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Supporting Continued Academic Success, Resilience, and Agency of Boys in Urban Catholic Alternative Middle Schools

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The persistent inequalities in urban public education in the U. S. that have left far too many Black and Hispanic male students behind with respect to academic skill development, high school graduation, and college success have led Catholic groups to provide alternative secondary school models to advance the academic and career success of urban students. One of these initiatives is the NativityMiguel model school, the first of which opened in New York City in 1971. The present study examines the lived experience, with respect to benefits of this education on the subsequent academic and career successes, of male graduates of two of these schools, one for African American, or Black, students and one for Mexican American students in different parts of the country. Analyses of interviews with 37 graduates showed that they benefitted from the schools' approach to academic skill development and the building of resilience, leadership, and a commitment to service in the context of a community that continued to support the development of resilience after middle school graduation. Differences in aspects of the two programs are examined along with the implications for making use of the schools' initiatives on a larger scale.

Keywords

Urban, Catholic, resilience, African American, Hispanic, adolescents, academic success

High school and college graduation rates for urban students of color continue to be substantially lower than those of White students (Aud et al., 2011; Kena et al., 2016; Ross et al., 2012). Research (Blustein et al., 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013) also has shown that urban students of color, boys in particular, often receive inadequate preparation for the level of academic work in elite high schools and in college. This skill differential is evidenced in the widening White-Black and White-Hispanic gap in the attainment of a bachelor's degree or higher among young adults from 1995 to 2015 (Kena et al., 2016). The low rates of high school completion and levels of educational attainment among Hispanic and Black students are of particular social concern

(Chapin, 2015), and initiatives such as My Brother's Keeper from the Obama administration have focused particular attention on the poor conditions that affect boys of color (Harper & Wood, 2016).

While structural educational inequalities persist and compromise the quality of education for far too many urban children and adolescents of color, Black and Hispanic students continue to suffer from unequal treatment in schools that are evidenced in higher levels of expulsions and special education designations, often in poorly funded public schools with inexperienced teachers (Andrews, 2015; Howard, Flenbaugh, & Terry 2012; Moore, 2016; Murrell, 2007; Noguera, 2003). Attempted solutions that have focused on such symptoms as low test scores and graduation rates fail to address the underlying issues of professional practice and misinformed policies that lead to under-resourced urban schools for children and adolescents of color (Andrews, 2015; Murrell, 2007). On another level, scholars of race and culture in education (e.g., Murrell, 2007) have suggested that cultural racism, and its accompanying color-blind ideology that perpetuates the myth of equivalent treatment, inhibits meaningful attempts at real structural change and undermines the academic identity development of children and adolescents of color (p. 9). Another aspect of the structural inequality, according to Murrell, is the lack of parity with respect to cultural and intergroup social capital afforded to majority and minority young people that affect quality-of-life opportunities and access to persons and institutions of power and desirable careers (see also, Orr, 1999).

Black and Hispanic boys and young adults have been particularly disadvantaged in the educational enterprise as a result of cultural racism. Scholars (e.g., Henfield & Washington, 2016; Howard et al., 2012; Moore, 2016; Noguera, 2002) have contended that common depictions of men of color, particularly Black men, as violence-prone menaces have contributed to the deficit perspective of urban Black and Hispanic males that has led to their poor treatment in schools and other institutions. In addition, far too many of such students come to school with critical unmet developmental needs that are affected by violence, chronic absenteeism, low morale, and low parent involvement (Holcomb-McCoy, Gonzalez, Harris, & Hines, 2016).

Efforts to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for urban boys of color have had mixed results at best and private groups, including Catholic and other religious communities, have stepped in to offer some unique and effective programs that have succeeded in advancing academic

skill development and performance (Aldana, 2015; Fenzel, 2009; Podsiadlo & Philliber, 2003; Proehl, Stanres, & Everett, 2015). For example, Cristo Rey high schools have adopted a work study program that places students five days a month in a professional setting in a corporation or non-profit organization that contributes to the students' tuition (Cristo Rey Network, n.d.). The present study focuses on the NativityMiguel model of urban middle level education that has been shown to be effective in accelerating the academic skill development and educational attainment of urban students placed at risk because of a lack of access to quality elementary schools (see Fenzel, 2009; Podsiadlo & Philliber, 2003).

Schools that operate under this model number over 60 in the United States and Canada (15 in the Jesuit Schools Network, 46 in the NativityMiguel Coalition). The model emerged from the program developed at the Nativity Mission Center by the Jesuit Catholic order of priests and brothers. The school, which opened in 1971, began as a tutoring and enrichment program for underserved Catholic boys of the area attending public schools to provide them with the academic skills to obtain admission to New York City Catholic high schools. Several years later, other groups, most notably the de La Salle Christian Brothers, began opening middle schools that incorporated elements of the Nativity Mission program, including small classes for instruction, an extended day for study, homework assistance, tutoring, and other activities, small classes, and a summer enrichment and leadership program at a camp away from the city (Fenzel, 2009; Podsiadlo & Philliber, 2003). Students receive instruction from experienced teachers, volunteers from local high schools and colleges, and college graduates serving the school through programs such as AmeriCorps. As students matriculated into area Catholic high schools and experienced the need for additional support, Nativity Mission Center adopted a graduate support program to provide counseling, tutoring, after-school activities, and monitoring of students' high school progress. An additional feature of most graduate support programs is the manner in which they afford graduates access to influential members of the community who have access to structures of power and wealth through mentoring programs (Fenzel, 2009). The graduate support programs, which are staffed by the NativityMiguel school personnel, contribute to the educational experience for students an additional four or more years beyond graduation from middle school, in part by helping students and graduates, as well as their parents and guardians, develop greater academic capital that will enable them to access and succeed in institutions of higher education (St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2011).

With 30 or fewer students in each grade level, NativityMiguel schools, which typically admit students into 5th or 6th grade, tend to be much smaller than public schools. The small size enables schools to provide individually-tailored instruction in an atmosphere where students' social-emotional struggles can be addressed individually and sensitively and true community can be formed that involve the families as well. In addition, the small student-teacher ratio provides opportunities for faculty and administration to help each student develop his or her unique leadership style. The faith-based mission of NativityMiguel schools also cannot be met in public schools. One public charter middle school program that has demonstrated some success and has some elements that are found in the NativityMiguel schools, such as an extended school day and a graduate support program, are the KIPP schools (KIPP Foundation, n.d.a). Compared to NativityMiguel schools, KIPP middle schools are considerably larger, with larger classes for instruction, and subject to district policies that do not affect the independent NativityMiguel schools and are not able to provide as intimate an educational experience as do NativityMiguel schools. NativityMiguel and KIPP schools enroll a comparable percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced-price school meals, at 83% (NativityMiguel Coalition, n.d.) and 88% (KIPP Foundation, n.d.b), respectively. In addition, national rates for high school completion are similar at 90% in four years for NativityMiguel schools and 92% for KIPP schools (number of years not specified). Both of these are higher than the 76% national low income average reported by the KIPP foundation.

NativityMiguel Educational Outcomes and the Present Study

The present study was undertaken to evaluate the lived experience of graduates of two schools that educate boys and follow the NativityMiguel model.¹ Previous research (Fenzel, 2009; Fenzel & Monteith, 2008) has used both quantitative and qualitative measures to examine the characteristics of the model, the extent to which the schools followed the model, and the

1 The organization of Lasallian San Miguel schools, whose approach was based on the Nativity Mission school model, developed in parallel with what were known as Nativity schools. This organization formed a partnership with the Nativity Network of Schools in 2006 to become the NativityMiguel Network. The two schools included in the present study were a part of the Nativity and NativityMiguel Networks (which subsequently ceased operation in 2013) and currently are included as part of the Jesuit Schools Network (www.jesuitschoolsnetwork.org) that includes 15 Nativity schools. Many of the schools that were part of the NativityMiguel Network currently are members of the NativityMiguel Coalition that formed in 2014.

benefits accrued to students and graduates from their NativityMiguel school education. This and other research (Podsiadlo & Philliber, 2003) has shown that NativityMiguel students and graduates significantly outperform students in urban public and traditional parochial schools on standardized tests of reading and mathematics achievement and graduate from high school at higher rates than do children and adolescents from similar racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The present study fills a gap from previous research by examining graduates' perceptions of the extent to which the schools fulfilled their objectives by contributing to their later academic and career success, as well as their leadership development and commitment to service. In addition, we sought to understand the processes that contributed to the graduates' success with respect to the challenges and supports they received while students at the school and through the graduate support program.

Theoretical Framework

The present study makes use of a resilience framework to guide the investigation and includes environmental (i.e., school, family, and peer) and personal factors (e.g., Masten, 2001) that have been shown to affect positive developmental outcomes for young people at risk because of high economic poverty, immigration status, and/or limited access to supportive services. In addition, processes and outcomes are examined within a culturally relevant ecological framework that addresses some of the structural inequalities and cultural racism that undermine many urban school reform approaches (Chapin, 2015; Murrell, 2007; Reyes & Elias, 2001). This framework considers the particular family and cultural expectations and peer influences that contribute to Hispanic and Black adolescent and emerging adult development, as well as an educational approach that communicates perceptions of students, boys in particular, as proficient and capable, rather than deficient.

With respect to children, Goldstein and Brooks (2013) defined resilience as achieving positive developmental outcomes and avoiding maladaptive ones under adverse circumstances. In addition, Wright, Masten, and Narayan (2013) added the notion of resilience as experiencing "positive adaptation in the face of risk or adversity" (p. 18). They suggested that risk exists when the child is placed in a situation that elevates the probability of negative outcomes and adversity entails the existence of conditions such as poverty, homelessness, exposure to violence, or child maltreatment that threaten normal healthy adaptation. Wright et al. also noted that interventions applied at

times of developmental transitions could contribute to a cascade of effects on multiple domains of functioning. One such transition would be the transition from elementary to middle school which typically takes place in 5th or 6th grade. For students of color, Andrews (2012) noted that resilience is seen in the ability to resist and succeed in the face of racism.

Schools support the development of resilience when they develop a culture of respect and care through a holistic program that is emotionally nurturing and academically challenging (Rivera-McCutchen, 2012). This often entails providing additional academic supports to help students overcome years of educational neglect. A college-going culture, strong peer support environment, high expectations, and quality instruction—aspects of which Winkler and Sriram (2015) refer to as academic capital—all contribute to the development of resilience and a sense of agency in which the students can come to see themselves as capable of achieving and charting a different course of development than the one they may have envisioned in another context (Rivera, 2014). Academic capital formation also can provide underserved urban students of color the knowledge and skills to negotiate the complexities of college admission and persistence (St. John et al., 2011).

Just as the support of caring and encouraging adults during the middle and high school years has been shown to reduce school dropout and keep adolescent boys placed at risk academically engaged (Mac Iver & Messel, 2013; Neild, 2009; Neild et al., 2008; Roksa, Jenkins, Jaggars, Zeidenberg, & Cho, 2009), continued support during the college years is needed to keep these students engaged in academic and social life. Caring mentoring, characterized by emotional support and individualized attention that is focused on students' strengths has been found to contribute to higher success rates for young men of color (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Rivera-McCutchen, 2012; Wexler & Pyle, 2012). Also, programs that offer opportunities to engage in service and other community activities cultivate a sense of belonging, enhanced resilience and self-esteem, leadership, and agency and contribute to engagement and persistence (Caton, 2012; Gamble et al., 2012; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Neild, 2009). These types of educational programs are "asset or resource gradients" which can increase adolescent resiliency (Masten, 2001, p.228).

Method

Participants and Schools

School A. The first author conducted five small-group interviews and three 1-on-1 interviews with graduates of St. Anthony Middle School, or SAMS (a fictitious name), operated by the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, and located in a large mid-Atlantic city ($N = 19$, mean age = 22.0, $SD = 5.0$). All meetings, except two of the individual interviews, took place at the school on one of two occasions. At the request of the first author, the director of graduate support invited graduates from various class years to participate who were (a) currently in high school ($N=6$), (b) currently in college ($N=4$), and (c) had graduated from college or gone into a career following high school ($N=3$). The three participants in one high school group all had changed schools at least once since leaving SAMS and the three participants in the second group remained in the Catholic high school they first attended. One small group interview was with a self-selected group of alumni, all college graduates, who had attended an alumni event ($N=4$). The two off-campus individual interviews were conducted with older graduates referred by a local college administrator. All of the graduates interviewed were African American, or Black, and all interviews were conducted for one hour. In addition, the Director of the Graduate Support Program, a White male, participated in an interview. At the time, SAMS enrolled approximately 70 boys in grades 6 through 8 and 85% of its students qualified for free or reduced-price school meals (see Fenzel, 2009).

School B. School B, located in a large Midwestern city, is also operated by the Jesuits. At the time of the study, it enrolled approximately 53 boys in grades 6 through 8, all of whom were Mexican American; 86% of the students qualified for free or reduced-price school meals. The first author, on a one-day visit to the school, conducted three small group interviews with graduates and an interview with the soon-to-retire Director of Graduate Support and a teacher who was in training to become one of two new co-directors. Both were white men and the retiring director had served as teacher and administrator at the school (which we refer to as Gesu Middle School or GMS) since its founding. Participants ($N = 18$, mean age = 21.3, $SD = 4.9$ years) in the small group interviews included seven current high school students, four current college students, six who were college graduates (age range 23 to 30), and one who was returning to college after working for four

years (age 23). All graduates interviewed were Mexican American and invited to participate by school personnel at the request of the first author to meet with graduates who were current high school and college students and older graduates who may or may not have completed college.

Procedure

Prior to the interviews, participants completed a brief demographic survey. In the semi-structured interviews, the first author directed questions to the participants related to their NativityMiguel school experiences that contributed to their development academically, socially, and spiritually and prepared them for lives of leadership and service. Questions also examined the nature and quality of support they had received as graduates through the graduate support program.

Data Analysis

Interview questions were derived from the findings of previous research on Nativity schools (Fenzel, 2009; Podsiadlo & Philliber, 2003) that examined aspects of the mission and goals of these schools and sought to understand graduates' views of the school experience. The authors made use of NVivo11 to code interview responses and undertake several levels of examination to arrive at themes that spoke to the lived experiences of the students during and following their time as middle school students and the qualities and culture inherent in these schools and their missions that contributed to the success of the graduates. The authors started with multiple readings of the transcripts and then moved to open coding to independently code the transcripts into the following themes: (a) academic self-efficacy and skill development; (b) building social and academic capital; (c) developing leadership and service; (d) brotherhood/peer support; and (e) teacher/mentor caring, challenge, and support. The iterative process of data collection and analyses reflected a grounded theory approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012; Creswell, 2007) that eventually led to the identification of the core concept of resilience as central to the experience of the graduates and reflected in the five dominant themes.

Results

Findings from the interviews are presented here for each of the five main themes with comparisons made between the perceptions of graduates from each of the schools to determine similarities and differences in the lived experiences of the two groups of graduates.

Academic Self-Efficacy Skill Development

Many of the graduates' comments reflected the high level of academic challenge they experienced that was quite a bit greater than their elementary school experience and also included a longer school day compared with their peers attending other schools. Graduates from both schools reflected how difficult their school experience was for them while also understanding that it had prepared them for the challenges they would face in high school and college by enhancing their academic self-competence and developing a strong work ethic.

A comment from high school student from Gesu captures the nearly universal sentiment of graduates from both schools:

You come into [Gesu] and you have such a big work load but after a while you just get accustomed to it. And it creates a sense of such a strong work ethic and more things are just expected of you so you try to live up to those standards and they carry on with you through high school.

An older Gesu graduate added:

The evening study hall time really prepared you for that next step; it showed your potential if you tighten up your belt and put your head into your studies; so the schedule definitely helps to ensure that you graduate from high school and then go on to college.

The following report from an older graduate of SAMS illustrates the long-term carry-over of a skill developed by graduates of both schools:

I think one of the great things about that is that in my professional career, I facilitate trainings for AmeriCorps members. So I am in front of [people] every Wednesday, facilitate training and I use the same exact lessons that I learned in sixth grade: Eye contact, make sure you look at everyone, ... speak clearly. And so to me little things like that we take for granted. People talk about public speaking as one of the biggest fears folks have. People always say, how comfortable are you speaking and I'm like man I've been doing it since sixth grade and that's no exaggeration.

Building Social and Academic Capital

A number of comments from graduates of both schools made reference to the effect the education they received at their NativityMiguel school changed them for the better and provided them with the tools and confidence to succeed beyond their childhood expectations. Comments from the SAMS graduate who was then serving as a first-year teaching fellow at the school summarized the effect noted by a number of graduates:

People see you come home from school in your tie and your huge book bag, you stand out.... And it definitely changes people's attitudes towards you. I think that helps the boys who are at various circumstances. It helps change their own self-image – views that they have of themselves because they are perceived differently from the masses in the neighborhoods.

He then articulated the following analysis on ways in which the education he received at the school prepares graduates for the challenges of a racist society:

Basically, [SAMS] is preparing them to enter a world that doesn't want them, into a world that is not accepting of lower social economic classes and just because of who they are, not because what they know.... [SAMS] breaks through that glass ceiling [sic] for the lower social economic classes. You cannot be the same person you were or the same person your parents wanted you to be growing up, and get to here, unless you change some kind of mindset, unless you change behavior, change your appearance, your demeanor, everything, your values.

One of the older students from Gesu reflected on the struggles faced by his mother and how the school provided him with greater opportunities:

She went to high school, and worked in a factory for the rest of her life; she made it happen supporting three kids, but that's not how I want it to be. Going here, they showed you that there was more potential in you.

Reports from a number of Gesu graduates about how the NativityMiguel education and graduate support enabled them to navigate the challenges of

attending an elite Catholic high school are captured in the following comment:

But it was difficult because you come from such a small school and you go there [high school] are you are really singled out, and it's like you learn to deal with it and learn to break down those barriers. And I think that [Gesu] really gave us the strength or taught us how to deal with it.

In addition, the NativityMiguel education also provided the skills of interacting with influential adults that included a firm handshake, as shown in this comment:

At the banquet they would have [Gesu] kids and a lot of donors and other contributors to [Gesu]. And we would go around and start conversations with them and they would prepare us with how to act with adults.

These kinds of interactions became sources of capital that provided access to the social, academic, and professional worlds of influential members of the community.

Developing Leadership and Service

The Jesuit educational philosophy of forming *men for others* permeated the learning environment at both schools. Developing strong leadership and engaging in service are expectations of the students, so much so that for many graduates these qualities became second nature to them. Several of the older alumni from the Gesu described their efforts to give back to the school that had helped them. One described this as follows:

I was given the opportunity to mentor and I am a mentor of a [GMS] graduate. I had the opportunity to have mentors and now I want to give that back. To me it was like the experience of having someone other than your family or your friends to give you different ideas. To give the feeling that someone else cared about where you were going with life. That's why I want to give back too.

The mentoring experience mentioned by this graduate illustrated a program that distinguished this school from SAMS, where graduates from the middle school are assigned a mentor from the community who commits to meeting regularly with the graduate and provide social support and guidance through high school and, possibly, beyond. According to the GSP director, the program has had mixed success with approximately equal percentages of mentors doing an excellent job, others doing an OK job meeting with the graduates, and the rest not being very dependable or helpful. With respect to a commitment to service, a Gesu student in college shared the following:

I think the major part [of the Gesu experience] was the volunteering at such a young age. Like we would go to an elderly home around the corner or Special Olympics and we didn't realize it at the time because we were so young, but we can see that we made a really big difference, and I always kept that with me that I can make a big difference to somebody even though it's not really a big deal for me – that you can impact somebody's life and put them in a straight and better path if you volunteer. I volunteer a lot with the younger Latinos 'cause I always wanted that older role model. So I see myself in them so that I can get ahead in life. I volunteered a lot in high school and now I am volunteering with the elderly. I think it was just that being here and that model of being a leader.

The following comment came from a graduate of SAMS:

[Two of us] worked for the [name of city] Community Foundation, non-profit organization that delivers grants and services to communities within the ... metropolitan area. We were on the board of directors for an organization called Youth as Resources... basically a youth-led organization where the young people ... organize; they run rallies; they do grant making. So we were writing proposals to raise grant money to give away. ... We started when we were still at [SAMS] participating with this organization and to say that we have had 10+ years with [City] Community Foundation. It has been a very eye opening experience. ... We got to run our own public speaking forums and we got to teach other youth how to organize their communities to do different things. We sponsored mural paintings and several community outreach

centers and I tribute that to the service mindset that [St. Anthony] provided to us. They gave us the platform and that allowed us to venture out to different businesses and actually contribute to, I want to call it, the service movement.

Brotherhood/Peer Support

The students and graduates noted that not only were the staff and faculty a strong and important support system for them in their NativityMiguel experience, but also that there was a strong sense of brotherhood among the students. Being in a Nativity school made them very different from family members and neighborhood peers, so the support from peers was an integral means for helping them acclimate and succeed in the rigorous academic environment.

The following comment from a SAMS graduate with a college degree demonstrates how this support contributes to building resilience:

I also think that the whole brother thing, it makes it like we are all each other's crutch so to speak. Like we're all in this together. There is no reason why someone could not reach out to another person. We all went through this together, we all had the same opportunity here, and we were all blessed to be able to walk through these halls. So we all the same experiences and grew up together for the most part. And so we're almost like brother to each other.

Another SAMS and college graduate spoke to the same theme:

I think the class size definitely had an impact on the type of brotherhood we all had. And they mentioned earlier we were in school pretty much year round so we all come from different parts of the city and because we are such a small size, we pretty much know who each person is – you may not know them but you know who he is. We see each other every day and on top of that, once we left here and we went to all these different private high schools and most of those schools were predominately White and so we all – it made us want to stay with each other more because we could relate to one another. We know the reality of our situation of where we come from and the people in the high schools may just think of us in a certain way. I won't say that it made it

like an us-against-the-world type of scenario, but it made us like stay together more 'cause we know each other and have had three years together at [SAMS].

A similar brotherhood theme was echoed by graduates of Gesu:

I have the same best friends now as I had in 8th grade I think – same guys I went to [Gesu] with are my best friends. Of course, I made some friends at [high school] but that's like our core group.

Teacher/Mentor Caring, Challenge, and Support

While, as was previously noted, Gesu provided a formal mentorship program for students, both schools have strong graduate support programs that focus on monitoring graduates' progress throughout high school, while they continue to communicate high expectations for performance and educational attainment. The students know that while they have graduated from middle school, they have not been forgotten, as is shown in this report from a Gesu graduate and current college student:

I think the biggest reason why we were motivated is that [Gesu] understood that we were Latino, that we were Hispanic, and that it was very common for a Latino to drop out and then say that's OK, I'll just work. ... And [Gesu] understood that it is very easy for them [graduates] to lose interest and lose spirit and just drop out of school. One week you could be fine and the following week you could do a complete 180. Mr. S, he would come to [name of high school] and we would wonder what is he doing here as this is not his school, but he was very respected there and he was working the halls and he was coming to pull kids out of class who were slacking and I got pulled out a couple of times. I knew how that was and he was like you need to get your stuff together 'cause you are going to graduate in a year and you **are** going to graduate. He would give you that firm look digging into your soul and you were going to graduate. We needed that stern push, I guess, from him to let us know that I am here with you 100% and we're going to make this together. I never felt like I was in it by myself. I still felt like [GMS] was part of [my] high school.

The following came from a high school senior from Gesu:

The help that they give us here is great and we have to remember that as high school students, he [GSP director] has that same commitment with the 8th graders now and he cannot help us as much with our college applications, and essays and scholarships but that it is kind of assumed that at this point that we can as seniors take that responsibility upon ourselves as young men and take care of business and get things done when it needs to be in. It's nice to have him despite all that to hang around and asking and caring and giving reminders and it's a nice thing and I think that we can all recognize that a lot of guys for different schools don't have that support and we are very fortunate to have that. No matter that you liked or didn't like your [GMS] experience, the bottom line is that they still have your back at the end of the day

From a graduate of SAMS, a college graduate:

I think for me the fact is I know if anything ever goes badly, I can always call someone up from [St. Anthony]. I remember, whether it is one of my fellow alumni, whether it is one of the faculty, even if it is a faculty member who I didn't have, I mean there's no one here who was here when I was a student because I also taught a year here myself. So I know some of the current teachers and I can say "Hey you know I need a job." Or hey there is this or that going on. I need some professional advice about a situation and I know I can call someone up. And it's ok even if it's an alumni that... like maybe they graduated like 4 or 5 years before I graduated. I know I can still approach them and say hey I went to [SAMS] and they do that. Same thing, I feel like if a [SAMS] alumni approached me and said hey I'm in a bad situation, can you help? If I have it they have it. It is a great resource.

Noteworthy from the interviews was that the graduates of Gesu in the Midwest, having had the same graduate support director for a number of years, expressed a particular connection with him. In addition, having been a high school teacher himself at one of the Catholic high schools many of the Gesu graduates attended, he was well known and respected in the Catholic educational community. Although the graduates of both schools expressed having a good relationship with their GSP director, these relationships and experience provided an additional benefit to Gesu graduates.

Discussion

Building on earlier research (Fenzel, 2009; Fenzel & Monteith, 2008; Podsiadlo & Philliber, 2003) documenting the success of a network of independent urban middle schools that followed the NativityMiguel model of middle level education for underserved urban children, the present study set out to understand the experiences of graduates of two schools from the network and how these experiences contributed to their development through high school and beyond. The schools chosen for the present study, like many of the earlier schools employing the Nativity model, educated only boys from underserved urban contexts and were operated by the Jesuit order of Catholic priests and brothers (Fenzel, 2009).

The present study presents an analysis of interview data from 37 young men who graduated from one of these two schools, one on the East Coast that serves primarily African American boys, and one from the Midwest most of whose students are Mexican American. These findings are consistent with and add to those from previous studies (Fenzel, 2009; Fenzel & Monteith, 2008; Podsiadlo & Philliber, 2003) that showed how successful these schools were at advancing academic careers of urban students placed at risk and some of the reasons for that success. More importantly, the findings presented here show how graduates experienced and grew from the educational program at their NativityMiguel school with respect to domains central to the mission of schools in the NativityMiguel Coalition.

The analyses of the interviews with graduates of the schools, who ranged in age from 15 to 31, led to the classification of five dominant themes that spoke to the importance of the confidence and resilience (Goldsten & Brooks, 2013) they had developed through the entirety of their school experience: academic skill and self-efficacy development, building social and academic capital, developing leadership and service, brotherhood/peer support, and teacher/mentor caring, challenge, and support. With respect to academic skill development, graduates reported how the long school days that included evening study and tutoring, the emphasis on organization to meet the heavy work load, and public speaking were important factors in building knowledge, habits, and skills that provided them with the confidence and resilience to be successful in challenging high school programs and, in many cases, college.

Developing these academic skills and habits contributed to graduates' ability to overcome their early low levels of hope and academic expectations, along with the lure of the streets with their high levels of drug activity and

violence that characterized the urban contexts in which most of them lived and played as children (Rothstein, 2015). The resiliency that the graduates developed contributed to their commitment to investing high levels of time and effort that they needed to put forth in order to overcome poor academic development prior to middle school (Goldstein & Brooks, 2013). The NativityMiguel school experience for them was one that truly changed their negative self-perceptions and aspirations to those of confident and mature young men high in self-efficacy, committed to leadership and service, and capable of high levels of educational attainment and career success.

The graduate support program and the graduates' continued relationships with NativityMiguel staff and graduates and, for Gesu in a formal way, with mentors from the greater community, contributed substantially, it appears, to the building of the academic and social capital that enabled them to negotiate the worlds of private high school and higher education, as well as careers. Graduates' reports of learning public speaking and the skill of the firm hand shake, along with opportunities to interact with more influential members of the community show how the broader school program contributed to their academic and social capital development. These skills and relationships clearly contributed to their ability to overcome many of life's challenges and negative influences.

The high level of commitment to service was a strong theme expressed by the graduates who engaged in service in their communities as part of their middle school program. Of particular note was the extent to which these graduates experienced the call to give back to their NativityMiguel school through mentoring, tutoring, or providing guidance to current students. Several graduates were also serving in leadership roles socially, professionally, or both, and many expressed a commitment to helping others through their example as a result of the mentoring and support they received through the NativityMiguel school program. A number of the interviewees used the often-heard Jesuit school motto of being *men for others* in their remarks, an orientation that clearly attests to the levels of resilience they had developed.

Having benefited from considerable support from their peers, teachers, administrators, and other mentors was a strong sentiment expressed by graduates. Built and nourished through long school days, activities outside of the classroom, including during summer camp, and a graduate support program that brought them together socially and for other school activities, these graduates expressed a strong bond with their Nativity classmates, as well as with other "brothers" who may have graduated before or after them.

They knew that they could call on one another, as well as school personnel, when they needed help or guidance. Graduates often cited the director of the graduate support program as someone whom they knew was there to support them and even seek them out when they were struggling.

Collectively, these data illustrate the powerful impact of the NativityMiguel experience that transforms urban adolescents of color who had been denied access to a quality educational experience through elementary school into young men of promise, resilience, and competence. As one of the interviewees pointed out eloquently, the NativityMiguel experience that extends beyond the middle school years helps these young men resist the lure of the urban drug trade and the oppression of a racist society and develop the skills and social capital needed for success (Andrews, 2012). In addition, graduates are afforded the opportunity to give back to their alma maters through volunteering and mentoring programs; this completes the circle as these graduates are now able to impact the resiliency of a new generation of students and transform the communities that they grew up in.

Certainly, a more thorough picture of the long-term benefits of schools that follow the NativityMiguel model could be obtained by seeking out the graduates who may not be as connected to the school as most of those interviewed for this study appeared to be. At the same time, we note that the graduate support director of St. Anthony's arranged for one group interview with graduates who struggled in high school, showing how important the continued support of a caring member of the school staff can help students who struggle to succeed in high school due to the continued stressfulness of their home lives (Rothstein, 2015). Ongoing support provides students and graduates continued opportunities to build resiliency and reduce vulnerability through their young adult years.

Another limitation of the present study lies in the selection of schools chosen for this study, both of which are operated by the Jesuits and educate only boys. Other schools in the network educate girls and some educate both boys and girls. In addition, the schools chosen for this study had been in operation for approximately 20 years and have had the opportunity to fine tune aspects of their respective educational programs to improve the educational experience of the students and graduates.

The findings of this study provide evidence of how an educational program that is emotionally nurturing and academically challenging can instill resilience and a commitment to service and leadership for urban adolescents placed at risk because of economic poverty and challenging life situations

(Rivera, 2014; Rivera-McCutchen, 2012). Also, consistent with the literature (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Rivera-McCutchen, 2012; Wexler & Pyle, 2012), the individualized, caring, and supportive mentoring provided by school personnel and volunteers contributed significantly to the academic, social, and career success experienced by the young men of color in the present study. A challenge for programs of the sort examined here is that of providing quality graduate support to meet the needs of the growing number of graduates, as this study showed that some students will continue to struggle and require high levels of contact and support through high school and beyond.

At the same time, other schools for urban adolescent boys placed at risk would be wise to take a page from educational plan of NativityMiguel schools that shows how a program of genuine care and mentoring, along with academic challenge accompanied by support, leads to continued academic success and the development of skills and social capital needed to claim a place in society made difficult by racist practices and attitudes. One venture that has shown similar benefits for urban boys of color with respect to academic preparation and college success is the small schools project begun in New York City in 2002 (Harper & Williams, 2014). This Expanded Success Initiative (ESI) seeks to provide students with a challenging academic curriculum based on Common Core Standards in a program that focuses on building students' strengths and an environment that supports the development of social and academic self-competence. In addition, the KIPP schools, through the KIPP Through College program, provide strong support that enables the graduates of their urban public charter schools to succeed through high school and college (KIPP Foundation, n.d.a).

The present study and the other programs noted above demonstrate that it is not enough to provide a strong middle school program and then send their academically well-prepared graduates off to high school and expect them to continue to meet the demands of living in a racist society that holds low expectations for young men of color to succeed. Clearly it continues to take a community of mentors, peers, and family caregivers, to provide the necessary support and encouragement to continue to demonstrate resilience and overcome continuing challenges. Such an effort meets a call to justice that is informed by the Catholic faith integral to the Jesuit mission in education, as well as that of other Catholic religious communities that have sponsored NativityMiguel schools (Fenzel, 2009).

Implications for future research

Future research is needed to examine the long-term benefits of a NativityMiguel education for graduates of more of the schools, including those that educate girls. In addition, with several of the NativityMiguel schools for boys and girls having now graduated 20 and more classes of students, studies of how graduates have contributed to the growth or transformation of their home communities would supplement the work that heretofore has documented individual success. These studies might also compare the successes of NativityMiguel schools with those of similar programs, such as KIPP schools, that could inform the kinds of programming that contributes most to graduates' success and community transformation. Also, given the somewhat limited number of small NativityMiguel schools, research is needed to examine how the NativityMiguel model could be implemented on a larger scale in public, private, and parochial education. Finally, we recommend that research examine models of effective partnerships, such as those with universities and corporations, that could help bring the type of education provided by NativityMiguel schools to more children and adolescents in underserved communities and schools.

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