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How Future-Focused Elementary School Cultures  
Influence the Future Aspirations of Low-Income Students:  
A Comparative Case Study

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of  
Education in Educational Leadership

by

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(Chair)

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2019

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to students of all ages with aspirations;  
don't let anything or anyone keep you from achieving your dreams.

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Thank you to my closest friends and family who continued to encourage me throughout this process, especially my husband, Scott- I know it was an intense and stressful time especially in our first year of marriage. Thank you for your ongoing support and for being proud of me.

## ABSTRACT

Through a comparative case study between two low-income elementary schools this study explored the influences of future-focused or college-bound cultures on low-income students' perceptions of and aspirations toward college and career pathways. Both schools had schoolwide initiatives focused around preparing students for the future. One had initiatives specifically around college-knowledge and developing leadership skills, while the other school focused on fostering global-thinkers and inquiry learners alongside their visual and performing arts magnet. The data collected through this study illustrate how school cultures and initiatives can influence the future aspirations of low-income students from the beginning of their educational careers, with the hopes of narrowing the perpetuated economic divide.

*Key words: future-focused culture; college-knowledge; low-income; first-generation; college mindset; future aspirations*

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### **Problem Statement/Background**

College is arguably the most impactful factor contributing to economic security and advancement (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Education is often the first step to breaking generational poverty cycles, reducing economic inequality, and increasing economic opportunity, especially for socioeconomically disadvantaged families (Haskins & Rouse, 2013). However, there are a multitude of factors impacting college attainment rates for low-income students, as compared to middle and upper-class students. Of the students attending college, low-income groups are among the most underrepresented populations (Gandara & Bial, 2001). Currently, low-income students struggle to apply for (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; McClafferty & Nunez, 2002; Tierney & Venegas, 2006) attend, and graduate from four-year colleges (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Horn & Chen, 1998; Perna & Titus, 2005; Roderick et al., 2008; Swail, 2000; Williams, 2013).

In 2015, the US Department of Education reported only nine percent of the lowest income students obtained Bachelor's degrees, as opposed to seventy-seven percent of the highest income group. There are several reasons for this, one of which is not knowing about college. Low-income students do not hear about college and career pathways from friends and family, like upper-income students might (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000), which puts the responsibility on schools to teach them about future options (Stern, 2008). In other words, the students who would benefit from higher education the most are the least likely to attend (Brand & Xie, 2010). They lack college-knowledge (basic knowledge about what college is, why people attend, and how to navigate the higher education system) and possibly college and career readiness (the academic

proficiency to be ready for the rigors of college coursework and career prerequisites).

Students who hear about future options from their families, or who gain explicit college-knowledge instruction in school, are more likely to successfully apply for and attend college (Carey, 2016; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). There is a discrepancy in the foundational understanding and exposure of college and career pathways between high and low-income families. According to Cabrera and LaNasa (2000), almost all students from high-income families (99.3%) had parents with college-knowledge, as compared to twenty-three percent of low-income parents. As a result, their children lack the college-knowledge required for applications and qualifications. The informational gaps are particularly evident with low-income, less-educated, and first-generation immigrant parents (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002).

If students struggle financially and academically while also lacking college-knowledge, they would not recognize the benefits of persevering towards a degree unless they have mentors or support programs to help them (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). If children only have exposure to career pathways their relatives had, their scope could be limited. It becomes the responsibility of the school system to provide effective mentorship programs and to develop future-focused mindsets and exposure to a variety of pathways including college-knowledge so all students have equitable future options (Stern, 2008).

Having a future-focused mindset and exposure to foundational college-knowledge makes higher education an option in students' futures. A review of literature showed that while college-knowledge and future-focused mindsets are critical, there is little evidence of them being implemented at the elementary school level. All learning builds upon the foundational content taught in elementary school, and the same can be applied to college-knowledge (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005). If college-knowledge and a focus on future pathways are not

introduced until high school, it may be too late as students have already enrolled in classes, have academic gaps and frustrations, and the idea of higher education or ambitious careers may seem too far out of reach to pursue. It becomes the responsibility of institutions to emphasize post-secondary options earlier so more low-income students will have access to higher education regardless of their socioeconomic status.

The goal is to ensure equitable access to college and career pathways for low-income students. To that end, college-knowledge and future-focused mindsets must start in elementary school by educating students about higher education options and career pathways from the beginning of their educational careers. How can future-focused cultures at the elementary level shape students' perspectives and future college and career aspirations?

### **Purpose Statement**

There is research on low-income students and college attainment (Aries & Seider, 2005; Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009; Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Haskins & Rouse, 2013; Immerwahr & Foleno, 2000; Jones et al., 2011; McKillip, Godfrey & Rawls, 2012; Perna, 2015; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008; Swail, 2000; Tierney, 1999), however, there is minimal research pertaining to the implementation of future-focused or college-cultures in elementary school. The purpose of this comparative case study was to develop a better understanding of how college or future-focused cultures in elementary schools influence the way low-income students perceive college and career pathways and what they aspire to in their futures. This study helped fill a void in the current literature and potentially inspire cultural changes in elementary schools so more low-income students develop college and career mindsets and aspirations.

## Conceptual Framework

The literature around college-knowledge for low-income students identify four categories of factors that contribute to inequitable higher education access: social, familial, institutional, and individual influences. Similar to the layers of systems outlined in Bronfenbrenner's (1992 & 1994) ecological systems theory and model of human development, I represent this framework through concentric circles in correlation to the contextual size in which individuals are embedded.

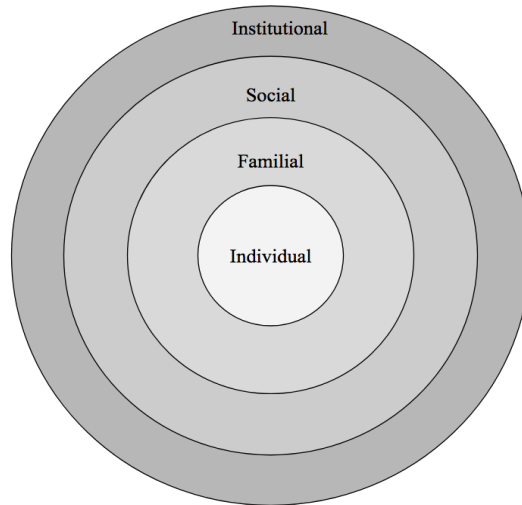


Figure 1. *Conceptual framework of factors affecting low-income students' access to higher education*

Individual students can have the determination and work ethic to pursue higher education, especially if they have exposure to the concept of higher education through interactions with family members or friends who have attended college (Alvarado & An, 2015; Gerardi, Tiwana, & Slocum, 2006; Knight, 2003; Portnoi & Kwnan, 2015). The circle of potential influence continues to grow based upon social networks and social situations that may expose students to the concept of college or to various careers; for instance, learning about future pathways through extracurricular activities (Knight, 2003). Lastly, as all students move through



the educational system, schooling institutions have the ability to guide them on college-bound trajectories by teaching them about various college and career options for their futures. My study explored the innermost and outermost circles to better understand the influence that K-12 schools (particularly focusing on elementary schools) have on the college-knowledge and future-focused discourse, attitudes and perceptions of low-income students. As such, I explored the influence of such contexts as they related to my research questions about how college or future-focused cultures in elementary schools influence the way low-income students perceive college and career pathways and what they aspire to in their futures.

The conceptual framework represented underlying cultural and social influences contributing to low-income elementary students' future aspirations as described by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development. His model (1994) said human development occurs through increasingly complex interactions with "dynamic forces" in one's environmental microsystems ("activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations"), mesosystems ("links between two or more settings"), exosystems (i.e.: "parents' workplace, family social networks, and neighborhood community contexts"), macrosystems (societal beliefs, resources, customs, lifestyles), and chronosystems (change over time). All of these layers influenced children's development, so my study explored how college or future-focused cultures in elementary schools influenced the way low-income students perceived college and career pathways and what they aspired to in their futures.

## **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of how college or future-focused cultures in elementary schools influence the way low-income students perceive college

and career pathways and what they aspire to in their futures. The following research questions guided the coding and data analysis:

1. What do low-income, elementary school students believe about their educational futures?
  - a. How do low-income students perceive/understand/think about college?
2. To what degree do these schools reflect the hallmarks of a college going culture?
  - a. How do each of them portray college or convey messages about college?
  - b. What messages do teachers send about students' future-pathways?
3. How do students experience future-focused cultures in elementary school?

## **Overview of Methods**

I conducted a comparative case study (Yin, 2018) of two Title 1 schools of similar, low-income demographics, both of which self-identified as having future-focused school cultures but in different ways. Painted Arrow Elementary School had embraced two initiatives: *The Leader in Me* and *No Excuses University* which explicitly taught college-knowledge and leadership skills. Spinning Compass Academy was an International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (IB-PYP) school focusing on inquiry and developing global thinkers. The study aimed to develop a better understanding of how college or future-focused cultures in elementary schools influence the way low-income students perceive college and career pathways and what they aspire to in their futures.

Multiple sources of data were analyzed including field notes, observations, document collection, questionnaires, and focus groups in order to better understand and describe low-income elementary school students' perceptions of college and career pathways as options for their futures. A more detailed explanation of the methods utilized in this study is found in chapter three.

## **Significance of the Study**

The current literature about college-knowledge and students' perceptions of their future pathways is primarily focused on the secondary level, while overlooking the start of students' educational careers. This study has the potential to influence current practices in elementary school around exposing young students to college and future-focused pathways.

Generational poverty is a cyclical problem creating a greater divide in the educational attainment from low and middle-high economic strata (Beegle, 2003). Education offers a means to break that pattern, yet low-income students are not well informed about their options, unlike their middle-high income peers, thus, they do not envision themselves on the same college-bound trajectory. If elementary schools expose all students to college and career pathways and foster the future-focused mindsets that college is an option for all students, perhaps more low-income students would perceive higher education differently and aspire to more ambitious careers.

College cultures in schools have the potential to influence all students' aspirations for their futures, and for many low-income students, it would be the only way they learn about higher education options. My study added a new perspective of the elementary school level to the existing literature around college cultures by exploring how schools influence students' perceptions of college.

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

**College-Knowledge vs. College-Readiness.** College-knowledge will be generally defined as basic knowledge about what college is, why people attend, and how to navigate the process, systems, and requirements. It is important to note the difference between college-

knowledge and college-readiness. The latter refers to academic preparation for the rigors of college coursework. This study focused on college-knowledge but acknowledged weak academic preparation (college-readiness) as a potential contributing factor in low-income students not attending college.

**Future-Focused Culture.** According to Peterson and Spencer (1990), school culture is defined as shared values and beliefs deeply embedded within an organization, while the climate is the resultant attitudes and behaviors of the people. In other words, students, and staff need to believe all students are capable of going to college, and the school practices, and actions reflect that belief. True college-going cultures emphasize all aspects of pursuing higher education, including motivating all students while preparing them academically. Researchers recognized a continuum of college-going cultures ranging from non-college-going culture, to a minimalist culture, to a strong culture where “almost everyone and everything is geared toward college preparation and the expectation is that virtually all students will continue directly to college” (McDonough, 1997, in Antonio, Venezia, & Kirst, 2004).

In this study, both schools had future-focused cultures. One participating school had an explicit college-culture, while the other school widened the scope beyond college to develop global thinkers. Both schools had two initiatives to contribute to students’ college, career, or life skills setting them on future-focused paths.

## CHAPTER 2: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Researchers agree that college-knowledge is a critical component of the college application process and attainment rates, especially for first-generation and low-income students (Carey, 2016; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Perna & Swail, 2001; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009; Vargas, 2004). Students from low-income families do not have access to college or career knowledge like their middle-high income peers whose families can share personal experiences and have access to college resources or exposure to successful careers. The review of current literature describes four categories of factors that contribute to inequitable access to higher education for low-income students: social, familial, institutional, and individual influences. Together, they illustrate the importance of closing the college-knowledge gap so more low-income students have access to higher education. While the literature review describes all four categories of influences, my data analysis focuses on the institutions' cultural influences on students' future college and career aspirations.

### **College Culture**

Culture refers to “deeply embedded patterns of organizational behavior and the shared values, assumptions, beliefs, or ideologies that members have about their organization” (Peterson & Spencer, 1990). Creating a future-focused, college-bound school culture is an all-inclusive effort and mindset. All staff are responsible for informing and encouraging all students about higher education and career options, all students believe college is an option for their futures, and all parents are partners in supporting their child's pathway to college. McClafferty, McDonough, Nunez (2002) identified nine principles as essential for a culture wherein students expect to pursue higher education: (1) college talk; (2) clear expectations; (3) information and resources;

(4) comprehensive counseling model; (5) testing and curriculum; (6) faculty involvement; (7) family involvement; (8) college partnerships; and (9) articulation. They defined each principle as follows:

College talk includes formal and informal, verbal and nonverbal ongoing communication pathways through which information about college is shared to expose students to vocabulary, prerequisite expectations, and personal experiences.

Clear expectations for all students, staff, and parents with specific goals so everyone knows their role in preparing students for college.

Information and resources means ensuring everyone has access to college information and resources.

Comprehensive counseling pertains more to secondary schools with counselors but is the idea that every counselor should be kept up to date about college, plan students' class schedules with college in mind, and every interaction with students is an opportunity for college counseling.

Model testing and curriculum help students prepare for and take standardized college entrance exams like the PSAT and SAT.

Faculty involvement enlists teachers as active partners in the college culture and asks them to integrate college messages in their instructional activities.

Family involvement. The college-going school culture teaches families about college, while reinforcing the message that their children are college candidates.

College partnerships with the local colleges builds awareness and creates pathways for field trips and programs where students can experience college realities.

Articulation means feeder schools convey consistent and ongoing messages, as well as

cumulative activities so students transition seamlessly on the college-bound path from kindergarten through twelfth grade. (McClafferty, McDonough, Nunez, 2002).

Similarly, Corwin and Tierney (2007) synthesized several studies on college culture and identified five elements of successful cultures: academic momentum, college plan development, a mission statement, college services, and systemic college support. They talked about two common barriers to sustaining a future-focused culture being low expectations and lack of resources (such as available college counselors).

Radcliffe and Bos (2011) called mentoring the foundation of an effective college culture. Their mentorship study followed five goals: (a) understand the nature of college, (b) recognize the importance of a college education, (c) gain positive perceptions and aspirations toward college, (d) prepare for college academically, (e) develop short and long term goals. They found an increase in students' aspirations and perceptions of college, along with an increase in academic perseverance, all contributing to an increased likelihood of college attendance (Radcliffe & Bos, 2011).

There were other programs that did not apply to a schoolwide college culture, but whose goal was to make college accessible for underrepresented groups. "According to the Educational Longitudinal Survey of 2002 (ELS), nearly 5% of all U.S. public high school students participate in a college outreach program for disadvantaged students. Additionally, for students whose family incomes fall below the poverty line, college outreach programs are a particularly important part of the high school experience" (Domina, 2009, p. 127). Domina (2009) completed a longitudinal study to evaluate the effects of programs like Quantum Opportunity Program, Upward Bound, and Talent Search, I Have a Dream, AVID, and GEAR UP. He found there was a minimal measurable difference between the college attainment rates for participating schools

and non-participating schools, thus learning the supplemental support programs were ineffective in accomplishing their goal of increasing college attainment for low income students.

Most of these college cultures pertained to the secondary level; very few studies have been done around creating future-focused cultures in elementary school. According to Swail and Perna (2002) who looked at the same, or similar programs as Domina, only ten percent of outreach programs had an elementary school component, a third of the programs started in middle school, and the rest did not begin until students are in high school.

### **Social Factors**

Ali and McWhirter (2006) applied Social Cognitive Career Theory SCCT (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002) to study how social factors influenced students' postsecondary educational and career aspirations. In large part, these aspirations were driven by self-efficacy, expectations, and goals. "Through repeated activity, modeling, and feedback from important others, children and adolescents developed specific skills, set their own performance standards, developed varying levels of confidence in specific types of activities and tasks, and formed expectations about the future outcomes of their performance" (Ali & McWhirter, 2006, p. 91). Not surprisingly higher efficacy was correlated with higher expectations and goal attainment.

College-cultures narrowly focus on higher education exposure and knowledge, but through my study I found the school cultures can broaden their focus to future pathways which included college and career exposures. As such, I use the term "future-focused" to encompass cultural components extending beyond the scope of college.

Future-focused cultures emphasize and rely upon meaningful interactions and relationships. The relationships students form were among the most influential factors in a student's decision to pursue college (Alvarado & An, 2015; Gerardi, Tiwana, & Slocum, 2006;



Knight, 2003; Sokatch, 2006). One's social network is often correlated with similar demographics, geographical location, and interests. Friends and mentors could form deep relationships resembling family, thus allowing first-generation students to receive college-knowledge from the experiences of mentors even if their parents or relatives did not attend college or have an understanding of college-knowledge (Swail, 2000).

Starting in elementary school, students' academic self-efficacy, effort, and performance were correlated with their academic reputations among their peers. Social comparison impacted performance, so if students saw themselves as less than their peers, they underperformed, but if they saw themselves as equals or more capable, they rose above their peers (Bandura, 1993). By upper elementary grades, students lived up to the academic performance reputations established by their peers (Gest, Rulison, Davidson, & Welsh, 2008). They became particularly influential during the teenage years when social ranking superseded the influence of parents and teachers (Alvarado & An, 2015). This is important to note because students gravitated towards peers based on commonalities in interests, successes, status, and aspirations. College-bound students were more likely to associate with other college-bound peers, thus continually influencing each other (Alvarado & An, 2015). Additionally, having friends with college aspirations doubled the likelihood of low-income students applying for college (Alvarado & An, 2015; Horn & Chen, 1998).

### **Familial Factors**

Families were also prominent factors in a student's college-knowledge and focus on the future. Children learned from the experiences of their older siblings, relatives, and parents, yet students from low-SES families were 23% more likely to have older siblings who had dropped out of high school, which negatively influenced students who may have aspired to college

(Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000b). Historically, low-income students were less likely to attend college because of their family backgrounds (Williams, 2013). Their socioeconomic status dictated the neighborhoods in which they grew up, their social circles of other impoverished families, and the limited resources to which they had access. Parents and relatives who did not attend college did not have the same understanding of the college process as relatives who did attend.

### **Parent Education**

Students whose parents have attended college had a foundational understanding of what college is and critical information about how to prepare for college (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000a; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). Unfortunately, low parent education often contributed to low-income socioeconomic status (Horn & Chen, 1998), so impoverished students were less likely to have parents with college degrees compared to their middle and upper class peers, thus negatively impacting their own pursuit of higher education (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000a; Ceja, 2006; McClafferty, McDonough, Nunez, 2002; Williams, 2013). According to Cabrera and LaNasa (2000a), “99.3% of high-income parents had some formal college education, compared to barely 23% of lowest-SES parents.” Without family experience and models to follow, low-income students and parents relied upon schools for information about how and why to pursue college and/or think about their future goals.

### **Parent Expectations and Involvement**

If parents were not knowledgeable about college, they could still offer their children support and expectations around aspiring toward college (Ceja, 2006). In fact, in many cases parents' educational expectations were often more important than parents' education, occupation,

or school involvement (Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, & Urajnik, 2002). Parents' expectations were established by the time their child starts first grade, which influenced a student's educational trajectory through the age of 22 (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Froiland, Peterson, & Davison, 2013). In other words, if parents saw the potential in their children and set high expectations in the primary years of education, the students were more likely to rise to the expectations, but the reverse was also true: if expectations were low, so too was student performance. The likelihood of college attainment was correlated with parent expectations. If parents expected their child to earn less than a bachelor's degree, it was less likely for a child to pursue college (Perna & Titus, 2005).

In general, surveyed parents believed college was important. Immerwahr and Foleno (2000) asked 200 parents of high school students and found 62% considered college 'absolutely necessary' for their own children, 35% said a college education is helpful, but not absolutely necessary, and only three percent did not think a college education is important. When they surveyed the general public (1,015 participants) about the most important factor for success, 35% identified that a college education is most important, but other factors were not far behind (30% getting along with people; 26% having a good work ethic) (Immerwahr & Foleno, 2000). Families may recognize the importance of higher education but not know how to help their children attain or pay for college. While knowing college is important, they may not have seen it as an option for their family.

As a result, oftentimes, low-income families had lower academic expectations for their children compared to upper-middle-income parents. Less than half of low-income families expected their children to go to college, compared to 70% of middle-income parents who did expect college degrees (Burney & Beilke, 2008; Loughlin-Presnal & Bierman, 2017). Even if

they did expect their students to go, they were not knowledgeable enough, or have the resources to help them through the process. While they often viewed college as important for their children, they were not familiar enough with it to know how to support or facilitate their child's pathway to higher education (Immerwahr, 2000; McClafferty, McDonough, Nunez, 2002).

Involvement in a child's education looks different for every family but could have measurable influences. A national study by Horn and Chen (1998) found that students whose parents frequently discussed schooling matters with them were two times more likely to enroll in college compared to those whose parents rarely or never discussed school. Perna and Titus (2005) found similar results regarding parent involvement: parent-initiated school contact around academics or volunteering was associated with a greater likelihood of the student enrolling at a two-year or four-year college.

### **Institutional Factors: The Role of Economics and Schools**

**Socioeconomic Status (SES).** According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 2016, there were 40.6 million people (12.7%) living in poverty. The poverty rate for children under age 18 was eighteen percent (Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2017). Students from low-income families faced several disadvantages related to economic struggles: residential instability, inadequate medical care, food shortage, family maladjustment, psychological and psychosocial risks, and general financial difficulties, all of which negatively impacted learning (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001). Children internalized these challenges leading to academic and foundational gaps. Even starting as early as kindergarten, low-income students showed lower academic gains than their peers not facing hardships (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010).

Family income affected where they lived, which translated to which type of K-12 schools to which they had access (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009).

Income brackets continued to correlate to college enrollment (Cooper, 2018). Although lower income students had been increasing their college attainment in recent years, they were still marginally behind the percent of high-income peers who pursued higher education. Figure 2 shows approximately 82% of the highest income bracket attended college after high school, compared to 62% of students from the lowest income bracket (Cooper, 2018).

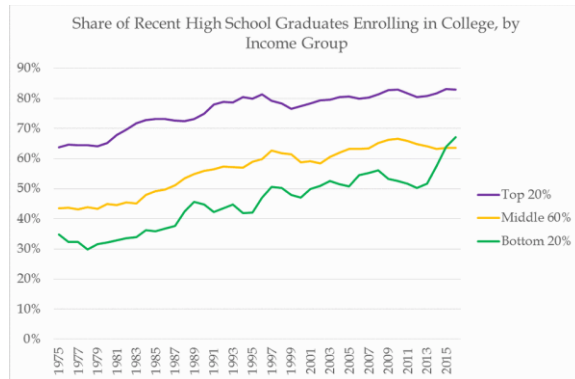


Figure 2. *College Enrollment by Income Groups*

While the trends for low-income students showed improvement toward increased college attainment, the data continued to reflect inequity in higher education as a result of socioeconomic status. The gap persisted between high and low income students attending college. Researchers continued to highlight low-academic achievement, lack of resources (financial and educational) and low college-knowledge as reasons for the gap (Lovenheim, 2017).

**Academic Preparation and SES.** In addition to economic hurdles, low-income students also faced academic inequities. The academic preparation students received from kindergarten through twelfth grade overwhelmingly affected their ability to be successful in pursuing higher education, even more importantly than their socioeconomic status (Gandara, & Bial, 2001). A national assessment in 2009 revealed only 21% of low-income students were proficient/advanced in reading, and only 10% were proficient/advanced in math compared to 44% and 32% of their middle-high income peers respectively (Haskins & Rouse, 2013). Cabrera and LaNasa (2000b)

reported students from the lowest-SES were 35% more likely to receive lower grades in middle school than their high-SES counterparts. They also found 30% of low-income students had been retained, compared to only nine percent of their high-income peers. The trend continued to repeat as “only 65% of low-income students completed high school, compared to 91% of their middle- and upper-income peers” (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2008, p.15). “This period may be critically important, as this is the point where powerful predispositions toward college attendance are formed” (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000b, p.23).

Students from poverty were not as academically prepared for college as their peers, which largely impacted their ability to be successful with the rigorous demands of college or prerequisites for ambitious careers. Without effective academic preparation, low-income students were not competitive applicants for colleges. The lowest-SES students were 24.2% less qualified for college than the national average (Cabrera, & La Nasa, 2000b). Low-income students were not receiving support and adequate academic preparation at school, nor were they receiving academic support at home if their parents worked multiple jobs to make ends meet or did not have strong educational or career backgrounds themselves.

**School Efforts.** For most low-income families, schools were the primary source of information about college, yet research showed inequities in how schools conveyed messages about college to different demographic groups, thus perpetuating inequitable college access for students. For instance, schools with more affluent families tended to expect students to attend college and had full-time college counselors on staff, but schools serving poor populations emphasized high school graduation or community colleges and did not have the same resources or personnel available (Antonio, Venezia, & Kirst, 2004; Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009). The culture and activities schools sponsored around college

informed students and established expectations for their futures. If students were denied resources, information, and support from their schools, they were essentially being denied equal access to higher education (McClafferty, McDonough, Nunez, 2002).

**Teacher Expectations.** Across several studies, teachers and staff generally had lower expectations for impoverished students, which translated to remedial courses being offered (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010; Gandara & Bial, 2001; Kenny, et. al, 2003; Kozol, 1991). Schools often predetermined students' future destinies by labeling students as "college-bound" or "non-college-bound," which sent messages to the students about their abilities and future aspirations (McClafferty & McDonough, 2000). The students internalized the perceptions about their academic abilities and did not aspire to ambitious college or career pathways (McClafferty & McDonough, 2000; Welton & Williams, 2015). However, when low-income students were placed in academically challenging classes, like Advanced Placement courses, they rose to the challenge and developed the mindset, confidence and ambitious future-aspirations as a result (King, 1996). Students could start to develop a future-focused mindset around college and career pathways based on the messages they hear and opportunities available to them at school.

**School Resources.** Low-income students often attended inner-city schools reflective of the neighborhood's economic situation, where buildings were dilapidated, and resources were lacking. These schools were overcrowded with students with high academic, social, and emotional needs who experienced trauma and had to worry about daily basic survival (safety, food, shelter), yet the schools were under-resourced, so students did not receive the individualized support they needed (Welton & Williams, 2015).

**Mentorship and College-Knowledge Programs.** Students in low-income areas often

relied upon schools as their only source of information about college (Carey, 2016; King, 1996; McClafferty, McDonough, Nunez, 2002; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). Horn and Chen (1998) reported low-income students who participated in a future-focused mentorship program almost doubled their odds of applying for college. While there were several programs in existence to teach students about college and future-focused pathways, it was not standard practice as a policy in today's educational system, much less at an early age. While the programs strongly encouraged early exposure, most of the literature showed college-preparation programs beginning at the secondary level.

School-wide college-knowledge initiatives were only effective when clear expectations were established outlining how all staff engaged in college-knowledge education (McClafferty, McDonough, & Nunez, 2002). Promoting college-knowledge and support systems in silos was not as effective as a school-wide college-bound culture were. Teachers embedded college-knowledge in their curriculum, discussions, "teachable moments" or assignments at any grade level (Garcia, 2012; Welton & Martinez, 2014; Welton & Williams, 2015). Across several studies, attending a school with a strong college-bound culture was the single most consistent predictor of whether students pursued college (McClafferty, McDonough, & Nunez, 2002; McDonough, 1998; Oakes, 2003; Perna & Swail, 2001; Peterson & Spencer, 1990; Radcliffe & Bos, 2011). An effective future-focused school culture empowered all students with the self-efficacy and skills to pursue whatever college and career pathways to which they aspired.

### **Individual Factors**

Ultimately, a student's future success was in his/her own hands depending on attitude, participation, personality traits, work ethic, ability to seek support, and overall determination. (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005). Self-efficacy was a powerful force that can potentially



outweigh the effects of poverty. When people believed they were capable, they aspired to ambitious pathways, their actions produced desired results, and they were more motivated to act (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011). Low-income students were college and career bound learners if they realized their potential and received the correct academic, logistical, and emotional support (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1996). Schools could foster students' college and career ambitions or future-focused mindsets.

**Self-Efficacy and Determination.** Self-efficacy is the belief about one's abilities, which affects people's motivation in the goals they set, how much effort they pour into achieving those goals, and how long they persevere when faced with challenges (Bandura, 1993). If we believe we are capable of achieving something, we are more likely to set high goals for ourselves, and persevere until we achieve it. Bandura (1993) found that our self-efficacy was influenced by our surroundings and experiences. Children's sense of self-efficacy was often shaped or influenced by their teachers, starting in elementary school (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001). When teachers told students they could do something and offered constructive, positive feedback, students rose to the expectations and saw themselves as capable. An individual's self-perception of academic competence was noticeable by fourth and fifth grade and was correlated with his/her academic performance (Loughlin-Presnal & Bierman, 2017). When they had been built up to believe in their abilities, they persevered and achieved academically, or if over their elementary school years they had struggled and been told they were not capable, they continued to struggle with their learning.

Loughlin-Presnal and Bierman (2017) found younger children had more positive achievement-related self-efficacy beliefs than children did when they were older. They had fewer negative influences telling them they could not do something, and for the most part were

receiving positive encouragement. In the primary grades, children's self-perceptions tended to be overly optimistic and less reflective of adults' perceptions, but their beliefs about their abilities became more negative as they got older. They saw themselves as less competent and were more inhibited as they progressed through school (Loughlin-Presnal & Bierman, 2017; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Bandura (1993) stated the higher students' perceived self-efficacy was, the higher they set their goals, and the more committed they were to achieving them. Self-efficacy became a pivotal factor starting in elementary school and could determine a student's future college and career trajectories shaping the rest of their lives.

**Personal Aspirations.** Educational aspirations were some of the most powerful predictors of educational attainment (Berzin, 2010). Socioeconomic status had a strong influence on students' educational and professional expectations (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Trusty, Robinson, Plata, & Ng, 2000). For example, the percentage of low-income students who aspired to go to college had increased up to 78%, but that still paled in comparison to the 86% of middle-income and 94% of high-income students with the same aspirations (Berzin, 2010). If low-income students perceived a lack of support, their aspirations declined, but on the other side of the coin, if students perceived school as meaningful, their aspirations rose (Berzin, 2010; Kenny, et. al, 2003). When students had someone believing in them and felt successful in school, they had better self-efficacy and higher aspirations for their future goals.

Elementary school is the optimum time to develop long-term college aspirations, which increased the likelihood of college pursuit, yet research found decreased aspirations as students got older (Berzin, 2010; McClafferty, McDonough, Nunez, 2002).

### **Why Elementary School?**

Kindergarten through fifth grade serves as the formative and foundational years in a

child's education and life. These are the years when curiosity for learning is high, students' have ambitious dreams for their future, and effective early interventions can ensure achievement gaps do not become overwhelming fissures. Buckner, Bassuk, and Weinreb (2001) found a linear regression of academic performance scores as low-income students got older. They hypothesized the correlation could be attributed to students becoming disengaged or falling through the cracks as they moved from smaller elementary school settings to larger middle schools. Early education years could help determine the trajectory for the rest of a student's academic career. All learning builds upon the foundational content taught in elementary school, and the same could be applied to knowledge around college and career pathways (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005).

Elementary school is also generally a time of optimum parent involvement. Parent expectations of their children's educational futures in first grade are associated predictors of educational attainment levels the students will reach later (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Froiland, Peterson, & Davison, 2013). The primary years provide an opportunity for schools to foster study habits, literacy skills, and commitment to lifelong learning while teaching parents and students about college. Early school partnerships with parents could have long-term impacts (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Students were more confident and successful when they had been exposed to future college and career mindsets and strong learning habits since kindergarten or preschool. Middle school might be too late to start talking about college-bound academic habits, especially if the habits are not modeled and reinforced in low-income households (Burney & Beilke, 2008).

Researchers collectively identified three phases of college-knowledge acquisition that directly connect to individual factors: the predisposition, search, and selection. While the latter two stages were more developmentally appropriate for secondary students, the initial stage of

setting high expectations and aspiring toward college and career pathways began in elementary school (Garcia, 2012). “These expectations must be present from the earliest stages of an academic career and must be communicated at every opportunity. This is best accomplished through a school “college culture” that encourages all students to consider college as an option” (McClafferty, McDonough, Nunez, 2002, p. 3). By creating college-bound, future-focused cultures, schools can influence and inspire all students to pursue ambitious college and career pathways, which can mean economic advancement and an end to generational poverty for low-income students.

### **Summary**

There were several influential variables affecting a student’s future aspirations and college-bound trajectory that could be categorized into themes around social networks, family influences, institutional preparation and support, and individual motivation and ability. Low-income students were disadvantaged when it came to college-knowledge, especially compared to their middle-high income peers. Schools could work to develop college and career, future-focused mindsets and foundational knowledge for all students equitably.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

### **Introduction to Research Design**

In order to better understand how elementary school college cultures influence students' perceptions of and future aspirations towards college and career pathways, I conducted a comparative case study between two low-income schools (defined by the allocation of Title 1 funding, in which case more than fifty percent of the student population qualifies for federally free or reduced lunch prices). Of the two schools, one self-identified as intentionally creating a college-culture through their mission statement and membership in the *No Excuses University* network. The other school did not have an explicit college-culture but broadened the lens to a future-focused culture that emphasized the development of global citizens through the *International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme*. I described and interpreted patterns across two sites using questionnaires, focus groups, document collection, and field notes. The purpose of this comparative case study was to develop a better understanding of how future-focused cultures in elementary schools influence the way low-income students perceive college.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the data collection and analysis in this study:

1. What do low-income, elementary school students believe about their educational futures?
  - a. How do low-income students perceive/understand/think about college?
2. To what degree do these schools reflect the hallmarks of a college going culture?
  - a. How do each of them portray college or convey messages about college?
  - b. What messages do teachers send about students' future-pathways?
3. How do students experience future-focused cultures in elementary school?

I collected data at each school to develop a better understanding of how college or future-focused cultures in elementary schools influence the way low-income students perceive college and career pathways and what they aspire to in their futures.

### **Comparative Case Study Design**

“Case study research is a qualitative approach exploring one or multiple bounded system(s) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, and reports a case description and case-based themes” (Creswell, 2013). I explored two low-income elementary school cases to find patterns and themes in how their future-focused initiatives influenced students’ aspirations toward and perceptions of college. Both schools self-identified as having future-focused cultures, and the contrasting contexts ensured “purposeful maximal sampling” (Creswell, 2013). Yin (2018) writes “multiple-case studies follow an analogous logic. Each case must be carefully selected so that the individual case studies either (a) predict similar results (*a literal replication*) or (b) predict contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons (*a theoretical replication*)” (p. 55). My study looked at the latter, wherein it would be predictable to assume students from schools with cultures focused specifically on college might have different perceptions of college than those with a more general focus on the future, but we did not know to what extent the schools’ messages influenced their mindset. The procedures were replicated for both sites for a more holistic comparison (Yin, 2018).

**Participant Selection.** This study targeted elementary schools with future-focused cultural initiatives in an effort to understand which strategies, if any, influenced the college or career aspirations and mindsets of low-income students. I started by looking at how the elementary school institutions communicated messages about college and future pathways to low-income students.

**Site Selection.** Two low-income schools in a unified school district in southern California were selected based upon relatively similar demographics and explicit cultural initiatives that had been in effect for more than four years. Table 1 shows the demographic comparison for the two sites.

***Painted Arrow Elementary School.*** This school served preschool to fifth grade students. The staff identified the school as having a strong future-focused culture that specifically targeted college-knowledge and exposure to higher-education pathways based on their membership in the *No Excuses University (NEU)* network since 2015- an established nationwide network of schools that build college-cultures founded by Damen Lopez. *No Excuses University* operated under the premise that all students have the right to be educated in such a way that prepares them for college, whether they choose to later pursue higher education is up to them (Lopez, 2013). This school also worked to develop students' leadership skills through *The Leader in Me* initiative founded on Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Happy Kids*. Teaching students about college pathways and giving them the life skills to pursue career pathways made Painted Arrow a future-focused elementary school.

***Spinning Compass Academy.*** This was a magnet school focusing on the visual and performing arts, as well as one of eight *International Baccalaureate-Primary Years Programme (IB-PYP)* schools in the county where students learned as global citizens. According to the IB mission statement,

“The International Baccalaureate® aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. To this end the organization works with schools, governments and international organizations to develop challenging programmes of international education and rigorous assessment. These programmes encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their

differences, can also be right. (IBO)” (School District  
(<https://www.sandiegounified.org/international-baccalaureate-ib-program>), 2018).

Spinning Compass Academy identified as future-focused through their IB learner profiles. The school did not intentionally promote or ignore college; rather, there was a more general future-focused orientation as global citizens and life-long learners. As a magnet, Spinning Compass Academy had the advantage of an enrollment lottery system instead of being a neighborhood home school.



Table 1. Demographics of Case Study Sites

	<i>Painted Arrow Elementary School</i>	<i>Spinning Compass Academy</i>
Total Enrollment	525	608
Grades Served	PK-5	K-5
Special Day Classes (special education)	0	44
Transitional Kindergarten	23	0
Kindergarten	74	93
First Grade	89	91
Second Grade	83	92
Third Grade	82	94
Fourth Grade	86	97
Fifth Grade	70	100
Free/Reduced Lunch Students	67%	76%
Homeless	5.9%	8.7%
Schoolwide Initiatives	<i>No Excuses University The Leader in Me Personalized Learning</i>	<i>IB-PYP (International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme) Visual and Performing Arts Magnet</i>
Parent Education: Graduate School	8%	4.8%
Parent Education: College Graduate	24%	13.7%
Parent Education: Some College	25%	17%
Parent Education: High School Graduate	18.6%	23.2%
Parent Education: Not a HS graduate	13.5%	31.3%
Parent Education: Decline to State	4.7%	8.9%
Hispanic/Latino	57.57%	86.35%
White	31.47%	10.03%
Black	1.59%	0.99%
Multi-ethnic	7.77%	1.48%
Filipino	0.40%	0.66%
Pacific Islander	0.40%	0.16%
Asian	0.60%	0.16%
American Indian	0.20%	0.16%

**Student Selection.** All students in third, fourth, and fifth grade were invited to participate in a questionnaire around how college or future-focused cultures influenced the way they

perceive college and career pathways and what they aspire to in their futures. For grade level focus groups, teachers were asked to explain the study to the whole class and ask for volunteers who wanted to participate. Students who returned their parent consent form were accepted. This reduced teacher bias and ensured a common participant sampling.

**Teacher Selection.** Teacher perspectives were included as part of the research questions because they are part of the school culture and their opinions could influence the messaging being conveyed to students. In order to better understand how this part of the institution affected student thinking, I distributed teacher questionnaires at both sites and invited all teachers to participate.

## **Data Collection**

This qualitative study required multiple sources of data to be triangulated in order to better understand and describe low-income elementary school students' perceptions of college and their future aspirations. Case studies typically include data collection through documents, focus groups, and observations (Yin, 2018). As such, I conducted research in three concurrent phases over approximately four months: Phase I included field notes of site observations and document collection at each of the schools. Phase II was an initial questionnaire sent to all students in third, fourth, and fifth grade, as well as teachers at my selected schools. Phase III involved student focus groups separated by grade-level (third, fourth and fifth grade) to learn more about students' experiences and beliefs.

**Phase I- Field Observation and Document Collection.** I observed the culture at each site for two days each by briefly visiting a random selection of classrooms, listening to staff communications with students and noting environmental messages in my field notes. During the site classroom visits I wrote memos about what I saw and heard on the campus to depict pieces

of observed and remembered life (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). I noted my reflections, thoughts, and interpretations as they related to future-focused discourse and attitudes from participants. The goal of the site observations was to understand the respective cultures and notice the messaging or opportunities given to students to build college and career mindsets or aspirations. With this goal in mind, there were times in the observations wherein I acted as a peripheral participant who only recorded focused observation notes based on what I saw or heard, and there were other times where I recorded active participant observations as I immersed myself in the research settings by talking with participants or asking questions in the moment.

While I was on each campus, I collected relevant documentation to observe the messages being communicated to students and parents. This helped me to understand if school cultures played a role in shaping young, impressionable minds as they related to low-income students' future college and career aspirations. Document collection included bulletin board pictures, brochures, handbooks, photographs, website information, parent night flyers, mission statements, social media posts and relevant demographic reports.

**Phase II- Questionnaires.** Next, I invited all teachers and students from third, fourth, and fifth grade to participate in anonymous school culture questionnaires. With the initial questionnaire (see Appendix A/B), I hoped to gain insights as to the mindset and perceptions of each participant group. It was offered to students in third, fourth and fifth grade at both school sites to take in class or in the after school program with the option of having the teacher read each question aloud if needed. Teacher questionnaires provided staff insights on the perceived future-focused culture at their school, as well as their attitudes about future aspirations for low-income students. I wanted to understand their perspectives about what the school's efforts (or lack of efforts) to promote future college and career options were and whether the teachers saw

the efforts as having an influence on students’ future-focused mindsets. Participant responses helped me to revise my questions and discussion prompts for the focus groups. All questionnaires were anonymous to encourage more authentic and genuine responses, and as such, I did not collect any identifying demographic data on the questionnaires. Although this decision precluded me from specifically connecting responses to certain income types or parent education levels, the demographic realities of each school as shown in Table 1 suggest that the questionnaires did provide a picture of how low income students thought.

I experienced a difference in participation from the schools. For the teacher questionnaire, I received 8 completed from Painted Arrow Elementary and 10 from Spinning Compass. At Painted Arrow, teachers offered the students the online questionnaire. Some students reported it was too long and they did not have a chance to finish, so I only had 96 completed questionnaires returned (15 from third grade, 42 from fourth grade, and 37 from fifth grade). Spinning Compass Academy reported the online survey was too challenging and they did not have available class time to administer it to their students, so instead a paper copy was offered to all third, fourth, and fifth grade students in the afterschool program. This yielded more participants, but given that students went home at various times, many did not finish. The completed questionnaires from Spinning Compass Academy were: 49 from third grade, 36 fourth grade and 60 fifth graders. Many more students (64) started to participate, but did not finish so their responses could not be counted.

Table 2. Completed Questionnaires

	Teachers	Third Grade	Fourth Grade	Fifth Grade
Painted Arrow	8	15	42	37
Spinning Compass	10	49	36	60

**Phase III- Student Focus Groups.** Lastly, I conducted grade level specific student focus groups asking about their perceptions of college and their future aspirations. Based on the questionnaire responses and field observations, I adjusted focus group questions to include details specifically related to each site based on the document collection and questionnaire responses. There were a few open-ended prompts for semi-structured focus groups related to the research questions asking participants at both sites to describe their school cultures and perceptions of college and their future career or life aspirations (see Appendix E). My focus group protocol revolved around open-ended questions so students could share their perceptions and experiences freely (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 2011; Seidman, 2012).

With consent from the participants, focus groups were recorded using a personal audio device for transcription and coding purposes. I took time at the beginning of the focus group to build rapport with the students and control for “reactivity” students might feel being in a focus group with a principal (Maxwell, 2012). Participant confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms. From these focus groups, I gained deeper insights of personal perspectives and accounts of school-related college-knowledge activities.

Focus group participants were selected after teachers talked to the class about the purpose of the study and explained what would be asked of them. Then the teachers asked for interested volunteers and distributed consent forms. Once those forms were returned with parent permission, the students were added to the focus group list. Many more students had returned consent forms, but parents had only checked that they could participant, but did not give consent for them to be audio recorded, so they were removed from the eligibility pile. Some students were absent on the day of the focus group, so the groups ranged in size from three students to ten students. The table below shows the demographics of the participating students. All but four

participating students were socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED). Three of those four economically stable students were white and one was Hispanic. Overall, Spinning Compass had more participants.

Table 3. Demographic Overview of Focus Group Participants

	PA Third	SC Third	PA Fourth	SC Fourth	PA Fifth	SC Fifth
Participants	5	8	8	6	3	10
SED	5	7	6	6	2	10
Girls	4	6	6	4	1	8
Boys	1	2	2	2	2	2
Ethnicity	4 Hispanic 1 Af. Am.	6 Hispanic 2 white	6 Hispanic 2 white	6 Hispanic	2 white 1 Af. Am.	10 Hispanic
Parent Education Level	2 Not a HS 2 HS grad 1 college grad	1 Not a HS 3 HS grad 2 some col. 2 col. grad	2 Not a HS 1 HS grad 4 some col. 1 col. grad	2 Not a HS 2 HS grad 1 some col. 1 declined	1 HS grad 1 Some Col. 1 Col. grad	3 Not a HS 1 HS grad 2 some col. 4 declined
Homeless	0	0	0	0	0	1

*Note.* (PA) Painted Arrow; (SC) Spinning Compass; (HS) High School; (SED) Socioeconomically Disadvantaged; (Col) College

Table 4. Demographics of Painted Arrow Focus Group Students

Gr.	Teacher	Student Pseudonym	Ethnicity / Race	Parent Ed Level	SED	Homeless
3	Teacher F	Ana	Hispanic	Not a High School Grad	Yes	No
3	Teacher F	Julia	Hispanic	High School Grad	Yes	No
3	Teacher F	Lizbeth	Hispanic	Not a High School Grad	Yes	No
3	Teacher F	Destiny	African American	High School Grad	Yes	No
3	Teacher F	Aaron	Hispanic	College Grad	Yes	No
4	Teacher H	Rylee	Hispanic	High School Grad	Yes	No
4	Teacher H	Brian	White	Some College	No	No
4	Teacher H	Lisa	Hispanic	College Grad	No	No
4	Teacher H	Lucy	Hispanic	Not a High School Grad	Yes	No
4	Teacher C	Nathan	Hispanic	Some College	Yes	No
4	Teacher C	Joy	White	Some College	Yes	No
4	Teacher C	Heidy	Hispanic	Not a High School Grad	Yes	No
4	Teacher C	Evie	Hispanic	Some College	Yes	No
5	Teacher C	Anabel	White	Some College	Yes	No
5	Teacher C	Isaac	White	College Grad	No	No
5	Teacher C	Michael	African American	High School Grad	Yes	No

Table 5. Demographics of Spinning Compass Academy Focus Group Students

Gr.	Teacher	Student Pseudonym	Ethnicity / Race	Parent Ed Level	SED	Homeless
3	Teacher T	Sarah	White	Some College	No	No
3	Teacher T	Elwin	Hispanic	High School Grad	Yes	No
3	Teacher J	Ashley	Hispanic	High School Grad	Yes	No
3	Teacher J	Bianca	Hispanic	Some College	Yes	No
3	Teacher J	Raquel	Hispanic	High School Grad	Yes	No
3	Teacher J	Antonio	Hispanic	Not a High School Grad	Yes	No
3	Teacher A	Katie	White	College Grad	Yes	No
3	Teacher A	Natalia	Hispanic	College Grad	Yes	No
4	Teacher B	Andrew	Hispanic	Declined/Unknown	Yes	No
4	Teacher B	Francesca	Hispanic	Not a High School Grad	Yes	No
4	Teacher D	Karen	Hispanic	High School Grad	Yes	No
4	Teacher E	Jessica	Hispanic	Some College	Yes	No
4	Teacher E	Kyle	Hispanic	High School Grad	Yes	No
4	Teacher E	Maria	Hispanic	Not a High School Grad	Yes	No
5	Teacher K	Gia	Hispanic	Some College	Yes	No
5	Teacher K	Marcella	Hispanic	Not a High School Grad	Yes	No
5	Teacher K	Tatiana	Hispanic	Some College	Yes	Yes
5	Teacher M	Oscar	Hispanic	Declined/Unknown	Yes	No
5	Teacher M	Lara	Hispanic	Not a High School Grad	Yes	No
5	Teacher M	Julian	Hispanic	Declined/Unknown	Yes	No
5	Teacher M	Diana	Hispanic	Declined/Unknown	Yes	No
5	Teacher G	Valerie	Hispanic	Declined/Unknown	Yes	No
5	Teacher G	Cynthia	Hispanic	High School Grad	Yes	No
5	Teacher G	Melanie	Hispanic	Not a High School Grad	Yes	No

It is also worth noting that while the semi-structured focus groups were asked the same types of questions, I asked them in opposite order at the two schools. At Painted Arrow, I started by asking about their future aspirations and led into asking about their school initiatives and culture, but at Spinning Compass I started by asking them about their school and finished with



questions about their future aspirations. Some of the variance in facilitation could account for more in-depth responses in some areas over the others when comparing schools.

## **Data Analysis**

**Influence of The Conceptual Framework.** Based on the concentric circles of influence: individual, familial, social, and institutional, my study paid particular attention to the innermost (individual) and outermost (institutional) circles to see how schools influenced low-income students' perceptions of college and their thoughts about the future. The data were coded with themes and patterns of common language around how college or future-focused cultures in elementary schools influence the way low-income students perceive college and career pathways and what they aspire to in their futures.

**Coding.** Once the various forms of data were collected they were coded to reveal the influence elementary schools may or may not have on students' college discourse, attitudes, aspirations and perceptions. In the analysis, I coded responses from each school separately to determine themes and patterns related to the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 2013) in order to analyze the influence the school culture has on their perceptions of their futures. I compared and contrasted those codes to understand if there was a difference in perceptions or future aspirations between the two types of cultures.

“In qualitative data analysis, a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes” (Saldana, 2013, p. 4). This was an iterative process requiring several cycles to identify common patterns and then to collapse those patterns into larger themes through the analytic lens of my research questions. The first round of coding involved identifying recurring phrases from the participants' language. The

next cycle of coding looked for “pattern matching” by clustering the initial codes into categories (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). “We strongly recommend reading line by line through as many pages or fieldnotes as possible, at least until coding seems to generate no new ideas, themes or issues. Reading notes as a whole and in the order they were visited confers a number of the benefits” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p. 144). When coding, I looked for both etic and emic codes, those I would have predicted based on my background knowledge or research and those that emerged. The responses were cross-referenced with the initial research questions to ensure focused analysis and alignment.

Table 6. Alignment of Data Collection Methods to Research Questions

Research Questions	DC	FN	SQ	TQ	FG
What do low-income, elementary school students believe about their educational futures? How do low-income students perceive/ understand/think about college?	x	x	x	x	x
To what degree do these schools reflect the hallmarks of a college going culture? How do each of them portray college or convey messages about college? What messages do teachers send about students’ future-pathways?	x	x	x	x	x
How do students experience future-focused cultures in elementary school?	x	x	x	x	x

*Note.* (DC) Document Collection; (FN) Field Notes; (SQ) Student Questionnaire; (TQ) Teacher Questionnaire; (FG) Student Focus Groups

**Document Review.** I sorted the materials and photographs by their respective schools and looked for patterns, common phrases, symbolism, and messages being communicated before comparing the findings to the other school.

**Field Notes.** During my observations of each case site, I recorded field notes of relevant interactions, events, and discourse. I read through every page of notes highlighting words and phrases related to college or future aspirations, either negatively or positively. I read through the data a second time jotting notes in the margin to synthesize what I had highlighted. Additional read-throughs allowed me to code those margin jottings so I could make coded statements about the culture of each individual school before I compared and contrasted the two schools in a memo.

**Questionnaire.** The open-ended written responses were coded for common perceptions and aspirations, as well as school culture. Here I looked for patterns, commonly used words, and shared attitudes among responses. This allowed me to see individual responses, as well as sort by common collective responses. I highlighted and grouped commonalities, while noting outlier responses to develop codes for each grouping. These responses informed and guided the development of the semi-structured focus group questions.

**Focus Groups.** All focus groups were transcribed verbatim from the personal recording device, with participant permission. Once the transcripts were complete, I used the same open coding process previously described to identify common themes or outliers before making general statements about the findings of the discourse, perspectives, and attitudes of students at each of the respective schools.

## **Limitations**

While the case study design allowed for a more comprehensive look at the potential influence of elementary college cultures on low-income students' perceptions of college and thoughts about the future, there were limitations to this method of research. First, there were several factors influencing students, across all four concentric circles illustrated in my conceptual

framework. As such, each student, each teacher, each family, and each school had a myriad of unique experiences that could shape their attitudes and beliefs toward college. This did not need to be mitigated as qualitative research shares unique lived experiences, but it did lead to other questions about the ways in which schools might influence students' thoughts about their futures.

Second, case studies are detailed accounts of unique cases, which means findings are not generalizable to all elementary schools (Yin, 2018). Case study research designs do not allow for the identical replication of the participating cases in that no two schools, students, teachers, families or cultures are identical, which limits the ability to generalize contexts and apply findings to all schools who identify both with or without college cultures, as each school has a unique, individual set of circumstances. Generalizability, however, is not the goal of qualitative research. Instead the goal is to explore and understand participants' lived experiences.

Lastly, it was impossible to completely avoid parents or teachers preparing students for the focus groups in advance by providing suggested responses in the questionnaires. The attempt to mitigate this was through directions outlined in the participation consent and questionnaire administration instructions. The focus groups were also only limited to a sampling of a few students per grade level as opposed to interviewing all individual stakeholders, which was sufficient for the purpose of this study in order to gain an understanding of student perceptions of college and their future aspirations.

These limitations, while important to mention, did not minimize the contribution of this study regarding how college or future-focused cultures in elementary schools influence the way low-income students perceive college and career pathways and what they aspire to in their futures.

## Positionality Statement

Having worked at a wide variety of elementary schools across the socioeconomic spectrum, I have seen the disparity in students' perceptions of, ambitions toward, and exposure around future-focused options first-hand. Low-income students do not experience the same exposure to college and career pathways, and such future discourse becomes a foreign language for them. In my professional experience, I have worked at several low-income elementary schools where students and families did not know about college or career pathways outside of their family work, and I have worked at one *No Excuses University (NEU)* school, a network which intentionally focuses on exposing all students to college-bound pathways. I observed noticeable differences between the college mindsets and career aspirations of students and families across the various schools. The schoolwide systems and culture established through the exclusive *NEU* membership transformed the way even the youngest TK (transitional kindergarten) students talked about college and their future ambitions. My hope is for every low-income student to know about college and career pathways so as to have the option of pursuing whatever future they aspire toward.

I ensured this hope did not influence my data analysis by transcribing and reporting participant responses verbatim and by ensuring my questions were neutral to avoid leading the participants to a desired response. I was cognizant of how my observations influenced the behaviors of the participants and accounted for this positionality in my data analysis, as well as clarified my role as an observer and researcher during the study. I described the observations in great detail, with an outsider in mind, while I recognized my own subjectivity. Furthermore, I mitigated potential biases by asking a peer from my doctoral cohort to review my data analysis and results.

## **Validity Statement**

To ensure validity throughout my study, phase one questionnaires allowed students across three grade levels, and all teachers at both schools to give different perspectives and have a large sample size of participants. This questionnaire included a rating scale, as well as open-ended opportunities for authentic responses from anonymous students and teachers. This first phase also involved site observations, document collection, and field notes in which I employed peer debriefing from a neutral colleague to facilitate validity of my research perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Phase II of the study involved student focus groups. These were recorded and transcribed verbatim to accurately capture student responses. The coding process started around my conceptual framework circles, and the second round of coding looked for patterns in discourse, mindset, and college-culture to ensure the research questions were answered (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001).

## **Summary**

I conducted a comparative case study between two low-income elementary schools that self-identified as having future-focused cultures. I gathered student and teacher insights through questionnaires offered to all students in grades three through five, and all teachers on staff at each school. Additionally, I conducted student focus groups and collected documentation of the schools' future-focused cultural efforts.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### **Background and Context**

There are countless influences in a student's educational career from the family's educational experiences to messaging about academic abilities at school; from peer relationships to societal barriers; from available extracurricular opportunities to one's own self-efficacy and motivation. We know these influences can shape one's future aspirations (Alvarado & An, 2015; Creswell, 2013; Gerardi, Tiwana, & Slocum, 2006; Knight, 2003; Portnoi & Kwnan, 2015), and we know low-income students are not attending college at the same rate as their middle to higher income peers (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Horn & Chen, 1998; Perna & Titus, 2005; Roderick et al., 2008; Swail, 2000; Williams, 2013), only perpetuating the economic divide between the haves and the have-nots. If college was a way out of poverty, all students need to have exposure and access to it.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of how college or future-focused cultures in elementary schools influence the way low-income students perceive college and career pathways and what they aspire to in their futures. Both elementary schools in this comparative case study considered themselves to have future-focused cultures with their initiatives, but in different ways.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the data collection and analysis.

1. What do low-income, elementary school students believe about their educational futures?

- a. How do low-income students perceive/understand/think about college?
2. To what degree do these schools reflect the hallmarks of a college going culture?
  - a. How do each of them portray college or convey messages about college?
  - b. What messages do teachers send about students' future-pathways?
3. How do students experience future-focused cultures in elementary school?

## **Overview of Findings**

Data analysis revealed that stakeholders at both schools believed college was important in order to procure successful jobs in the future; Painted Arrow Elementary sent messages specifically about college education pathways while the Spinning Compass Academy emphasized more broad ideas about future pathways. With that, I use terms like college-bound or future-focused depending on whether the documents, observations, or participant responses referred specifically to colleges or rather to broader future options, which could include, but are not limited to colleges.

It appears that students from all income levels and at both schools had high aspirations and optimistic beliefs about their educational futures and career pathways. They had a baseline, abstract understanding that college was a school where you learn about your future job and get to take classes you want. Some knew about specific colleges, vocabulary around college, and details about financial aid and admissions processes, while others knew of it more as a general place of learning.

Both schools considered themselves to have future-focused cultures through their respective initiatives. Both staffs believed that college was an option for most students' futures regardless of economic hurdles. Teachers at both schools felt students should be exposed to



college early but also needed to have exposure to alternate pathways in case trade schools or technical jobs were more appropriate or interesting to the student.

Students at both campuses connected school to learning, work ethic, a sense of belonging, and relationships with staff and peers. They took pride in opportunities and initiatives that made their schools unique from their perspectives. Students felt their schools' programs gave them advantages over other schools.

### **Relating Findings to Research Questions**

*What do low-income, elementary school students believe about their educational futures?*

- a. *How do low-income students perceive/understand/think about college?*

Participating students across the economic spectrum at both schools believed their educational futures were bright. They saw college as an option for everyone and understood it necessitates hard work and perseverance in order to be successful. When asked who goes to college, common student responses were: "people who work hard; people who like to learn more;" and "anyone who wants to go" Most students had high career aspirations generally inspired by careers they had encountered in life or through media. They realized a college degree was crucial for "getting a good job" and perceived college to be a school where you learn about your future job and continue learning. They did not talk about the barriers to college pathways at this age, which allowed for the open mindset.

*To what degree do these schools reflect the hallmarks of a college going culture?*

- b. *How do each of them portray college or convey messages about college?*
- c. *What messages do teachers send about students' future-pathways?*

Painted Arrow Elementary and Spinning Compass Academy both showed evidence of a focus on post-secondary choices although the messages ranged from a specific emphasis on

going to college to a more general focus on the future. These usually included the occasional verbal comments from teachers to students about going to college, typically from individual teachers in isolation as opposed to common language across the school community. The other end of the spectrum included deeply embedded visual and verbal messages from teachers and students to their peers including disseminating parent information and partnerships with the larger community or local colleges. At Painted Arrow Elementary, college messaging was seen and heard across the campus through murals, t-shirts, posts on social media, class flags, class chants, and common language.

While both schools considered themselves to have college-going cultures, Painted Arrow Elementary was more explicit in conveying messages about specific college-knowledge, whereas Spinning Compass Academy conveyed messages around students' futures more broadly.

Teachers at Painted Arrow believed in all students' abilities and supported their ambitious future aspirations. Eight of the nine participating teachers spoke of their high expectations and efforts to support all learners. Four teachers noted some students have "learned helplessness" or a "defeatist attitude" when they encounter barriers, but three of those four teachers spoke of boosting their confidence and working to develop growth mindsets.

Teachers at Spinning Compass Academy also believed in students' abilities, but they said the students' perceptions of themselves are split between those who "feel confident in some areas" and those who "don't value or lack awareness of the importance of academics." One teacher said students did not know their grade level standards so they should focus on the present instead of the future, and four teachers wanted to give equal importance to trade schools or technical schools when teaching about future options.

### *How do students experience future-focused cultures in elementary school?*

Students at both schools saw their schools as effectively “preparing them for their futures” and they viewed their school initiatives as giving “them an advantage” to go to college. At Spinning Compass Academy, the students appreciated being exposed to the arts and expressed interest in careers around the visual or performing arts. They also saw IB as accelerating their learning through their units of study and development as inquiry learners who effect change for the world. At Painted Arrow Elementary, students appreciated developing their leadership skills and learning about colleges. They were knowledgeable about specific colleges and majors.

The following section disaggregates data from the individual school results from specific groups of stakeholders (students and teachers) in order to compare the two case study school cultures. Pseudonyms have been added for readability.

#### **Painted Arrow Elementary Results**

**Safety and Relationships Created A Positive School Experience.** All grade levels regarded Painted Arrow Elementary as a great school because of the “nice teachers and friends.” The students called Painted Arrow Elementary a great school because of the learning- especially the projects they get to make in the Maker Lab, field trips, annual activities, and overall fun. Destiny said, “I love my school and even if I tried I couldn't think of one thing I don't like.” According to their questionnaires, Painted Arrow Elementary makes them feel happy, awesome, cool, good, successful, and smart, as well as known, cared about, comfortable and loved. “My school makes me feel happy because of art, my friends, and my teacher.” They appreciated the opportunities their school offered, as Isaac described, “I like wheeling because we get to switch classes a lot of time we go to art and coding, music, counselor, innovation and one more.”

Students expressed their psychological safety at school emphasizing feelings of acceptance, belonging, and the school's unique opportunities. "I'm Alexa from Arizona State University, class of 2032 and this is Monica from UC Santa Barbara, class of 2033..." This was a common way for students to identify themselves. In the focus groups, students introduced themselves by which college they belonged to, "all of us are Redlands" or "I'm CSULB" rather than "my class represents..."

On the two days I visited campus, most students and teachers were showing their school spirit either wearing their respective class college shirt or wearing their blue Painted Arrow Elementary t-shirts, which has their logo on the front, and the *No Excuses University* logo on the back with the words "I'm college bound." Painted Arrow Elementary's social media was also filled with Friday Flag college chant performances from the various classes in their college shirts leading the assembly which showed how pervasive college exposure is in their school culture. "We wear our college shirts... it's a shirt that represents our school" (Michael). They explained each class has their own college t-shirt that they wear on Wednesdays together, and sometimes on Fridays when they are leading Friday Flag. Having a common shirt and showing collective pride for their class's college reemphasized the fifth graders' sense of belonging. The same pride translated to the visual representation and peer support during Friday Flag.

Isaac: Friday Flag means...we represent the flags. There's maybe two schools and they'll do their chant to represent their college... sometimes they use... the chants. They make it and it's really cool 'cause that's like, we're the only school that does that and that's really cool.

Michael: I think that it's... a happy time 'cause they play music for us so we can go in and dance. But I also think that it's kind of, once people are announcing stuff, like the people to eat lunch with the principal. Ms. Gepeas, whenever someone in our class goes up, the class says, "Go beach," to cheer them on. For other people, we know we can just clap and congratulate them.

Anabel: I say the same thing as Michael and Isaac because all those things are about Friday Flag. We are one of the only schools that do it.

In their focus group, they shared their strong sense of belonging based on each class identifying with their respective colleges. As Issac put it, “[I feel] appreciated and happy because, if we didn't have this, maybe I would only have a couple friends, but every year, I make new friends because of this.” In other words, students are able to bond over their common class college identity. They expressed positive peer relationships. They felt safe around their peers as Michael explained, “What I like most in my school was the other students. They are all really nice and there are no bullies.” Nathan added, “I like that we have different people that speak different languages to help kids.” They highlighted the personal relationships and sense of inclusivity and diversity. “I like my friends and the teachers. You make good friends at [Painted Arrow Elementary]” (Brian).

Brian: I would say it's a great school and it's a great way to learn.

Rylee: ...this is a great school and I think you should go 'cause everybody's nice and we have no excuses... and I feel like this would be a perfect place...

Lisa: It's open for almost anyone to come in.

Brian: And we're all family.

They also reported that their school was great for learning and the teachers were nice and provide extra help if needed. Students felt supported by their teachers “the teachers never give up on anyone” (Anabel). Evie added, “I really like my classroom my teacher is nice and the classroom is comfy.” Overall, students felt they belonged in Painted Arrow Elementary’s family, “the school makes me feel welcome” (Michael). In addition to relational safety and belonging, students also focused on feeling physically safe at school by talking about emergency drills and the teachers who “keep you safe.”

## Painted Arrow Elementary Conclusion

**School Initiatives Contribute to Their Experiences.** They shared their understanding of schoolwide initiatives proudly. Anabel said, “[Painted Arrow Elementary] is a *No Excuses University* and it's okay to be yourself here 'cause we accept for who you are. It doesn't matter what happens. You're a leader.” They felt proud to attend the only school that emphasizes leadership and college.

Isaac: This school was different from the others 'cause it's a leadership school.

Yeah, it's a leadership school.

Michael: I've only been to one other school and it was different because we didn't have colleges and it wasn't a No Excuses. I feel like this helps us learn faster.

Anabel: [We] learn about more college.

Isaac: Yeah, what you said really that she wants us to know that there's no excuses at this school and it's really cool because most schools don't do that. It's really cool that we're like one school that does that, and it's cool.

Anabel: Leader in Me means...you're all a leader inside of you and it doesn't matter what anyone says 'cause you're a leader inside and out.

Third graders identified “learning and preparing for college” as things their school community does together. They perceived the *No Excuses University* messaging to mean no excuses about homework or behavior. They recognized that everyone has to take responsibility for their actions “You can't say like, ‘I forgot my homework.’ It's your responsibility.” Nathan continued, “It's no excuses and we talk about college.” Evie echoed the college focus, “It's a great school to go to because it really influences the children to go to college.”

At Painted Arrow Elementary, almost all participating students wanted to go to college in order to learn and get a good job, according to questionnaire responses and focus group discussions. Students perceived they had an advantage for going to college because of the unique opportunities offered at their individual school. It is important to note students did not talk about the *Leader in Me* initiative. They emphasized the more singular focus on higher education.

**Exposure to College Developed Students' Aspirations.** Students were confident about pursuing higher education like Kurtis said, “[Painted Arrow Elementary] gets you ready for college.” Ninety-seven percent of fifth graders said they learned about college at Painted Arrow Elementary. Fifth graders assumed most of college information was common knowledge. They talked about their school and future pathways with confidence and pride.

The visual college messaging around Painted Arrow’s campus increased students’ exposure to a variety of schools. The following excerpt from my researcher field notes illustrates the environment.

*Across Painted Arrow Elementary’s campus, there were college advertisements marketing higher education and exposing students to future pathways. Three flags waved from the flagpole: America, California, and a large white flag with the NEU logo: a capital blue U in graduate font with a graduation cap and tassel on its upper corner. In the main quad, there were several painted wooden arrows nailed to all sides of tall poles, pointing in different directions. Each arrow had a different college name and the number of miles that college was from Painted Arrow Elementary pointed in the respective direction like a compass giving students options for their futures. Across the open blacktop, there were three large handball walls, each with a college-focused mural like the wall with several painted students in college shirts and various college pennants painted above them. The visual college representation continued down each hallway, where classes flew their adopted college flags.*

Students at Painted Arrow reported being exposed to college both in and out of school. The theme of the messaging they received was “you’re bound for college and... college was a great place and you should go there.” Sixty percent of students responded on the questionnaire that they also knew a relative who had experienced college in some way even if some dropped out before earning a degree.

In their questionnaires, eighty percent of third grade students said their school helped them for their futures because they “teach me stuff I’ll need to know to get into college” (Aaron). College preparation was almost expected, “Yes, school is supposed to prepare you for college”

(Julia). As a result, seventy percent of third grade students saw college as a natural progression after high school and made comments like it is a place where you “learn more” and “learn stuff for your job” (Lizbeth). Ana added, “College is a place where you go after you go to high school and learn to get a job.” Destiny believed college was going to be “harder than here” (elementary school) because there are “lots of tests.” Fourth grade students echoed that people go to college to learn, study, “get smarter,” get a good job, and they also referred to college as a natural progression after high school, “it was the last years of school” or “college is education after high school.” College was “a place you can go to after high school” and, “a school that you go to after high school” or “a place to start a life.” Ninety-four percent of fourth grade students reported college was an inclusive option for anyone, with the target audience being “smart people” or “people who get good grades” and “people who want a job or want to do well in their futures.”

All focus group participants knew college classes and the different types of colleges depend on what you’re studying. They viewed college as an option for anyone, big kids, people who paid attention in class, and those who finished high school. On their questionnaires, all but two third grade students identified someone who went to college (either a relative or their teachers). They spoke of seven specific colleges: Ashridge (Ashford) University, USC, UCLA College of the Ozarks, Oregon, Arizona, UC Davis, all of which they associated with the teachers’ adopted colleges across the campus. The fourth graders mentioned five specific colleges by name, knew specific mascots and locations. Fifth graders knew there were different types of colleges, specifically pointing out private versus public school options. They did not discriminate between types of colleges saying their teachers tell them it “doesn’t matter which one you go to as long as you get good grades and have fun.”



Students had exposure to a variety of college experiences. They recounted when their teacher took them on a virtual tour, Facetimed with her son as he toured them around his college, or when they did a report on their college in second grade. In addition to the virtual tours and field trips, five focus group students had driven by a college with their families. Students had an understanding of how large campuses are. Lizbeth shared “I actually passed by a college once. It's not here anymore, it's a college that Miss Latty used to teach. I don't know which college,” and the other students in the focus group identified that teacher’s college as USC.

All sixteen focus group students and 94 students who responded to the questionnaires showed an understanding of college and fluently discussed explicit vocabulary around dorms, professors, admissions processes, scholarships, various degrees, as well as mascots, locations, chants, and details about the campuses.

Lizbeth: Some people they actually, they live in the college dorms.

Aaron: It depends what you want to study for how many years you stay in.

Destiny: You have to stay there for like 20 years to get your Doctor's Degree or something.

Julia: College is where people go to get a diploma

**Students Have Financial Awareness.** Elementary students at Painted Arrow were conscious of college costs. Third graders discussed needing jobs when they are in high school (“like 15 or 16”) in order to pay for college based upon other family members’ experiences. They recognized the difference between jobs and careers as “jobs they’re [family members] doing right now to earn money and then for your career [it’s] your dream job- something you really want to do.”

Fourth grade students also focused on the cost and financial aid options associated with higher education. Thirty-three percent of the fourth graders wrote about “college money” and the respective vocabulary around scholarships, loans, and saving up for a long time “since middle

school” or “their whole life,” but they did not all have an accurate concept of estimated tuition expenses: “they have to get up to 1,000 dollars or more.” During the focus group, they discussed cost:

Evie: There are many different types of colleges, but colleges cost a lot of money. You gotta pay a lot of money. So, let's say if you wanted to go to college, here's a smart thing to do. When you're little save your money, have a piggy bank and save it for college. Save all that money in the piggy bank. And then when it's college time and let's say someone doesn't have enough money, then you were smart because you saved all your money for it.

Nathan: And also, depending on where you are going to go for college, it depends on how much you are going to pay. Like if you go out of state, you're going to go to a college out of state, you have to pay more money.

Interestingly, fifth graders did not talk about the finances of college as much as the fourth graders did, but they mentioned scholarships, grants, and loans in their questionnaires and talked about needing to get a job before college or being recruited in sports during the focus group.

Anabel: Well, first of all, I know that you would need to get a job so you could pay your rent to stay there.

Michael: I know that sometimes, if you're really good at the sport you do, you might get pulled and they might want you in their college, and then you might get accepted.

Teachers at Painted Arrow have informed students about financial aid options. Tristan knew “sometimes people give you a grant,” and Sam added, “You can get a scholarship by getting good grades, doing communication [community] services, and more.” Riley was on the fence about pursuing higher education, but was knowledgeable about options for financial aid, “Idk [I don't know], cause I wanna get a scollership [scholarship] in a soccer grade to help pay for college but I'm still not sure if I'll decide that I want to do that later on in my life...”

**Work Ethic is Critical for Success.** “People get into college because of their hard work and learning in high school, middle school and elementary.” This school repeatedly talked about

work ethic as a requirement for success. All third grade students said the secret to success was rooted in studying and paying attention. In their questionnaire responses, Painted Arrow fourth graders knew one gets accepted to college with good grades, hard work, and money. One student replied college was more exclusively for “hard workers and rich people.”

Third graders also described the application, financial aid options, and acceptance process on a surface level knowing you need good grades and essays leading up to college. Rosalyn said, “People get into college because of their hard work and learning in high school, middle school and elementary.”

Fourth graders reported hearing work habit messages from both their teachers and their parents, telling them to study, practice, persevere, listen, not plagiarize, stand up for what they believe in, and get good grades in order to be successful in their futures. Students were internalizing the keys to success and apply them to their future aspirations as indicated across their questionnaire responses:

Rylee: Go to college, work hard, and practice.

Lucy: I am going to do whatever it takes to get to where I want to be.

Brian: I’m gonna have to work hard and meet my goals.

Heidy: I am going to work the hardest I can in school and try my best to reach my goals.

Joy: I would have to go to art school and go to graduate school and most importantly work hard.

The students recognized it will be academically challenging and that college students need to maintain good grades “so you don’t get kicked out.”

Families echoed the importance of getting good grades to get into good colleges, and years of hard work. Kensie said, “They tell me that college will be hard, but you need to try your best.” Families tell the students “[college] was great,” and it was important “to get a job to get more money.”

Michael: Our parents... say, "We don't care what college you go to as long as you're learning something."  
Anabel: my aunt lives in Arizona, so they want me to go to the Arizona college out there, so I can just live with her. But I also said, "I want to get into a college close to home, so I can come see you guys more often."  
Isaac: Oh, my aunt goes to CSULB.  
Michael: My mom was gonna go back to college 'cause she wants to be a preschool teacher. She's going to go on online college.  
Anabel: My aunt, she got her doctors degree and I went to help celebrate. [she said] it's gonna be hard and you're gonna make friends.  
Isaac: my mom went to college and I was very young when she graduated. My dad, he started college, but he never finished it.

**Future Educational Aspirations.** With students' hearing college-bound messaging at home and at school, students at Painted Arrow aspired to higher education and ambitious future life pathways. Eighty percent of third grade students at Painted Arrow reported they think their family expects them to go to college. Some students were specific about their dream college such as "apply to Southwestern University" and Becca knows she will "Go on a mission like I am supposed to do then take a 1-year break for my hard work, then go to CSULB" (one of their class colleges). Students wanted to go to college "so I won't be homeless and poor," while others were not as sure: "I can't tell" or "I think they would want what I want" or a few responses like Luke's, "no, most of my family don't go to college, (well they kind of expect me to go because I'm getting good grades and good feedback, I think)." But students were confident in their teachers' expectations of college in their futures. According to questionnaire responses, eighty percent of third graders at Painted Arrow Elementary believed their teachers expected them to go to college. Eighty-three percent of third graders expressed a desire to pursue college after high school, with one student specifically listing UC Davis by name. Acacia talked about taking over her Grandpa's farm in Idaho, but almost all other student participants wanted to go to college. Ashley wrote, "My goal for the future is to go to college, my plans are to raise a child and a

family.” Despite the college-knowledge already acquired by the fifth graders, fifty-four percent said students should start thinking about college in middle or high school.

**Career and Life Aspirations.** The focus group participants had common career aspirations (doctors, scientists, teachers) and were able to articulate why they wanted to pursue that career path (to help people feel better, to help kids learn more, and so on), but responses to the same question were not elaborated on in the questionnaire. Written responses around career aspirations covered most of the typical jobs ranging from professional athletes (football, baseball and soccer players, and skater or snowboarder) to doctors/pediatricians/surgeons, lawyers, teachers, authors, illustrators, news anchors, construction workers, oceanographers, and engineers. Payton wanted to do it all, “I want to become a game developer, scientist, and engineer...I am going to work the hardest I can in school and try my best to reach my goals.” Other students who did not mention college focused on getting jobs without listing specific career paths and they wanted to pursue hobbies like Ryan, “soccer player, football player, basketball player, I wanna be an athletic person and a youtuber.”

Students also vaguely talked about career or future lifestyle aspirations like “getting kids” or “buying a house.” Five students focused on life goals instead of college or career paths like Octavian, “To get a nice car and to get a house” or Juanita “to have a family and other things I need.” Liberty planned on staying home to help her family, “probably stay with my parents, have a job, and help my parents” instead of pursuing college.

**Student Summary.** Overall, the students at Painted Arrow Elementary were knowledgeable about college and saw themselves as hard-working, college-bound candidates despite economic barriers. They had high aspirations for their futures and felt supported and encouraged by their teachers and parents. It appeared that the singular focus of the school's

initiative meant that students thought about college specifically when thinking about the future. They liked that their school taught them about and prepared them for college. They viewed college as an option for anyone who works hard to get good grades, and they knew there are financial aid supports available for students who encounter economic struggles. It is also important to note the students barely mentioned the other schoolwide initiative *The Leader in Me*, except when talking about student clubs or the *7 Habits* as character traits, which showed the heavier emphasis at Painted Arrow is on the *No Excuses University* initiative.

**Teacher Perspectives.** Teachers at Painted Arrow Elementary described their culture as a “college-going” focus centered around the “whole child” including social-emotional, academic, and “career-ready” preparation from a strengths-based foundation. They described the school as a happy, positive place where “children are encouraged to do and be their best.”

**School Initiatives.** Teachers mentioned the two main school initiatives: *Leader in Me* and *No Excuses University*, as well as the school’s strategic principle or motto “Where students grow: college, career, and life.” Ms. Mapps explained,

“Leader in Me focuses on the 7 Habits of Happy People which gives students important life skills and coping mechanisms. *No Excuses University* (NEU) encourages students to take responsibility for actions and words and not blame other people and things. At [Painted Arrow Elementary], we are always talking about college and career.”

The teachers talked about their school’s population being split with the haves and have-nots, with over sixty percent low-income and around the same percentage was identified as Hispanic and the need to differentiate for the diverse learners’ needs, as Mrs. Journey said, “we are always looking at the ways to best facilitate the needs of our students while trying to focus on a college bound attitude.”

The teachers took pride in their hard work in making the initiatives possible, “We are constantly seeking ways to innovate and improve our personal practice (professionally)... I'm convinced we'll always strive to prepare our students with a future-ready mindset and experience” (Mrs. Navi). They saw these initiatives transferring to the students’ future aspirations already like Mrs. Pathe pointed out, “Students have a "college bound" attitude. Most believe that college was definitely the next step after high school and already have picked out favorite colleges they would like.”

**Academic Perceptions.** The teachers saw students’ academic abilities as high and all students as capable. Ms. Navi’s comment illustrated this belief: “All students have potential, and we will do our part to support ALL students towards academic, behavior, and future-ready success. We promise to cultivate compassionate global leaders who possess 21st century skills through rigorous learning environments and meaningful experiences which prepare them for college, career, and life.” They were consistently positive when referring to students’ abilities. Miss Routed wrote “We believe that our students can do whatever they put their minds to. They are bright, hardworking, kind, and energetic students. Our staff works together to find the best learning style and environment for each child.” The staff described students’ own beliefs about their academic abilities to be along the same vein: positive, capable, and confident. This illustrated how the school reflects the hallmarks of a college going culture in their beliefs.

Three of the participating teachers qualified a statement around student self-perception saying “at the level I teach” followed by a statement about student self-efficacy. “At my level, most students generally believe they can do anything. Most are willing to try new things, but some are not, and this requires some confidence boosting and working to develop an "I can try" attitude” (Mrs. Routed).

**Student Motivation.** While fifty percent of the responses about student abilities were positive, four teachers pointed to some students' apathetic learning attitudes or efforts as a hindrance. Ms. Journey wrote, "I believe that the staff believes that all students have the ability to learn and that we have to figure out to best facilitate their learning styles. I also believe that there was some belief that students are somewhat apathetic in their learning."

She talked about students' perceptions in the same light, "I believe that most students feel that they have the ability to be successful in the classroom if they put effort into doing what needs to be done. That being said, they also have a somewhat defeatist and lazy attitude especially in this Google world where Google will do whatever they ask it to do." Whenever a teacher made a discouraging comment she followed it up with a more hopeful and positive statement, which affected how students experienced the future-focused culture at Painted Arrow. Ms. Navi explained by saying, "General beliefs in my opinion, most students strive to do their best academically, but there was a population who need additional support to motivate and help them discover their strengths. Overall, I perceive students to be motivated based on our culture that ALL students are Leaders and all of them possess strengths." Given that the teachers believed in students' abilities and were willing to support those who needed extra help, the students reported feeling safe around their teachers.

**College-Knowledge.** Painted Arrow Elementary teachers said their students knew a lot about college since every class had adopted a college, so students learned the name, mascot, and characteristics about those schools. They knew college was an opportunity after high school and they were excited to pursue it in order to learn about their dream careers.

"At [Painted Arrow Elementary] we promote a culture of universal achievement. Each of our classrooms represents a college or university. We each have a college flag, we wear college t-shirts every Wednesday, we have college chants and we



promote college language. I believe students know that college was a goal that they can aspire to achieve if they work hard.”

Teachers reported varied ranges of college knowledge exposure for students depending on the grade level including specific vocabulary to more general, abstract thoughts about college being hard work. “Many students are aware that there was something after high school called college and that this was where they will learn about their future job or career. Many have a positive attitude about it. Many know about the college chants, colors, mascots, and major or career paths” (Mrs. Routed). As a result of the school-wide initiative facilitating daily college exposure, teachers reported high student future aspirations and college-bound dreams. Ms. LaTour said, “Many students talk about and expect that they will attend college. They also talk about what professions/careers they would like to go into.” All but one participating teacher described students’ aspirations as bright, purposeful, and college-bound, like Mrs. Pathe, “Many like to dream really big, which was great. Students want to become something important and something they enjoy” and Ms. LaTour, “Many students talk about and expect that they will attend college. They also talk about what professions/careers they would like to go into.”

**College Exposure.** Teachers at Painted Arrow Elementary believed there were benefits to introducing students to college starting in elementary school as Ms. Navi wrote, “If we don't plant the seed of college and career now, they may never hear it elsewhere. Exposing students to college at the elementary level gives our kids purpose and empowers them to be drivers of their own education.” Seventy-five percent of teachers made comments like Mrs. Routed, “We want them to know it’s never too early to start thinking about college and to explore different types of careers and discover their strengths and interests.” Most importantly, teachers wanted their students to know it was an attainable option for each of them, and that there was no “one-size fits all” pathway, rather they had the ability to choose for themselves. Part of that required for

students to learn about their options, which teachers suspected not all students were receiving the same messaging at home.

“I like the idea of students thinking about their futures. At their age, it should be exciting. Not all students will receive the same messages at home, so I think it was important to get the message out in schools. I don't want any of my students to think that college was something other people get to do” (Mrs. Gepeas).

The teachers saw college as important but recognized there are other options for students, such as trade schools, that could lead to equally successful pathways, yet all teachers highlighted the need for formalized training or formal education. “We know not ALL kids will go to college, but at least we would have prepared for that option should they want to pursue that route.”

Teachers emphasized work ethic and goal setting for the pathway to college, like Mrs. Journey said,

“I believe my students believe that college is attainable because we focus on being proactive and persevering through those difficult times to reach their goal. They understand that setting goals was paramount to attaining any goal including going to college. My hope was that the college attitude was prevalent in their education moving through elementary, middle, and high school.”

**Painted Arrow Elementary Conclusion.** Painted Arrow Elementary had a primarily college-focused culture from both student and teacher perspectives. They had a unique sense of belonging that bonded peers and teachers around their adopted class college. Their college became their identity and an instant connection for relationships to form. Students were encouraged by their teachers and their parents to pursue college pathways, and as a result, most students expressed an interest in higher education. Students and teachers at Painted Arrow Elementary described eight of the nine elements of a college culture as identified by McClafferty, McDonough, Nunez (2002): college talk, clear expectations, information and resources, counseling, faculty involvement, a few annual events to promote family involvement,

some college partnerships (field trips and guest visitors), and clear articulation across grade levels at the site. Students had a concrete understanding of what college was and saw it as an option for their futures. The data did not show a general focus on the future career or life choices, rather it was narrowly focused on college. As such, it appears that the type of initiative does influence the way in which students think about the future.

### **Spinning Compass Academy Results**

As a visual and performing arts magnet, Spinning Compass Academy focused on how the arts influenced the whole child to offer a well-rounded education as it intertwined with the academic inquiry and learning through their International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (IB-PYP) units. The data collection mirrored the process at Painted Arrow Elementary whereby student questionnaires were offered to third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers to administer to their students, but the teachers found it difficult to find the time during class, so instead paper questionnaires were distributed to the students in the after school program. In all, 145 students (49 third graders, 36 fourth graders, 60 fifth graders) completed the questionnaire. The same grade levels were offered a chance to participate in the student focus groups with parental consent. Simultaneously, an anonymous teacher questionnaire was offered to all teachers, yielding ten participants. I also visited the site to walk classrooms and experience the culture on campus, during which time the principal offered an impromptu, unstructured interview.

**Safety and Relationships Created A Positive School Experience.** Students emphasized the supportive staff as favorite elements of the school. “It has lots of nice teachers here” (Natalia). They bragged about their “great teachers that teach you a lot of stuff.” Harper wrote, “I like that all the staff here work hard for us so we can have the best experiences of school.”

Bailey also said, “My friends and teachers [make this school great] because they are nice and understand me, [and] the playground because it's my school home.” Students highlighted emotional safety as a reason they liked their school, especially with the nurse who “does a really great job,” as well as the physical safety from the security cameras and lockdown drills. Third grade students also shared there are “no bullies” at Spinning Compass Academy.

The school community united each week and danced the “Bulldog Boogie” which students said was a dance to show how they “appreciate our school.” The song ends with a loud “our school is number one” shout, which students say makes them feel “awake, happy, and appreciated.” As a result of the positive experiences, Oscar said Spinning Compass Academy “makes us feel motivated to do stuff and gives us motivation to reach our goals.”

**School Initiatives Contribute to Their Positive Experiences.** Students considered Spinning Compass Academy to be a “really good school for the arts.” Thirty out of questionnaire participants in fifth grade listed the arts and specialty classes as their favorite part of school. Corey said, “I like how this school is into the arts in the many options of things I like this because I like many different things And love the arts” and Dana agreed “What I like most about my school is all the art, music, steam, library, dance, drama, I like that because we get to express ourselves during those classes.”

Students at Spinning Compass Academy were very proud of their school for various reasons, namely the arts integration and being an IB school. They felt they had an advantage over other schools because of those initiatives. They saw how unique their school’s art program was and took pride in being part of the school because according to them there was a waiting list of others who wanted to get in. Natalia said she liked Spinning Compass because “This was the only school with tons of art classrooms.” Students talked highly about the art, dance, drama and

STEAM “that stands for science, technology, engineering, art and math. Because we are in art in school, so they added and 'A' into it.” Marcella recognized the value in their extra classes, “I think we get to use stuff that some kids don't even have in their schools.” Karen added, “You get to go to drama, and most kids in different schools don't have that, 'cause they stay the whole day in school.”

Students at Spinning Compass Academy also took pride in being an International Baccalaureate school. “We feel lucky to be here and to have the opportunity to be an IB learner.” They alluded to the learner profile attitudes and attributes (caring, kindness, and knowledge) as something they liked about the school culture. Kelly said, “It’s an IB school so it can help you get any career you want, and it can help you get into middle school easier.” Fifth graders identified the learner profiles and IB attributes as “characteristics that you should have...before you leave the school... so maybe when you're an adult you need those characteristics to get into a job... A couple of them are caring, knowledgeable” (Gia).

They discussed the thematic units and how being an IB school teaches students differently than other schools. As Ashley described, “When you're IB, there's units. Like right now, we're learning about how human impact changes all the wildlife and how they're going extinct. And that we don't have any more animals that can take care of...”

Jessica: It's like, an IB school is like where they have their friends and like, IB things, like who we are, or a place and time, how we organize ourselves, different units that we learn about and we like write about what happens, like what that unit means.

Andrew: Each unit is specific about what we're learning about, like how we are place and time, we learn sometimes about our habitat, and what type of animals they are, and their habitat, how they live, how they survive.

Kyle: We also get to go on field trips,

Maria: Cause like, here we - here we do lots of different things, we like learn lots of things, like the gold rush that we never heard of before when we were younger, and then over there, they just give you a little bit of information, they never do plays, like they just like, probably four new kids in fourth

grade this year, and then one of my classmates said that where she went, they never did plays. Like they would just sit in their classroom and do nothing.

Kyle: IB was like also like being a risk taker, a communicator, and open minded.

They had a relatively strong understanding of what IB meant and how the units of study were actionable, while also showing how the arts were integrated into their learning.

The following excerpt from my field notes suggested a focus on helping students think about and be prepared for the future, without emphasizing any specific future plans.

*The principal talked about their journey becoming an IB school and described what it took to get everybody certified. She said it changed the way the students and staff saw each other and talk about student learning. I noticed every classroom had an IB bulletin board with “Wonder Walls” to foster inquiry, and the student awards were based off the IB learner profile and attributes. There was a focus on student agency as kids took ownership in the culminating “taking action” projects at the end of each IB unit. There was consistent language and learning occurred in thematic units across the grade levels, which was cultivated through additional collaboration time made possible by the magnet funding. The principal talked about the magnet for the arts and the IB school and how both support student learning in tandem. Having a common language and common understanding of what they were working towards, with a common purpose that all staff, students and parents understood, gave their school an identity. There was a lot of symbolism across the campus with reminders about IB learner profiles and attitudes including a mural on the library wall at the front of the school designed by students, with the support of their teaching staff. There are posters and banners around the campus with the school’s mission and a pamphlet in the front office to explain about their school.*

**Messages About Futures Developed Students’ Aspirations.** Students at Spinning Compass had varied sources of college messaging. They had been exposed to college either through their siblings, occasional class discussions, or outside advertisements on commercials or buses. Students felt encouraged by their relatives to pursue college:

Oscar: My mom, she used to go to the school college but now she's taking online classes and she says that I should go to college. And I want to.

Lara: A lot of the times my mom she wants me to get a better education and get into college so she's telling me to work really hard.

- Lara: My older cousin, he's in high school and he's about to go to college and he always talks about how he wants to be in different classes when he goes into college.
- Gia: My mom didn't finish college, so she wants me to finish it.
- Julian: My cousin was going to college right now to be a veterinarian.
- Lara: My mom always tells me that she never got to college so I can go so we both can feel successful.

The messaging students receive around college influenced their aspirations to pursue higher education. For example, in the above focus group, Gia and Laura shared that their moms did not get to go to college and wanted a better life for their daughters, so the students are encouraged and motivated to go to make their mothers proud, but they only knew it was where you get smarter and the homework was harder based on what the teacher shared.

Fourth graders said their teachers talked about the importance of going to college to get a good job. “They tell us that college like really helps you participate in your life, think about what you wanna do, and like they have different classes, for like doctors, artists, technology, like everything.” Three students had a teacher who shared personal anecdotes from her college experience, while other teachers talked about how much college costs and what kind of financial aid options were available. They learned about getting accepted to the colleges, sharing apartments with roommates, and signing up for classes that pertain to your future career paths. Andrew shared that his teacher discussed college when they had to do a survey about college (the questionnaire for this study). “Well usually my teacher, she - we do like assignments, surveys, and one time we did one that was talking about college, and our teacher was preparing us for it, and she was teaching us about it, like what they do there.” Andrew did not elaborate on whether college was a regular topic of conversation, but it appeared to be situational for the questionnaire.

The third graders shared that their families are the ones who talk to them about college,

their teachers do not really talk about college “because we still have a lot of grades to go to.”

Only one student in the focus group said no one has talked to her about college yet. There were six students who responded “I don’t know” when asked about if their family expects them to pursue college, which could mean the families are not talking about college in the home.

Unlike their third grade peers, fourth grade students did not say their families talked to them about college or their futures, which could be a result of their parents’ educational levels: two “not a high school graduate” two high school graduates, one with some college, and one who declined to state.

Twelve out of sixty fifth grade students said their teachers do not talk about college, while thirty-four students reported messages from their teacher about “getting good jobs” and “earning more money” with college degrees. River said teachers tell them “That it's hard but worth it because you get the job you want in the end.”

**Students Have Financial Awareness.** With the varied sources of messaging, students were still aware of college expenses and financial aid options.

Katie: College is about learning how to get your career and about your future. How things are going to work out, like if you want to be a doctor, or a P.E. teacher, or teacher. You could be it. And sometimes you can get two jobs. And that's really fun because then you'll have better money that you can spend things on.

Bianca: It's an option if you want...the dorms...but you have to pay like, \$550 or more money. And for books you have to pay money.

Katie: Being at the IB school makes me go to college easier because we could get really high grades. And let's say this was the college that I want to go to, and I actually want to go to this college... Princeton-...university. And let's say I get a really high grade on this test, and then Princeton's going to say, like, “Oh wow! This girl was really good at physics, and she's at her grade level in algebra, and she can read at third grade to fifth grade level. She's really smart, I want her in this school.” You don't have to pay for it, they beg you to come. Like my brother, he got begged to come in so many colleges.

Bianca: Scholarship.

Katie: ...and he's...yeah...and now he's in Boston University. He didn't really have



to pay to go there. All he had to pay was just the trip. Financial aid. In their questionnaires, third graders described their future aspirations around making money and meeting future goals. Six students focused their future goals around possessions like nice cars and houses. Antonio aspired “to go to college university, find a job, get a mansion, get rich, get a lambo.”

They also aspired to support their families financially like Andrew, “[I plan] to go to work and help my family save money.” Some of the questionnaire responses showed the pattern:

“Go to college and help my parents with money”

“I want to work to help my family with bills and food, go to college”

“Find a job so I could get money for my mom dad and sister”

“Work with my mom or dad”

“I plan on getting a job in Petco and my goal [is to] earn the money to get a little farm where my mom lives.”

“My plan is to get a good job and help my mom”

“One, get my Master’s degree. Two, buy my parents a house. Have a stable life. Get the job I want”

Raquel wanted to work and go to college “I’d like to be a teacher or a dance teacher. Because dance teachers don’t make that much money, I still want to get my degree and do it at the same time, because doesn’t make that much money, and it’s not a full time job.”

In the questionnaire, Levi said his family does not expect him to go to college “because we don’t have enough money” but his teacher wants him to go “to get a good job.”

They aspired to material wealth and possessions like big houses, but they wrote about saving money, which shows they are starting to have financial awareness, which could be connected to the school’s future-focused initiative. Elliot planned to “start a little savings for a car, job, college, and some extra money.” Sage wants “to try to save [as much] money as possible for college” while Ariel wants to “have a mansion, and a job, and two dogs.”

Money was important to them and they wanted to use it to help their families, which suggests an empathetic culture. It also suggests students from poverty are aware of economic challenges their families encounter and it is on their minds at school.

**Work Ethic is Critical for Success.** The participating students discussed the same keys to success as their Painted Arrow counterparts like “go to school, try hard (and not be lazy), study a lot, pay attention, be cooperative, and never give up.” Landen said, “I have to stick to your goals” and Morgan highlighted creativity “I have to think of a lot of ideas.” Students were also more literal with their successful life habits: “wake up early,” “try not to waste money,” or “study, but also hang with friends so I am balanced.” When asked what they will need to do to meet their future goals, Quinn wrote, “I’m not sure but I’ll find out later on and done [doing] things for sure I need to work hard for it.” In all, students at Spinning Compass Academy knew it takes hard work and “concentration in school” in order to “learn more, pass college, and get the best job.” They all listed work habits or study skills like that in order to achieve their future aspirations.

**Future Educational Aspirations.** Eighty-one percent of the fifth graders expressed an interest in pursuing college in order to get their dream jobs. Of the twenty-five fourth grade students who aspired to attend college after high school, there were four who listed specific schools by name. For example, Sawyer said, “I want to graduate and enter in Harvard” and Dakota wanted to “Go to UCLA college.” David wanted to stay local and “Go to Palomar.” Finally, Zion knew of the University of California system, but may not have known how many UC schools there are as his goal was “to go to UC.” Either way students knew college was an option and they saw themselves as college-bound.

Bianca: You could choose if you want to go to college, or not go to college or university.

Ashley: It's better to go to college. That's how you get a career.

Raquel: In college...I think I've learned you work; you learn. You could say, “I want to be a vet, and I'm going to college. That's where I learned how to be a vet.” So, I can be prepared for being a vet.

Katie: College isn't just school, or a place where you spend money. It's an opportunity to be who you want to be. And my brother taught me a couple

symbols from math in one of the books of college. And I learned a couple of those.

Elwin: It's good that you can know that at this school the teachers don't tell you what school you could be in. It's like you can be in any school. And college was really important because if you don't go to college...if you go to college that's mostly where you get your degree to go and work.

The students said their parents were supportive and want them to go to college one day.

As a result, they expressed an interest in pursuing college in their futures.

Ashley: I do want to go to college. I don't want to skip college. I want to college and I want to be... I don't want to be like...mm... like my parent's jobs I think are kind of boring. But I don't want to have a boring job. I want to have like, to be a vet or something. Or to be a doctor.

Elwin: I want to go to college so I can get a good job and so when I'm 12 I can just...you have to learn how to save money when you're big,

Katie: I don't want to go to college for the years I'm supposed to... Like for ten years. I was thinking I could go to college for at least 12 to 18 years. And I really want to be a surgeon. Like, any kind of surgeon, like newborn babies or heart surgeon, brain surgeon, surgeon.

Antonio: I want to go to college and save up money so I could play football and buy the stuff I need for...like a bag that I can carry my stuff in, some cleats, and some gloves. And maybe when I grow up I'll keep on playing until I get into... if I get into a Division II...

Sarah: I want to go to college that way I can get a really good job...

**Career and Life Aspirations.** Students at Spinning Compass Academy focused their future aspirations around possessions, money, and lifestyles. Fifth graders expressed goals for their futures like “be healthier” and Amari wants to “be someone important in life; an inspiration to other people.” Eight students aspired to be famous in their future career goals. There were thirty-three students who aspired to careers as visual or performing artists such as: “artist, singer, dancer, musician, or actress,” which was not a theme from students at Painted Arrow, which showed the influence of their school’s initiative.

They discussed their aspirations to ambitious careers such as architect, gemologist, technician, engineer, computer programmer. Others listed more typical careers such as doctor,

photographer, scientist, medical scientist, cartoonist, police, singer, gamer, soccer player, judge, YouTuber, teacher, artist, fashion designer, video game designer, computer technician, surgeon and veterinarian. Twenty-eight of the students who completed the questionnaires were specific in their responses about their dream careers. Three students gave reasons behind their dream career like wanting to help a sibling with a pacemaker, or because they were encouraged by a family member who recognized their strengths. Ashley wanted to “be a vet so I can help animals in need and to help the community with their animals.”

Since this question was toward the beginning of the questionnaire, of the ninety fifth grade students who had started it, fifty-three were specific in their aspirations, while the other thirty-seven were not quite sure, or were more general.

“Get a job at Jack-in-the-Box”

“Going to college and becoming a gamer or just dancer or actor”

“I want to get a job at the Escondido Humane Society.”

“[I want to] be a soccer player and [get] married”

“I want to work with animals preferably land animals

“To work for the government and serve in the Marines”

“[I want to] cut trees or be a construction man.”

“Be a scientist or doctor a scientist to find a cure for some sickness. A doctor to save peoples’ lives so it's almost the same thing.... I need to “To do all those cool stuff I got to get a high school diploma, and an associate’s degree, a bachelor's degree, and a graduate degree, and the last one a doctorate degree”

“To work in an FBI because When I was little I used to play FBI”

“Become either a lawyer, or a videogame designer, or an artist.”

“After high school I want to go to college and teach kids how to dance while being a professional ballerina.”

“Want to be a YouTuber because it's fun to make videos and to be famous and to get a lot of money... like if I make videos then I want to be rich.”

“[I want to] go to Paris and be a fashion designer... so I will try my very best to get good grades and get into a good college so that I can get enough money to go to France on first class.”

During the focus group the reasons for their aspirations connected to empathy, their strengths, or related to personal experiences. When asked what their goals for their futures were,

students discussed:

Valerie: My plan for the future is to become a medical scientist and I think I need a doctoral degree and like a degree with science to get there.

Diana: My dream is to go to college and become a firefighter. I kind of wanted to go to college and have to do something with animals. I want to help animals and I kind of want to work at a marine biology place.

Marcella: Go to college. I have no idea.

Oscar: It's kind of like building but ...

Interviewer: Oh, engineer.... An architect?

Oscar: Yeah, an architect.

Julian: I want to be like an engineer also because I like building with Legos and my grandma, she tells me that I do really good.

Gia: My sister, she is three years older than me. She has a heart problem, like, she has a pacemaker, so she wants to be a cardiologist when she's older.

Students also shared lifestyle aspirations like raising kids of their own. In the questionnaires, six of the third grade boys talked about becoming dads: “be a football player and raise a family,” (Ray) “my plans for my future is to have a family,” (Shawn) “get a car and a job. I want to be a dad” (Max) or Gabriel wants to “go to Mexico to have children.” Jesse wrote that after high school she wants to “find a job and go to college and find a car and a house so I can live in Vista and raise a family and work as a dance teacher.”

There were also three third graders who planned to move away after finishing high school with very specific plans like Jordan who wants to “live in Brazil and study birds;” or Parker wants to “Get a job in Texas. I want to see my brother in Texas;” and Angel, “I want to do college then get my masters in Kansas. Finish school and then do some more school.”

**Student Summary.** Overall, students at Spinning Compass Academy expressed compassionate and empathetic desires to help their families, help their community, and to follow career pathways in visual and performing arts. The student responses were positive in their desire to go to college and their perceptions of both teacher and parent expectations for them to pursue college pathways. Students at Spinning Compass Academy aspired to make a lot of money in

order to help their families. They also placed more emphasis on career aspirations, especially visual and performing arts while they still aspired to higher education. This suggested their broader future-focused initiative and their arts experiences influence students' future aspirations.

### **Teacher Perspectives.**

**Culture.** Teachers at Spinning Compass Academy described their school culture in reference to teachers' hard work, passion, collaboration, and commitment. They considered the school culture to be positive and pleasant, with a focus on teaching and learning. Mr. Poles said, "Our culture was one of acceptance, inclusivity, perseverance and inquiry. We value each individual and their unique contribution to our learning community."

International Baccalaureate united the school staff from all their extensive training to become certified and Mrs. Needlet shared, "For the most part, the students love being a part of the IB school culture and do their best to become all around better citizens on a daily basis." Between the IB initiative and the arts magnet, the teachers proudly highlighted IB as influential in shaping students' futures.

**Academic Abilities.** Teachers reported the general beliefs around students' academic abilities to be where every student was thought of as capable with the right supports but might struggle because of perceived lack of family and language support in addition to economic status. Mrs. Magnetia wrote "Students have the abilities to learn, however, language and lack of support at home often impedes further learning" or as Ms. East wrote, "Many students are lacking in family and language support but will rise to high expectations."

When the teachers were asked about students' general beliefs about their academic abilities, the teacher responses were split in half. One half perceived their students to believe in themselves and put forth a strong effort through statements like Mr. Poles said, "Most students

believe in themselves and value their effort over outcomes;” or like Ms. West described students: “mostly hard working and persistent;” and Mrs. Needlet agreed “students want to learn and are active participants in their education process. They understand and believe that their teachers are here to help them.” Other teachers reported the students did not believe in their own ability and were more apathetic in their learning. Ms. Starrs said, “many of them don’t value or lack awareness of the importance of academics;” or Ms. Attra wrote “I believe also that many feel they can overcome difficulties with effort. However, not all students put forth effort unless there was a clear goal and accountability and monitoring toward that goal.”

The same sentiments surfaced when teachers were asked about parent/family beliefs about students’ academics, again painting a picture of disengagement,

“I think all parents want their child to do well in school. However, many are at a loss for how to support their child. Many think that the responsibility rests on the teacher. The most successful students have parents who are engaged and actively monitoring and communicating with teachers about their students’ progress” (Ms. Attra).

While the teachers hoped for a partnership with the parents that may or may not have been feasible, the teachers knew the parents believed in their kids and wanted the best for them. Mrs. Easterly wrote, “Although parents don’t participate very much, the parents believe in their kids.” Five teachers felt parents were not knowledgeable about grade level expectations. They made comments like Mrs. Northern: “Some of our parents are super supportive and understand their child’s academic levels and abilities. Others are surprised with the expectation at each grade level” or, in Mr. Southe’s words, “They feel that students are learning but sad when some find out how low their child is,” and Mrs. Hiker agreed, “Some are naive about students’ strengths and weaknesses.” Ms. Starrs wrote,

“Parents and families expect their children to do well in school and learn to do well in life and trust the school system to accomplish that, and many times they are unable or lack the knowledge on how to support their children because of their living conditions, poverty, housing, undocumented status and many other ailments of their social status.”

Only one teacher Mrs. Needlet responded empathetically toward family situations, “I believe that most families are doing the best they can with the resources they have to help their child be successful in school,” which could be a reflection of the embedded school culture and mindset from the staff with regards to the family involvement, or could be an outlier in a more pessimistic culture.

***Future Focused.*** Despite teachers’ mixed perceptions about students and parents, they unanimously agreed Spinning Compass Academy had a future-focused culture, most of which was attributed to their International Baccalaureate (IB) certification which encouraged short term and long term global thinkers. As Mr. Poles said, “Absolutely! Being an IB school we focus on real world problems and solutions.” They saw their school culture as “constantly looking at what we can do to support students in growing and developing as learners” (Ms. Attra). When prompted for examples of how the school promotes future aspirations, the teachers highlighted IB events/parent informational nights, wearing college shirts on Wednesdays, field trips, guest speakers, and general discussions about colleges and careers with students in the classroom. The principal Mrs. Explorer said, “We do have Wave Pact Wednesday where we encourage college gear, and some kids will do it, some don't. Some maybe don't have the resources to do it.” The teachers said some older students were aware that it was important or that they have to go to make money, but they are still learning about it, so the teachers “also promote technical careers and other careers such as entrepreneurs and hairdressers” (Mr. Poles), which was common across several responses, “Many have heard that after high school the next step was college. We also



talk about career paths that require higher education. However, many students may choose to enter trade schools. My personal belief is that for some, trade school can be a worthwhile goal as well” (Mrs. Attra).

***Students’ Aspirations.*** Students’ aspirations, according to the teachers, were “typical, mixed with scientists and doctors there are rock stars and soccer stars” (Ms. Easterly) with “high aspirations, but perhaps not fully understanding the pathway to reach them” (Ms. West). The teachers thought students whose parents emphasized education had higher aspirations for careers that required college degrees. However, when asked about their personal opinions around exposing students to college starting in elementary school, teachers were split again. Some said it was important to get them excited and explore options for their futures, while emphasizing the importance of doing well in school, especially because they may not have role models at home to expose them to college in the same way. They felt it opens up a variety of career paths for all students. Mrs. Needlet even shared:

“I absolutely agree with it! 100%. No one ever talked to me about going to college or told me I was going to college and I was not ready, so I joined the Marine Corps. Now, I have my Master’s Degree and I just wonder how much further in life I would be if I had that support at a younger age.”

This group of participating teachers felt “the sooner, the better” when it came to promoting college as an option for students’ futures.

The other group of teachers did not feel it was developmentally appropriate or that talking about college was too narrow of a lens for the students who may prefer trade school pathways instead. They felt it was too abstract for them at this age unless they had meaningful experiences to connect to, which was not the case for many of the students whose parents did not experience formal education in their home countries, according to the teachers. Ms. Easterly

wrote “I like the exposure, but I don't think it should be hammered home yet. My kids are struggling with their grade-level stuff and I feel for some, college was too far away and a little scary.”

Despite not explicitly teaching students about college, and not believing it was the path for everyone, all participating teachers described college as “essential, important, imperative, paramount, attainable for everyone, and possible.” This contrasting message in their personal beliefs about the importance of college and in their attitudes toward their students going to college showed a disconnect in the school’s future-focused culture. The teachers wanted students to have realistic aspirations for successful futures. Sixty percent of the participating teachers wanted their students to go to college (or a technical training school), have successful careers, and have happy, meaningful lives, but college was not a requisite for the other forty percent of teachers. As Ms. Easterly said, “I hope college is in their heads and that they can really decide for themselves” but if not college, Mrs. Hiker emphasized jobs “in which they feel fulfilled and they enjoy,” Mrs. Attra promoted lower paying jobs,

“I would hope that they would have someone who would be able to encourage them to pursue a career that they are interested and passionate in doing. I believe if your work was also your passion then the monetary income was not important to feeling successful in life. I have many friends who have found full lives by raising families on one income in very small houses. Their children are amazing people!”

Or the teachers wanted their students to be good people overall, “I want my students to be successful and happy. I want them to be good citizens and to pursue their dreams!” (Mrs. Northern).

Teachers re-emphasized the importance of presenting a variety of options for everyone and the importance of parent involvement, especially in understanding what the academic

expectations are for each grade level and how to help support the learning at home. Teachers at Spinning Compass Academy believed they set students up for successful futures and believed all students deserved access to and encouragement and support for college. “College was my path! I know that it was not everyone’s path. All students should have options. They should be supported throughout their education to meet their social, emotional, artistic, and academic potential” (Mrs. Northern).

Half of the teacher questionnaires yielded a more pessimistic tone about future aspirations at Spinning Compass Academy compared to Painted Arrow Elementary. They pointed to family income as a barrier to student success, which at the elementary level, if this was the mindset of teachers now, leaves little hope for improvement as the students progress through their educational careers. Ms. Starrs wrote, “I dare to say they believe students' abilities are or could be lower compared to other groups because of socioeconomic and other life circumstances.” However, the teachers were invested in their students’ wellbeing and wanted successful futures for all of them, whether that means college or trade school, careers or technical jobs, they wanted them to live happy lives. “Besides a handful of teachers, everyone was dedicated and enjoys their job and was willing to go above and beyond to meet each student's individual needs” (Mrs. Needlet).

**Principal Interview.** During my site visit, the principal gave an impromptu, unstructured interview and overview of Spinning Compass Academy. Mrs. Explorer discussed the IB PYP (International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme) initiative as well as the arts Magnet both of which make Spinning Compass Academy unique. IB follows a pathway into the middle school, and into the diploma program in high school, which, according to Mrs. Explorer, was considered more valuable than AP (Advanced Placement) classes to some universities and was

recognized internationally with possibilities for scholarships. While this was not something Spinning Compass Academy discussed with students yet, they talk about following the IB pathway into the Middle Years Programme. Their future-focused conversations were more along the lines of “what are you planning to do in your future? How are you going to change the world?” ... We build that student agency so that they have some control over their education.”

Mrs. Explorer went on to explain the International Baccalaureate initiative at Spinning Compass Academy:

“Overall, the educational premise of IB revolves around inquiry, but IB is focused on inquiry, and inquiry is basically where students take the reins of their learning and then they can kind of take it in the direction that they want to. So, they're constantly asking questions about, ‘Well why did this happen, how did this happen.’ If they have other interests they can also research those as well. So, it's a huge focus on student agency. So, students controlling their learning. Our school in each of the grade levels has six units of inquiry in every grade level, they last about six to eight weeks and they are units that are focused on a transdisciplinary theme. The transdisciplinary themes are who we are, how the world works, where we are in place and time, how we organize ourselves, how we express ourselves and sharing the planet.”

According to the principal, the arts magnet supports students' futures by giving them public speaking skills and confidence and at the same time it enhanced their school experiences. “We'll hear from the middle school that our students feel very confident talking in front of adults, talking in front of other peers,” as well as improved their performance abilities, and made kids love school. “We'll have students that have fevers like, “I don't want to go home, I'm going to miss...drama.” You'll see that kids are just happy to be here, and they love school. I think when you have students that love school then they will learn. It's been a huge positive culture.”

Starting in kindergarten, students learned to dance, act, build, design, sing, and play instruments, which influenced students' career aspirations.

**Spinning Compass Academy Conclusion.** The data from Spinning Compass Academy

showed students were proud to be “the only” arts magnet and IB elementary school, and they perceived those attributes to give them an advantage to go to college because of how and what they learned in their units of study. While Spinning Compass Academy did not focus futures around college, the students were still aware of college and aspired to it in their future pathways. The International Baccalaureate program encouraged future-focused mindsets, which influenced students’ aspirations. The students learned to be inquirers and action-oriented as global thinkers who could affect change. They were introduced to a “bigger picture” scope of why their learning was relevant. At the same time, the arts integration gave students a strong sense of confidence and venues to express their learning. As a result, several students aspired to be visual or performing artists, pursue art schools, or at least keep art as a hobby in addition to their career paths. The students at Spinning Compass Academy were receiving well-rounded, future-focused learning opportunities that influenced their aspirations through a love of learning and the self-efficacy to achieve their goals.

### **Themes From Findings**

After analyzing the big ideas found throughout the students’ and teachers’ responses at both schools, I identified the following themes that apply across all schools and are important for all students but are even more critical for low-income students. In brief, students’ future aspirations are cultivated by school cultural initiatives when they ensure safety and belonging, enhance the school experience, and when there is alignment and coherence among all stakeholders.

**Effective Cultures Ensure Psychological Safety and Belonging.** Before a focus on the future can happen, students need to feel psychologically and physically safe. Students at both schools highlighted safety as being critical to what makes their schools great. This safety

manifested through relationships with teachers and peers, physical safety against dangers, and having the tools to work safely with others. Students wanted to feel “comfortable, appreciated and happy” at their schools. As Francesca put it, “it feels like I'm special, like everybody should.”

*Safety necessitates relationships with staff first.* Students spoke of “really nice teachers,” in every focus group. As Lucy said, “If you ever need help with something during class, they are always there to help.” They felt valued according to Gia, “The teachers are really nice to you, they listen to you, they understand you.” They felt the teachers were accessible and cared about their success. When they had a relationship with their teachers, the students felt the teachers valued their work and wanted them to go to college. On the questionnaires 59 (out of 94) participating students at Painted Arrow reported they think their teachers want them to go to college as did 122 (out of 145) participants at Spinning Compass.

Students also pointed to compassionate nurses, empathetic counselors, and other “helpful” staff members as ensuring their safety. In Andrew’s case, he appreciated the cafeteria team because “They feed you a lot. They give you breakfast if you haven't ate breakfast in the morning or they give you lunch.” Lisa’s emotional needs were met at school,

“I have a counselor that helps you feel better when you're sad because a thing dies. Let's say an animal died and you're really depressed. The counselor can pull you out of class and resolve the problems... I think having a counselor is a good idea 'cause then somebody can overwatch you and the principal won't have to do a lot of the work 'cause have somebody helping, and the counselor is gonna help you fix problems like if you get into a big fight.”

Diana connected with the IB coordinator whom she feels is an accessible resource, “you can talk to her whenever you want to. You can also send her letters in her mailbox.” Kyle knew he was in good hands at school, “If we're hurt, we have a nurse here that does a really great job”

And Karen supported his stance, “If you get wet, and get soaked, she has some clothes for you because one time, I fell in a puddle, everything got wet.”

Students had to trust the staff to take care of them in the daily operations as well as in the face of a disaster in order to feel safe. They talked about feeling physically safe at their schools specifically referring to security cameras and safety drills. Third graders in the focus group at Painted Arrow were the first to mention the safety drills, but it came up during each group at both schools.

Lizbeth: You'll be super safe here.”

Ana: The teachers have you evacuate; you go under the tables in case there's an emergency.

Destiny: The teachers keep you safe.

Aaron: The whole school teaches you how to evacuate from your classroom if you're in a classroom in case there's a fire or an earthquake or something like that.

*Safety necessitates relationships with peers.* Knowing they were physically and psychologically safe with the adults first, students talked about their interactions with peers. Almost all students at both schools mentioned good friends and “nice kids.” “You can make a lot of friends here.” Issac said he feels “appreciated and happy because, if we didn't have this [class colleges], maybe I wouldn't only have a couple friends, but every year, I make new friends because of this.” The relationships that came from their common class college fostered new friendships and connections at Painted Arrow. How students treated each other contributed to psychological safety. “It's okay to be yourself here 'cause we accept for who you are. It doesn't matter what happens” showed what was valued in how people treated each other at the schools and what behaviors were expected. Bullies were not tolerated according to Bianca, “And if there are any bullies you should just report them. They get suspension.” Instead, students were celebrated for their differences. Raquel at Spinning Compass highlighted, “We have different

cultures and different languages. And that's what we respect.” Tatiana liked that “they let you play with anyone that you want to play with. They don't separate you and they help if someone is being mean to you.” And Cynthia added “They show a lot of tolerance.” In all, the students at both school reported feeling safe on the playground among their peers and in their classrooms with their teachers.

Both schools had unifying traditions to build relationships by bringing the school community together as a whole, and to celebrate each other publicly. “We’re all family here.” Students referred to their respective Bulldog Boogie or Friday Flag positively as something that excited them and validated their accomplishments. These events were part of the schools’ future focused initiatives and had the additional benefits described here. Michael reported, “whenever someone in our class goes up [to get an award], the class says, "Go beach," to cheer them on. For other people, we know we can just clap and congratulate them.” The other students in the focus group said it “makes me feel good, happy and appreciated.”

*Physiological safety led to a focus on the future.* Because of safe and trusting relationships with staff and peers, students felt more confident and positive about their own abilities. They expressed ambitious future plans, which seemed to connect to their perceptions that their teachers and peers to believe in their work and potential. In their future aspirations students felt they were going to be successful when they had the self-confidence and demonstrated the work habits to be successful. Teachers and peers encouraged one another to “work hard” and “persevere.” To facilitate this focus on future success, teachers and school initiatives explicitly taught character traits so all students felt safe and confident in their abilities and potential. These traits helped ensure safe interactions with peers in their expectations around character development and learning habits such as kindness, caring, knowledge, risk-taking,



being action-oriented, and more, thus fostering life skills and instilling responsible work habits.

In all, feeling safe and valued by peers and adults increased students' confidence in their abilities and future aspirations.

**Having a Schoolwide Initiative Enhances the School Experience.** Both schools in the comparative case study had two campus-wide initiatives in which they were invested, which gave the stakeholders a common purpose, focus, and language. With the initiatives at the case study schools, students expressed pride and unique opportunities and the staff expressed investment and dedication around them. It appeared having an initiative improved the morale at each school because stakeholders had a unifying identity.

*Staff belong to a bigger purpose through initiatives.* Teachers spoke proudly of their work, commitment, and training for the initiatives at their respective schools. At Spinning Compass Academy, the teachers collaborated each week around their IB units of study and they planned together to integrate the content learning into the arts. Teachers at Painted Arrow Elementary referenced their mission statement as the reason why they do what they do every day. They believed it was their responsibility to prepare all students for whatever path they might choose in their futures. Additionally, the staff had fun being part of the initiatives, again related to psychological safety. At Painted Arrow some of them led friendly competition against other colleges on campus or played rivalry pranks on other classes. Their school mascot, callbacks, and chants became their secret codes with their students to connect them around campus. Spinning Compass Academy teachers sometimes participated in the theater productions or service learning projects alongside the students. The initiatives enhanced teacher's school experiences so they spoke positively about their culture and were invested in their teaching.

*Students have enhanced school experiences with initiatives.* Both school initiatives

helped students feel a sense of belonging, and they referenced the unique opportunities that came with their respective initiatives. For instance, at Painted Arrow, they spoke of their uniting college chants and t-shirts, and named the college as their identity: “We are UC Davis. They’re CSULB. She’s UC Santa Barbara.” Spinning Compass students shared how much fun art is and how it enhances their learning beyond the “regular” classroom. With their annual IB exhibition, they designed and implemented service learning projects as culminations of their learning. They also spoke about clubs, especially afterschool opportunities or theater production groups that enhance their school experience. With these initiatives, the students associate school with positive memories and engagement.

*Pride in what makes them unique.* Students expressed school pride and positive school experiences as a result of being “the only” arts magnet and IB school or “No Excuses and leadership school.” Their schools offered opportunities they did not perceive other schools to have, which the students felt gave them an advantage over neighboring schools. As Michael at Painted Arrow explained, “I’ve only been to one other school and it was different because we didn’t have colleges and it wasn’t a No Excuses. I feel like this helps us learn faster.” The fifth graders at Spinning Compass shared the same sentiment about their initiatives, “it’s a really good school for the arts and it’s an IB school so it can help you get any career you want and it can help you get into middle school easier.”

It appears students and staff tend to have more positive perceptions about school and learning when they were part of schoolwide initiatives. In all, the school pride did not revolve around test scores or data, it derived from what they did together and how they all belong. The initiatives made them feel united as everyone looks to belong to something bigger than themselves working toward a common purpose with others.

**Alignment and Coherence Within School Cultures Contribute to Students' Future Aspirations.** Both schools had a common language and common expectations across their community that contributed to their positive school cultures. Part of the alignment gave staff and students shared values about what is important, which contributed back to the aforementioned themes of positive experiences with safety and relational belonging at the foundation. According to MacNeil, Prater, and Busch (2009) a school's culture includes the organization's beliefs, values, attitudes, expectations, ideas and behaviors. It gives stakeholders a clear understanding of the school's purpose, why it exists, what it must do, and whom it should serve.

***Initiatives offer alignment in expectations and purpose.*** Peterson and Deal (2016) found the success of schools depends on their culture, because "culture kindles motivation, amplifies the energy of staff, students and the community, and focuses attention on what is important and valued" (p. 14). Whether it was the common language, explicit expectations, or the sense of belonging, having a schoolwide initiative, regardless of which one, gives everyone a common goal. When asked "is your school a college-bound school?" almost every affirmative from students and teachers at both schools related back to the respective initiatives. "Absolutely! We are an IB school," or "Yes, as a *No Excuses University* school, we promote college as an option for everyone."

Students also crave and thrive off the structure and consistency of the same expectations from year to year. It adds to the sense of psychological safety to have something dependable like the alignment the initiatives bring. As third grader Ashley said, "I like this school because we learn so much. We learn to how to be caring and all the good things that IB teaches us like the attitudes and attributes."

***Aligned messaging and exposures have broader influences.*** The messages at Spinning

Compass Academy were mostly verbal communications through “teachable moments” or general reminders about working hard now in order to have a successful future. Students from Spinning Compass Academy reported broad statements from their teachers like “go to college” and “it’s important.” Teachers at both schools agreed it was important to *expose* students to college while they are young, so they are aware of their options, but there were teachers at each site who felt it was also important to inform students about options other than college.

When students believed their teachers expected them to pursue college, they expressed more positive aspirations to attend. Even when one student said he did not think his family expected him to go because he was “too dumb,” he thought his teacher believed in his potential and wanted him to go to college to get a good job, so the student reported positive aspirations toward higher education. It may only take one teacher to plant the seed of potential that college is an option for a child to aspire toward college pathways.

When teachers shared about their college memories or allowed students to take virtual tours of colleges, they were exposed to more choices for their futures. “Ms. LaTour had her son go there and she always Facetimes him, and he showed us around. So, we know that there's a music room in our college, and there's a big outside. And it snows once there, so it's not that good of weather.... We also learned the dorms are all on the side, not like in the middles or anything and he told us about his classes.” The experiences of the students in the class who is taking the virtual tours and hearing about college or career pathways could give them an advantage over students whose teachers give the more general statements about college. Schools should be aligned where all students are hearing encouraging messages and vicarious stories about college and career pathways in order to give them more options for their futures.

As the results of this study showed, messaging about the future can come in a variety of

forms: verbal, visual, passive, active, and embedded or separate. Messages could look like class adopted colleges with explicit college vocabulary, to messages around becoming inquiry learners who seek to impact the world as global citizens in their projects or assignments. The messages have greater influence and power when they are aligned with a campus-wide initiative.

*Community efforts can reinforce future-focused messages.* In the focus groups, students referenced video games like *Roblox High School* and something they called *Animal Jail* that alluded to college and was set in dorm rooms, so as they were playing they associated college with “something cool” through subliminal messaging. Students also discussed seeing or hearing familiar advertisements for community colleges on the radio or sides of public transportation. With social media offering more communication venues, the schools posted messages about future-focused events for parents and students to see, especially when they had partnership events with local colleges like when the students at Painted Arrow were offered free admission to the local college basketball game and the college’s mascot came to visit during a Friday Flag. College partnerships and frequent exposures can help make college less abstract and seem more attainable for all students, even if the messages are subliminal. If students as young as third grade were aware of the community advertisements, the visual messaging can be powerful.

*Parent encouragement carries weight in students’ aspirations.* Something I was not looking for in this study but emerged as a peripheral pattern that was relevant to influencing students’ aspirations was the idea of parental involvement and encouragement. My study was focusing on the influence of school culture on the individuals’ aspirations, but the teachers, as part of the school culture, felt they needed parents to be more involved and understand standards, grades, and participate in events more. The students as they talk about their school experience highlight their parents’ encouragement as motivation for them to work hard and pursue their

aspirations. For instance, when students are saying “my mom wants me to go to college because she never got to go so I can go for both of us” or “my parents are always telling me to work hard and I can do it” we see how the messaging students receive from their families encourages them to pursue higher education even if they are not familiar with the system themselves.

Teachers at both schools felt parents did not have an understanding of grade level standards or how to help their children academically. Staff at both schools talked about wanting to increase parent participation and engagement. Some teachers at each site felt parents were doing the best they could with the resources they had, while other participating teachers expressed frustration about perceived parent disengagement. Students at both schools talked about how encouraging and supportive their parents were in their educational careers and future aspirations. They reported their parents wanted them to work hard to be successful. Without concrete knowledge of the grade level standards, parents be involved by enforcing strong work habits.

Some students at each school had heard about college from their older relatives, but there was a range in what information they were provided. Some students said their relatives scratched the surface when talking about college through general statements like “it’s good for you to go to college so you can have better jobs” or “it’s hard work and expensive, but you should go.” Other students reported specific anecdotes from siblings around dorm life, rigorous coursework, or the application process. Students reported encouraging support from their parents, “Our parents. They say, ‘We don’t care what college you go to as long as you’re learning something’.” or “My mom wants me to go to college. But my dad, he says, ‘I’ll be happy [with] whatever choice you make.’ They’re always supportive.” Informing students and parents about future options becomes the school’s responsibility, and when there is alignment in the messaging across the grade levels,

parents are able to reinforce them at home.

## **Summary**

Both schools offered great opportunities with positive cultures that influenced the ways in which students thought about college and other future aspirations. They both had positive components and encouraging messaging for students to feel empowered in their future-focused aspirations. Most importantly, the students expressed ambitious future aspirations cultivated by school cultural initiatives that ensured safety and belonging enhanced the school experience for teachers and students, and when there is alignment and coherence among all stakeholders.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this comparative case study was to develop a better understanding of how college or future-focused cultures in elementary schools influence the way low-income students perceive college and career pathways and what they aspire to in their futures. While the participating schools were identified as low-income by their receipt of Title 1 funding, not all students who participated in the questionnaires were from low-income backgrounds. The demographic data were not disaggregated on the questionnaires to protect anonymity, but all but three of the focus group participants were identified as low-income. Greene and Forster (2003) suggest finances are not a major barrier to college attendance for low-income students who are college ready, rather it was a lack of information or knowledge about college and career pathways that kept students from pursuing their aspirations. They went on to say public schools have very large influences on students' college or future readiness (both positively or negatively), which means schools need to do more to expose students to future-focused options, starting in elementary school.

In this comparative case study, both schools had schoolwide initiatives focused around preparing students for the future. One had initiatives specifically around college-knowledge and developing leadership skills, while the other school focused on global-thinkers and inquiry learners alongside their arts magnet. Data analysis revealed that both school cultures included staff mindset about student ability as well as the students' own sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Having schoolwide initiatives contributed to students' optimistic beliefs about their future college and career options whether this impact was greater because the students were classified as low-income was beyond the scope of this study. Further research might investigate



whether there is a difference between the way low-income and more socio-economically advantaged students experience future-focused, schoolwide initiatives.

### **Implications for Educational Leadership**

Findings from this study imply site educational leaders should invest time in developing safe, supportive, and coherent cultures. These should focus on developing relationships among students and staff at the foundation as well as empowering students with the tools to develop relationships with their peers in the classroom and on the playground.

Principals should also consider a school-wide cultural initiative that enhances the schooling experience and gives staff, students, and parents something to unite around. Regardless of what the initiative is, if it creates alignment around a common message using a common language with common expectations for all stakeholders, it can be powerfully unifying in the schools' cultural mindset, which has a positive effect on the way students think about college specifically and the future in general. Teachers and students need to belong to school cultures where they feel safe, have meaningful relationships and enjoy coming to school. Once students feel safe and have the tools to be productive learners (the *how*), they can learn about *why* they are in school and what end goals to aspire toward.

Since principals are the ones who shape the culture of a school (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009), site administrators need professional development around implementing effective schoolwide initiatives and learning how to develop and maintain positive school cultures. Beliefs lead to expectations that lead to actions. Where the cultural beliefs are aligned and the expectations are reinforced, the actions produce results. This means principals need to learn more about and invest in the role of the teacher in the school culture. Teachers need training on developing students' self-efficacy and intervening early to support students' academic,

behavioral, social, and emotional skills to have successful futures.

Further alignment and coherence across the district would broaden access to safe, supportive and engaging school cultures for more students that may result in positive aspirations to continue onto higher education pathways or to make other productive choices about the future. In this case study, there was a vertical pathway for IB students from elementary to middle to high school, but the *No Excuses University* initiative was only isolated to the one elementary school in the district and there was not a *No Excuses* pathway continuing through middle or high school.

Systemic changes are necessary in the K-12 educational system if we are to close the equity gap and make college an accessible option for all students. The shifts should start with developing an understanding of what college is, how to get there, and why it is important for students to earn college degrees. Early exposure to college and future-focused options should begin in elementary school. The emphasis in K-5 should be exposure around future-focused options. These messages can be embedded into any future-focused schoolwide initiatives to have a positive influence on students' educational aspirations.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study developed a better understanding of how college or future-focused cultures in elementary schools influence the way low-income students perceive college and career pathways and what they aspire to in their futures. The findings from this study indicated schools that make students feel like they belong and give them the tools to work hard and persevere foster happy, motivated learners with ambitious future educational aspirations.

It was not possible to determine causation or correlation of future aspirations based on elementary school experiences alone, so the next step is looking at how to align school cultures, future-focused mindsets, and college-knowledge exposures from elementary to middle to high

school through longitudinal studies or replicated comparative case studies across the different levels.

The research on future-focused learning was located at the secondary level, but Pérusse, DeRonck and Parzych (2017) said if students are not exposed to a variety of future college and career pathways, they have limited perceptions of college and inaccurate understanding of college pathways needed for career aspirations, which could lead to rejection of the college or career ideas as early as fourth grade (Blackhurst, Auger, & Wahl, 2003). Blackhurst, Auger, & Wahl, (2003) called for continued research on the relationship between educational aspirations and occupational aspirations.

Research is also missing to indicate which levels of the college-knowledge and future-focused continuums are developmentally beneficial for students in various grade levels. Teaching students about college and career pathways can range from exposure to immersion. Effective college-knowledge systems and future-focused mindsets can be embedded in school cultures. While there are several initiatives in existence, each program has varying philosophies and focal points, but they all had the same goal of giving students access to better school experiences and futures in some way. More research is needed on the types of future-focused cultural initiatives in existence, along with data to substantiate their influences, especially at the elementary school level.

Educators hold the important responsibility of preparing all students for college, career, and life, which extends beyond just building an academic foundation and starts with their relationships and messaging they send students. Schools are responsible for opening doors for students by educating them about their future options. In order for all students to be college and career ready, they need to know about college, future options, and how to get there. Elementary

schools have the opportunity to set all students on a college-bound path from the start of their educational careers.

**Future-Focused Considerations.** When researching “future-focused” cultures, most researchers referred to technology and the digital world, while overlooking other or additional skills necessary to be successful in the future. However, the literature on “college and career readiness” pointed to high school exposure to 21st century career paths and the skills needed. However, if these concepts were applied to develop the skills and exposure to higher education and 21st century careers early and often starting in elementary school, more underrepresented students would be able to access successful future pathways. Future researchers should seek to broaden the definition of “future-focused” school cultures and explicitly define what future-focused elements are developmentally ideal at each educational stage to maximize opportunities for higher educational attainment for all students.

**Longitudinal Considerations.** Future researchers should look at ways the school cultures in elementary schools contribute to future pathways through longitudinal studies following students across school cultures in their educational careers. Researchers should gather students’ perspectives of their school cultures as well as students’ future aspirations to find where or if there is a point of disconnect or discouragement for students that changes their future trajectories.

If these same questionnaires were administered to middle school and high school students, how would the responses differ? At what age are they concerned about the economic divide? Where does the self-efficacy show a decline in future-focused aspirations? Where do their academics start to affect their college-bound mindsets? Does the elementary school culture carry over to middle and high school campuses if their culture is not as intentional?

Lastly, if elementary school is about exposure and exploration of a variety of future pathways, schools have a responsibility to explicitly address college and career options. The culture students experience at the beginning of their educational careers determines if students like school and enjoy learning. It builds the common expectations and develops the skills necessary for success.

### **Implications for Social Justice**

It is imperative for schools to ensure equitable access to future-focused career and college-bound paths and to provide the supports, mentorship, and education needed to help all students be successful. The themes identified from my analysis have implications for all educators, but even more critically so for those who serve low-income students starting with the importance of ensuring psychological safety and relationships at school. Low-income students are more likely to be the ones struggling with psychological and physiological safety outside of school. They are more likely to encounter economic hardships or relational instability (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001), which makes it paramount for them to fulfill those needs at school before learning can take place effectively. Next, low-income students are less likely to have access to experiences, resources, and extracurricular activities outside of school, so schools can enhance students' learning experiences by exposing them to a variety of engaging opportunities or classes. Initiatives and school-wide classes help create the coherence and alignment for students to develop background knowledge and share commonalities with their peers from all socioeconomic levels. Future-focused school cultures help level the playing field for all students to aspire to college and career pathways.

## Summary

The National Office of School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) delineated eight components that should be integrated into K-12 school cultures if they intend to promote college and career readiness for all students, especially low-income students. The first of these components is helping develop students' college aspirations and awareness starting in kindergarten. "College aspirations build a college-going culture based on early college awareness by nurturing in students the confidence to aspire to college and the resilience to overcome challenges along the way. Maintain high expectations by providing adequate supports, building social capital and conveying the conviction that all students can succeed in college" (Bryan, Young, Griffin, & Henry, 2015, pg. 12).

This should be the priority of all elementary schools to place all students on future-focused trajectories so that they may attain whatever college and career pathways they aspire toward. The components go on to include: engaging students in rigorous academic coursework and enrichment activities; involving students in college exploration activities; providing students and their families with college information; working with students and parents to develop their knowledge about college costs and financial aid; ensuring students understand the college application and enrollment process and lastly, building partnerships with colleges and community organizations (Bryan, Young, Griffin, & Henry, 2015). At the exposure level, most of these are all foundational starting at elementary school, especially college exploration, partnerships and information to students and families.

So often it seems schools focus on the past or present like test scores, interventions, discipline data, graduation rates, and school rankings rather than focusing on students' future aspirations and goal setting. While still learning from the past and addressing present needs,

school cultures can embed messages around college-knowledge and future-focused pathways, all of which could help motivate students and make learning relevant and purposeful. School administrators and practitioners at all levels should focus on creating effective initiatives where all staff and students have a common language, common expectations, and common mindsets around their academic abilities, self-efficacy, work ethic, and access to future pathways. Administrators should communicate grade level success criteria to parents so they can support their children through encouragement and high expectations. As a school community, teachers, students and parents should all have an end goal of continued learning in mind, where all students are treated as college and career bound candidates and given the college readiness skills for them to make informed decisions when the time is right.

This study changes the emphasis for schools to first look at school cultures before teaching and learning can effectively occur. Schools are a place for students to develop an intrinsic love for learning and are not only supported but inspired to reach their potential. If students do not feel emotionally and physically safe, or if they do not feel they belong, they will not focus on learning. If they do not feel someone believes in their academic abilities, they will not believe in their own. If teachers and schools do not communicate future-focused messages around colleges and career pathways, low-income students may not gain the knowledge or skills necessary to reach their educational potential. It is the responsibility of schools to guide all learners equitably to pursue college and aspire to successful career pathways.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, elementary schools as institutions have the potential to influence low-income students' perceptions of and aspirations toward college and career pathways. I argue that elementary is the foundation of one's educational journey, and as such, it should extend beyond

the academic groundwork to include teaching students about future options. In my opinion, if students realize the end goal and have an impetus for pursuing higher education or aspire to ambitious career pathways before academic frustrations develop, more students would consider themselves college and career bound. Elementary schools could also focus on developing a college-bound mindset, setting high expectations and aspirations with students, and on educating the parents with future-focused knowledge so they will have a better understanding of how to support their children going into middle and high school. Elementary school cultures can influence students' mindsets and future aspirations, so all students have options for their future college and career pathways. Most importantly, school aspirations should be cultivated by school cultural initiatives that ensure safety and belonging, enhance the school experience for teachers and students, show alignment and coherence among all stakeholders.



## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: SAMPLE INITIAL STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Answer the follow to the best of your ability. It's okay if you are not sure, just do the best you can.

1. What grade are you in?
2. Describe how your school makes you feel.
3. Describe how you feel in your classroom.
4. Describe how you feel on the playground.
5. Describe things your school does with everyone together
6. What do you like most about your school? Why do you like that?
7. Is there anything you do not like about your school? What? Why don't you like it?
8. What do you want to do after high school?
9. What are your plans/goals for your future?
10. What are you going to have to do in order to meet your future goals?
11. What kinds of things does your school do to help you for your future?
12. How do you think you do compared to the other kids in your class?
13. What do your classmates think about your work in class?
14. What does your teacher think about your work in class?
  
15. What is college?
16. Who goes to college?
17. Why do people go to college?
18. How do people get into college?
19. How do people pay for college?
20. When should people start thinking about college?
21. Do you know anyone who has graduated from college? Who?
22. What does your teacher tell you about college?
23. What does your family tell you about college?
24. Do you think it is important to attend college? Why or why not?
25. Do you want to go to college? Why/why not?
26. Do you think your family expects you to go to college? why/why not?
27. Does your teacher expect you to go to college? Why or why not?
28. Are there any other comments you would like to share?

## APPENDIX B: SAMPLE INITIAL TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

### College Culture Questionnaire for Elementary School Teachers

#### Teacher Perceptions:

1. Describe your school's culture
2. Describe your school's student population
3. Describe the staff's general beliefs around students' academic abilities (based on your perception to the best of your ability)
4. Describe students' general beliefs around their academic abilities (based on your perception to the best of your ability)
5. Describe the general beliefs of parents/families around students' academic abilities (based on your perception to the best of your ability)

#### School Culture:

1. Do you feel your school has a future-focused culture? Why or why not?
2. If you answered “Yes” to question 6, what are some examples of events at your school that promote future aspirations?
3. How do students at your school think about college? What do they know about it?
4. How would you describe your students' future aspirations?
5. What kind of goals do your students set for themselves? How do those goals change throughout the year?

#### Personal Opinions:

1. What are your personal opinions about exposing students to college starting in elementary school? Why do you feel that way?
2. In your opinion a college education is \_\_\_\_\_ for your students? Why do you believe that? \*
3. Describe your aspirations for your students after high school? \*

\*(Immerwahr, 2000).

## APPENDIX C: STUDENT FOCUS GROUP PROMPTS

*Introduction:* Thank you for joining me today. I want to learn from you about what you know about college. Everyone has different levels of understanding about college, so I'm not here to grade you on how much you know, I just want to see how we can help more kids learn about college.

- Assent form (read to them before beginning and get signatures)
- Explain audio recorder
- About the study:
  - intro myself, background, and my interest in the study
  - Purpose statement
  - Remind confidentiality
  - Freedom to leave at any time

***RQ: What do low-income, elementary school students believe about their educational futures?***

1. Tell me about your plans for your future. What are your goals?
2. What are you going to be when you grow up?
  1. What do you think you need to do to get that job?

***RQ: How do low-income students perceive/understand/think about college?***

3. Describe what you know about college
  1. Where did you learn about that? Who talks to you about college/your future?

***RQ: To what degree do these schools reflect the hallmarks of a college going culture?***

***How do each of them portray college or convey messages about college?***

1. What does your school do to teach you about college or your future?
1. What does your school tell you about your options for your futures?

***RQ: How do students experience college-going cultures in elementary school?***

1. Your teachers said they talk about being \_\_\_\_\_. What does that mean to you?
2. Tell me about some things you/your school do/does to be \_\_\_\_\_.
1. Your school is a \_\_\_\_\_ school. What does that mean to you?
1. In your surveys lots of you mentioned \_\_\_\_\_. How does \_\_\_\_\_ make you feel?
1. Your teachers talked about WavePact Wednesday. What does that mean to you?
1. If a family was trying to decide which school to go to, what would you tell them about your school?

*Note.* RQ=Research Question

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