported more instances of disparaging comments made about them compared to Latino/a or East Asian immigrant students. Prior works have shown that school staff's racialized assumptions about students' abilities contribute to differential disciplinary practices, negatively impact the learning environment, and undermine students' ability to use education for social mobility, particularly for Black students (Allen, 2010; Ogunyemi et al., 2020). East Asian students less frequently reported feeling emotionally close to school staff. While Asian American adolescents as a whole report receiving more support from teachers compared to other racial/ethnic groups of youths (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004), our findings are more consistent with counterevidence in the literature

suggesting that marginalized Asian American students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, may experience uncaring relationships with school staff (Louie, 2001; Lew, 2006). That East Asian participants were the least likely to report receiving emotional support from teachers may reflect teachers' positive expectations for Asian American students due to the model minority stereotype that these students are uniformly well-adjusted in school contexts (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007), regardless of their actual performance. Collectively, two key differences across racial groups point to the detrimental impact of stereotypes, whether positive or negative, on students' school experiences.

One noteworthy barrier for students who were undocumented or had family members who were undocumented was the weight that their undocumented status played on their college application process. Students expressed frustration with immigration-related constraints (e.g., scarce options, lack of access to financial aid) and a desire to resist limitations that were placed upon them. This theme more commonly came up with Latino/a students in our study – however, it is worth noting that the majority of Latino/a students in our study were born abroad while the majority of Asian and Black students were born in the U.S. and were U.S. citizens. Students' desires to pursue higher education and create meaningful and joyful college experiences despite this barrier of being "shut out" replicates previous findings about undocumented college-aged students (Perez & Ballinas, 2023; DeAngelo et al., 2016; Santa-Ramirez et al., 2023).

Limitations

There are several limitations in our study. While these findings do provide a start to understanding immigrant-origins students' experiences across racial groups, our sample was 30 students and a larger sample might be needed in order to reach definitive conclusions. For this reason, we opted to retain those whose parents may not be working-class, limiting the

generalizability of working-class students. Additionally, it was skewed in terms of gender (more women) and variability of ethnicity across three subgroups, such that there was more variation in ethnicity for Black and Latino/a students than for the East Asian group. This could be due in part to the fact that East Asian students were recruited through a community agency that served Asian Americans, whereas Black and Latino/a students were recruited through a university. As such, some differences observed across groups may be attributable to differences in important factors such as specific socioeconomic status and other variations.

In addition, questions about unique experiences based on students' racial/ethnic identities were not explicitly asked in the interview, which could have helped us better understand the intersecting struggles that immigrant youth of color may experience. Although there were students who brought up challenges related to ethno-racial salience, it was not asked of students across the board.

Lastly, related to the transferability of our findings, it is important to note that all our participants were college-going students who were raised in New York City. In other words, they were successful and resilient despite barriers they may have encountered. In order to develop further understanding of college pathways of working-class immigrant youth of color, it is also essential to conduct qualitative interviews with those who were not able to complete college or chose not to pursue college. It is also important to consider geographic influence in future studies to capture the experiences of immigrant-origin students outside of New York City. For instance, because many students in New York City are immigrants or children of immigrants (Cherng et al., 2017), students may have felt that their experiences were normalized rather than the exception, allowing them to lean on community support systems more readily. In addition, social conditions in New York City (i.e. gentrification, a high cost of living) (Ballamy et al., 2023) may

also have impacted access that students had to financial resources that could have aided their educational journeys. Despite these limitations, there were meaningful implications and recommendations that can be drawn from our study.

Implications and Recommendations

Many students reported that their parents expressed a desire to help but were not familiar with the education system and struggled to know how to help. An implication is a lack of resources available for working-class immigrant parents about college pathways for their children. While it may be true that working-class immigrant parents are busy and face other barriers, the most commonly cited barrier from students was their parents' lack of familiarity. Language-appropriate access to information for parents about higher education and financial aid resources through schools and community organizations can mitigate some of those barriers. Because our study was from the perspective of the students, future research can explore immigrant parents' perspectives on college pathways.

Two key differences across racial groups (for Black and Asian students) mentioned above point to the detrimental impact of stereotypes, whether positive or negative, on students' school experiences. We argue that evidence-based training to reduce racial biases among school staff (e.g., Pendry et al., 2007) and culturally affirming curricula (e.g., Allen et al., 2013) can help create a conducive educational environment for students from diverse backgrounds.

Peers were a powerful, albeit informal, source of support for students. Participants in our study pointed to peers as helpful resources for studying together, sharing information regarding college, and emotionally supporting each other. The finding highlights the importance of peer socialization for adolescents' development and postsecondary envisioning. Future research can

be used to identify pathways and opportunities for peer connections to be especially helpful to students in their college pathways.

Across the board, community programs were a great tool for students to explore their interests, receive additional support, and gain leadership experience to apply to future opportunities. An implication of this finding is that expanding access to community programs for other students who have not already participated in them can be a useful tool for expanding knowledge and resources for working-class children of immigrants. Community programming can mean both access to extracurricular activities and local and national programs that help guide students and families through college applications. Community programming overall allowed students opportunities to be leaders in their communities, strengthening skills and building up students' interests and self-esteems.

Overall, while working-class immigrant-origin youth of color may face barriers on their pathway to college due to a lack of social capital from their parents, they are able to lean on key assets that facilitate their ability to thrive. When considering interventions and support systems for working-class immigrant-origin youth of color, it will be important to consider these students in their current ecosystem and build upon these strengths.

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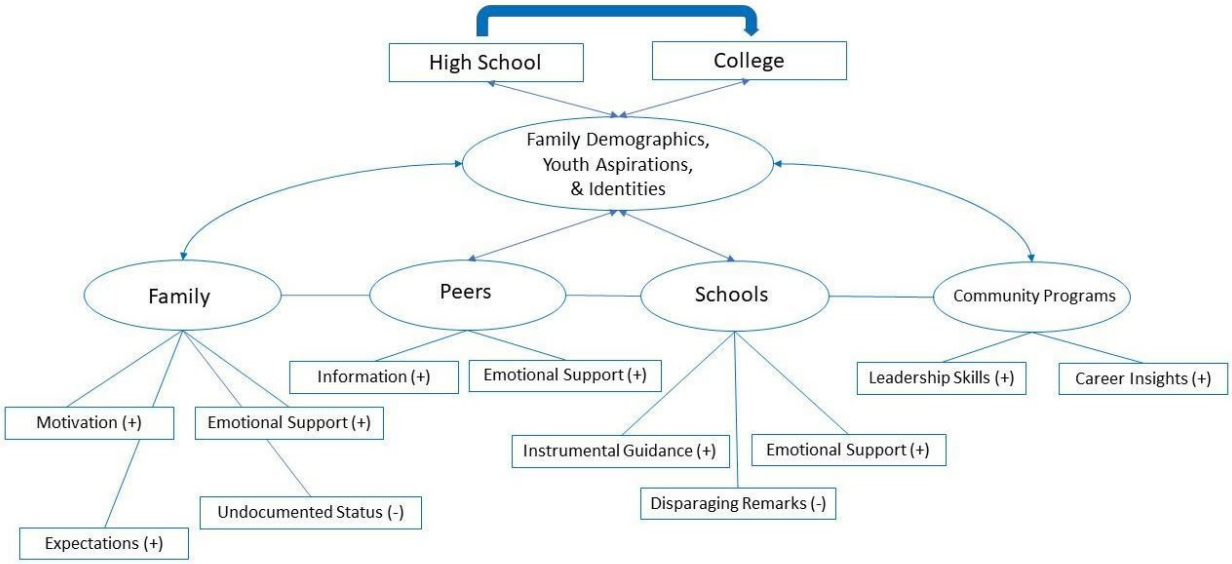
Figure 1

Thematic Map of the BMWT with our samples