Conversations About College with School and Non-School Actors:

Socioeconomic Gaps in Both Contexts

Undergraduate Research Thesis

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I: Abstract

Students from the top income quartile are 50 percent more likely to attend college than their peers in the bottom income quartile (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2016). Much current literature blames this college-attendance gap on variations in high school quality, while an alternative view posits that schools are not the source of the gap and might even help to reduce it. I analyzed nearly 9,000 9th graders using data collected in the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLS:09) to test whether socioeconomic gaps in support for going to college are greater among non-school actors (e.g., parents) than school actors (e.g., high school counselors and teachers). I find that youth of low socioeconomic status receive less support from home actors, but roughly equal support from school actors compared to youth of high socioeconomic status. Surprisingly, the results are consistent with the view that, with respect to support for going to college, schools serve to equalize youths’ opportunities.
II: Introduction

Economic inequality is longstanding and persistent in the United States. According to Piketty and Goldhammer (2014), such inequality has grown significantly over the last half-century. In addition, inequality in the U.S. is greater than in most other countries with advanced economies (Fischer et al. 1996). Social mobility is fading-- Chetty et. al. (2016) explain that among more recent cohorts, only fifty percent of adults surpass the income level of their parents whereas in cohorts from the middle of the twentieth century, ninety percent surpassed their parents. These patterns challenge the legitimacy of our political system and its ability to provide the promise of the “American Dream.” An important question concerns the role that schools play in shaping opportunity. Would school reform be the optimal way to improve life chances for the disadvantaged? High schools in the United States are clearly unequal, but scholars are trying to determine just how unequal they are, and whether they are (1) the source of inequality, (2) primarily reflect inequalities that already exist outside of schools, or (3) possibly serve as an equalizing institution. To better understand how to improve opportunities for the disadvantaged, my thesis will compare the magnitude of inequality in and out of schools across one dimension: support from adults regarding going to college.
IV: Literature Review

IV-I: How Schools Might Exacerbate Inequality

There are many reasons for believing that variations in high school quality might explain why children from bottom-quartile-income families are 50 percent less likely to attend college than their counterparts from top-quartile-income families (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2016). While scholars have studied variations in school resources (Darling-Hammond 2010; Kozol 1991), teacher quality (Darling-Hammond 2000; Gordon, Kane, and Staiger 2006), tracking (Oakes 1985), and curriculum (Bowles and Gintis 2011), one school feature that might be highly influential but has received relatively less attention is the support that students receive from high school actors such as counselors and teachers. Counselors and teachers are multifaceted resources to whom many students turn for high school course scheduling, conflict resolution, and--what we are most interested in for this study--information regarding college. However, low-socioeconomic status (SES) students might be less likely to receive such knowledge from their school actors.

Information passed from counselors can be vital to a student's college attendance. First, counselors might aid students in becoming competitive candidates for college admission throughout their time in high school. Counselors serve as motivators to schedule rigorous high school courses such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), STEM-centered, college preparatory, and standardized test (ACT and SAT) preparation credits—all of which are favorable for college admission (McKillip, Rawls, and Barry 2012; Venezia and Jaeger 2013). In addition, counselors can be important sources of information required for college-going, such as knowledge of admissions deadlines and policies, as well as financial aid processes including scholarships and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).
They also provide guidance on college application essays and letters of recommendation. These resources are vital for students—especially those of low SES—when applying to college (McKillip et al. 2012). Counselors can also help a student determine which college(s) might be the right “fit” for them. As defined by Venezia and Jaeger (2013), fit is a holistic look at “cost, location, size, student-faculty ratio, counseling and advising services, student-body composition… and areas of study…”. Understanding such features is important in deciding which institution might lead to the most success in pursuit of a college degree.

There is significant evidence that contact with a good high school counselor is important, especially for exposing students to information about college that may not be widely known. According to Tang and Ng (2019), students are 1.4 times more likely to enroll in an institution of higher education within 5 years after high school if they meet with their counselor for college planning than if they do not. Counselors’ positioning allows them to connect students directly with information regarding college choice, the application process, and financial aid. In this way, counselors serve as a form of cultural capital for students by guiding them through the process of searching for and applying to college (Bryan et al. 2011). Cultural capital is classically discussed as the ability to signal affiliation among elite groups (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). In this context, high school counselors could be gatekeepers to a particular kind of cultural capital—information about how to apply to college. Cultural capital transmitted from a high school counselor, such as advice on obtaining a letter of recommendation, applying for financial aid, or preparing for standardized testing, is particularly valuable to students from low SES backgrounds, as they are less likely to receive this information at home (Belasco 2013; Bryan et al. 2009, 2011).
Students attending schools that serve mostly low-income students are less likely to have access to a high school counselor. The American School Counselor Association recommends a counselor-to-student ratio of 1:250; the national average in the 2020-2021 school year was 1:415 (American School Counselor Association 2021). Counselor caseloads are correlated with college attendance rates. According to Woods and Domina (2014), students attending schools with small counselor caseloads (and therefore more time per student) are ten percent more likely to attend college than students attending schools with large counselor caseloads. As expected, students of low SES disproportionately attend schools with higher-than-recommended caseloads, in comparison to their high-SES counterparts (Woods and Domina 2014). Bryan et al., (2009) explain that students who attend schools with more counselors and fewer students who receive free or reduced-priced lunch get information from their counselors more often and that students in schools with more students, fewer counselors, and higher poverty rates get less.\(^1\)

In addition to the issue of access to counselors, high-SES youth may enjoy higher quality high school counselors. In schools serving mostly low-SES students, counselors report a lack of administrative support and mental health resources, along with the responsibility to work outside of their job description; as a result, these schools face lower retention rates and might be less appealing to potential guidance counselors (Boulden and Schimmel 2022). Arbuckle (1969) argues that a close relationship with college admissions officers is a vital part of their job (p. 167); this relationship might be difficult to build at low-SES schools where caseloads are higher. When it comes to the impact of high school counselors on college-going, students with more

\(^1\) It is also worth noting that white students and students whose mothers have an advanced degree are situated in schools with the smallest counselor caseloads (Woods and Domina 2014).
effective counselors have higher college attendance, retention, and graduation rates; their impact is even greater on students from low-income backgrounds (Mulhern 2020). Pointing to counselor quality as the causal factor for college-going might suggest that the counselor's role in the college process is not just informational but also inspirational.

On the other hand, counselors' bias surrounding disadvantaged students' ability to succeed might deter low-SES students from pursuing a college education (Bryan et al. 2009). Oftentimes, high-school counselors reference their own experience—where and what kind of school they attended, along with their racial and gender identities, and socioeconomic status—when guiding students toward higher education (Mulhern 2020). While this can be effective for students who share backgrounds with their counselors, it is potentially harmful to students who do not.

Like counselors, teachers can play a vital role in promoting college attendance for high school students (Chamberlain 2013; Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka 2011). By creating an environment that promotes college-going ideals and meets the needs of all students, including disadvantaged ones, teachers can play a substantial role in the college attainment of the youth in their classrooms (Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka 2011). However, low-SES students might not receive the same support from teachers as their high-SES counterparts. Students of higher socioeconomic status have an easier time navigating the classroom than their low SES peers (Calarco 2011; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003). According to Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka (2011), schools that provide substantial resources for college planning are less likely to host students of low socioeconomic status. Once in college, Johnson (2022) explains, students who went to high schools that host primarily students of low SES face more difficulty when collaborating and communicating with their classmates.
Schools with the lowest student achievement rates—which are also most likely to be attended by low-SES students-- face the highest teacher departure rates, making them the most likely to have teachers new to the school and the profession (Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin 2004). This could create a cycle in which students do not have time to develop close relationships with teaching staff due to teacher turnover which leads to low rates of student achievement, which in turn leads to more departures as teachers move to schools with higher levels of student achievement. Higher levels of student exposure to teachers are positively correlated with student achievement levels; the more a student can interact with their teachers, the more likely they are to go to college (Lui and Loeb 2021). This implies that consistent access and exposure to high school teachers is an important factor in going to college.

As with high school counselors, access might not be the only issue when it comes to the impact of teachers on the college attendance rate of low-income students; quality is important as well. Specifically, it matters that students of low SES receive equal support from teachers relative to their high SES counterparts. Teachers may unconsciously expect standard classroom behavior to reflect behavioral patterns set by middle-class parents (Calarco 2014). Consequently, low-income students might be disadvantaged because they are unaware of the behavioral standards in the classroom. Again, the problem might be that educators who grew up middle to upper-class are unfamiliar with the needs of low-income students, and therefore are unsure of how to meet them. Wickham and Mullen (2021) note that nearly one-third of educators hold beliefs that assume that poverty is a result of poor choices and/or moral character and that those in poverty do not work as hard. This bias towards students in poverty results in teachers underestimating low-SES students’ ability to succeed in college (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2007; Downey, von Hippel, and Broh 2004; von Hippel, Workman, and Downey 2018). As a
result, teachers might exacerbate socioeconomic gaps in college-going by more frequently encouraging the marginal high-SES student and discouraging the marginal low-SES student.

In sum this argument is that school actors enhance inequality because low-SES students have less access to interactions with counselors and teachers and when they do have those interactions, they are of lower quality. However, this view does not align with all education research. Some scholars argue that schools are compensatory and work to reduce inequality—a perspective that I describe in the next section.

**IV-I: Schools and Inequality: An Alternative View**

In the previous section, I discussed why high school actors could enhance gaps in college attendance between low-SES and high-SES students. Though there are differences in the quality and accessibility of such actors, those differences might not be the primary reason why low-SES youth are less likely to go to college.

There are many ways that non-school environments might contribute to growing socioeconomic inequality in factors that are strongly related to going to college. Families in poverty are often without necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, and transportation (Rank 2021, p. 81). Children in high-SES families enjoy more stable home environments, with more educational resources, and warmer interactions with parents (Gibbs and Downey 2020). They also enjoy more consistent access to health care, are less vulnerable to food insecurity, and are less likely to be exposed to dangerous toxins in their home or neighborhood (Wodtke et al. 2022). When children are struggling outside of school, it makes sense that their focus is not centered on scholastic achievement or college-going; it is hard to focus on applying to college when you are not sure if you will be eating dinner. Scholars from this perspective emphasize how education inequalities observed in schools are rooted in non-school
environments. For example, low-socioeconomic youth (relative to high-socioeconomic peers) report less “push” to attend college from their parents (Mitchall and Jaeger 2018). The modeling effect of parents—that is, how much a parent motivates college-going for their children based on their own educational attainment—is substantially different between families of different socioeconomic status (Cohen 1987, p. 339). The cultural capital of both a student and their parent(s) can increase the likelihood of educational attainment for a child (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997), but high-income parents have considerably greater cultural knowledge to transmit to their youth than low-income parents.

Children’s socioeconomic status may shape their ability to take advantage of school opportunities. As one example, Calarco (2014) explains how middle-class parents teach their children a “by-any-means-necessary” approach to problem-solving whereas working-class parents teach their children a “no-excuses” approach. As a result, children of middle-class backgrounds are more likely to seek help from teachers while working-class children are more likely to try to figure things out on their own and accept the academic and behavioral consequences that their teachers provide (Calarco 2014). In practice, this means that higher-SES children are likely to get their needs met more quickly and more often because they can communicate what those needs are to their educators.

These socioeconomic differences in home environments are well known, but some scholars have started to posit that they are the primary source of inequality for education outcomes and that schools may do more to reduce than increase inequalities (Downey 2020, p. 67). One pattern consistent with this view is how socioeconomic achievement gaps in reading and math develop either primarily, or predominantly prior to formal schooling (Farkas and Beron 2004; Miller, Votruba-Drzal, and Coley 2019). Downey (2020, p. 17) notes that reading and
math achievement gaps between the highest and lowest quintile SES students become smaller as they move through school. For example, the reading gap at the start of kindergarten is .64 standard deviation units and narrows to .55 standard deviation units by the end of 8th grade. This pattern is consistent with the view that schools are working to close the achievement gap. Based on these kinds of patterns, Heckman (2011, p. 32-34) concludes that the answer to closing the achievement gap is to focus on helping disadvantaged children before the age of 5; they suggest that the best way to do so is through parental support and early childhood education.

Another source of information that challenges the idea that schools do little to decrease inequality are seasonal comparison studies. This literature notes that the achievement gap between students of low and high SES grows primarily during the summer and that the growth is almost entirely accounted for by outside-of-school factors (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2007; Downey, von Hippel, and Broh 2004; von Hippel, Workman, and Downey 2018). This means that when students spend less time in school, the achievement gap between low and high-SES students grows and appears to be a result of the inequality existing outside of school. Figure 1 provides one way of conceptualizing how schools could be unequal, but still serve as an equalizing force—non-school environments are much more unequal than school environments (von Hippel 2010). These patterns have prompted some education scholars to conclude that schools could be more a part of the solution to socioeconomic inequality than its cause (Downey 2020, pp. 83-92).

While the seasonal comparison evidence represents a significant challenge to the critical view of schools, there are two limitations that question whether schools are truly compensatory. First, these studies have focused almost exclusively on reading and math scores—indicators of cognitive skills—leaving open the possibility that schools may exacerbate inequality in other
ways that can impact a student’s life success. Support for going to college is one area where school actors might exacerbate inequality, as counselors and teachers may underestimate the potential of low-SES students.

A second limitation of seasonal comparison studies is that they have focused on young children, mostly kindergarten to second grade; because of this, it is unclear if schools are largely compensatory during the early years but less so during the high school years. In comparison to elementary school students, those in high school often have more to worry about: applying to college, an increased social life, and a heightened sense of awareness of what is going on in the world around them. Colleges focus on more than standardized test scores when deciding whom to admit; they take into account personal essays, letters of recommendation, and extracurricular activities. So, in this conversation about the impact of school actors on college-going, we must question how well schools serving students from different socioeconomic backgrounds meet the broader needs of their students.

In sum, we know that there are large SES gaps in college going in the U.S. and there is reason to believe that these might be explained by variations in U.S. high school quality. We also know that conversations with parents, teachers and guidance counselors can all play an important role in influencing youths’ decision to pursue higher education. Despite this, we know little about the socioeconomic gaps in youths’ opportunity to talk about going to college or make a college plan with these actors. I hypothesize that higher-SES youth enjoy more opportunities to talk about college with parents than low-SES youth, but I also expect that this same level of inequality—perhaps even a greater level—will be observed in schools. Consequently, I hypothesize that schools serve to exacerbate existing inequalities in the opportunity to talk about and make a plan for going to college.
H1: Relative to low SES youth, high SES youth will talk to their mother and father more frequently about going to college.

H2: Relative to low SES youth, high SES youth will talk to their teachers and guidance counselors more frequently about going to college.

H3: The magnitude of the SES gap observed among school actors (teachers, counselors) will be equal to or greater than the gap observed among non-school actors (mother, father).
V: Methods

V-I: Sample

The data used in this thesis comes from the *High School Longitudinal Study of 2009* (HSLS:09), which is a “nationally representative, longitudinal study” (Ingles et al. 2011). The primary population for this study is 9th graders enrolled in United States public, catholic, and private high schools. Over 23,000 students were randomly selected from 944 schools across the United States. In addition to data from the student, this study also collected information from the guidance counselors, math and science teachers, and parents of the students. 21,000 students responded to the survey. I restrict my analysis to those in the highest and lowest income quintiles (n=8,953), as shown in Table 1, from the initial data collection when the students were in 9th grade.

V-II: Measures

Dependent variables which I used to assess college-going conversations with non-school actors include: (1) *Talked to mother about college*, (2) *Talked to father about college*, and (3) *Parents helped put together an education and/or career plan*. *Talked to mother about college* and *Talked to father about college* were gathered from the question: “Since the beginning of the last school year, which of the following have you talked with about going to college? (Check all that apply.)” The variable *Parents helped put together an education and/or career plan* was gathered from those who selected “Your parents” as a response to “Who helped you put your education and career/education/career plan together? (Check all that apply.)” The responses are =0 if they did not report talking to the actor and =1 if they did.

To assess school actors in conversations about college-going, I used the variables (1) *Talked to teacher about college*, (2) *Talked to counselor about college*, (3) *Teacher helped put together an education and/or career plan*, and (4) *Counselor helped put together an education and/or career plan*. 
career plan. Talked to teacher about college and Talked to counselor about college were gathered from the question: “Since the beginning of the last school year, which of the following have you talked with about going to college? (Check all that apply.)” In this analysis, they serve as distinct variables that assess whether the 9th grader talked to “a favorite teacher” and “a school counselor” about going to college or not. The variables Teacher helped put together an education and/or career plan, and Counselor helped put together an education or career plan were gathered from those who selected “A teacher” or “A counselor,” as a response to “Who helped you put your education and career/education/career plan together? (Check all that apply.)” The responses are =0 if they did not report talking to the actor and =1 if they did.

For the independent variable, I isolated the first socioeconomic quintile (n = 3,434) which represents the lowest quintile and fifth socioeconomic status quintile (n = 5,519) which represents the highest quintile. The original socioeconomic status variable was determined using the educational attainment, employment status, current or most recent occupation, household income and home ownership of the student’s parents. To make the quintile variable, the socioeconomic status variable was weighted using the student weight; this is why the quintiles do not have similar numbers of students (Ingels et. al. 2011).

V-III: Analytic Strategy and Hypothesis

My analytic strategy is to directly compare the magnitude of resources (talking to actors about college) available to students in school and non-school environments. I reason that the SES gaps in these two environments have implications for understanding how schools matter, at least for the dependent variables of talking about college-going and making a college plan. I test my hypotheses by directly comparing SES gaps in conversations about college going with school and non-school actors. Larger gaps among school versus non-school actors would suggest that
schools exacerbate inequality. Similar magnitude gaps would indicate that schools reflect the inequalities that exist outside of school. Finally, smaller gaps among school versus non-school actors would be consistent with the view that schools are compensatory. I test differences in means across the bottom and top quintile SES groups using t-tests for all dependent variables.
VI: Results

In general, youth are more likely to have spoken with non-school actors about college in comparison to school actors (Table 1). The actors to which 9th graders are most likely to talk to about college are mothers or female guardians, with 80% of youth responding that they had talked to them. 68% of youth reported speaking to their father or male guardian about college. Twenty percent of 9th graders reported talking to their teachers about college and 18% reported talking to their counselor. When it comes to making an education and/or career plan, students were the most likely to talk to their parents (59%), followed by counselors (18%) and teachers (15%).

Figure 2 shows that 9th graders of high SES (86%) were more likely to talk to their female guardians about college, relative to low SES youth (70%) (t = -18.03, p < .001). Additionally, high SES youth (80%) were more likely to speak to their paternal figures about college relative to low SES youth (48%) (t = -30.32 p < .001). High SES youth were more likely to make an education and/or career plan with their parents than low SES youth, at 67% to 47% respectively (Figure 3) (t = -14.73, p < .001). These results are consistent with my first hypothesis, that relative to low SES youth, high SES youth will talk to their mother and father about going to college more. All of these comparisons are statistically significant.

Figure 2 shows that high SES and low SES youth were equally likely to talk to teachers about college (20% and 21%, respectively); the difference is not statistically significant. For both high and low SES, 18% reported speaking to their counselor about college. When it comes to making an education and/or career plan, high SES youth were less likely to do so with a teacher (15%) than low SES youth (16%) according to Figure 3, but this small difference is not
statistically significant. Regarding a high school counselor’s role, 20% of high SES students responded that they made an education and/or career plan with a counselor in comparison to 15% of their low SES counterparts; this comparison is statistically significant \(t = -3.96 , p < .001\).

The results between high and low SES youth in conversations with school actors show that the conversation gaps are very narrow and not statistically significant, except for the category of making an education and/or career plan with counselors. Consequently, my hypothesis that relative to low SES youth, high SES youth will talk to their teachers and guidance counselors more frequently about going to college is mostly rejected.

The results from Figures 1 and 2 are contradictory to my third hypothesis, as they reflect that the SES gap is larger between non-school actors than school actors. Therefore, I reject my hypothesis that the magnitude of the SES gap observed among school actors (teachers, counselors) will be equal to or greater than the gap observed among non-school actors (parents and guardians).

Although there are little to no differences by SES in interaction with teachers or counselors, the indicators I have available are rather specific in that they only measure whether the student talked to those actors or not. Therefore, it is possible that even though there are little to no SES differences in interactions with school actors, high-SES students might enjoy higher-quality interactions. Testing this directly is difficult, but I estimated interaction models that assess whether high-SES students enjoy a larger benefit (in terms of college going) from their conversations with school actors than do low-SES students. These results are presented in Tables 2-5 in logistic regression models predicting whether the youth was enrolled in a 4-year college four years after ninth grade.
The base model logistic regression results suggest that some of these interactions with adults are related to a greater likelihood of attending a four-year college. For example, in the base models, talking to one’s mom, dad, and teacher are all associated with a greater likelihood of attending a four-year college while talking to a high school counselor is not.\textsuperscript{2} As one example, in Table 4 (base model) the “Talking to teacher” logistic coefficient is .22. Converting this to log odds ($e^{0.22} = 1.25$) which indicates that, independent of SES, students who report talking to their teacher about going to college in ninth grade are 25 percent (1-1.25) more likely to attend a four-year college than are students who do not talk to a teacher.

Importantly, none of the interaction coefficients with school actors (SES*talking to teacher or SES*talking to high school counselor) are statistically significant\textsuperscript{3}, suggesting that high-SES youth do not enjoy greater benefits from their interactions with school actors than do low-SES youth. If the interactions high-SES youth have with school actors are of higher quality, they are not enjoying a greater benefit in terms of college-going.

\textsuperscript{2} In the logistic regression model for the three education and/or career plan variables, making an education and/or career plan is associated with a greater likelihood of going to college (60\%) while making an education and/or career plan with teachers or guidance counselors is not.

\textsuperscript{3} I created interaction models for the three education and/or career plan variables (SES*making an education and/or career plan with a parent, SES*making an education and/or career plan with a teacher, or SES*making an education and/or career plan with a high school counselor); none of the interaction coefficients were statistically significant.
VII: Discussion

The smaller gaps between high and low SES youth in college conversations with school actors shown in these results are more consistent with the compensatory than the critical view of schools. The compensatory view implies that schools might work to reduce inequality, but previous literature on this topic was limited because it only measured cognitive skills (math and reading test scores) before high school age (when students are thinking about college less, or not at all.) This thesis addresses the limitations of prior research by providing two key insights. The first is that the compensatory role of schools continues beyond 8th grade and into high school. The second is that schools might compensate for SES gaps in more ways than addressing cognitive skill gaps, as this research focuses more on the ability of schools to meet the broader needs of their students regarding college-going and post-high school plans.

Though this research shows that schools appear to be compensatory, it does not invalidate previous research that labels schools as unequal. As seen in these results, there is a statistically significant gap between students from different SES backgrounds when it comes to making a college plan with school counselors. This aligns with literature that points to counselor quality and access as reasons why schools are unequal (Boulden and Schimmel 2022; Bryan et al. 2009; Woods and Domina 2014). The results of this research show that schools inhabit a particular space in that they are both unequal between students of low and high SES, yet not as unequal as non-school environments. This aligns with the view that school settings, though unequal themselves, are less unequal than outside-of-school settings (Downey 2020).

One limitation to this research is that it does not pin down exactly how conversations about college matter in the college attendance gap between students of high and low SES. While it does show the effectiveness of conversations students had surrounding the concept of college-
going with different actors in getting to college, it doesn’t show how that matters for students' socioeconomic status background. This leaves the question as to how the large gaps in conversations with parents between students of high and low socioeconomic status directly influence the college attendance gap.

Though this study investigates the accessibility of counselors and teachers to students and their influence on college attendance, it does not measure the actual resources that those actors provide to students. Measures that include what college-going conversations consist of would help to acknowledge what exactly counselors provide youth based on SES background. However, while knowing how those resources vary might be worthwhile, Leopold (2020) finds that high- and low-SES students benefit equally from their guidance counselors.

Looking to future research regarding the impact of school actors on the college attendance of low-SES students, scholars should include data that measures the quality of the conversations with school actors and the magnitude of resources they provide. If we want to keep the focus on the impact of schooling, then I think that the largest space for expansion here is to understand how school quality impacts college attendance and retention. Many scholars might still believe that schools serving high SES youth are better than schools serving low SES youth. Addressing these questions can be done through investigations of the resources and motivation provided to students by school actors, and their school system at large.

On the other hand, since these results mostly suggest that schools are not the perpetrators of inequality then the most worthwhile questions might be those that seek to find external causes of the college-attendance gap. This would require investigation into the at-home experiences of youth so that we can understand what the driving factors are in their decision-making regarding higher education.
These results imply that, to reduce the college attendance gap, we must focus on reducing the inequality that students experience outside of school. There are substantial gaps in conversations about college between parental figures and children of high and low SES backgrounds. A possible reason for this is that these low-SES parents are less likely to have attended college themselves and therefore have little information to draw on for such conversations; providing low-SES parents with information about higher education so that they can facilitate such conversations might aid in reducing the gap. Additionally, increased financial support could be provided to these families so they could spend less time worrying about basic necessities and allocate more time to these conversations about college. If we could lessen the effect of poverty on the lives of children outside of school, then the impact of their time spent inside of school would likely improve.

Though we know that schools are somewhat unequal between students of high and low SES, it is clear that they are much more equal than the experiences of those students outside of school. When it comes to the college attendance gap, and how conversations about going to college facilitate it, the largest difference between youth of high and low SES lies among non-school actors. This pattern suggests that high school youth enter schools having experienced widely disparate home environments, and then that disparity is reduced or entirely eliminated within high school. This raises the radical possibility that schools play a substantially more positive role in the stratification system than most education scholars have assumed.
VIII: References


von Hippel, Paul. 2010. “Are Schools the Problem? The Effects of School on Learning and Obesity.” The Ohio State University.


### IX. Tables and Figures

**Table 1. Descriptions, Means, and Standard Deviations for All Dependent Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</tr>
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<td>Socioeconomic Status First and Fifth Quintile</td>
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<td>1 = Fifth Quintile (highest SES)</td>
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<td><strong>Non-School Actors</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked to mother about college</td>
<td>9th grader selected “mother or female guardian” as someone they had talked to about going to college.</td>
<td>0 = No</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>8,592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked to father about college</td>
<td>9th grader selected “father or male guardian” as someone they had talked to about going to college.</td>
<td>0 = No</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>7,977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents helped put together an education and/or career plan</td>
<td>9th grader selected “parents” as someone who helped them put their education and/or career plan together.</td>
<td>0 = No</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>5,288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Actors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked to teacher about college</td>
<td>9th grader selected “a favorite teacher” as someone they had talked to about going to college.</td>
<td>0 = No</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>8,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked to counselor about college</td>
<td>9th grader selected “a school counselor” as someone they had talked to about going to college</td>
<td>0 = No</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>8,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher helped put together an education and/or career plan</td>
<td>9th grader selected “teacher” as someone who helped them put their education and/or career plan together.</td>
<td>0 = No</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>5,288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor helped put together an education or career plan</td>
<td>9th grader selected “counselor” as someone who helped them put their education and/or career plan together.</td>
<td>0 = No</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>5,288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Logistic Regression Predicting 4-year college attendance (four years beyond 9th grade) with SES, talking to mom, and SES*talking to mom interaction (data source: HSLS 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Base Model</th>
<th>Interaction Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>2.02***</td>
<td>1.96***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to mom</td>
<td>0.46***</td>
<td>0.41**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES*Talking to mom</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.01***</td>
<td>-0.97***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>5,582</td>
<td>5,582</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Predicting 4-year college attendance (four years beyond 9th grade) with SES, talking to dad, and SES*talking to dad interaction (data source: HSLS 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Base Model</th>
<th>Interaction Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>1.97***</td>
<td>1.90***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to dad</td>
<td>0.54***</td>
<td>0.46***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES*Talking to dad</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.95***</td>
<td>-0.97***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>5,323</td>
<td>5,323</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 4. Logistic Regression Predicting 4-year college attendance (four years beyond 9th grade) with SES, talking to teacher, and SES*talking to teacher interaction (data source: HSLS 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Base Model</th>
<th>Interaction Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>2.05***</td>
<td>2.05***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.071)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to teacher</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES*Talking to teacher</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.70***</td>
<td>-0.70***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>5,630</td>
<td>5,630</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 5. Logistic Regression Predicting 4-year college attendance (four years beyond 9th grade) with SES, talking to counselor, and SES*talking to counselor interaction (data source: HSLS 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Base Model</th>
<th>Interaction Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>2.04***</td>
<td>2.07***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to counselor</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES*Talking to counselor</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.67***</td>
<td>-0.70***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>5,630</td>
<td>5,630</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001
Figure 1.

(Downey, 2020, p. 37)
Figure 2. Percentage of high school 9th graders reporting that they talk to their mother, father, teacher and counselor about going to college. (Data source: 9th graders, HSLS:2009)

*** = p < .001

Figure 3. Percentage of high school 9th graders reporting that they made a career and/or education plan with their parents, teacher and counselor. (Data source: 9th graders, HSLS:2009)

*** = p < .001