

Impact of Project Leadership on Student Academic Achievement: An Informed Case Study

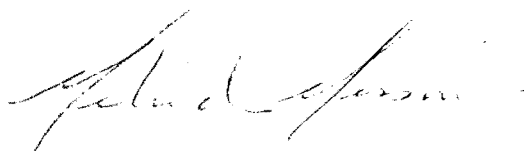
An Honors Thesis (SOC 492)

by

Katherine R Blankenship

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Melinda Messineo

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Melinda Messineo". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

December 2014

Expected Date of Graduation

December 2014

Abstract

This paper's objective is to connect macro level data to a micro example, within the context of public sociology. The author interviewed a student at Ball State University who had been involved in the Project Leadership mentoring program before attending college. The data gathered was used to guide integration of literature regarding educational attainment. Topics discussed include individual, parental, and school factors with a primary focus on class and socioeconomic status and the importance of mentoring programs when working with children coming from poverty.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank “Amy” for sharing her story with me for this project and being willing to be the focus of my honors thesis.

Special thanks to Dr. Messineo for agreeing to be my thesis advisor. Her assistance with this project is just a small fraction of the help and guidance she has given me during my career at Ball State University. Thank you for being a sounding board for my ideas and helping me put them together.

A final thank you to Malia for your encouragement and support.

Introduction

A common critique of sociology is that researchers go into a community, gather data, make suggestions, and then leave without doing something concrete to actually help the community. Colloquially critics of the discipline often note: “sociologists talk about things and social workers do things.” However, when I talk to sociologists, I find that they are passionate about community support and change. Why does this disconnect exist? I argue that to some degree the problem lies in the nature of sociological reporting itself. The premise of my project was to give sociological research and the resulting statistics a face. I believe that by illustrating the macro analysis that is typical of sociology with a micro example, that I will be able to bridge the divide that will support ‘public sociology’ (Burawoy, 2005).

I did this by first interviewing a fellow student at Ball State University and then comparing her history and aspirations to the sociological research regarding educational attainment. This thesis explores a major premise of sociology; An individual faces many decisions in their lifetime that have life-long consequences, yet it can be variables that the individual has no control over that have the most influence. This classic conflict between structure and agency fuels many conversations in the field. I will bring this abstract comparison to life through real life experiences of a young adult who we will call “Amy”. By all accounts, Amy was born in a less advantaged world, but she also found a system that was designed to help level the playing field...the name of that structural intervention came in the form of mentorship.

Amy is involved in a mentoring program called Project Leadership, a grassroots initiative that works with the Twenty-First Century Scholars Program in Indiana. I wanted to interview a student who embodied both the power of structure in the supports offered by Project Leadership

and also had the personal agency of being highly motivated. I ultimately want to show that these positive traits can only go so far alone within the larger social context of inequality.

21st Century Scholars Program

There are many efforts designed to help children living in poverty attend and succeed in college. The 21st Century Scholars Program is Indiana's response to low high school graduation rates, low enrollment in post-secondary institutions of higher learning, rising costs of higher education, increasing drug and alcohol abuse, and increasing poverty rates (Indiana Commission, 2008). The program provides programming designed to support academic success and post high school education. When students apply, they pledge to "achieve a high school diploma with a cumulative GPA of at least 2.0 on a 4.0 scale; not use illegal drugs or alcohol, or commit a crime; apply for admission to an eligible Indiana college, university, or propriety school as a high school senior; and apply for state financial aid on time" (Indiana Commission, 2008, 1). With admission to the program, students receive a grant to cover the cost of attending any Indiana public college or university. The students also receive resources and support to help with the college admission and financial aid process (Indiana Commission, 2008). The Indiana Commission for Higher Education (2013) reports over half of the students involved in the program are first-generation college students. Students involved in the program are also more likely to be from single parent families than the average financial aid applicant.

According to the 2013 report by the Indiana 21st Century Scholars program, students who are involved with the program are more likely to enter college directly after high school than other students (Indiana Commission, 2013). Students involved in the program are also more likely to be ready academically for college, have a higher GPA, and graduate from college compared to the rates of all low-income students (Indiana Commission, 2013). Some colleges and

universities have created programs to further facilitate educational success beyond the limits of the 21st Century Scholar Program benefits (Indiana Commission, 2008).

Project Leadership

Despite these admirable goals, community members realized that having the program was not enough to guarantee participation. At risk students need additional systems of support to help them effectively apply for the 21st Century Scholars program and navigate the path to higher education. In response, a local organization was founded. Project Leadership serves Delaware and Grant Counties and is an example of a highly engaged grassroots mentoring program. The program mentors middle-school and high-school-aged children to facilitate eligibility for the 21st Century Scholar Program (Project Leadership, 2012). In the years since it has been in effect, the enrollment of students into the scholarship program has increased dramatically in the two counties, from under 40% to 80% (Project Leadership, 2012). I wanted to focus on a student who had been involved with Project Leadership because it is a community based program that combines mentoring and social activities to facilitate student access to 21st Century Scholar Program and success in higher education. An e-mail was sent out to students who were involved in Project Leadership and are currently attending college to assist with my project. Amy was one of two individuals that responded. I chose to use Amy as my subject because she embodies many of the characteristics that I was interested in analyzing—high motivation and achievement, significant relationship with Project Leadership, and a family is currently living in poverty.

Amy began her involvement in Project Leadership her freshman year of high school. Additionally, she was an intern with the program during the summer of 2014. She is currently a sophomore at Ball State University, a public Indiana university. She stated that she has had a very positive interaction with the program and believes it is part of the reason she wants to be a

school guidance counselor. Amy graduated third in her high school class; she is very involved on campus, and plans to obtain a Master's degree after her Bachelor's to pursue work as a guidance counselor. To put Amy's experience into her familial context it is worth mentioning that she has an older brother who graduated high school but did not attend college. He dropped out of high school his senior year even though he had been planning on going to college. He now has two children that are in the care of Amy's mother. Amy has a younger sister in middle-school. Amy shared that her sister is doing very well in school and looks up to her greatly. She shared with me that she does not talk to her family very often—stating she does not want to listen to their issues, and that they do not seem to care.

She said that her mentor really helped her to believe in herself and her goals. She indicated that the social component of Project Leadership is something that benefited her during her time in the program. Amy claimed that her mentor has been the most important support system she has had in her life. She said she helped her see college as a possibility, as her parents never talked to her about attending. When asked “Who were your role models growing up?” Amy replied: *Honestly, I did not have any role-models as I was growing up. There was never that one person who I would always look to for advice or anything of the sort.* Along with academic support, Amy's mentor provided emotional support and encouragement. At the time of the interview, Amy was still in contact with her mentor and plans to be for the rest of her life. Amy has experienced the struggles of living in poverty and sees schooling as an avenue to achieve the American Dream of success.

The American Dream and Meritocracy

Shane and Heckhausen (2012) looked at beliefs about meritocracy and found that the majority of their sample of college students believed in the "American Dream" and identified

a causal link between that goal and an individual's effort and ability. This belief that an individual's effort and ability impact their status and SES attainment is considered a meritocratic-causal connection (Shane & Heckhausen, 2012). This meritocratic causal connection is what drives the ideology of individualism in our culture. The students in the study also reported having expectations of achieving a higher SES than their parents (Shane & Heckhausen, 2012). The authors argue that students may have such a strong belief in meritocratic-causal conceptions regarding class mobility because they have been socialized that way (Shane & Heckhausen, 2012). Individuals who hold strong beliefs regarding the connections of personal effort and social mobility are more likely to be goal engaged (Shane & Heckhausen, 2012). Goal driven individuals were more likely to have higher self-expectations regarding their social mobility and expect to attain higher levels of SES (Shane & Heckhausen, 2012). In comparison, luck oriented causal conceptions regarding status mobility and SES attainment is associated with disengagement and decreased expected personal SES (Shane & Heckhausen, 2012). Amy can be characterized as a goal driven individual; she has very high expectations regarding social mobility and believes that it is through her own personal effort that she will be successful.

Gender

Amy shared that it was expected that she do better in school than her brother. This is an example of how gender roles for girls and boys can impact their educational experiences. One major factor that Brint attributes to the impact of gender roles on girls' education is how patriarchal the society is in which they live (Brint, 2006). He describes that in less patriarchal societies the "traditional" female gender roles of childrearing and home life receive less support, allowing girls to have a similar experience in their schooling as boys (Brint, 2006). That being said, boys are commonly given more freedom and higher expectations regarding schooling. According to

Brint (2006), even in less patriarchal societies, boys are given more allowances in the classroom such as more time to answer questions and the ability to interrupt the instructor. The author also states that instructors are more likely to maintain eye contact with men and are more likely to call on males than females to answer questions (Brint, 2006). While Brint discusses these differences, he also points out that it varies across disciplines. In some areas like art, history, and social science women are in the majority and do not experience as many negative factors as in disciplines like mathematics or sciences that are still predominantly male focused.

There is definitely something feminine about being a good student. Brint states that there are a fifth more women enrolled as undergraduates in the US and are more likely to have higher grades and complete their degree (Brint, 2006). Brint argues that “feminine” traits like the ability to cooperate with others, good interpersonal skills, and the ability to concentrate and comply with authority over an extended period of time allow females to be more successful in higher education compared to males (Brint, 2006). Mickelson (2012) reports that, overall, females do better in school than males. The author states that females outperform males in reading and writing and are only slightly out-performed in mathematics and science (Mickelson, 2012). The majority of AP and SAT exam takers were reported to be female, and there are currently no gender differences in the likelihood of student placement in higher level math and science secondary tracks (Mickelson, 2012). Females are more likely to graduate high school, enroll in college, and persist to graduation (Mickelson, 2012). She states that while females excel in education, when it comes to the labor force they have lower rates of participation and income than men (Mickelson, 2012).

One hypothesis that Mickelson (2012) describes to explain why women do so well in school despite lower income returns is the “Pollyanna hypothesis.” She describes this hypothesis as women believing that gender discrimination no longer exists (Mickelson, 2012). Rather than

gender, success is based on educational attainment and personal merit attainment. Doing well in school leads to higher returns later in life and that is why women do so well (Mickelson, 2012). An alternate explanation that the author offers is the gender-role socialization hypothesis. Mickelson (2012) states that women do well in school because girls are socialized to be good students. Unlike their male counterparts, females are trained to comply with authority and receive validation via praise by complying (Mickelson, 2012). The author states that because motivation is not tied to external rewards like high income, the weaker rewards women receive do not negate their academic achievement (Mickelson, 2012). Both of these explanations can help illuminate Amy's success in school even though the career she is training for has low income returns. Amy has internalized the meritocratic conception of success, and the socialized traits of femininity have assisted her in being able to do well in school.

Academic Tracking

Additionally, academic tracking has assisted in Amy's success in her educational career. According to Brint, the rationale behind ability grouping and tracking within schools is that students perform best in groups of their own ability and learning pace (Brint, 2006). In addition, lower track students should gain confidence in their abilities when they are not forced to compete with students who learn at a faster pace (Brint, 2006). In comparison, Oakes (2010) argues the classes of students in different tracking levels have little resemblance to one another. Assignments that engage students in knowledge and information application and acquisition is regulated to the upper tracks while remedial, basic knowledge is taught in the lower tracks (Oakes, 2010). Expectations are also reduced in the remedial tracks and influences what is taught. While tracking allows higher level students to excel greatly it holds those in lower levels back significantly (Oakes, 2010). Rather than being based on merit alone, some tracking decisions are influenced

by SES and/or race (Oakes, 2010; Brint, 2006). Lower status children are more likely to end up in the lower tracks, taking less rigorous courses and learning significantly less than their peers (Oakes, 2010).

Furthermore, there are curriculum differences between schools based on the socioeconomic status of the neighborhoods that provide the tax base. Spade, Columba, and Vanfossen (2012) report lower SES schools offered fewer AP and honors classes than its higher level counterpart. One reason that working class schools do not have as many advanced courses is that they do not have staff qualified to teach them (Spade, et al., 2012). Also, working class schools have fewer children enrolled in the advanced classes; if classes cannot reach a minimum enrollment they are usually canceled (Spade, et al., 2012). This further limits the advanced classes offered to students at working class schools. Excellent schools feature higher financial and cultural support from the community. These schools also are more likely to have staff members that take initiative to gain student interest in higher level classes and are resourceful when dealing with challenges (Spade, et al., 2012).

Amy was put into tracking in elementary school. In second grade she was a part of a program called "Talent Pool," where she was involved in special projects. In middle school she was involved in an honors program called Excell. In high school she took many honors and AP classes. She described her guidance counselor made her take AP/Honors classes her freshman and sophomore years of high school but was able to choose more what she wanted to take as an upper classman. She graduated with a core 40 diploma and has maintained her 21st Century Scholar scholarship while at BSU. Amy benefited from being placed in a high academic track early in her educational career. By being in a high academic track, she was able to experience many of the benefits described above and is hopeful and positive about her future.

Personality traits and academic success

Personality traits and attitude are also correlated with academic achievement in college. Farsides and Woodfield (2003) report that extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism were found to have no direct correlation with academic undergraduate success. In comparison, agreeableness, openness to experience, and verbal intelligence and application are traits that are positively correlated with academic undergraduate success (Farsides & Woodfield, 2003). Amy appears to have these traits. She is involved in many activities on campus, is agreeable to the mission of her college and organization, and is succeeding academically.

Additionally, students with a positive attitude about their college experience are more likely to perform better academically than peers with a negative attitude (Gerandi, 2006). In addition, student degree of satisfaction with their college's influence on their intellectual growth differentiated between students who had positive or negative academic outcomes (Gerandi, 2006). Students who experienced highly positive academic outcomes rated the influence of the college on intellectual growth higher than students who experienced mostly negative academic outcomes (Gerandi, 2006). The findings of this research also seem to be true in Amy's case. It is possible that as her journey in her undergraduate career has gotten harder, she has struggled more to maintain her academic success. Amy stated:

“Throughout middle school and high school, I rarely ever saw school as challenging. My AP World History class my sophomore year in high school was really challenging for me, but looking back it was probably because it was the first “college-level” class that I took. At the end of my junior year, I found school challenging just because there were a lot of assignments that were piled on at once, and I wasn't used to that kind of pressure. Now, I see school as challenging, but only because I feel like 80% of my time

has to be spent on school work so that I can get everything done, and that's a lot of pressure because I do not have enough attention to focus that 80% of the time."

Another factor that influences academic achievement is student boredom (Pekrun, Hall, Goetz, & Perry, 2014). Pekrun et al. (2014) report course-related boredom has negative effect of student academic performance which then increases the level of boredom the student experiences. The researchers state the negative correlation between student boredom and academic achievement can be mediated by interest and intrinsic motivation as the factors decrease the likelihood of the onset of boredom (Pekrun et al., 2014).

Self-efficacy

Arslan (2013) reports that there are four factors that increase a student's self-efficacy—mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and psychological state. The researcher defines mastery experiences as previous experiences that provide realistic information to the student on their ability to handle new situations (Arslan, 2013). In comparison, vicarious experience is a student's observation of their classmate's performance (Arslan, 2013). Social persuasion is described as the explicit demands placed on the student by their social environment (Arslan, 2013). Finally, psychological state is the student's perceived educational environment. Arslan reports females are more likely to believe that mastery experience, social persuasion, and emotional state increase their self-efficacy beliefs related learning and performance. Student opinion regarding the sources of self-efficacy change depending on academic achievement. High achieving students are more likely to credit mastery experience, social persuasion, and vicarious experience for their academic success than medium and low achieving students. Even with her primarily positive attitude towards school, Amy has faced obstacles in her educational career.

Creating a Student Identity

In addition to the factors discussed above, there are other factors that can hinder academic success in students who are coming from poverty. Brint states that it is difficult for working class children to create a “student” identity because they have not been exposed to academic activity and expectations in the home (Brint, 2006). In addition to trying to create this identity from the ground up while managing school, these children must overcome doubts and negativity from their family and social group (Brint, 2006). Looking at the likelihood of graduating from high school, Hickman and Wright (2000) report that standardized testing, school expulsions, and student duration in a mentoring program were not correlated to the student graduating from high school. The younger a child is when enrolled in a mentoring program, the greater likelihood that they will not persist in the program and not graduate (Hickman & Wright, 2011). The authors theorize that this is connected to the child being labeled “at risk” and the label influencing negative behaviors (Hickman & Wright, 2011).

Owens (2010) reports parental education expectations are not a significant indicator of an individual earning a college degree. The researcher discovered a correlation between parental factors and the likelihood of the child graduating from both high school and college (Owens, 2010). These factors include parental educational attainment, cognitive ability, and duration at current residence (Owens, 2010). In comparison, academic achievement is negatively correlated to neighborhood poverty, family poverty, and childhood neglect (Nikulina, Widom, Czaja, 2011).

Neighborhood Environment

Before coming to college Amy primarily lived with her mom, with visits to her father’s home. Both parents lived in Marion, Indiana while she was in school. When asked if she ever

had to move, she revealed that they moved a few times but only a few streets away. Amy discussed with me that her neighborhood was predominately white, but that she lived in “bad part of town.” I asked her for clarification of why it was not a good place to live. She responded that there were a lot of minorities living there and it was mostly working class people or people who had been laid off. Amy described that her town was separated into “good” and “bad” areas. When asked to describe the racial make-up of her school, she stated that it was pretty balanced, maybe mostly minorities. In actuality she was correct as around 45% of the total school population were people of color in 2013 (IDOE, 2013).

Amy’s perception of “good” versus “bad” is supported by Persell’s theories of segregation. Persell (2012) describes that structural inequality influences socialization—the dominate culture influences how individuals are perceived, interacted with, and their possible life outcomes. She states that while different races have similar cultural values regarding education and schooling, the structural and interactional inequality and discrimination that minority children face impacts their educational outcomes (Persell, 2012). An example is that communities are predominantly socially and racially segregated; creating a chain reaction that impacts the perceived quality of the school, the quality and amount of teachers, access to materials, and the SES and race of the students who attend (Persell, 2012).

According to US Census Data, almost a fourth of school-age children were living in poverty in Grant County, Indiana in 2012 (SAIPE). The average household income for residents in Grant County was \$39,151, which is significantly lower than the national average of \$51,371 (SAIPE, 2012). Overall poverty rates are also higher in this county; 18.7% of the population is living in poverty compared to the national average of 15.9%. Within the Marion Community School district, over thirty percent of students live in poverty (SAIPE, 2012). In 2010, the grad-

uation rate of Marion Community schools was 68.2%. In comparison, the reported graduation rate in 2013 was 95.4% (SAIPE, 2012). This is comparable to national trends (PEW, 2012).

Children exposed to more poverty-related risk factors in preschool have worse functioning in third grade compared to children who experienced low levels of risk (Roy & Raver, 2014). Roy and Raver (2014) argue that the experiences of those living in deep poverty are not uniform across families, rather that specific combinations of risk-factors have the most influence on a child's development. Children from single-parent families in deep poverty combined with multiple life stressors and crowded living conditions are more likely to exhibit impaired functioning compared to children in other situations (Roy & Raver, 2014).

Stull (2013) reports that at the start of a child's formal educational career, there is an achievement gap between children from different socioeconomic status backgrounds (Stull, 2013). A child's family SES has both direct and indirect effects on a child's educational career but can be mediated by the school environment (Stull, 2013). Owens (2010) describes neighborhood SES as positively associated with educational attainment. After controlling for individual characteristics, the researcher states that a disadvantaged neighborhood is a significant negative predictor for a child graduating from high school or college (Owens, 2010). Students from neighborhoods of high educational and occupational attainment were found to be three times more likely to graduate from college than students from low attainment neighborhoods (Owens, 2010). The author argues that this may be related to the resources available to students in their neighborhoods—motivation, information, and role models. By being involved in Project Leadership, Amy was able to access resources outside those available to her in her neighborhood or family.

Owens (2010) states that neighborhood background has the potential to influence an individual's selection of academic track, friend groups, and self-expectations. The social class and expectations of peers were found to be significant factors in predicting an individual earning a bachelor's degree. Owens (2010) suggests that this may be related to the norms and values regarding education and occupational attainment within social class. Negative effects from coming from a disadvantaged neighborhood are amplified if the child attends a school whose students are of a higher social class (Owens, 2010). As the majority of the students who attended Amy's school had a similar background to her, the negative effects from her neighborhood and family culture were not made worse.

Peers

Similar to the impact of the neighborhood environment, the peer environment of a student can influence their belief in the value of schooling. Brint defines anti-school peer groups as containing those students whose life trajectory does not adhere to what is expected from the school. These students often feel alienated and do not believe that they are receiving information or skills from the school that will be beneficial to their life. Therefore, they do not comply with the institutional socialization of schooling. This supports the findings reported by Metz (2012) about students from poverty. She reports that in schools where more than half of students were not expecting to attend college, students felt and expressed alienation from the curriculum, class, and school procedures (Metz, 2012). Rather than following what would be expected in a school classroom setting, these students would sleep, converse, banter and badger the teacher, and exhibit other disruptive activities (Metz, 2012). Metz (2012) describes that this type of "anti-school" peer group extensively undermines the socialization efforts of the school. She describes how teachers and administrators report feeling at a loss about their ability to succeed and they

report feeling detached from their own tasks (Metz, 2012). Metz (2012) describes how the perpetuation of the traditional and symbolic aspects of “The American High School,” (ie: it being a vehicle specifically toward college) is a disservice for communities that do not mirror the expected middle class ideals. This disconnect creates distance between students and schooling, making the institution extremely ineffective (Metz, 2012). As Amy’s goals agreed with those of the school she would not be considered a part of one of these anti-school groups. Without intervention by her mentor and the 21st Century Scholarship, she may have never seen college as an option and therefore would not have seen schooling as beneficial or necessary to her life as her family culture is different than that of the school.

Culture of School

It is relatively easy for middle class children to create and maintain this class identity because their social culture closely resembles that of the school. Brint (2006) argues that middle class children have learned the behavior and expectations of organizations from their families and these skills and habits allow them to be successful in the institutional environment. Higher parental expectations and support related to schooling also contribute to student success among members of the middle class (Brint, 2006). Amy’s interactions with Project Leadership and her mentor facilitated her overcoming many obstacles to academic success that she might have faced as a result of being raised in poverty.

One educational advantage middle class parents provide to their children is the extensive preparation given in anticipation of the start of school. Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007) state that working class parents see kindergarten as the beginning of their child’s educational career; whereas, many middle class parents have already begun teaching their children basic school skills prior to kindergarten. This could occur through pre-school programs that working class

families may not have financial access to or even in differences in child-rearing practices (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007). Being prepared for school increases a middle class student's chances of high academic achievement later in their career (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007). This working class mindset was an integral part in Amy's upbringing. Rather than attending pre-school, Amy was tended to by her mother, aunt, and step-mother throughout the years before entering kindergarten.

Concerned Cultivation vs. Natural Growth

Covay and Carbonaro (2010) describe the middle class method of childrearing as cultivating children by exposing them and involving them in many activities while parents living in poverty are more likely to let children progress naturally along interests and accomplishments. The researchers state that extracurricular activities increase children's non-cognitive skills— independence, achievement, universalism, and specificity—which are correlated with academic achievement (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010). The middle class parents' desire for their children to be involved in extracurricular activities benefits the children, increasing their non-cognitive skills in the classroom (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010).

Although Amy grew up in a working class family in poverty, she seems to subscribe to many middle class ideals. In addition to involvement in school, Amy was also highly involved in extra-curricular activities. Amy shared that these activities included—concert and marching band, volley ball, 4-H, HS government, track, bowling, key club, HS senate, Spanish club, and numerous national honors organizations. Amy has maintained her high level of involvement in college. She is involved in marching band, Epsilon Sigma Alpha, acts as a coordinator for SVS with "Home Savers", and is employed as desk staff for a campus residence hall. Amy stated her parents supported her participation and interest in a wide variety of activities, teams, clubs, and

organizations while she was growing up, especially her mom, but did not push her to be involved. Amy shared that her mother was highly involved throughout her time in school—serving as a chaperone for field trips and events, a volunteer with boosters, and by attending her performance events.

The Summer Learning Gap

Additionally, involvement in extra-curricular activities helps children maintain rates of learning while school is not in session. Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007) report that middle class parents are more likely to push their children to attend summer camps and other programs that maintain their level of schooling and academic engagement throughout the summer (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007). This advantage allows the children to maintain their rate of absorption and lessens the chance that they will forget concepts from the previous school year.

Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007) describe the learning gap that occurs in a child's education between when school ends in the spring and resumes in the fall. The children from middle class backgrounds were found to progress in their education during the summer at a rate similar to that seen while school was in session school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007). On the other hand, children living in poverty lacked such a progression, thus broadening the a "gap" between their education and those in the middle class (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007). Children from middle class backgrounds are more likely to receive educational enrichment from their parents (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007). Parents from working class families are more likely to believe in the natural growth of their children, behaving in a more detached manner than their middle class counterparts (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007).

Parental Factors

Interestingly, different parental factors continue to influence a student's involvement in schooling through their career. Stebelton and Soria (2009) report first-generation college students often experience different obstacles to their success than their peers who are non-first-generation college students. First-generation college students are also more likely to experience higher number and combination of obstacles (Stebleton & Soria, 2009). The researchers identified the obstacles as competing job responsibilities, family responsibilities, weak math skills, weak English skills, inadequate study skills, and feeling depressed, stressed, or upset (Stebleton & Soria, 2009, p12). While Amy is doing well in school, she stated that she has struggled with obstacles that can be characterized as those identified by Stebelton and Soria (2009). She spoke about how she does not have strong study skills and sometimes struggles to cope with stress. Additionally, she identified that her family is not very understanding of her life in college and that also influences her stress level.

Communication

Amy shared that her parents divorced when she was young and both have since remarried. While she has always been closer with her mother than her father, since she has been at college their communication has decreased greatly. While this is not uncommon, the research warns that the reduction can have many negative effects on students like Amy. Student-family contact declines as students travel through emerging adulthood (Sneed et al., 2006). Agliata & Renk (2008) find higher rates of parent-student communication is related to higher levels of self-worth and adjustment in college students. Parent-child communication reciprocity is very important to student adjustment and academic success (Agliata & Renk, (2008). Perceived levels of parental expectations, especially from mothers, have a greater impact than actual beliefs the parents might

have (Agliata & Renk, (2008). While Amy may not maintain levels of communication with her parents, her involvement in campus organizations and her continued contact with her mentor have the possibility of mediating the negative effects discussed above. It is not uncommon for children coming from poverty to struggle maintaining communication with their parents while they attempt to straddle different social categories (Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2006).

SES and Work

When asked to describe the socioeconomic status of her parents she said they were low income but she would not say that they lived in poverty. Amy's mother was laid off from a well-paying factory job when she was young and has had three other jobs since then. Her mother graduated from high school and has an Associate's degree. Her step-father receives disability benefits and has not worked for as long as she has known him. Her father graduated from high school and was a supervisor at an auto-parts factory for many years until he was laid off. Amy shared that he currently has no source of income because of a recent injury.

Students coming from a rural professional-managerial household are more likely to have high academic involvement, be ambitious, and subscribe to the traditional meritocratic model of status attainment than students who are of a lower socioeconomic status (McGrath, Swisher, Elder, & Conger, 2001). When lower-status families replicate behaviors of the professional-managerial families, their children are more likely to attend college (McGrath, et al., 2001). While the researchers report that over half of students from professional-managerial families continue to college after graduation, only thirty percent of students from low-status families attend (McGrath, et al., 2001). The researchers theorize this finding is associated with different levels of human and social capital between different household types.

In addition, this finding can be related to the culture of those living in poverty. According to Rothstein (2004), children are less likely to be encouraged to be creative in solving problems if their parents work in routine, highly supervised jobs that are common among those living in poverty (Rothstein, 2004). This puts children on track to live in poverty as well as they will be less likely to have an active, self-motivated approach to learning (Rothstein, 2004). As Amy's parents have not always been in their current employment situation, Amy was spared the majority of the ill effects that can come from having parents working low autonomy jobs.

Divorce

Divorce and an unstable home life can also impact a student's academic life. Research finds that high school students from unstable divorced, relatively stable divorced, and single-parent households were out-performed academically in late adolescence by their counterparts that never experienced family restructuring (Sun & Li, 2009; Cavanagh, Schiller, & Riegle-Crumb, 2006). Sun & Li (2009) find that longer duration of family stability after parental divorce is linked to more positive performance than would be expected otherwise. In other words, negative impacts of divorce can fade overtime if a stable environment is created. Also, rather than the effects of family structure and instability being equal during a student's educational career they were found to have a greater impact on educational outcomes in late adolescence than the start of high school (Cavanagh, Schiller, & Riegle-Crumb, 2006). While Amy stated her parents remarried relatively soon after they were divorced, the tumultuous nature of family restructuring along with the job instability her mother faced influenced her life strongly. Amy spoke of how she never really struggled high school but is beginning to lack motivation in college. This could possibly be a latent effect from home instability in her childhood.

Income and Educational Attainment

If Amy had not chosen to attend college, her life trajectory would look much different. Young Adults (25-32) who have at least a bachelor's degree have an unemployment rate of 3.8% compared to 12.2 % experienced by those who only have graduated from high school (Pew, 2014). Additionally, individuals who have less than a bachelor's degree are significantly more likely to live in poverty than those who have earned a four year degree (Pew, 2014). Additionally, the median income for an individual who has not earned a bachelor's degree is \$28,000 compared to the median income of \$45,500 experienced by those who have a Bachelor's degree or more (Pew, 2014).

Conclusion

While Amy has defied expectations regarding educational attainment for children who come from poverty and the working class, not all children with her background will necessarily fare as well. Amy was afforded many privileges and benefits in her life that have allowed her to reach the point she is today. Without the intervention from her mentor from Project Leadership it is very unlikely that she would have went on to higher education. Children who participated in a mentoring program are more likely to have more positive life outcomes—emotional and behavioral functioning, academic achievement, and employment—than children who were not involved in a mentoring program (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). Youth who have both environmental and individual risk factors experienced the highest effect from being involved in a mentoring program (DuBois et al., 2002). The researchers theorized that mentor-mentee relationships with frequent contact and emotional closeness that span a significant amount of time may have significant positive effects on youth outcomes (DuBois et al., 2002). A combination of school and community based mentor programming is more likely to have the

greatest positive effect on mentees. Herrera, et al. (2000) argue student engagement in social activities as well as academic activities offers more value to the child than only one type of activity. These findings are repeated in Amy's experience with Project Leadership and her mentor. In short, the supportive structure of Project Leadership combined with Amy's personal agency has facilitated her success. I argue that the support, encouragement, and advice that she received from her mentor helped her overcome many negative effects from growing up in poverty. For every success story like Amy, there are many more at-risk children that fall through the cracks of the educational system because of factors outside of their control. By connecting the macro research findings to the individual, these factors become easily visible. With more programs like Project Leadership, disadvantaged children could have the support and opportunity necessary to achieve their goals.

Reference

- Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Olsen, L. S. (2007). Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. *American Sociological Review*, *72*(2), 167-177.
- Arslan, A. (2013). Investigation of relationship between sources of self-efficacy beliefs of secondary school students and some variables. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice*, *13*(4), 1983-1993.
- Brint, S. (2006). *Schools and societies*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Sciences.
- Burawoy, M. (2005). For public sociology. *American Sociological Review*, *70*, 4-28.
- Covay, E. & Carbonaro, W. (2010). After the bell: Participation in extracurricular activities, classroom behavior, and academic achievement. *Sociology of Education*, *83*(1), 20-45.
- DuBois, D. L., Holloway, B. E., Valentine, J. C., Cooper, H. (2002). Effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth: A meta-analytic review. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *30*(1), 157-197.
- Farsides, T., & Woodfield, R. (2003). Individual differences and undergraduate academic success: The roles of personality, intelligence, and application. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *34*, 1225-1243.
- Gerardi, S. (2005). Positive college attitudes among minority and low-income students as an indicator of academic success. *The Social Science Journal*, *43*, 185-190.
- Graves, S. L., & Wright, L. B. (2011). Parent involvement at school entry: An examination of group differences and achievement. *School Psychology International*, *35*(1), 35-48.
- Herrera, C., Sipe, C. L., & McClanahan, W. S. (2000). Mentoring school-age children: Relationship development in community-based and school-based programs. *The National Mentor-*

ing Partnership. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2-52.

Hickman, G. P., & Wright, D. (2011). Academic and school behavioral variables as predictors of high school graduation among at-risk adolescents enrolled in a youth-based mentoring program. *Journal of At-Risk Issues, 16*(1), 25-33.

Indiana Commission for Higher Education. (2013). *2013 Scholar scorecard*. Retrieved from [http://www.in.gov/21stcenturyscholars/files/2014_Scholars_Scorecard_\(STATE_COLLEGES\).pdf](http://www.in.gov/21stcenturyscholars/files/2014_Scholars_Scorecard_(STATE_COLLEGES).pdf)

Indiana Commission for Higher Education. (2008). *Indiana's twenty-first century scholars program: Years of impact*. Retrieved from http://www.in.gov/che/files/21st_Century_Scholar_Report.pdf

Indiana Department of Education (IDOE). (2014). Find school and corporation data reports. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.in.gov/accountability/find-school-and-corporation-data-reports>

Magano, M. D. & Gouws, F. E. (2012). The academic self-concept of adolescents who live in disadvantaged home environments: A life orientation perspective. *Journal of Social Science, 32*(3), 311-319.

McGrath, D. J., Swisher, R. R., Elder, G. H., & Conger, R. D. (2001). Breaking new ground: Diverse routes to college in rural America. *Rural Sociology, 66*(2), 244-267.

Metz, M. H. (2012). Real school: The universal drama amid disparate experience. In Ballantine, J. H. & Spade, J. Z. (Eds), *Schools and Society*, (pp.154-166). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

- Mickelson, R. A. (2012). Gender and education. In Ballantine, J. H. & Spade, J. Z. (Eds), *Schools and Society*, (pp.321-331). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Newman, K. S. & Chin, M. M. (2003). High stakes: Time poverty, testing, and the children of the working poor. *Qualitative Sociology*, 26(1), 3-34.
- Nikulina, V., Widom, C. S., & Czaja, S. (2011). The role of childhood neglect and childhood poverty in predicting mental health, academic achievement and crime in adulthood. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 48, 309-321.
- Nora, A., Barlow, L., & Crisp, G. (2006). Examining the tangible and psychosocial benefits of financial aid with student access, engagement, and degree attainment. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49, 1636-1651.
- Oakes, J. (2010). The distribution of knowledge. In Arum, R., Beattie, I. R., & Ford, K (Eds), *The Structure of Schooling: Readings in the Sociology of Education* (pp.199-207). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Owens, A. (2010). Neighborhoods and schools as competing and reinforcing contexts for educational attainment. *Sociology of Education*, 83(4), 287-311.
- Payne, R. K., DeVol, P. E., & Smith, T. D. (2006). *Bridges out of poverty: Strategies for professionals and communities*. aha! Process, Inc.
- Pekrun, R., Hall, N. C., Goetz, T., & Perry, R. P. (2014). Boredom and achievement: Testing a model of reciprocal causation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 106(3), 696-710.
- PewResearch. (2014). The rising cost of not going to college. *Social and Demographic Trends*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/02/11/the-rising-cost-of-not-going-to-college/>

- PewResearch. (2012). US high school and college completion rates continue to climb. *Social and Demographic Trends*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/11/05/us-high-school-and-college-completion-rates-continue-to-climb/>
- Prasad, M., Perrin, A. J., Bezila, K., Hoffman, S. G., Kindleberger, K., Manturuk, K., Powers, A. S., & Payton, A. R. (2009). The undeserving rich: "Moral values" and the white working class. *Sociological Forum*, 24(2), 225-253.
- Project Leadership. (2012). *About the program*. Retrieved from <http://www.projectleadership.org/twentyfirstAbout.html>
- Rothstein, R. (2004). The achievement gap: A broader picture. *Educational Leadership*, 61(3), 193-195.
- Roy, A. L., & Raver, C. C. (2014). Are all risks equal? Early experiences of poverty related risk and children's functioning. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 28(3), 391-400.
- Schafft, K. A. (2006). Poverty, residential mobility, and student transiency within a rural New York School District. *Rural Sociology*, 71(2), 212-231.
- Shane, J. & Heckhausen, J. (2012). University students' conceptions about social mobility: Diverging pathways for believers in personal merit and luck. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 82, 10-19.
- Stebbleton, M. J. & Soria, K. M. (2009). Breaking down barriers: Academic obstacles of first-generation students at research universities. *Learning Assistance Review*, 17(2), 7-20.
- Stull, J. C. (2013). Family socioeconomic status, parent expectations, and a child's achievement. *Research in Education*, 90, 53-67.

Informed Consent - Audio recorded interview- Student

Study Title - Impact of Project Leadership on Student Academic Achievement: A Informed Case Study

Study Purpose and Rationale - The purpose of this study is to gather information to better understand the impact of a program like Project Leadership on academic achievement and adulthood.

Participation Procedures and Duration - To ensure accuracy of responses, the interview will be preserved as an audio recording as well as interviewer written notes. The interview will take approximately one hour.

Data Confidentiality or Anonymity - Your name will NOT be coded. The final reporting of data will be used as a comparison to national data trends.

Storage of Data - Data will be stored on a password protected computer/flash drive. Only the researcher will have access to the data. The data will be kept indefinitely but all identifying information will have been removed after initial coding.

Risks or Discomforts - Potential risks and discomforts are minimal, however, you may experience psychological discomfort from having your voice recorded. If you would like to communicate with a counselor about your discomfort, Ball State University does provide mental health services for students. For more information please go to: <http://cms.bsu.edu/campuslife/counselingcenter> or call 765-747-7330.

Benefits - There are no direct benefits to student.

Compensation - You will not receive compensation for participating.

Voluntary Participation - Your participation is voluntary and you may choose to close the interview at any time.

Informed Consent

I have had an opportunity to ask questions about the above named research project as part of the informed consent process. I understand that part of the research involves the use of a audio recording device. The following information was described to me by the researcher and in the informed consent form:

- The type or types of media to be used;
- How this media was to be used in the research project;
- Who would have access to it;
- What safeguards were to be used;
- What privacy and security precautions would be used (if applicable);
- How the media would be destroyed and when once the research was completed (if applicable);
- That I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time;
- That I have the right to decline having my responses recorded; and
- That I can receive a copy of both the informed consent form and this media release form for my records.

As such, I agree to allow the researcher to use the media described to me as part of the above named research project. This media will only be used for the above named project.

IRB Contact Information - For questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact Director, Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070, irb@bsu.edu.

Jaimee Maddox

✓ *Jaimee Maddox*

Printed Name

Researcher Contact Information

Principal Investigator:
Katherine Blankenship, Sociology
Ball State University
Muncie, IN 47306
Telephone: (937) 336-7110
e-mail: krblankenshi@bsu.edu

PLaSA Interview Questions

Birthday ___/___

Gender M/F

Race _____

Tell me a little about yourself.

F/S/J/S

Sorority

Job

Clubs

Relationships

Project leadership

How long were you in the project leadership program?

Describe your interaction within the program.

Do you think that the program helped you? In what ways?

What impact do you think your mentor had on your educational career?

Are you still in contact with your mentor?

In what capacity?

Family background

Was a language other than English routinely spoken in the home?

SES (Parental income)

Who did you predominately live with before you came to college?

Both Parents/Mother/Father/Grandparent/Other

-are your parents married, divorced, never married, _____

-highest grade mother, mothers occupation

-highest grade father, father's occupation

Do your parents ever talk about wanting to go to college/higher ed but were not able to? Why?

-Any younger/older siblings?

ages

older: did they go to college?

younger: how are they doing in school?

What are your longterm goals and aspirations?

Where do you see yourself in the next:

2 years

5

10

How motivated are you to reach your goals?

Why?

Do you believe you will be able to achieve these goals?

Why?

Family values

-Is school considered important?

-Is doing well in school important?

-Do you feel like your parents are proud of you?

-Were they happy with your decision to go/not go to college?

Who was your primary caretaker before you entered kindergarten?

Were you involved in any pre-school programs?

How old were you when you started kindergarten?

Did you repeat any grades in school?

Did you skip any grades in school?

Did your parents read to you when you were little?

Do you remember playing outside?

Do you remember watching television?

Describe parental involvement in your life

How involved were your parents in your school career and activities?

Did you attend many school field trips?

Describe neighborhood where you lived while you were in school.

Did you move at all?

What school(s) did you attend?

How was your school district organized? Local, township, county

Did you attend a public or private school?

Was your school affiliated with any religion?

Where was your school located?

How far away was it from your home?

How did you get to school? Walk, ride bike, parent drove to school, rode school transportation, public transportation

How would you describe the racial composition of your school?

How many students were in your graduating class?

What activities were you involved in Elem, MS, HS

Sports

Music Instruction

4-h

Girl Scouts

Camps

In school were you put into an academic track?: general, advanced, honors

When? What subjects?

Where you able to choose your classes in school at all? What courses did you choose to take?

Describe your social life growing up.

Did it change in hs?

Who were your role-models?

Did/do you see school as challenging?

Would you describe yourself as talented or hard working?

Why?

If you receive a bad grade, do you blame the instructor or yourself?

When you receive a good grade what do you attribute it to?

Looking back, can you identify any important turning points in your life?

Why did you make the decision you did?