Human Capital and Resilience Highlighted in *Three Miles*

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In the Three Miles episode of the popular NPR radio program, This American Life, we encounter three compelling young alumni of University Heights High School in the Bronx, each of whom participated in a classroom exchange program with an affluent private high school nearby. Despite very different outcomes, the three students, Melanie, Raquel, and Jonathan each applied for Posse Foundation scholarships at selective colleges in the northeastern United States. Using their experiences with the Posse Foundation as a lens for examining their distinct life experiences and outcomes, I will argue that programs like the Posse Foundation and the Fieldston classroom exchange excel at introducing students to institutions and lifestyles to which they have not been previously exposed. However, these programs fail to take into account the accrued cultural and social capital, or lack thereof, that may inhibit students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and poor communities from thriving and excelling in the application process and through their eventual transition to college.

Melanie, the subject of most of the episode, is universally remembered by her classmates and teachers as a fiercely intelligent student who does not suffer fools gladly. When she first visited Fieldston, the affluent private school, as a sophomore in high school, she was overwhelmed by the stark contrast of the environment of Fieldston compared to what she knew at University Heights, saying, “I couldn't possibly bring myself into my body to actually engage with these [Fieldston] kids.” Upon witnessing the disparities and inherent unfairness, Melanie experienced a crisis and an awakening that day, something that isn’t surprising considering her relatively advanced maturity and intelligence. I would argue that she was exhibiting characteristics of Stage Five of Erik Erikson’s identity development theory, which is marked by a

"struggle with role confusion as [students] delineate between how others see them and how they view themselves." (Patton et al, 2016).

Angela Vassos, a Fieldston teacher who took an interest in Melanie from their first encounter during her sophomore year, joined teachers and advisors at University Heights who tried to cultivate Melanie's talent by nominating her for a Posse Foundation scholarship. Melanie made it to the final round of interviews, a tremendous achievement in itself, but she was ultimately not selected as a winner. This rejection appeared to be Melanie's undoing and she perceived it as just one more sign that she is unworthy to attend a prestigious school or to take part in the many privileges afforded to her counterparts at Fieldston. Melanie's reaction to the Posse Foundation rejection was decisive and swift. She cut off ties from her teachers and friends, graduated high school early and terminated her college search, demonstrating her lack of social capital to navigate the college predisposition and search process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Her counterparts at Fieldston would have been warned about putting all their proverbial eggs into one basket, relying solely on one college application. Furthermore, her inclination to run away from her teachers at a time when she most needed their support and guidance struck me as particularly tragic. Melanie undoubtedly adopted a set of survival skills and instincts to thrive on the tough streets of New York City, but these instincts came into conflict with the patience and skills one needs to endure the competitive college admissions process. This is further evinced by Melanie's visit to Pablo Muriel (one of the teachers who tried to support her) some time after she graduated. Pablo was busy with another teacher and asked Melanie to wait a moment, but it is clear that Melanie took this as another rejection. She left Pablo's classroom in much the same way that she fled school when she was rejected by the Posse scholarship. She had not yet developed the requisite human capital and the ability to make rational decisions because she

lacked a sufficient understanding of the college admissions process and the effect that a college degree would have on her life (Perna, 2006).

Raquel, another University Heights graduate, failed to make it through the first round screening for the Posse scholarship, but her reaction was quite different. Raquel's first visit to Fieldston was an eye opening experience that motivated her to pursue the kind of learning environment and community that she witnessed there. This, of course, is the stated purpose of the classroom exchange program, but Raquel is a perfect example of the way that other factors contribute to the outcomes of the students in the program. In addition to the Posse Foundation nomination, Raquel applied to numerous schools and eventually enrolled at Bard College on a scholarship. Raquel demonstrated resilience and determination, both of which are tied to social capital, as she navigated the college search process (Ledogar, 2008). She knew what she wanted to achieve and she took the necessary steps in the process to meet her goal of enrolling in college. Pierre Bordieu would attribute both Raquel's perception of herself and her assessment of the future benefits of a college education to her habitus, the ingrained beliefs, habits, and abilities that define her and compel her to engage in actions directed at her ultimate goal of enrolling in college (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). These aspects of Raquel's character further help us understand how she can exhibit certain actions and beliefs about herself that are not shared prevalently among her peers.

While the limitations of this paper prevent me from engaging in a robust discussion about the inequalities that exist between the two schools, it is important to take a step back to discuss what Joshua Klugman describes as the "marks of distinction" that parents and administrators at affluent schools are able to offer their students to make them more attractive college applicants (Klugman, 2012). Consider Raquel and her struggles at Bard, where she was a B and C student

during her freshman year, which, as she put it, “was devastating to me because I was an A-plus student in high school.” It is important to consider the role of the university in identifying students like Raquel who attended schools like University Heights, which lacked marks of distinction such as AP and IB courses, advanced math and statistics, and unique extracurricular activities. Furthermore, we know from the work of Clifford Adelman that a student’s level of “academic curriculum intensity” (i.e., a progressive curriculum of English and math, along with foreign language, AP courses, and other classes) correlates strongly to that student’s ability to graduate high school on time and to continue to complete a bachelor’s degree (Adelman, 2006). Furthermore, this academic intensity is more predictive of these desired outcomes than either standardized test scores or overall high school GPA, a fact that is worth bearing in mind as we consider the lack of high level math and AP courses at University Heights compared to the availability of such courses at Fieldston. A high achieving student like Melanie, for example, took math classes with seniors when she was a freshman, citing that University Heights “is a school that doesn't even have fucking statistics offered, you know, like AP classes.” When we zoom out, we can see why inequalities in curricula across our two high schools predict the incongruence we observe among graduates from the high schools who go on to 4-year colleges (Renn & Reason, 2012).

One such example of this is our last student, Jonathan, who grew up in foster care before he was eventually adopted by a foster mother, who neither cultivated nor supported college ambitions for him. Jonathan’s academic talent and potential were cultivated by the aforementioned Raquel and his teachers, who also recommended him for a Posse Foundation scholarship. In this case, the Posse Foundation was instrumental in shaping the college search and choice process for Jonathan, who did not see college as an option. His decision process for

selecting an institution to attend did not fit neatly into the groupings of Hossler and Gallagher's college choice models because Jonathan did not initiate the search process (Renn & Reason, 2012). Instead, I argue that by sidestepping the traditional search process, the Posse Foundation exposed Jonathan to four-year colleges that he would not have considered otherwise. In doing so, Jonathan was spared the fate of Melanie who undermatched and enrolled in a community college that she has been attending on-and-off - and stopping out of - over the past ten years of her life after giving up on applying to colleges when she was a high school student (Smith et al., 2012). Perhaps even more critically, Jonathan would not have simply been undermatched, by he might not have applied to college at all, community college or otherwise, had it not been for the Posse Foundation because, as he put it, "I thought of myself in the future. . . being a janitor."

Jonathan attended Wheaton College in Massachusetts on a Posse Foundation scholarship, but he quickly began to experience problems. He could not afford books, he fell behind in classes, underwent disciplinary actions, and was eventually expelled halfway through his junior year. Rather than seek out help from professors and advisors, Jonathan disengaged from student life and isolated himself from others on campus when he experienced problems at Wheaton. Colleges are, after all, "designed to serve students. . . [with] minimal need for remediation [and who] lack financial stress," exactly the opposite of a "first-generation, low-income" student like Jonathan. George Kuh and his followers might lay part of the blame for Jonathan's unfortunate outcome at the feet of Wheaton College (and its professors and administrators) who failed in the role they played in Jonathan's engagement. It is clear that Jonathan's professors were not proactive or insistent in their interactions with him, nor was he referred to support services on campus. Likewise, while the Posse Foundation purports to connect students with on-campus mentors and to host regular events for the Posse cohorts on its partner campuses, it is evident that

Jonathan's mentor was not consistently engaged in Jonathan's struggles in college. According to Jonathan, his primary source of support and information was Raquel, who was 200 miles away in another state, and it appears as if Jonathan's deans and advisors were not as actively engaged as they needed to be. At a minimum, and recognizing that student engagement is indispensable in measuring and achieving student success, there should have been a process in place that alerted Jonathan's Posse mentor when he was suspended and expelled so that the mentor could have intervened or checked in on Jonathan. Instead, a vicious cycle and a negative feedback loop began in which Jonathan was faced with stereotype threat and imposter syndrome, the same monsters that continue to haunt Melanie who said of their public high school, "I know that we're only being taught to flip burgers," despite the sincere and earnest efforts of her teachers to help her attend college and to enter the middle class.

This is the silver lining of the podcast and the positive takeaway I choose to accentuate in the final analysis of the University Heights High School alumni I have highlighted. Each student was identified and nominated for a Posse Foundation scholarship by teachers and advisors who saw great promise in them. These often overworked and overloaded teachers went above and beyond to encourage these students and to achieve their dreams, but there are so many additional factors that contribute to a particular student's habitus. There are many students like Jonathan, for example, who face antagonism at home and are told that they are incapable of achieving their potential. Jonathan, our only student to attain the Posse scholarship was expelled from college and forced to suffer the same fate of many of his classmates who made it through the college search process only to be bested by the cultural and lifestyle struggles presented to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This gives us much food for thought for addressing the needs of this population in our practice.

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