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## Undergraduates Mediating Kids' College Knowledge

Most twenty-first century jobs now require some degree of postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., 2016; Savitz-Romer, 2019; United States Department of Education, 2017). Yet more than half of high school students graduate without ever completing a “college-nor career-ready course sequence” (The Education Trust, 2016). This is troubling since it is estimated that a high school diploma will secure access to just “a third of the fastest-growing jobs” (Gonser, 2017). Whereas previous generations could access middle-class status with a high school diploma, this is no longer the case (Pew Research Center, 2014). For these reasons, K-12 school systems have begun to attend to the ways students’ college and career interests are developed and supported. Yet much of the focus remains on students enrolled in middle and high school. Students in elementary schools seem to go unnoticed in these college-going efforts (ACT, 2009; Wood & Kaszubowski, 2008). While there are very few studies examining young children’s development of college aspirations (Knight, 2015), we know the early years are crucial to developing college readiness (ACT, 2008; Emmett, 1997). How do we help young children develop a college-going mindset? This study examined fieldnotes from undergraduates enrolled in a service-learning course who participated in an after-school club in a Los Angeles public school, focusing on how they elicited and mediated children’s understandings of college.

### Literature Review

Though the nation’s adjusted cohort graduation rate is at its highest since it was first measured for the 2010–2011 cohort (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), graduating high school does not signify being college ready (America’s Promise Alliance, 2020; English et al., n.d.). Most students graduate high school having nowhere to go (Education Trust, 2016). This is especially true for marginalized students (Amos, 2019; Education Trust, 2016; English et al., n.d.). Among educational policymakers, scholars, and practitioners, there are calls to ensure that graduating high school equates being both college *and* career ready (America’s Promise Alliance, 2019).

**College and career readiness defined.** States vary in how they establish education-to-workforce pipelines under the Every Student Succeeds Act, the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Achieve, 2016; Cushing et al., 2019). This has led to several definitions of college and career readiness (Webster, 2015). For the purposes of

this paper, college and career readiness for students is defined:

(1) understand[ing] the connection between school and the world of work and (2) plan[ning] for and making a successful transition from school to postsecondary education and/or the world of work and from job to job across the life span. (American School Counselor Association, 2014, p. 3)

Attending to K-12 students' college and career aspirations and their plans to make those dreams reality is extremely important if educators are to support them.

**Elementary students' college and career readiness.** There are very studies that examine elementary students' college and career aspirations (Wood & Kaszubowski, 2008). However, there is a growing consensus among educational researchers that what happens in elementary school matters for their K-16 educational trajectory (English et al., n.d.). Dougherty (2013) stresses that "early learning itself facilitates later learning" (p. 1). Engaging elementary students in activities that help develop their college and career aspirations is extremely important (Mariani et al., 2016). By the time students transition from elementary to middle school, most have already formed ideas about their college aspirations as well as their ability to attain a college education. Paulson, Coombs, and Richardson (1990) found that 9- to 11-year-olds reported higher college aspirations than their 12- to 17-year-old counterparts, though they had fewer expectations of completing college. Kao and Tienda (1998) found that among a cohort of minority youth college aspirations were high in eighth grade, but these declined in tenth and twelfth grade. Though college-going efforts continue to target middle and high school students, the reality is that college and career readiness begins in elementary school (ACT, 2008, 2009; Knight, 2015). Aiding young children's explorations of what college is can help establish and sustain their college journey.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Adults play an important role in the development of children's college and career aspirations, with parents, teachers, and school counselors all influencing the formation of young children's ideas (Blackhurst & Auger, 2008; Pulliam & Bartek, 2018). But we can also stand to learn from children about their own understandings of the world they inhabit, including their understandings about college. In fact, it is often challenging for adults to see kids as "competent social actors who take an active role in shaping their daily experiences" (Thorne, 2010, p. 408). In our work, we approach children as "knowing subjects" (Luttrell, 2010, p. 225) and continuously reflect on our assumptions about children's way of

knowing and views of the world (Thorne, 2010).

One approach to developing young children's college and career readiness is by drawing upon the knowledge and skills children already possess from their experiences outside the classroom. Often adults have taken a "banking" approach to "deposit" information into students (Freire, 1970). College and career readiness activities often involve *telling* them about college or careers, without taking time to learn about and leverage students' personal interests to make connections to college and careers. We join with scholars who have long advocated for educators to instead recognize the wealth of knowledge children bring to schools and expand upon their understandings (García-Sánchez & Orellana, 2019; Moll et al., 1992; Paris & Alim, 2017). As Owocki and Goodman (2002) argue:

Learning in school is purposeful and meaningful when children (1) find the curriculum *relevant* to their personal and social worlds; (2) *own* their learning activities; and (3) make *choices* about what and how they will learn. (p. 22)

These understandings can help us create learning opportunities that are relevant to children's lives and that expand upon their existing skills (García-Sánchez & Orellana, 2019; Moll et al., 1992).

While learning happens everywhere, all the time, it is best supported through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978) and thoughtful approaches to *mediation* (Diaz & Flores, 2001). How others respond shapes children's learning in powerful ways. This sociocultural/sociohistorical approach to teaching and learning is embodied in the after-school program that is the focus of this research. In this paper, we focus on how undergraduates both elicited and mediated B-Club participants' understandings of college and career aspirations. We ask the following question: How do undergraduate students mediate kids' understandings of college and build on their college knowledge?

## **Methods and Data**

**Service-learning course and after-school learning club.** This article is based on the events that transpired during winter quarter at B-Club. The after-school club is embedded in a service-learning course that integrates theory with practice to study learning and human development in educational settings. The course was focused on language and literacy.

Undergraduate students participated in a three-hour weekly classroom seminar on sociocultural learning theory where they learn to write fieldnotes and reflect on their interactions with youth at the club. To support undergraduate students' understanding of learning, language, and literacy, they read about

conducting fieldwork (Emerson et al., 1995; Kleinsasser, 2000; Thorne, 2010), sociocultural learning theory (Cole & Griffin, 1983; Diaz & Flores, 2001; Rogoff, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978), and literacy (D'warte, 2016; Enciso, 2019).

Once a week, groups of undergraduates visited the play-based, multilingual afterschool program for elementary school students in central Los Angeles. B-Club is modeled after the Fifth Tradition/La Clase Mágica approach developed by Michael Cole (1991–1994) and Olga Vásquez (2013) in San Diego, California. It is a unique “community of learners” (Rogoff, 1994) where undergraduates and kids learn as they play and play as they learn (Orellana, 2016). Located in a multicultural immigrant community, the after-school program serves approximately 35 children ranging from third to fifth grade. Most children attending Bruin Club are from families that migrated from Mexico and Central America. A high percentage of students were identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged and classified as English learners. Enrolled in the course were many undergraduate students who identified as first-generation college students and as non-traditional students, many of whom shared the children’s experiences as children of immigrants.

After each site visit, undergraduates were tasked with writing up their observations and reflections in response to a weekly prompt. These assignments were rooted in an ethnographic approach to support “‘ways of seeing’ and interpretation [of] the activities, practices, and understandings of themselves and the children” (Ángeles et al., 2020, p. 134). While the research conducted at B-Club is informed by ethnographic perspectives, our approach “defies conventional ethnographies” as this article reports on a synthesis of insights gathered through undergraduates’ fieldnotes (Orellana, 2016, p. 28). The fieldnotes provide insights into what happened at the club, through the eyes of undergraduates. We analyzed them with an eye both to what happened and to *how* undergraduates made sense of the activities and relationships.

One of the core practices at B-Club involves creating authentic and meaningful ways for children to engage in literacy practices. We have experimented with various ways of motivating children to write, including relational ones, through a letter-writing system in which kids write to each other, to the undergraduates, and to an imaginary creature who has variously been named “El Maga” (Cole, 1991–1994), “X” (Orellana, 2016) and “Oso Bruin” (Alvarez et al., 2019). That quarter, we decided to use letter writing to elicit B-Club kids’ knowledge about college. I guided the undergraduates in writing letters, in the voice of Oso Bruin, who asked them about college and careers. In a sense, Oso Bruin acted as an ethnographer, using this innovative approach to elicit kids’ ideas in a child-centric way (Clark, 2011). Our goal was to create opportunities for them to share with us their stories and dreams related to college.

Undergraduates responded to kids' letters in playful ways: utilizing color, different fonts, incorporating various languages, and including images, to encourage literacy. In addition to the letter writing, other activities in which undergraduates and kids took part was playing a game of college bingo, listening to a presentation about college, and outlining a college roadmap.

**Data analysis.** We began by uploading 28 fieldnotes written by undergraduates that quarter to the on-line software program, Dedoose, and coding broadly for any mention of Oso Bruin and college. We identified 150 separate excerpts. In the next round of more refined coding, I identified specific college and career aspirations named by students, such as stating that they wanted to go to UCLA or become a doctor. I conducted a similar form of document analysis in kids' letters to Oso Bruin. I also identified instances when undergraduates seemed to actively mediate kids' college knowledge in these activities. This included *in vivo* coding to capture times when students themselves named these instances as "mediation" or referred to themselves as "mediators" (Saldaña, 2016)—a finding that surprised our research team. (In other work we are examining how undergraduates take up the ideas in the readings and connect theory and practice.) Our findings highlight how undergraduates saw kids as knowledge bearers and the various ways in which they highlighted knowledge about college with them.

## **Findings**

Because Bruin Club is a co-designed space between undergraduates, the research team, and kids, the instructor and I encouraged undergraduates to reflect and rethink, if necessary, their approaches to facilitating engagement with the various ongoing activities happening that winter. Like B-Club kids, undergraduates had never met Oso Bruin prior to this quarter. The first few weeks were dedicated to becoming acquainted with one other as well as with Oso Bruin. Here I describe the various ways in which undergraduates acted as sociocultural mediators of college and career information.

**Affirming sociocultural knowledge.** Noting that it seemed awkward or unnatural to ask about college, undergraduates began to take a different approach and to broker information about college that was more tailored to kids' interests. Undergraduates quickly realized that affirming kids' sociocultural knowledge was important in engaging kids in conversations about college. For example, one undergraduate, Miché<sup>1</sup>, shared:

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<sup>1</sup> All participants names are anonymized.

I asked them what they wanted to be when they got older . . . I got a plethora of responses. A lot of the kids want to be YouTubers when they grow older . . . . I also learned that some students in my homebase wanted to be teachers when they get older. Also, an IT guy was another job that was desired. I then tried to explain to the kids in my group that those are great jobs and they sound really fund. I asked them if they've thought about how they wanted to go about getting these jobs . . . . That's when I explained to them that would be a very necessary and important step in making all of these incredible dreams even more incredible realities. (Winter 2019 Fieldnotes #19)

Instead of starting a conversation about college without accounting for kids' interests, Michél invited students to discuss their career aspirations. A group of fifth-grade boys shared how they want to be YouTubers, revealing their understandings of how YouTube channels work. In fact, they reported having their own YouTube channel and collaboratively creating video content. B-Club kids are growing up in a world where social media is a prominent tool for engaging with the world (McCrinkle, 2020; Pinkser, 2020). Michél seized the opportunity to engage in a conversation that highlighted how postsecondary education could help actualize their professional dreams.

When undergraduates made direct connections between kids' interests and college, kids' interest about college seemed to increase. Lilly described a moment in which Janelle's engagement with the college roadmap changed. (The college roadmap was left on the tables for kids to discover.) Lilly attempted to scaffold the activity to affirm Janelle's knowledge about college. She learned that Janelle knew she wanted to go to college and that college led to employment. Yet it was not until Lilly asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up that Janelle expressed her desire to be an actress. Upon hearing this Lilly said, "you can go to college to major in drama and acting." This statement, according to Lilly, made Janelle's "eyes grow wide and she asked for further explanation." Lilly and Janelle then conversed about what majors are and how that shaped the college classes you take. By focusing on what Janelle wanted to do, Lilly was "able to stretch [her] understanding of college is for jobs...to a more defined understanding that college is for an acting career" (Winter 2019 Fieldnotes #21).

Another undergraduate, Yanelly, worked with Ana to complete a college roadmap by incorporating her own experiences while honoring those of Ana. She explained,

I gave her some information about how my own social and cultural experiences shaped my college roadmap. This really seemed to excite Ana because she found out that my parents also speak Spanish like hers do and that they did not know much about college because they did not go to college themselves. (Winter 2019

Fieldnotes #18).

After Yanelly shared her college journey, they collaboratively discussed what Ana wanted on her college roadmap. Ana included things like joining cheering in high school, getting good grades, joining clubs, visiting UCLA, and getting accepted as a math major (see Figure 1).



# COLLEGE ROADMAP

your name:

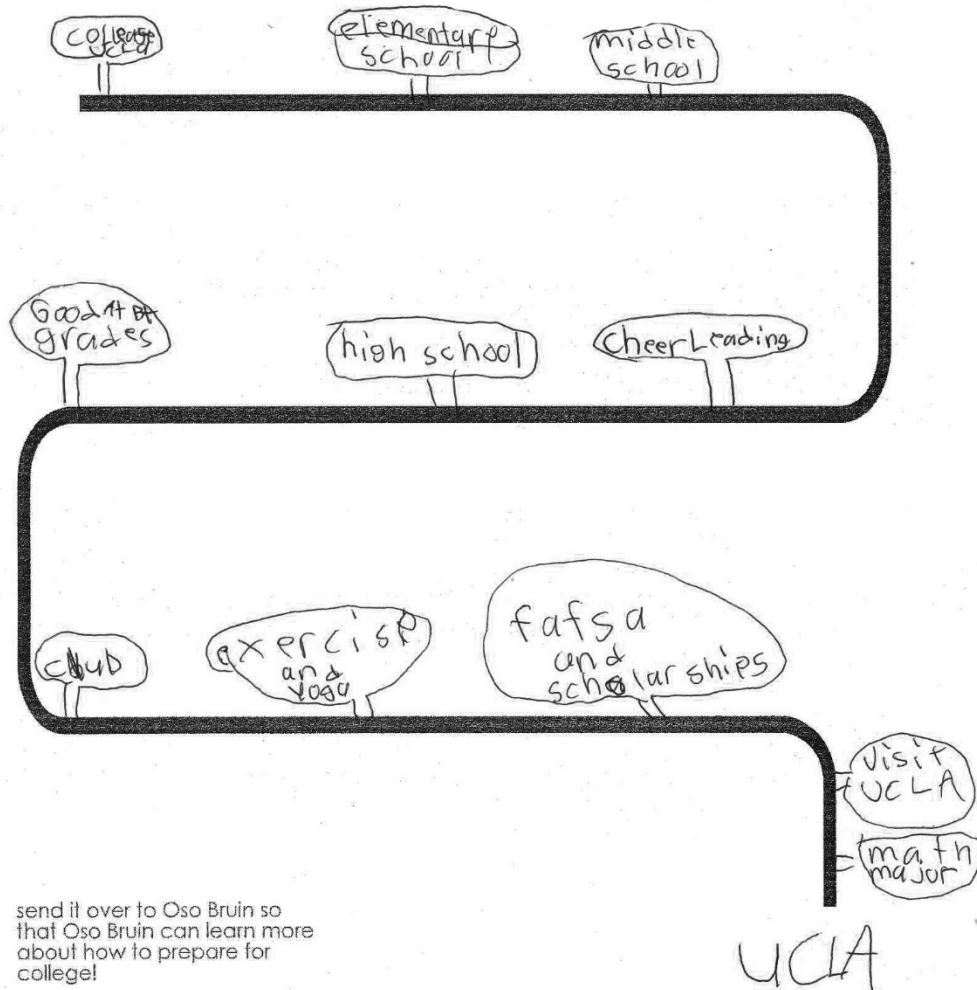


Figure 1. Ana's College Map. Image from the author. Copyright 2019 by Sophia L. Angeles. Reproduced with permission.

In her fieldnotes, Yanelly reflected on what it meant for B-Club kids to

hear about her and her peers' college experiences. She wrote:

[B-Club kids] were always fascinated and curious by our answers and wanted to know more and more about our college experience. This is important because it allowed them to open their mind up to different ideas and they received a glimpse of what college might be like. They saw us having fun and may have thought to themselves, "I can be a college student and have fun like them," and I believe this is a powerful impact for them. (Winter 2019 Fieldnotes #18)

As a Latina, child of immigrants, Spanish-speaker, and first-generation college student, Yanelly shared many of the experiences of B-Club kids like Ana's. Through interactions with undergraduates, B-Club kids gained new perspectives about what the college experience could be like for them (Almarode, 2012). In contrast to Marian Wright Edelman's famous saying, "You can't be what you can't see," B-Club kids had the opportunity to see themselves as college students through their interactions with undergraduates from a variety of backgrounds.

**Co-constructing knowledge as sociocultural mediators.** Most undergraduates approached their role as sociocultural mediators (Diaz & Flores, 2001) by asking questions to probe for kids' knowledge about college. For example, Lilly helped Leilani create a college roadmap by asking questions about what she thought students needed to do to get to college. Leilani's response was that students needed to "get good grades." When Lilly asked how that was achieved Leilani clarified on the map that this was done via "studying, practicing, and reading" (Winter 2019 Fieldnotes #21). Later, Leilani let Lilly know that students needed "to go to school" before applying to college. Lilly asked if she was eligible to go to college *now*, since she was in school now. Leilani responded by specifying that you go to high school before college (see Figure 2).

# COLLEGE ROADMAP

your name:

studying practicing reading

ing more

go to high school get straight

As much

as hard save up lots

of money if

send it over to Oso Bruin so that Oso Bruin can learn more about how to prepare for college!

Figure 2. Leilani's College Map. Image from the author. Copyright 2019 by Sophia L. Angeles. Reproduced with permission.

Lilly engaged Leilani in a conversation about college by building on her

funds of knowledge. Leilani's knowledge served as the springboard to more nuanced discussions about college. Lilly reflected on this experience: "teachers are mediating tools for students...I was able to mediate the teaching and learning experiences of college so that they could reach a better understanding." Without assuming what Leilani knew or did not know, Lilly curiously asked questions to sustain her current understandings of college while expanding upon them and further developing her college awareness.

**Adapting tools in the toolbox.** Undergraduates detailed additional ways they used to expand on the tools they employed to engage B-Club kids in conversations about college (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Reflecting on ways of engaging kids' interests, one undergraduate, Ella, proposed that we create an Instagram account to share day-to-day college experiences with B-Club kids.

Other undergraduates agreed that something more personal and interactive might work better. Lilly observed:

We [undergraduates] concluded that there were too many texts in the presentation for the kids liking . . . . We decided to include more pictures and videos. Someone from our group said we could make an Instagram page for our club and share things with the kids. Many others from our group thought it was a good idea. (Winter 2019 Fieldnotes #21)

Ella helped draft a proposal about how to ensure responsible use of the social media account, given school rules about technology. Undergraduates and the instructional team reached a consensus, and it was agreed that undergraduates would submit their photos either directly via the Oso Bruin account or by submitting them to me if they did not utilize Instagram.

This newly created Instagram account was introduced to the Bruin Club kids as an account used by Oso Bruin who was visiting undergraduates to observe their daily lives as college students. Not only did undergraduates get to share snippets of their college lives, but Oso Bruin began to follow various college accounts that Bruin Club kids had expressed interested. For example, Nancy stated that she wanted to attend Harvard University while Vance knew about Pepperdine University (Winter 2019 Fieldnotes #26). B-Club kids would ask to visit the Instagram accounts of the college campuses in which they were interested in attending to see what they looked like as well as the college events that took place there. After introducing Oso Bruin's Instagram account to her small group, Caroline shared:

The Instagram account is great because we can post interesting and important things while also having the students be engaged. It was a very fun idea to create

an account where Oso Bruin can interact with the kids on another level instead of just letters . . . they do seem to at least put more interest into the Instagram account. (Winter 2019 Fieldnotes #14)

Following Oso Bruin as well as other college accounts allowed B-Club kids to see a range of college experiences captured via photos and videos. By incorporating tools that Bruin Club kids were already using, undergraduates found that conversations about college could occur more organically.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the various understandings kids in third to fifth grade had about college. Analyses of data collected that winter quarter showed that undergraduates quickly came to embrace their role as sociocultural mediators of college information and developed interesting ways of eliciting and building on kids' understandings of college. By utilizing letter writing, mapping out college journeys, and following college Instagram accounts, opportunities arose for organic conversations to take place about what it means to go to college, how one prepares for college, and the purposes of attending college. Undergraduates quickly learned to utilize kids' own interests and understandings to expand upon their understandings about college in authentic ways. This approach is different than the more common approaches of simply presenting students with information ("banking model").

At a time when national educational leaders alongside policymakers and scholars are concerned with how to develop K-12 students' college and career readiness, B-Club serves as an example of how teachers and school counselors can hook college-knowledge on to children's' existing interests. Conversations with third- to fifth-graders centered around what they knew, and their interests reveal how connections can be made between "what they're learning now to their . . . career of [their] (elementary) dreams" (Mittman, 2020). This reflects the larger goals of school counselors to showcase how school is relevant to their future careers (American School Counselor Association, 2014). Our work also reveals the wealth of knowledge that elementary school students already possess about college. Being able to identify and expand upon this should be the goal of all educators, including educational researchers who wish to examine college readiness across K-12 contexts. By illustrating this example of how adults leveraged the knowledge and passions of elementary school students, we encourage educators in and out of school contexts to do the same to tend to the seeds that have already been planted in an effort to help them attain their college and career aspirations.



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