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From "punks" at school to "superstars" at work: social capital and educators' asset-based perspectives of students in high school internships

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High school internships provide students with valuable work-based learning experiences, career-oriented networking, and in-demand professional skills. In this study of high school principals, internship coordinators ("institutional agents"), and student interns, we highlight data from interviews and focus groups that substantiate the idea that internships can showcase students' more diverse and latent aptitudes but are more effective when building upon students' existing interests and abilities. Given the opportunity-focused goals of these programs, we recommend that school-based professionals adopt the language of social capital (or similar frameworks) to develop shared understandings between stakeholders and also critique existing conceptualizations to approach the work from asset-based and equity lenses.

KEYWORDS

internships, social capital, institutional agents, workforce, educational leadership and administration

1 Introduction

The existing research overwhelmingly suggests that students gain positive outcomes by participating in paid high school student internships (Bayerlein, 2020; Hora et al., 2020; Blau, 2022). Researchers emphasize that, through internships, students can receive work experience, develop and hone their professional skills, and establish critical networks for their future careers (Maertz et al., 2014; Blau, 2022). Ideally, internships help prepare students for fast-paced, highly competitive, and rapidly changing job markets.

Specifically, internships can provide students with useful forms of insider knowledge and professional connections—factors that closely resemble the academic concepts of "social and cultural capital" (Bourdieu et al., 1977; Bourdieu, 1985; Alawamleh and Mahadin, 2022). Although there is a growing body of scholarship that highlights these concepts as exclusionary—promoting a limited, middle- and upper-class, and predominantly White portrayal of success (see, e.g., Yosso, 2005; Cartwright, 2022; Kundu and O'Brien, 2022)—these key concepts frequently appear in the social sciences as essential for fostering social mobility (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Crul et al., 2022).

Internships can be particularly impactful for low-income students, especially if they are paid. Paid internships often are created with the explicit goal of "leveling the playing field" for

students who are underrepresented and marginalized, allowing them to participate in early career advancement while still contributing financially to their families. In this paper, we focus on paid internship experiences that are formatively, legally, and programmatically quite different than unpaid internships.

This article reports on qualitative research that examines how both institutional agents (adult staff at school and internship sites who orchestrate student programming) and high school participants involved in student internship programs appear to, in their own terms, describe social and cultural capital and their benefits related to career advancement. Our guiding questions are: How do institutional agents and high school student interns describe the benefits students gain from participating in paid internships? Where are there connections and disconnections between these stakeholders' articulated perspectives?

Our scholarly contribution is two-fold: First, we posit the potential benefits of having a shared language and framework for discussing students' skills and abilities to better operationalize how students may acquire them. Second, we build upon existing and increasingly popular "asset-based" research which aims to position all students as capable rather than deficient. However, much of this existing scholarship does not go far enough in articulating how to go about promoting systems-level, asset-based cultural shifts. It is not enough to simply position students as deserving of opportunity if, once granted those opportunities, they are expected to *assimilate* into a dominant profile of what success looks like.

Rather, we argue that educational programs must adopt shared languages and frameworks for discussing students' (acquisition of) skills and abilities in order to support students but also to collaboratively *critique* existing norms and expectations that may currently reproduce forms of inequity. Specifically, by continuously applying and critiquing social and cultural capital theory to better recognize the assets underrepresented youth *already* possess (so as to not assimilate them into our preconceived notions of successful students), we can more aptly build upon these assets to ultimately transform our institutions into becoming more inclusive environments.

2 Review of literature

The goals of many high school internship programs, particularly those aimed at serving Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) youth from low-income backgrounds, are to level systems of inequity and privilege and to connect students to employers in ways that foster future life success. Programs often are designed to provide opportunities to young individuals from low-income families, ideally enabling them to enter the labor force as more attractive employees, receive support during the transition to higher education, and expand their educational and career aspirations and networks (Anderson and Nieves, 2020). When high schools offer internships on top of traditional curricula, they create potential avenues for increasing social mobility and equity, thus helping youth overcome structural barriers as they pursue their academic and professional goals (Angelique, 2001; Wright and Mulvey, 2021). At the same time, many internships that claim to provide opportunity actually reinforce existing structural barriers (Hora et al., 2020). For example, unpaid positions may implicitly exclude lower-income students who lack the financial means to pursue such opportunities (Blau, 2022). Designers of internship programs should acknowledge the subtle ways in which these initiatives can perpetuate inequalities and unintentionally exclude students who lack certain resources due to their gender, race, and class (Swan, 2015; Hora et al., 2020; Wofford, 2022).

Collaborative efforts between schools, universities, employers, and government agencies are crucial for transforming youth internships into social mobility catalysts (Anderson and Nieves, 2020). Well-designed partnerships can minimize the barriers that impede disadvantaged students in these programs. However, effective communication between cross-sector partners necessitates the presence of shared understandings, language, and frameworks that speak to students' lives, nonacademic needs, and outcomes. The concept of *social capital* offers one such framework, one that may enhance internship programs' abilities to provide students with access to academic and professional resources. Social capital theory has the potential to facilitate a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play within youth internships and their promising role in fostering a more equitable society.

2.1 Social and cultural capital in schools and workplaces

The social reproduction view of education describes educational systems that primarily perpetuate the existing class system and unequal social order rather than mobility (Bourdieu, 1985; Marx, 1986; Bowles and Glintis, 2002; Cole, 2022). Social capital theory exists within this perspective and paints education as existing at the will and mercy of the ruling class. Social capital theory has been foundationally influential within the social sciences, providing a framework for understanding how power, relationships, and networks influence educational and subsequent outcomes (Bowes and Gintis, 1976; Dika and Singh, 2002; Trainor, 2010; Cole, 2019).

Social capital consists of a person's explicit social connections, relationships, and networks that can increase access to certain opportunities, information, and other resources (Fukuyama, 2000; Dika and Singh, 2002; Kundu et al., 2022). Many scholars have examined the impact of social capital in facilitating or impeding an individual's or group's objectives (see, e.g., Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001; Fukuyama, 2000; Adler and Kwon, 2002). Social capital also helps form networks, including the trust and reciprocity developed between individuals and groups (Coleman, 1990; Baron et al., 2000). Social capital derives its influence from allowing individuals to signal their belonging in a group, including access to quality resources from that group and adjacent groups (Bourdieu, 1985; Portes, 2000). Examples of this phenomenon might include Ivy League college degrees, many of which are legacy-related and having a connection to land an interviews at a coveted management consulting firm.

While students from upper-class families may have preexisting acquaintances who can improve their access to professional opportunities, working-class youth are less likely to know someone in a similar influential position (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Fisher, 2018). These discrepancies in access to social capital affect opportunities for social mobility. In fact, as many as 80% of jobs may be filled through existing personal contacts and professional relationships (Fisher, 2018).

The concept of *cultural capital* exists under the broader umbrella of social capital theory. Cultural capital relates to an individual's proficiency at adapting to different settings by leveraging the appropriate behavioral codes, language, and cultural resources (such as clothing and supplies) expected within those environments (Bourdieu, 1985; Huang, 2019; Bhugra et al., 2021). Typically, the cultural capital that is expected in academic or professional settings such as schools or workplaces is associated with the dominant social class and essentially promotes a biased reward system (Yosso, 2005; Kundu, 2020). Students who possess social and cultural capital often reap additional social and cultural capital. Students with social and economic disadvantages often struggle to acquire more social and cultural capital because they are less accustomed to certain systems and the expectations within them.

2.2 Capital and social reproduction

Bourdieu (1985, 1986) and Coleman (1988) are credited as the pioneers of two foundational schools of thought within social capital theory. For Bourdieu, social capital is the aggregate of both the current or potential resources that a person has, which can be leveraged in order to gain respect and acceptance. Ideally, an individual can rely on these kinds of relationships to achieve various goals (for example, the support of a supervisor allows an employee to work on tasks that they enjoy) (Bourdieu, 1986; Rogošić and Baranović, 2016).

Many scholars have noted that educational systems play a significant role in perpetuating the class system through the inequitable distribution of resources (see, e.g., Huang, 2019; Yoon, 2020). Bourdieu (1985, 1986) highlighted how social capital functions to maintain status of some over others (for example, a letter of recommendation from a person of influence). Within educational settings, many have called attention to *the hidden curriculum* (Jackson, 1968). The hidden curriculum consists of the implicit and usually unspoken messages and social norms that shape students' school and life experiences outside of the formal academic curriculum. Since public schools in America are funded through local taxes, the hidden curriculum also can be structural, such as when students and schools in wealthier neighborhoods have greater access to high-quality teachers, facilities, technology, academic programming, and other educational supports (Lareau, 2011; Duncan and Murnane, 2016). The potential positive impact of social capital relies on how well an individual's current resources can increase their access to additional resources they otherwise would have lacked (Bourdieu, 1985; Florin et al., 2003). Social capital remains a tool of the ruling class unless it supports individuals' transcendence of their social position. According to Bordieuan scholars, school and program structures generally limit marginalized students' access to resources and diminish their agency to leverage more capital (Kundu, 2020; Cartwright, 2022).

Widely applied in the sociological study of education, Coleman's (1988) social capital theory has roots in structural functionalism, emphasizing Durkheim's (1933) approach of social harmony and stability over conflict (Dika and Singh, 2002). A "Colemanian" analysis might be concerned with an entire social ecosystem, ranging from the factors that affect high school dropout rates to what affects engagement in social movements (Ehrenberg and Brewer, 1995; Glanville and Bienenstock, 2009). For Coleman, "social capital is a mode of social structure that eases the activity of an individual in a structured context" (Rogošić and Baranović, 2016, p. 86; Coleman, 1990). Put another way, social capital is a tool that exists to increase individuals' *agency*, enabling them to better achieve goals within very complex social and organizational structures (Kundu, 2020). In contrast to Bourdieu's view that social capital is a mechanism for maintaining an unjust social order, Coleman believed that power accrued through social capital can help individuals overcome structural obstacles.

Social scientists rarely assess internships through the lens of social reproduction theory, which is more prevalently applied to in-school contexts (Lareau, 2011; Kundu, 2020). We venture into this territory because internship programs frequently carry language around their intended aim to promote opportunity for youth with socioeconomic disadvantages. Our unique contribution has been to see where existing language for internships fall short and where they can be expanded to truly fit the goals they purport prioritizing.

2.3 Institutional agents in education

Relationships and connections play a vital role in students' access to knowledge-based resources in educational settings, including hands-on guidance from adults on how to progress toward college and career goals (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995; Xu et al., 2023). Because working-class youth possess less of the social capital that is typically acknowledged and rewarded in institutional settings (Yosso, 2005; Cartwright, 2022; Kundu and O'Brien, 2022) compared to their middle- and upper-class counterparts, institutional agents can be helpful for marginalized youth who are navigating these inequities.

Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2011) defined an *institutional agent* as someone who occupies a position of authority and status within a hierarchical organization. In schools, institutional agents include principals, directors, teachers, and other staff who hold power over each other and students. Individuals in an adolescent's social network become institutional agents when they act on their behalf and transmit or negotiate highly valuable resources, including social capital. To illustrate this concept, Lareau (2011) provided the example of a middle-class parent who encourages their son to speak with his pediatrician directly as a patient and receiver of service instead of as a child. In this way, the middle-class child is reared to develop more institutional wherewithal, which can be used to gather resources and rewards over his lifetime (Lareau, 2011).

Institutional agents transmit or negotiate highly valued resources, such as internship programming, for students who are the perceived beneficiaries of these agents' actions (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). School-based institutional agents' influence on the distribution of social capital varies according to their positions of power and status (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011). Social capital also is influenced by other factors that may be under the control of institutional agents, including the unspoken rules and codes that manage a school and the interactions within it (Smith and Kulynych, 2002; Garcia and Ramirez, 2018; Lee and Young, 2023). For instance, if a teacher is more likely to call on certain kinds of students in their class, they transmit implicit messages related to the hidden curriculum and the kinds of social and cultural capital that they acknowledge and prioritize.

In the context of secondary schools, social capital fundamentally impacts the academic performance exhibited by students as well as how their performance is assessed (Leana and Pil, 2006). Research indicates that the backgrounds and experiences of school staff and

faculty also have a significant effect on student achievement, impacting adults' impressions of and interactions with their students (see, e.g., Daly and Finnigan, 2011; Kaso et al., 2019). Additionally, factors such as the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of students, the economy of the local community, and access to resources influence the social context of schools.

3 Methods

This study sought to amplify the voices and experiences of students and institutional actors, which are critical for developing targeted, essential resources that can improve access to opportunity and increase inclusivity of both high school internships and labor markets. Student and educator voices can inform state and city policymakers who seek to improve these programs and counteract inequities, such as poverty and racism, in the communities that they serve.

Sociologists use the term *social context* to refer to the norms and realities of a specific community. Many students in the South Bronx contend with social contexts that pose multiple barriers to academic excellence. Extreme poverty can affect numerous aspects of these youths' lives, including their access to high-quality transportation, food, and health-care resources (Chatterjee et al., 2019; Norberto, 2020). Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 75% of public schools in New York City experienced a decrease in their enrollment, and schools serving low-income students were impacted most severely (Zimmerman and Wilburn, 2022). Chronically truant or absent students often are those who have had to make trade-offs between pursuing their academic and professional interests and supporting their families financially.

Within these social contexts, and in order to better follow stakeholder experiences "on the ground" in schools and programs (Glesne, 2011), we engaged in semi-structured interviews of 16 institutional agents and focus groups that included 24 high school students who held summer internships across seven participating schools in the South Bronx, all of whom were selected for this qualitative study due to their participation in New York City's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). In operation since 1963, SYEP is the largest paid summer youth jobs program in the United States and is a flagship model for other similar initiatives.

The SYEP program was explicitly created to address "opportunity gaps" (Carter, 2013; Kundu, 2020)—or the nonacademic, basic needs of underprivileged and low-income students—through stipends. SYEP also helps these students gain in-demand professional skills (Jacobs et al., 2017; Heller and Kessler, 2022). School staff helped identify students for focus groups and ensure a diverse mix of male and female students across internship sites. Consent forms were created and signed by students, guardians, and staff several months before any research was conducted. We worked to ensure that a wide variety of perspectives were gathered so that data collection and subsequent analysis would be as inclusive as possible. We did this by making sure that we had roughly equal numbers of professionals from each of the South Bronx-based schools that participated in this study. We sought to include professionals with a variety of years of experience as well as roughly equal numbers of male and female participants, to account for differences in perspectives and experiences. For students as well, we made sure to have roughly equal numbers of male and female participants, grades, and racial backgrounds represented, reaching out to schools to let them know if we needed more or less of a certain types of stakeholders.

Our participating institutional agents included school principals as well as Work-Based Learning and Internship Coordinators who are employed in schools. These participants were interviewed first to not only capture their goals and challenges but to confirm the context of their programs. Institutional agent interviews lasted for approximately 30 min. Student focus groups then were conducted after their internships took place. Individual students were randomly selected from each participating workforce site so that students who had both positive and negative experiences were represented among the sample. The focus groups were conducted at a central hub/site where all students visited for ongoing training and development workshops after their workplace-based internships ended. All students were of color (predominantly identifying as Dominican, Black, and Latinx) and attended Title 1 high schools where each student qualified for free and reduced lunch; therefore, participating students also qualified for free and reduced lunch. These focus groups lasted between 60 to 80 min, and each group had three to five student participants. In total, the overall study includes the voices of 40 individuals.

Audio recordings of all interviews were first uploaded into Rev., an AI-assisted transcription service. Interview transcripts were checked and revised to ensure accuracy, and then were uploaded into the qualitative analysis software Dedoose. Social reproduction theory and social capital theory were used to frame the study and guide deductive analysis, going from broad theory to narrow findings. This entailed a process of initial broad coding followed by more focused, theory-informed coding. A constant comparative approach in which codes were compared to other codes, emerging data, and whole narratives (Charmaz, 2014) was used to identify patterns in the data. Attention also was paid to the ways in which participants constructed their responses and gave meaning to their experiences through narrative.

Initial codes and themes were developed relative to social and cultural capital frameworks, including potentially diverse forms of social and cultural capital that traditional conceptualizations may neglect to recognize (such as the unique ways that people from underrepresented backgrounds connect with each other and/or garner the support of others). Additional coding emphasized implicit or explicit deficit framing of students. Data both within and across the institutional agent and student stakeholder groups were compared to facilitate meaningful interpretation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Design safeguards such as triangulation and purposeful sampling helped ensure the credibility and confirmability of our findings (Creswell and Poth, 2017) and that accuracy to participants' lived experiences was bolstered.

As this inquiry has been qualitative in nature, it is not generalizable nor representative of all internship programming experiences, nor the perspectives of all stakeholders who participate in internship programs (Schensul and LeCompte, 2012). Qualitative research centers around the objective of examining people's nuanced experiences and meaning-making within specific social phenomena, subject to the researchers' interpretation and positionality. The emerging patterns we noticed, as well as our interests and proclivities to rely more heavily on certain theoretical groundwork, shaped our analysis. However, our exploration has been rigorous and detailed, accounting for how social

capital seems relevant to these contexts. This work merits further investigative work to validate, perhaps from a more quantitative approach (Stake, 2010).

4 Findings

Our findings corroborate much of the existing research, which suggests that internships can be quite beneficial to adolescents as they continue to develop their academic and professional identities. Our research confirms that paid internships during high school can provide valuable and meaningful experiences for young people and their career trajectories, specifically when they offer students new environments for gaining academic and interpersonal skills and interacting with new mentors. Although this study highlighted some important ways that implementation and programming of SYEP might be improved, we believe that our takeaways are transferrable to other, similar programs in schools that also predominantly serve diverse students of color from low-income backgrounds. Below we present our primary thematic findings that seem generalizable to other similar programs. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, we use pseudonyms to reference all individuals mentioned in this study.

4.1 Finding 1. Educators strongly believed that paid high school internship programs allow participating students to showcase more of their latent talents and forms of unique giftedness

Extant scholarship on internships and extracurricular activities describes how nontraditional academic settings can allow students with marginalized identities feel more comfortable (see, e.g., Sack and Moody, 2020). The adult interviewees noted that the SYEP internships provide avenues in which underrepresented students can express themselves and access existing social and cultural capital that may go unrecognized and unrewarded in school spaces. The institutional agents in this study repeatedly described instances where they witnessed their students demonstrating skills and interests that they were unaccustomed to seeing in exclusively academic spaces. As Shannon, a principal, said in her interview:

> Sometimes we have kids who are total punks at school, total pains in the butt who break rules all the time. Then it turns out they're *superstars* at their job, which involves research, coding, programming, and development. It's [what] we're trying to teach them. It makes us step back and go, "That's so interesting"… It makes them real people to us, and it gives them a chance to kick butt in other ways—almost more meaningful ways.

Without explicitly admitting so, Shannon alluded to previous judgment of some of her students, perhaps through a deficit perspective that positioned the students as incapable. However, the out-of-school internship context and experience created a space for her students to defy those preconceived notions. Yosso (2005) and Gorski (2011) remind us that students benefit from these types of atypical environments in which traditional modes and expectations of academic achievement are challenged and young people are welcome to express previously unseen or undervalued abilities, competencies, or forms of capital (Kundu et al., 2022). Surprised by her student, this particular school leader began to adopt a more asset-based perspective (Kelly and Kundu, 2023).

Another institutional agent, Marcus, supported this idea, saying, "[Internships] give us an opportunity to learn things about the kids that we would not know otherwise, to hear about their experiences, to hear from their mentors or through other adults that they are working with [at their site]." In other words, when young people are mentored and nurtured by multiple caring figures, each with their unique perspectives and vantage points, they can better recognize students' many gifts. Some student gifts may need more prodding to emerge—perhaps more prodding than an under-resourced school in the South Bronx can provide by itself. School ecosystem partnerships, such as those initiated by SYEP between high schools and workplaces, can be critical for serving students' college and career readiness needs beyond their academic coursework (Allen et al., 2014; Kundu et al., 2022).

4.2 Finding 2. Students reported that their most formative and transformative internship experiences fostered their confidence and helped them feel valued in ways they had not felt before

In our focus groups with high school students, the conversations routinely and naturally shifted to students expressing how their best, most positive internship experiences affected their feelings about themselves, their world, and their future possibilities. Research on belonging indicates that students need to feel these types of connections in order to buy into academic activities and feel like they are contributing to something greater than themselves (see, e.g., Walton and Cohen, 2011; Cohen, 2022). Instead of explaining the tangible hard and soft skills that they honed or acquired, student participants often remarked that "what they gained or benefitted" from these programs were larger, more abstract benefits. They sometimes described summer internships in life-changing ways that impacted their identity or their developing sense of self.

One participant, Darius, compared his internship to a previous work experience, describing how the financial rewards were secondary to finding fulfilment through work:

> I had my first job making money but not actually enjoying what I was doing… Now, being passionate about work is something that is important to me. If I'm not passionate about it, I'll feel like a *worker*; I won't be efficient. That's what I learned, and this internship helped me out a lot. Before I was like, "Oh, I need to save money for college." That was the first thing on my mind. But, when I actually loved doing [the work], even payday would come and I'd forget because I loved doing my job so much.

Darius described how his internship, at least for short instances, allowed him to overlook the burdens of his immediate financial situation. This was possible because the internship was fulfilling and enjoyable. Such students often have to make trade-offs between school and work in order to meet basic needs. However, Darius had a

newfound perspective on work—that work has benefits outside of mere financial stability—and a motivation to find passion in his career in order to thrive.

When students were asked to elaborate on what made certain experiences more meaningful, they inevitably came back to the idea that these programs allowed them to build upon their existing strengths and interests. For instance, one student, Carmel, described not particularly enjoying her internship at a software company at first, but she slowly came to appreciate it over time. She explained:

> My dream is to be a pilot. So even though this is far off the grid from that, it's good. These skills that I'm learning now can translate to when I become a pilot. For example, learning how to speak up for myself, as a female trying to go into that male-dominated career path, it's going to be difficult, and I need to fend for myself.

Although Carmel did not find joy or fulfillment in the day-to-day activities of working at a technology company, she was able to consider which parts of her experience could become transferrable to her future and her goal of becoming a female pilot. Through conversations with mentors and peers—many of whom Carmel said were nice and kind—she came to realize that being an underrepresented female was something that she would have to learn to confront across environments. Carmel also mentioned later in her focus group conversation that her internship slowly improved her confidence and interest in math because she was able to better see the real-world relevance of mathematical problems and questions.

Another student, Donna, described her summer experience working on a digital/social media campaign that sought to reduce online bullying among teenagers. The internship site, a media agency, allowed students to select and work on an issue that mattered to them. Donna worked with a group of students who also designed a campaign for promoting their message to fellow students during back-to-school programming. Donna said that she vied for this cause because her best friend had recently experienced being bullied online. Describing what it felt like to put finishing touches on the campaign for launch, Donna said, "That was really a moment in my life where I said, 'I have something—I'm worth something. I can do something for the community of the world'".

Both Carmel and Donna indicated the importance of belonging. In concurrence with what adult educators reported in this study, the commonality in these experiences was the ability of students to build upon and validate their existing strengths and interests. When internships and other academic programs allow students like Donna and Carmel to lean into what matters to them while also learning formative skills, the impact on young adults can be quite significant.

4.3 Finding 3. Adult institutional agents routinely alluded to their desire to boost students' acquisition of social and cultural capital, even if they did not use these terms explicitly

Each institutional agent was asked in their interview to discuss "real world" or "work-based" learning in their own terms. Below are a few exemplar responses that illustrate how internship administrators thought about the benefits of the SYEP internships that were offered to their students:

> It's anything that's connected to the real-world and connected to our students' experiences… One of our objectives [is] to make sure that each student is in a program that makes sense for *them* but also coordinate the integration of students into a larger education system. (Alana, school internship coordinator)

> The ideas that underpin work-based learning blur the lines between the community and the school. Students interact with professionals across disciplines, ideally finding something that matters to them. When it's at its best, we have had students who have been offered jobs straight out of high school because of these internships. (Brian, principal).

> It's an opportunity for us to help kids build their social networks, helping kids connect to ways to navigate systems. It's exposing kids to things they have not been exposed to. It's both enrichment and academic. (Jenna, principal).

> My role is to provide students with opportunities that are not normally available to them. I [want to] expose them to opportunities, careers, and college opportunities so that they start to internalize what it could [look like] for them, in their lives. (David, school internship coordinator).

These exemplars and other adult participant responses suggest that the crux of what internships offer goes beyond the hard skills and content that students are learning. For example, while Donna may have learned valuable applications of math and some basic software coding, the more important lesson that she gained was realizing that she was capable of being in male-dominated spaces as a female and aspiring pilot. These less-tangible benefits, which bolster students' confidence and sense of self, are closely aligned to the concepts of social and cultural capital since they reinforce the importance of forming relationships and navigating unfamiliar contexts.

Each interviewee in this study described in their own words that these internship programs exist in order to increase students' exposure to opportunities, experiences, and networks. Again, there is a strong connection between these sentiments and the scholarly literature regarding social and cultural capital, although no interviewees named those concepts explicitly. As we parsed through the data, we noted that a variety of interchangeable and related words and phrases were used by institutional agents to describe what students would hopefully get out of participating in these programs.

4.4 Finding 4. Despite adults' beliefs about the positive impacts of internships for high school youth, their discussions and actions sometimes hinted at deficit-oriented perspectives of the students that they were serving

Lewis and Diamond (2015) highlighted that the low expectations of students' abilities, or deficit perspectives toward marginalized students, often seems unavoidable, even by good-intentioned agents.

The comment of Shannon, the principal mentioned previously under Finding 1, is an example of this slow creep. Other statements from participants in this study also indicated the potential presence of deficit-oriented perspectives. For instance, one internship coordinator, Barbara, said:

> I feel like a lot of [internship participants] have no clue before this what it's like to take something seriously, get up and be accountable, wake up at a certain time, punch the clock, punch out. It's not like, "I'm sick. I can't go to school today." You have to talk to your boss or your internship director and be like, "I'm not feeling well." And you have to do it way before time—not at the time of but an hour before, half an hour before.

Chris, another internship coordinator, stated:

> These kids come from another country and speak another language, but they're still 15-year-olds, they're still 16-year-olds, so I would say that another large area of support for students is… helping them envision a positive, productive future here in this country. They come with, I think, some kinds of misconceptions depending on where they come from about what their opportunities can be and what their possibilities are. I think I've had a student come to me and say, "This is not what I expected to be living like, here in America," and then the opportunity is to say to them, "Well, now that you're here in America, let's make the most of what you have now and see what you can make it be in the future."

Employer perceptions also can be deficit-oriented or value-extractive, as Jenna, a principal, recognized:

> Another major [challenge] is on the employer side, and that's identifying employers and internship managers who understand what it means to work with kids and what it means to work with predominantly Black and brown kids in the Bronx. *Which is not the same as just any old kids*, necessarily [emphasis added]. Some employers … are interested and genuine and want to work with our kids, and some are about workforce development, which can be good but aren't necessarily about the students themselves; they are about how we can turn these kids into workers… And then there's some that want free labor.

Some student interns had little choice in their placements. Instead of being active agents with their own internships, they simply were assigned to a work setting. One student, Emmanuel, said, "My [placement] was kind of random. We did not really hear about it, right? Our computer teacher introduced us to the company… Then we started working." Another student, Natalie, stated:

> I [originally] signed up for [working at] the Bronx Zoo. I don't know, but [the internship coordinator] pulled me in and, like, a bunch of different students and said, "You're gonna be in CareerCLUE." I was like, "Why?" But then she said, "I'm just gonna put you there and then you're gonna tell me if you like it or not."

Similarly, another student, Destiny, noted:

> I'd never heard of CareerCLUE. What happened was, when I did the application, I signed up for art, media, and design. I like doing media. Then they put me in CareerCLUE and that's how I found out that I had CareerCLUE because I remembered that I signed up for art and media.

Although it's quite possible that potential internship settings were limited for these SYEP participants, institutional agents still must be intentional about how they frame these instances and dialogue with students if they wish to avoid sending disempowering messages that students should just be happy with where they are assigned.

5 Significance and discussion

Internship programs have been a public strategy for creating bridges between schools and workplaces and for training young people to fit needs that have been identified in the labor market (McCormick, 1993; Garris et al., 2008; Sanahuja and Ribes, 2015; Bayerlein, 2020; Hora et al., 2020). While youth employment programs like SYEP have the potential to traverse school-workplace gaps and level disparities among youth (Heller and Kessler, 2022), schools and institutional agents need to carefully consider how they maneuver social stratification and social inequality given their influence over the outcomes of the young people in their care (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

The value of high school internships can go far beyond the academic offerings that they provide—these can be pivotal experiences in the lives of young people who are beginning to consider and explore life possibilities (Hochberg and Konner, 2020; Kelly and Kundu, 2023). As Dominique, a principal, said,

> We are in the South Bronx. Our students experience a lot of poverty, a lot of traumas… These programs enable students to feel empowered, to travel the city, to be global citizens. We often see that transition in students where they don't even feel entitled to take the train and go to Central Park or a museum, even though it's in *their* city. So, it's not just about taking them on a school trip. It's about giving them another base that they own and they feel welcome to visit, and connect them with other adults that are not school staff that validate their contributions and their leadership.

For low-income students of color, paid summer internships during high school can be important, formative opportunities to learn new skills, gain work experience, and develop connections and networks while simultaneously contributing to their family's finances. Countering the structural realities that disadvantage certain youth populations requires addressing both students' academic and nonacademic needs. It is imperative that schools and programs acknowledge and address the social contexts that can impede youth from meaningful learning experiences in their internships.

5.1 Intentional incorporation of social and cultural concepts

In this study, we drew on the voices of 40 adult educators and students from seven South Bronx high schools. School-based adults included both principals and internship coordinators. The institutional agents interviewed in this study occupied positions of status in school contexts through which social capital was channeled (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Our findings revealed that these institutional agents sweepingly emphasized and embraced the importance of paid internships in helping students develop "soft and hard skills," using words and phrases that closely characterize the processes of accumulating social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001, 2011), even though they never used those exact terms.

Our findings revealed that institutional agents largely saw paid internships as beneficial to their South Bronx students, mainly because these experiences would help students gain forms of capital. At the same time, though explicitly cognizant of how these programs offer students opportunities to develop into in-demand professionals, institutional agents sometimes still displayed inherent deficit perspectives of students. They believed that students needed to do whatever they could to take advantage of these opportunities to improve their and their families' lives with little attention to the larger structures that often perpetuated these students' marginalization in low-income communities. For example, though principal Dominique acknowledges different traumas her low-income students contend with, she did not offer any thoughts on how a professional internship or mentors may help to alleviate these traumas, nor how they may actually *exacerbate* them, grooming students into a narrow, exclusive, and capitalistic concept of what success should look like.

We believe that educational stakeholders would benefit from explicit adoption and application of the conceptual language of social and cultural capital. Institutional agents and high school internship participants already are speaking in terms of capital, whether they realize it or not. Through utilization of social and cultural capital concepts, school administrators, teachers, students, employers, policymakers, and others would have more concrete language for discussing the implicit benefits of these internship programs. Additionally, by adopting social and cultural capital perspectives, stakeholders could begin to nuance and problematize these ideas as they wrestle with their role, power, and ability to promote equitable outcomes. Students and adults would have some language for discussing how to help students acquire and exhibit important competencies as well as how to scaffold new skills upon students' existing interests and capital. Similarly, policymakers and educational staff could consider the unintended consequences of certain accountability and performance practices on social capital distribution and student outcomes.

Teachers with greater social capital, knowledge, and experience tend to have students with better educational performance (Daly et al., 2014). By definition, institutional agents possess access to higher levels of human, cultural, and social capital than others in their organization or network. Familiarizing these agents with social capital concepts and terminology can help them recognize the power of their roles, as well as the tools and authority that they possess, to foster social mobility and provide students with access to resources. With a stronger conceptual understanding of themselves and their institutions regarding the promotion of equity (Quintana, 2007, cited by Stanton-Salazar, 2011), institutional agents can mobilize resources for other actors and operate more effectively within systems of social stratification and inequality (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

For example, while one SYEP internship site might be at a startup technology and media company based in the Bronx, another internship may be at a historic landmark or grocery store where students are expected to perform more menial and labor-based tasks. Institutional agents' decisions directly influence student internship distribution and outcomes as they direct where students are placed, whom they meet, and in which activities they will participate and learn. Unequal distribution of social capital can lead to disparities in navigating the educational process and accessing internships, favoring those with greater social capital (Dika and Singh, 2002). Since adults and institutions directly impact student performance through their actions and resource allocation (Leana and Pil, 2006, p. 361), their decision-making likely would benefit from some explicit thinking and conversation about social reproduction theory.

5.2 Student interns as asset-based actors

While both the adults and youth in this study recognized the tangible skills and connections that resulted from participation in SYEP, students rarely alluded to gaining these forms of capital as a stated priority or goal when describing their summer experiences. Instead, students described their most impactful and meaningful experiences as those that built upon their strengths and interests, affirmed parts of their identity, and allowed them to think differently about the world of work. Educators and students both demonstrated consensus around the idea that internships can allow young people to showcase their more latent forms of merit than traditional school settings. Participants also largely shared the perception that internships can be more impactful if they allow students to invest in their existing and often unrecognized skill sets, adding value to capacities that are unique to them.

In this investigation, we found that institutional agents often depicted their South Bronx students as needing to learn how to interact with authority figures and mentors in ways that middle-class and White peers already may be conditioned (Lareau, 2011). For example, South Bronx students were described as unfamiliar with the use of "proper email etiquette" by adult interviewees. Students also were characterized as being unfamiliar with knowing how and when to ask for help. The inherent challenge of these beliefs is that they explicitly or implicitly position some students as less capable of success than others, which is ironic given that internships and similar programs exist to combat intergenerational inequality rather than perpetuating it. Institutional agents sometimes expressed surprise at the capabilities of students that emerged or flourished in their internship settings. Moreover, some adults were willing to simply impose internship settings upon student participants with little explanation.

These takeaways not only underscore the potential power of social and cultural capital conceptual framing, they also highlight the importance of positioning underrepresented youth as inherently

asset-based when offering them internships and other such opportunities (Gorski, 2011; Kundu et al., 2022). While students may need to learn new skills, positioning youth as asset-based combats the notion that they are deficient and in need of reform and instead characterizes them as capable of thriving and contributing academically and professionally if offered the right opportunities (Yosso, 2005; Kundu and O'Brien, 2022). This reframing away from a deficit-oriented perspective is important if we wish to allow students to buy into academic, work-based, and other learning opportunities without compromising themselves in the process (Kundu and O'Brien, 2022; Nieves, 2022). Marginalized youth deserve to be more than passive recipients of whatever well-intentioned adults offer or impose upon them.

We also are cognizant that it is important to nuance and critique existing conceptualizations of social and cultural capital, particularly since those beliefs can privilege middle−/upper-class and White norms as more valuable (Yosso, 2005; Cartwright, 2022; Kundu and O'Brien, 2022). For example, as young people acclimate to and learn the cultural norms of professionalized workplaces that may be unfamiliar to them, they may experience implicit and explicit biases as well as internal pressures to uphold or reject certain identities in order to "fit in" (Aronson et al., 2002; Anderson and Nieves, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Kundu and O'Brien, 2022). In these instances, it is imperative that resource-limited young people are viewed through asset-based perspectives. Working with underrepresented student interns should not be charitable but rather part of a necessary growth process for organizations to become more inclusive in an increasingly diverse society. Underrepresented students already have existing skills, talents, and interests. As students work toward new competencies and future aspirations, their strengths should be acknowledged, rewarded, and built upon rather than replaced through assimilation.

6 Conclusion

Given the many out-of-school factors that affect the success of low-income students of color, it is critical that school professionals and institutional agents strive to develop curricula and programming that facilitate students' acquisition of dominantly rewarded forms of social and cultural capital. Our important caveat is that these initiatives should also be designed with asset-based frameworks that recognize students' *existing* capital and various forms of talent so that youth do not feel that they have to forfeit their identities in these programs (Yosso, 2005; Kundu, 2020). High school internships can simply assimilate young people into mainstream, dominant notions of success that privilege and reward some while excluding others, or students can possess some agency and ability to be their authentic selves within these programs while also contributing and learning valuable skills. We believe that internship programs should meet students where they are before they build toward where adults desire them to go.

One place that schools can start is by adopting systematized ways of offering and dialoguing about opportunities for students. A social and cultural capital framework might be useful for school professionals to adopt, as long as educators also contend with the limitations that these concepts have when considering multiple forms of giftedness (Gorski, 2011). In our interviews with institutional agents, adult interviewees described contending with institutional and structural factors of inequity but also acknowledged lacking the frameworks or strategies for doing so.

Existing scholarship that seeks to position students as asset-based does not go far enough in articulating why this endeavor is important and how those assets may actually spur transformative progress. This is exactly our contribution through the specific case of internship/workforce research: the stated, implicit, and culturally conditioned viewpoint is that these are inherently good opportunities and resources for youth, but if not further interrogated, they can lead to an assimilating approach, believing that once students get placed into internships the rest will work itself out. This does nothing to reduce social reproduction and the cyclical nature of poverty. Within our well-intentioned aims, we may not realize how we ourselves perpetuate systems, narratives, and/or ideologies that maintain the existing social order or class- and race-based inequality. To *truly* be asset-based, perspectives must aim to examine how underrepresented young people not only deserve to be included within our rigid and unbending institutions but also valued so they can transform these spaces to be more inclusive for others through their unique contributions.

SYEP and other similar programs clearly impact students' access to social and cultural capital, which is an important baseline acknowledgment. However, these programs alone are not sufficient for promoting more widespread equity and must be accompanied by other measures, including policy changes. Both students and educators have different forms of social and cultural capital that affect interactions and decisions such as internship site choices and student placement. Institutional agents must be particularly cognizant of how their beliefs, language, and actions grant access to opportunities and network resources. By reckoning with their own "power," educational leaders can approach their work from asset-based and equity-focused lenses that more fully allow their high school internship participants to thrive and be successful in their work-based learning opportunities.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available due to anonymity of subjects. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Dr. Anindya Kundu, akundu@fiu.edu.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Institutional Review Board, New York University. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

AK: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Visualization, Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision. SM: Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. YP-G: Visualization, Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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