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The Effect of Small Learning Communities on the High School Experience for At-risk Students

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Title Page

The Effect of Small Learning Communities on the High School Experience for At-risk Students

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Abstract

From elementary schools to universities, small learning communities (SLCs) are cropping up all over the place. While SLCs sound like a good idea, there is little viable research to support their implementation at the high school level. There seems to be an inherent assumption that collaboration between teachers is good, and that a more personalized environment will enrich the learning experience. Despite the optimism of these presumptions, there is a dearth of program evaluation research to support the effectiveness of SLCs in the high school setting. In order to establish and maintain these programs, teachers, parents and administrators will rightly demand a solid body of evidence to support the assertion that SLCs enhance the student learning experience and lead to measurable results.

The most vulnerable population at any high school are the at-risk students. This paper specifically focuses on the impact SLCs have on these at-risk students and their learning experience during their first and second years of high school. This research is to articulate the benefit of SLCs for at-risk students by presenting relevant literature and then data from a high school in the San Francisco Bay Area in order to evaluate a program in action.

An interview with a district administrator establishes the district's perspective on existing SLCs as well as existing responses to intervention for at-risk students. This research utilizes a sample of convenience of high school sophomores using in depth interviews to collect qualitative data and examine the benefits of enrollment in an SLC for students identified as at-risk.

Chapter 1 Introduction

“There are 15 of you in this room right now. Look around. Only five of you will walk across that stage at graduation four years from now,” the booming voice of an African-American woman echoes across a half-full classroom. A normally boisterous and chatty group of 13 and 14 year olds sit in startled silence. Why would only one third of this group succeed in high school? What, if anything could increase their chances of success? Perhaps most controversial, whose responsibility was it to see that something was done to increase their odds?

All of these students identify as African-American and are 8th grade graduates about to enroll in a 1200 student, comprehensive high school in an affluent suburb located in the San Francisco Bay Area - an affluent residential area near an impoverished residential area. Most of them grew up in a small suburb, just one short bus stop away. They all sit in fear of failure. Recent history shows that incoming 9th graders who attended the middle school in the impoverished neighborhood are dramatically less likely than students from the nearby middle school in an affluent neighborhood to graduate from this comprehensive high school.

This disparity can be attributed to a variety of factors. A cursory comparison between the two middle schools reveals a stark contrast in socioeconomic status (SES), test scores, and grades. The majority of students from the impoverished area qualify for a free or reduced lunch. They score below proficient or far below proficient on state standardized tests. Several of them failed most or all of their 8th grade academic classes, but were still allowed to move on to high school. By contrast, only a handful of the students from the affluent area qualify for any federal assistance, most students consistently score high marks on state tests, and all students show passing grades or better from the previous school year.

These disparities are not unique. Instead, they represent a national trend of achievement along racial and socioeconomic lines. What is unique is that the students seated in this room represent a mere 1% of the population of the high school they are about to attend. They are about to be students who, by most predictors, are doomed to fail, surrounded by students who, by most predictors, are destined to succeed. Part of an affluent community with a wealth of resources, the school has been working for decades to remedy this problem. One adopted solution was an Academic Workshop (AW) class, designed specifically for students classified as at-risk. Students from the impoverished neighborhood. Another adopted solution was a summer Transitions program for these same students. While initially serving only students from the impoverished neighborhood, the program was eventually expanded to include incoming students from all feeder schools, however, students from the impoverished neighborhood consistently represent 80-90% of the Transitions students.

The woman in front of the classroom is Patrice Williams (pseudonym), a long time resident of the impoverished neighborhood who has been a Para educator at the comprehensive high school for the last 40 years. She has seen the same scenario play out with group after group of students, so she speaks with authority and empathy. Every year 10-15 eager 8th graders move up to the big high school with aspirations of graduation and beyond. By the time all is said and done, only a fraction of these students will graduate from the high school. Some will drop out entirely. Others will transfer to an alternative high school within the district and receive a modified diploma. On the day being described above, the students are being chastised for bad behavior during the summer Transitions program. They have been working with a larger group of 40 students, some of whom come from the other area feeder schools, but today they have been

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isolated in Ms. Williams room for a meeting. She admonishes them for their actions, “Who do you want to be here? Because this isn’t middle school. It’s time to decide now.”

My interest springs from my recent involvement in this Transitions program, beginning in the summer of 2011. That year I met a group of 40 students who were identified as at-risk. This classification means that these students are considered to be more likely than their peers to drop out of high school prior to graduation. Instead of dropping out entirely, many of these at-risk students often transfer to one of several alternative high schools in the district, where they receive a modified high school diploma. Students who are classified as at-risk when they enter high school are often enrolled in an AW class.

The goal of the district is to retain and graduate these at-risk students, particularly those who represent minority sub groups, at a comprehensive high school. In addition to ethical implications, the district has faced scrutiny from state legislators for an overrepresentation of minority students in special education as well as at alternative high schools. Accordingly, the district was charged with exploring the causes of this overrepresentation and making changes in order to rectify it.

In addition to teaching the AW class, I am also involved in a two-year, interdisciplinary program for 9th and 10th grade students known as CORE. The program serves all students, including the students identified as at-risk and enrolled in the supplementary AW class. During the 2011-2012 school year, 13 of the 40 Transitions students were enrolled in my AW class as well as my English class. During the ’11-’12 school year, their freshman year, I saw these students every day for 90 minutes. I became emotionally invested in the success of these students and intellectually interested in the factors which would enable or inhibit their success.

Specifically, would enrollment in CORE lead to a greater retention of the at-risk students I first met in June?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the actual benefits of enrollment in a small learning community (SLC) for students classified as at-risk. For the purpose of this study, that SLC is the CORE program. After the third semester of high school, are these students receiving passing grades in their academic classes? Do they feel a strong sense of connection to the school community? Do they feel a sense of success? Are they confident in their ability to graduate high school and succeed in their endeavors beyond high school? Do they have high levels of self-efficacy? If CORE has contributed to their success, how and why? What, if any, additional supports could have set them up for success? What can be done from here on out to support their success? Through a sample of convenience involving student surveys and interviews, this paper will gather qualitative research to inform these questions.

Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, I define a small learning community as an identified group of students and teachers within a school who work together across disciplines and for more than one year (Heath, 2005). At-risk students are defined as students who, as a result of low SES, low test scores, and poor academic performance at the middle school level, have been identified as less likely than the average student to graduate from a comprehensive high school with a non-modified diploma (McDowell, 2012).

The questions I intend to explore include:

What are the effects of small learning communities (SLCs) on the academic success of at-risk high school students?; To what extent does enrollment in an SLC foster a sense of belonging

within the larger school community for the student?; Do students who have been enrolled for 3 semesters in an SLC at a high school believe they are more likely to graduate from that high school than they did when they entered as ninth graders? If so, to what extent do they attribute this increased confidence to their enrollment in an SLC?

Theoretical Rationale

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory suggests that "human functioning is viewed as a product of a dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental influences" (Pajares, 2002, para. 2). This idea is central in the conceptualization of what allows students to learn and therefore be successful in an academic setting. By building relationships with students in small learning communities, teachers are able to monitor and influence their personal factors, behavior and environmental factors in order to foster student achievement. According to Bandura,

Using social cognitive theory as a framework, teachers can work to improve their students' emotional states and to correct their faulty self-beliefs and habits of thinking (personal factors), improve their academic skills and self-regulatory practices (behavior), and alter the school and classroom structures that may work to undermine student success (environmental factors). (Pajares, 2002, para. 3).

Geneva Gay's theory of culturally responsive teaching advocates the need for educational practices, which acknowledge the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of diverse learners. Nearly all at-risk students profiled in this study are African American students, a minority population at the high school profiled, thus the inclusion of Gay's theory is critically important. According to Gay, culturally responsive teaching, "builds a bridge of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities"

and “uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles,” (Intime, 2002, para. 1). Gay argues that culture matters in the classroom. In order to reach minority students, pedagogy must reflect an awareness of the students’ backgrounds and experiences.

Assumptions

The researcher assumes that students who are grouped in small learning communities (SLCs) feel a greater sense of belonging to the school at large. By “shrinking” the school, students are less likely to fall through the cracks. A student’s academic and social experience of high school will be positively affected by their inclusion in an SLC. Additionally, the researcher assumes that teacher collaboration around individual students leads to greater personalization, improved teacher-student relationships and greater student success. Finally, the researcher assumes that all students have difficulty learning when their affective filter is high and that minority students need culturally responsive teaching.

There is an extensive body of research around small learning communities and at-risk students. However, as identified by Armstead, Bessell, Sembante, and Plaza (2010) and Smerdon and Cohen (2009), there is a dearth of student voices expressing their perspective on the effectiveness of small learning communities. Additionally, this study will engage students who have participated in an SLC for 3 semesters, providing them with a more developed perspective on the effectiveness of the structure than previous studies have presented. While many studies including Lee and Frederich (2007) examined high schools in large cities with large populations of color, this study examines a high school in a suburban, predominantly white, affluent community with a small population of at-risk students of color.

Background and Need

The persistence of a nationwide racial achievement gap establishes the need for research into culturally responsive teaching and culturally appropriate responses. Existing research suggests that small learning communities (SLCs) may be a critical culturally responsive intervention. The state mandated that school administrators at the site studied identify why minority students are overrepresented in special education and at alternative high schools within the district (McDowell, 2012). While this is a pressing reason for action, there is also a moral imperative to ensure that all students learn. Therefore the need is both practical and ethical.

The greater aim of this paper is to assess student success as defined by achievement of a non-modified high school diploma and establish best practices to enable students to achieve success based on that definition. Research suggests that 21st century workers will need a minimum of a Bachelor's Degree in order to compete in the job market (Vockley, 2009). As such, a high school diploma is a critical indicator of future career success and potentially, overall satisfaction with one's life and self (Neckerman, 2004). The implications are great. Quality of life and the unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness seem to be at stake.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

There is a wealth of research into small learning communities (SLCs) as a response to intervention. I began my research by locating studies specific to this topic, as it seemed most relevant. As the achievement gap has become part of the national vernacular and consciousness over the past decade, the government, corporate sponsors, and not-for-profit organizations have all endeavored to create SLCs or schools within schools (SWS) as an intervention to “bridge the gap.” Resultantly, there is no shortage of documentation to support the rationale behind these endeavors.

As my research continued, I found that the student voice was largely missing from this literature, which relied instead on teacher perspectives and quantitative measures. This led me to the question of how students experience success. Many studies relied upon grades, test scores and graduation rates – all indicators of academic achievement. However, I became interested in students’ feelings about their accomplishments and capabilities as well as the factors that led them to their conclusions.

In designing my study, I discovered the need to define success. If students are defined as at-risk based on their likelihood to drop out of high school, due to failing grades or low grades, what are the factors that lead to these behaviors and outcomes and how can they be avoided? In my opinion, only students themselves can answer these questions. What really lies at the heart of my research questions are several intangibles including feelings of self-efficacy, self-advocacy, and self-esteem, which are only partially quantifiable by grades and other measures. I went back to the literature to look for foundational theories and theoretical rationales around social

inequality. This led to a review of literature around poverty and the achievement gap as well as various predictors and measures of academic achievement and success at and beyond high school.

Finally, I reviewed a number of sources regarding teacher teams. Before a student can be enrolled in an SLC, there must be an SLC in place, which requires immense teacher collaboration and high functioning teams. My findings around SLCs revealed serious challenges with regards to the formation of these teams, which I investigated at length.

Historical Context

In the 1950s social justice advocates began to raise concerns about academic outcomes for disadvantaged and disaffected children. Prior to the 1950s, schools were largely seen as a sorting ground for those who would go on to college and those who would do manufacturing and agricultural jobs that required no postsecondary education (Lortie, 1975). In 1950 the economist Milton Friedman proposed the first voucher program, calling for family flexibility in educational decisions.

In 1983, at the behest of then Secretary of Education T.H. Bell, David Gardner and his colleagues authored *A Nation at risk*, a report on the current state of public schooling in America that would forever change the landscape of American education. Gardner and his colleagues concluded that due to low expectations, poor teacher preparation and outdated curriculum, the nations' students were falling into mediocrity, and falling behind their peers in other advanced nations, like China and Japan (Gardner, 1983). The study concluded that if swift and sweeping reforms were not enacted, not only would the reputation of American schools be in peril, but the nation itself would eventually be at risk of losing its status in the global landscape.

The startling revelations in Gardner’s report paved the way for sweeping school reforms. The movement towards smaller schools, including SLCs and schools within schools (SWS), as well as small schools of choice (SSC) surged forward when Ray Budde, a professor of educational administration, and Al Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) put forth the Charter School Concept in 1988 (Kolderie, 2005).

By 1990, three types of legalized voucher options were available: voucher schools, privately managed public schools, and charter schools. Since then, private donors, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have dedicated millions of dollars to the formation of new smaller schools and SSCs to serve at-risk students. According to a study by Bloom, Thompson and Unterman (2010), from 2002-2008 the Gates foundation funded 123 new SSCs in New York City, all with lower enrollment than traditional campuses, and all aimed at increasing attendance and graduation rates through a focus on rigor, community partnerships, and personalization (Bloom, 2010). During this same time period, the Gates Foundation funded 18 new small schools in Baltimore (Smerdon, 2009). Regarding the state of American high schools, in 2005 Gates said:

America’s high schools are obsolete. By obsolete, I don’t just mean that our high schools are broken, flawed, and under-funded – though a case could be made for every one of those points. By obsolete I mean, that our high schools – even when they’re working exactly as designed – cannot teach our kids what they need to know today. (Fishetti & Smith, 2010, p. 1).

The publication of Wagner’s *The Global Achievement Gap* in 2010 reiterated the findings of “A Nation at risk” and reignited the public debate surrounding what to do about America’s schools

(Wagner, 2010). 21st century politicians from both major parties consistently cite education reform as a top priority. George Bush's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) aimed to enact tough standards and hold schools accountable for the success of all students, or else risk government sanctions. Under President Obama, much of the NCLB policy was scrapped in favor of an incentive based program called "Race to the Top", which rewarded states for gains in student achievement. Today, many states, including California, are focused on developing Common Core Standards (CCS) in order to ensure a Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum (GVC) for all students (California Department of Education, 2012).

The need for educational reform looms large in the national consciousness. The achievement gap persists along racial and socioeconomic lines; American students consistently test lower than many of their international peers, and the drop out rate for African American students in California lingers around 30% (California Department of Education, 2012b). As indicated by the history detailed above, the movement towards smaller school environments as an intervention strategy for at-risk students has evolved over several decades and continues to take shape today.

Review of Previous Literature

This review is divided into three subheadings. The three major headings are organized chronologically based on my research, as outlined in the introduction to this section. The first of these headings is "Case Studies – What's Been Done and What We've Learned." This section explores previous attempts to create SLCs, SWS and SSCs as intervention strategies. The second heading is "Definitions of Success and Predictors of Failure – Who's at-Risk and Why?" This section explores the concept of "at-risk" and what that concept means to students, teachers, school administrators, and policy makers. Finally, the third heading is "Teacher Collaboration

and Small Learning Communities – What Can Be Done.” This section investigates the requirements, challenges and potential benefits of teacher collaboration with a focus on the formation of high functioning teams and the promise of SLCs.

Case Studies – What’s Been Done and What We’ve Learned

There is a plethora of research detailing efforts at creating small learning communities (SLCs) and schools within schools (SWS). Armstead et. al looked at the formation of a 9th grade academy program and quantified student perceptions of their sense of belonging through photo language methodology (Armstead, Bessell, Sembiente & Plaza, 2010). Larger scale studies, such as Felner, Seitsinger, Brand, Burns, and Bolton’s meta analysis concluded that the implementation of SLCs can be correlated to a 40-50% decline in drop out rates (Felner, Seitsinger, Brand, Burns & Bolton, 2007). Fischetti and Smith (2010) also conducted a meta analysis of the small school movement which details the origins (premise) and aims (promise) of the movement, but fails to provide any concrete examples or data (Fischetti & Smith, 2010).

Researchers at the University of Minnesota examined the effectiveness of SLCs as a school reform measure aimed at improving achievement amongst minority students. In other words, researchers set out to explore whether or not SLCs represent an effective solution to closing the racial achievement gap. Using the Frank model to look at standardized data from 193 schools, researchers concluded that implementation of SLCs contributed to small gains in achievement amongst minority students. The most impressive gains were shown in large cities, with large populations of students of color (Lee & Frederick, 2007).

Through a meta analysis of data from 57 high schools Levine (2010) looked at attendance rates, graduation rates, and standardized test scores. The analysis supported improved attendance and graduation rates, but little to no gain in standardized test scores. Researchers

concluded that results were difficult to interpret because many schools implementing SLCs were also implementing other innovations, such as professional learning communities (PLCs), so it is difficult to prove a cause and effect relationship between SLCs and student success. Further, this study raises the question of how student success is defined. The definition of success must be clear in order to make any supportable conclusions about the effectiveness of SLCs (Levine, 2010).

Additional research included the use of a control group of students not enrolled in an SLC for the purpose of comparison. Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman, and Francis, researchers from Bowling Green State University, The University of Toledo, and Toledo Public Schools, conducted a comparative case study at an Ohio public school. The purpose of the study was to understand and combat the phenomenon of 9th graders who fail a bulk of their 9th grade classes and subsequently must repeat their freshman year. A pilot program randomly selected 50 incoming ninth graders to participate in a Freshman Academy, consisting of 4 teachers. A control group of 150 incoming 9th graders were not enrolled in any such program. Data collected focused on student achievement, attendance, suspensions, and perceptions of the school environment. Focus groups were conducted among students, teachers and parents to discuss student/teacher relationships. Qualitative research revealed positive perceptions of the program by students, teachers and parents. Notable among these responses was improved student teacher bonds as reported by students, as well as teachers. Academic achievement results were inconclusive (Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman, & Francis, 2007). A negative consequence of the academy was that students reported feeling isolated from the rest of the student body. This possibility should be taken into account in any study of an SLC that includes a school within a school.

Oxley and Luers (2010) began to look at not only the success of SLCs, as measured by student performance, but also the strategies employed by teachers within SLCs.

Five lessons are drawn from the researchers' experience working with the federal Smaller Learning Community Program grantees since 2000. Chief amongst their findings was the need for a strong instructional core in order for SLCs to be successful. Researchers also suggested the need for a strong vision and a shift in resource allocation. The researchers advocated reduced 9th grade class size, echoing the conclusions of Armstead et. al, cited above. The article included several concrete suggestions for schools planning on implementing SLCs, however many of them, such as eliminating electives, seem unrealistic (Oxley, 2011). Skerrett (2010) looked at curriculum transformation in order to create a learning community. Researchers gathered data regarding the move away from a Eurocentric curriculum and the difficulties of convincing SLC teachers to modify existing curriculum.

The need for culturally responsive teaching, as originally outlined by Geneva Gay, has manifested and been studied in various forms. Research at large urban schools with a high percentage of African American students and high drop out rates has endeavored to "break-up" the school into small learning communities (SLCs) by creating "from scratch" high schools, as well as dividing existing high schools into schools within schools (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). Smerdon and Cohen's study of these efforts in Baltimore showed an increase in test scores in attendance.

Within a large, heterogeneous high school, minority students are sometimes inadvertently tracked into classes with their peers along ethnic and racial lines. Gandara (2008) studied this phenomenon as well as purposeful grouping of racial and ethnic minorities within a large high school setting, a strategy she called "cocooning" (Gandara, 2008). Gandara argued that the oft

touted strategy of “colorblindness” or “color muteness” is misguided. She contends that grouping students by race sometimes makes sense. Gandara (2008) uses the term “cocooning” to describe the temporary separation and grouping of minority students. Based on years of work at the high school level, the author contends that cocooning is the most cost effective and successful strategy to promote graduation and college enrollment amongst low-income students of color. The author further suggests that the mentor teacher assigned to this group be of the same racial-ethnic group as the students, not the case in this paper’s study. The High School Puente program is profiled. The author asserts that cocoons provide a safe space for sharing and learning about culture and school, a space which is extremely difficult, albeit not impossible, to create in a heterogeneous classroom. The study profiled by Gandara concerns Latino youth, while this paper focuses on African-American youth, however the implications for minority students seem relevant.

Overall the extensive research into what Fischetti and Smith (2010) called the “premise and promise” of small learning communities establishes the widespread belief that smaller is better and that increased personalization will lead to greater student success. A belief set forth as an assumption of this researcher. By and large the research seems to support this belief.

Definitions of Success and Predictors of Failure – Who’s at-Risk and Why?

As my research progressed, I found myself grappling with definitions of at-risk, as well as success, and failure. Why are students failing disproportionately along racial and socioeconomic lines? Data on the predictors of failure among high school students, including low socioeconomic status (SES) and level of parent education seem to perpetuate the myth that circumstances beyond the teacher’s control largely dictate whether a student will pass or fail (Buffum, Mattos & Weber, 2012). However, these indicators are important to acknowledge as

they are frequently used to identify, at-risk students. Social inequality, as explored by the contributors to the book of the same title, is a complex phenomenon, which is, in many senses, perpetuated by the school system. In *Social Inequality*, (Neckerman, 2004), Meyers writes about the short and long term effect of economic and health-care inequalities on early childhood education. In another paper Fligstein and Shin study the psychological implications of low levels of education by looking at measures of happiness among workers in low skilled jobs. Both studies suggest the long terms implications of income inequality as a predictor of decreased student academic success, career dissatisfaction and an overall poor quality of life (Neckerman, 2004). The broad reaching implications of social inequality raises the stakes for secondary educators to both compensate for the disadvantages children of low SES parents face and to prepare students to vie for jobs as members of an increasingly competitive global workforce.

Sean Reardon's (2011) research into the achievement gap expands upon Tony Wagner's (2010) work to establish quantitatively that students of color are consistently underperforming their white counterparts (Reardon, 2011). The author examined the trajectory of the achievement gap among SES lines over the past 50 years and concluded that, in short, the gap persists. Reardon's work confirms the widely reported fact that students of color with low SES consistently underperform on standardized tests, receive lower academic grades, and are more likely to drop out prior to graduation.

As Pollock (2008) points out, the inherent danger in vague terms such as "urban" and "at-risk" is that we mask the differences between students who may fall into these broad categories, and thus fail to identify their specific needs (Pollock, 2008). For the purpose of my paper I tried to get increasingly specific, looking at data from my own district as well as state and nationwide statistics. The school where this study is commissioned is positioned uniquely. A school with

similar enrollment within the district currently enrolls a student population that is 94% white and has an overall graduation rate of 99%. Given the contrast between this population and the population of most of the schools profiled within my literature review, the need became increasingly clear to look at data from the district. This data was provided courtesy of the district's 2011-2012 achievement report.

The report shows an opportunity and achievement gap between white students with high SES and students of color with low SES. Success indicators outlined in the report include student participation on statewide tests, percentage of students scoring at the proficient level or above in English-language arts and mathematics on statewide tests, and graduation rates. Additional accountability measures include participation and pass rates of exams outside of federal and state requirements (e.g. SAT, AP), and student GPA (McDowell, 2012). Given the specific focus of this report its value cannot be understated. One of the most startling findings of the report was that data on African American students were not presented, due to the fact that as a racial subgroup, they had been deemed numerically insignificant. Nevertheless, the report outlines the achievement gap within the district and calls for a “team-based” system of interventions in order to close the gap.

Increased personalization by “shrinking” of the learning environment has been proposed as a viable and critical support system that leads directly to increased student achievement (Fischetti, 2010). Research tends to support this thinking. Armstead's research provides a strong counterexample including student voice – students enrolled in a 9th grade academy expressed that the program was ineffective due to large class size (Armstead, 2010). A useful definition of conditions can be found in Felner's research, which defines opportunities to learn (OTL) and opportunities to teach (OTT), both of which are maximized in SLCs (Felner, 2007).

Lastly, the positive effects of personalization, both academically and socially, are supported by Supovitz's work, which teacher who follow their students for more than one academic year are better equipped to respond to their socioemotional needs (Supovitz, 2005).

Teacher Collaboration and Small Learning Communities – What Can Be Done.

McDowell's assertion that a team-based approach is necessary led me to investigate what measures need to be in place prior to a student's enrollment in a small learning community. The move towards the academy system within the district profiled began in the late 1990s. One high school in the district (not the high school profiled in this study) created academies focused on student interest for 11th and 12th graders. Students worked in SLCs for at least half of their academic classes and focused on project based learning. Lauded by U.S. News and World Report as a "New American High School" and featured on the prestigious magazine's cover, this high school became a poster child for SLCs (Gest, 2000). Today, many of these academies still exist and the CORE program is a relatively new academy of sorts aimed specifically at 9th and 10th grade students. However, there are still great difficulties in the district surrounding the formation and implementation on SLCs. The final leg of my research looked at how and why high functioning teacher teams must come before the formation of high functioning SLCs and how and why high functioning teacher teams work.

Lortie's work in 1975 established that not only do schools have cultures, they are among the most rigid and difficult to change of any professional environment. In *The Culture of School*, Lortie argues that teachers tend to work in isolation and resist both change and collaboration (Lortie, 1975). Fullan's work into the systems of leadership that lead to real and sustainable change sheds light on the difficult processes of engaging teachers in the formation of teams. In *Leadership and sustainability*, Fullan asserts that system wide changes, the kind necessary for

the formation of SLCs, requires visionary leadership that doesn't fear naysayers (Fullan, 2005). This kind of leadership is hard to come by. The work of Supovitz and Christman illustrates what happens when this kind of leadership is absent. A study of teachers in Cincinnati and Philadelphia in the 1990s showed that teachers bemoaned poor leadership on the part of administration, which, in their opinions, failed to allow teacher groups the autonomy to learn from their mistakes and grow as professionals (Supovitz, 2005).

One of the most compelling take-aways from my interview with the district assistant superintendent was that teacher teams are not necessarily "good". Just like this paper aims to challenge the assumption that smaller is better because SLCs personalize and improve the school experience, it is important to examine the nature of teacher teams and the spectrum of functionality and success that they can fall along. With specific focus to the formation of SLCs, Heath found that "high functioning teams" are a necessity for high functioning SLCs (Heath, 2005). But what exactly is a "high functioning team"? In *Simplifying Response to Intervention*, Buffum defines teams on a scale of 1, 5 or 10, with 10 being the highest functioning team. A "10" team, Buffum argues, could not imagine their work in isolation from their peers, shares common goals that are clearly articulated, and shares best practices as well as results in order to maximize student learning and ensure the success of all students.

By this definition, very few teams within my district are "10" teams. Probably the greatest sticking point is the hesitancy to share results for fear of exposure and embarrassment amongst peers. According to Buffum's definitions, the lack of "10" teams within my district suggests foundational problems which could prevent the formation of real and sustainable SLCs.

Statistical Information

As part of my research I pulled relevant statistics from several sources including government cites and studies, studies commissioned by not-for-profit organizations, (sometimes these studies are underwritten by corporate sponsors) and published academic research papers. The California Department of Education's website provides comprehensive information and data regarding attendance and drop out rates. While this sample only reflects the students who reside in California, it is useful for the purpose of my study, which focuses on a California high school. This study showed a drop out rate of 29% amongst African American students in the '09-'10 school year. Additionally, students classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged posted a drop out rate of 21% (California Department of Education, 2012).

Studies commissioned by the national Secretary of Education show a more complete snapshot of the nation's youth and that data is useful for a composite sketch. "A Nation at-risk", while dated, provides useful data that illustrates the history and trajectory of educational achievement in the U.S. Measures such as the College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Test and other standardized tests revealed a marked decline in student skills in the decades leading up to the 1980s (Gardner, 1983). Additionally, when the study was commissioned, many high school graduates were identified as lacking "higher order thinking skills" – with nearly 40% unable to draw inferences from written material (Gardner, 1983).

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation frequently sponsors studies from public policy organizations like MDRC, and these studies, such as "Transforming the high school experience: How New York City's small schools are boosting student achievement and graduation rates" provide reliable and useful data about the efforts of the Gates foundation as well as the overall state of America's schools and student achievement levels. Specific graduation rates are cited to

show that by the end of their first year of high school, 58.5 percent of students enrolled in small schools of choice (SSC) are on track to graduate in four years compared with 48.5 percent of their non-SSC counterparts, for a difference of 10.0 percentage points (Bloom, 2010).

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills' – a joint venture between several corporate sponsors and the NEA – published report entitled, “21st Century skills, education & competitiveness: A resource and policy guide” (2009) provided many useful graphs and charts as well as statistical data about the global economy and the education necessary for 21st century job seekers. For example, between 1995 and 2005, the United States lost 3 million manufacturing jobs, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In that same 10-year period, 17 million service-sector jobs were created.

I found several published academic papers that included extremely useful data, which had already been correlated and in many cases translated into a graphic format to illustrate a point. Papers like Reardon's “The Widening Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New Research and Possible Explanations” (2011) contains a wealth of statistical data. Reardon illustrates that the gap in standardized test scores in reading between high- and low-income children has grown to about 1.25 standard deviations. To get a sense of the magnitude of this difference, consider that a gap of 1 standard deviation corresponds to roughly 3 to 6 years of learning in middle or high school (Reardon, 2011).

Finally, with regards to the district and site I studied, I found a great amount of useful data in McDowell's 2011-2012 Achievement Report, which cited an overrepresentation of minority and low SES students in enrolled in one credit redemption courses (summer school) as evidence of a the district's failure to serve these students (McDowell, 2012).

Special Collections

In order to gain statistical data and a more narrowly focused perspective on my topic I looked to McDowell's "TUHSD 2011-2012 Achievement Report". Commissioned by the district, Dr. McDowell profiles the district and quantifies multiple measures of student success. By studying external (state mandated) as well as internal (district and site specific) indicators of success, McDowell paints a compelling picture of a district both at once extremely successful and in deep denial about its failures. "In particular, students on free and reduced lunch, or low-SES, are underperforming significantly from their high-SES counterparts and the projected trend shows a negative pitch in overall intended equivalence of performance," (McDowell, 2012). The report not only presents data, but calls for specific responses to intervention, including a team-based approach to ensure a guaranteed and viable curriculum (GVC) for all students.

The report depicts a discrepancy in the mission statement of the district and its programs and resource allocations. Far from failing as a district, the district is consistently failing a small population of students, while continuing to serve the majority of students well. Dr. McDowell sees this as a problem. Since this small population of failing students is comprised largely of minority and low-SES students, the stakeholders who tend to have less agency within the district, Dr. McDowell perceives a moral and ethical imperative to address the opportunity and achievement gap for these students.

In order to provide opportunities for all students to succeed, Dr. McDowell suggests, "a curriculum that provides adequate time to teach and learn," aligned with program goals and learning progressions. In conclusion, the report calls for a need for alignment and teacher collaboration at the site and district level. According to McDowell,

This will require all educators, from district administrators and board members to site administrators and teachers to work together to implement an educational system that confronts the achievement and opportunity gaps head on, and, at the same time, expect growth and mastery for all. (2012, p. 6)

Interview with an Expert

Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to the ethical standards in the treatment of human subjects in research as articulated by the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally, the research proposal was reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board (IRBPHS), approved, and assigned number 10125 for the interview with Mr. Jones.

Summary of Interview

I interviewed the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction for the Bowling Green High School District – Jim Jones (pseudonym). I selected Mr. Jones because he works in the district where my site is located and my research takes place, and also because he has worked extensively with SLCs as well as at-risk students in several other districts. His experience in the field of education as well as his position within the Bowling Green district made him a valuable source of information. He brings an experienced perspective to the topic of my paper, and, additionally, he has the administrative decision making power to dictate which programs will be funded at my school site.

While I knew Mr. Jones on a very cursory level from interactions at district staff development days, this interview, which took approximately one hour, was the longest amount of time we'd spent together in conversation. Over the course of our interview, I found him to possess a wealth of knowledge on the research underlying my paper and he was able to provide greater insight into my topic than I'd anticipated. Additionally, he was able to make recommendations for further reading, which proved extremely helpful to my research. Mr. Jones has a Masters in Curriculum Design and Instruction and a Doctorate in Organizational Leadership. Prior to arriving at his current position as a district administrator, Mr. Jones worked

first as a middle school science teacher, then as a site administrator. In between Mr. Jones worked for a non-profit organization building new high schools and as an educational consultant for the Buck Institute.

The work Mr. Jones speaks of most proudly, and perhaps most salient to this research, is his role in establishing the Science Department of a high school in Northern California, an SLC model. Mr. Jones used this model as an example of a fully realized SLC for the following reasons. All students and teachers belong to an SLC, the ethos of the school as well as each SLC is clearly articulated and consistently reinforced, and the teachers within the SLCs function collaboratively to ensure the success of all students. Another successful example cited by Mr. Jones was a high school in the East Bay, which enrolls 2100 students, and is subdivided into 3 SLCs. Teacher teams and administrative staff are able to pilot strategies and share best practices in order to support the success of all students.

With these models in mind, Mr. Jones was hesitant to define any of the groups within his current district as an SLC. He stated that he believed that there are some high functioning groups or “pockets of excellence” but that none of these groups fully meet the aforementioned criteria for a high functioning SLC. Furthermore, none of the district’s schools are structured so that all students belong to an SLC, a shortcoming in his opinion. He pointed to one school in the district (not the site I work at) as having the structure for SLCs, but not the community ethos.

When asked about the CORE program at my school site, he stated that he believed the program has some qualities of an SLC, but needs development in order to be most effective. For example, he cited the extent to which students feel a sense of belonging and purpose within their SLC. He questioned whether students, if asked, would be able to readily identify what they were learning and why, as well as what the community valued. At the Northern California high

school, he asserted, any student, in any class, on any given day could cite the daily lesson and learning goals, in addition to the guiding principles of their SLC (trust, respect, responsibility). Another SLC school in New Mexico has a strong focus on ethos. On any given day, any student would be able to identify that their community valued reputation building (“today’s the day for me to build my reputation” is an oft repeated mantra.)

One of the most interesting things Mr. Jones said was that he came to his current job because he perceived a challenge. Given the district’s reputation for resistance to change, he was eager to present a compelling case for implementing new, district-wide programs and strategies (GVC) and responses to interventions (RTI). These implementations would fundamentally change the way students and teachers taught and learned with the aim of ensuring that all students are successful. His 2011-2012 Achievement Report illustrates that the district has a history of success with a great percentage of students, but consistently fails to address the needs of the struggling and at-risk population. More pointedly, the majority of students are succeeding and so the community does not perceive a problem with business as usual. However, Mr. Jones feels that the imperative of the district is to ensure success for all students.

As anticipated, Mr. Jones reported that he met considerable resistance to his efforts to implement change at many levels. With regards to teachers, he perceives a fear of “top-down” leadership and a resistance to any programs that may be interpreted as efforts to decrease the autonomy of teachers within their own classrooms. Aren’t teachers in the district already modeling the principles of collaboration for increased student success in programs like CORE and upper level academies? Mr. Jones sees these programs as first steps towards the formation of true SLCs and schools that support and enhance the missions of these SLCs.

Mr. Jones distinguished between SLCs and intervention strategies. SLCs, in Mr. Jones' opinion, are a place for all students, not just specific students. SLCs, including an outdoor education program exist within the district, but not all of the district's students belong to an SLC. Another intervention strategy that Mr. Jones examined was Academic Workshop (AW). When asked whether AW could fit within a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework, Mr. Jones responded in the affirmative. While he sees the program as valuable, he sees it as a "shell". This assertion led to a discussion of what he perceives as the district's failure to determine what students know and what they don't know, in order to determine what they need. AW is a shell as a response to intervention, but without reliable data as to what individual students know and are able to do, the program falls short of meeting the unique and individualized needs of all students.

Chapter 3 Method

Introduction

My research is designed to gather data that explores whether enrollment in a small learning community has an effect on the success of at-risk students. This study is non-experimental and focuses on a small sample of convenience. The aim of this research is to determine whether students perceive that their enrollment in an SLC has allowed them to be more successful in high school, in order to provide evidence and rationale for the existence and continuance of SLCs at the high school level. Data collected is entirely qualitative, including survey question and answer responses and oral narrative responses, which were recorded by the researcher in a focus group setting. Survey responses as well as oral narrative responses are analyzed for trends as well as inconsistencies.

Sample and Site

As the researcher I utilized a sample of convenience. Students are sophomores in high school who are enrolled in my English 3-4 class, as well as a supplementary Academic Workshop class, taught by another English teacher. All students were enrolled in my English 1-2 class during the 2011-2012 school year, and, during this time, were concurrently enrolled in an Academic Workshop class, taught by me. All students attended the same small middle school, in the San Francisco Bay Area, prior to attending high school. All but one of the students identify as African American. This student is a white male. Since my English classes are heterogeneous, I used the Academic Workshop class to identify students who were classified as at-risk when they entered high school.

Small Learning Communities in High Schools

As detailed in my introduction, Academic Workshop is a self-contained class in which students are enrolled in based on low test scores, low grades, teacher recommendation, or a combination or all three. All of these pre-requisites are indicators of students who are less likely than their peers to graduate from the high school, thereby classifying them as at-risk. Re-enrollment in the 10th grade year suggests either that the aforementioned indicators still classify them as at-risk, or, in some cases, the student and/or their parent elected to enroll because they perceived that the class was benefiting the student.

As previously mentioned, the school where I teach is majority white, with less than 10% minority enrollment. The enrollment of the Academic Workshop class is in stark contrast, as 80% of the students enrolled are African American.

Ethical Standards

Students were assigned to me in my regular English class, and this research did not change the curriculum or instruction these students received. My advisor, Madalienne Peters, approved this research proposal, and the results are summarized in a report. In order to preserve confidentiality, and ensure anonymity, no names or identifying information is used. Students participated voluntarily and were not penalized for electing not to participate.

Data Gathering Strategies

One written survey was administered prior to the focus group sessions. In March of 2013, a little over a third of the way through their second semester in high school, my students enrolled in a specific section of Academic Workshop were asked to answer a series of questions, designed by me to illicit responses relevant to my research. The survey was reflective in nature, asking students to compare their feelings of self-efficacy upon entering high school with their current

feelings of self-efficacy, and to think and write about whether enrollment in a small learning community had affected their academic and/or social experience in high school. Questions included on the survey are listed below:

- 1) When you came to high school, did you feel like you had a good chance to graduate in 4 years? Why or why not?
- 2) Do you feel more or less confident now and why?
- 3) Do you think enrollment in CORE helped you be successful academically? How?
- 4) Do you think enrollment in CORE has helped you be successful socially? How?
- 5) What other supports and programs have helped you succeed in high school and how?
- 6) What supports do you wish you had (that you don't now) in order to be on track to graduate?

In designing the survey it was important to me to keep it relatively short and to use kid friendly language. I also tried to focus very specifically on the topic of my research and to leave questions open ended. In order to prevent bias, the Academic Workshop teacher (not me) administered the survey and I was not present. Students were informed that I would be reading their responses. I felt that this structure was important, because if I had administered the written survey, students may have been less likely to give honest feedback or critical feedback because they didn't want to offend me.

One week later, students were presented with their responses and allowed time to reflect, before being asked the same questions by me and giving oral responses in a small focus group setting of 3 students. I sometimes asked students to elaborate on their responses and sometimes asked them to "piggy back" or respond to the responses of their classmates. All conversations were recorded for the purpose of data collection and analysis.

Both the survey and the focus group were designed allow students time to think reflectively, both individually and as part of a group. Students were asked to respond first individually in writing, and then orally as part of a group. This structure was designed to allow them time to formulate their own ideas before hearing the ideas of their classmates.

Additionally, the one-week time lapse between the survey and the focus group was intentional and was intended to allow them time to process their thoughts and reflect in depth. The information I gathered served two purposes. First, it is useful for my research. Second, it allowed a time and space for these students to reflect. In my work I have found that being asked about their opinions gives students a feeling of validation and self-importance as well as a sense that their lives and experiences are valuable and worthy of examination.

After consulting my principal, I decided to gather information on an additional population, CORE students enrolled with different CORE teachers. As a participant observer attempting to collect program evaluation research, Dr. Knolls (pseudonym) felt it would be useful to have data from students other than my own. These students were surveyed, but not interviewed.

Data Analysis Approach

The researcher read the surveys, however, my primary focus was on the interview responses, since the surveys served as the precursor for the interviews. I transcribed the interviews after transferring the audio to Garage Band, so that I could better navigate between responses.

Once all interviews were archived and transcribed, I re-listened for patterns (common assertions or comments), statements of particular interest, and anomalies (assertions or statements that seemed to diverge from the opinions of the group).

Chapter 4 Findings

Description of Site, Individuals, Data

Students participating in the study are mostly all my students, enrolled in my English 3-4 course. Those that are not my students are enrolled in another CORE cohort with a different English and history teacher. Each grade level cohort has 4 CORE pairings, 1 English teacher and 1 history teacher. I teach one fourth of all CORE students. All of the students profiled have been classified as at-risk based on their test scores, grades, and behavioral issues and enrolled in an Academic Workshop class. Nearly one half of all Academic Workshop students are enrolled in my English classes. Based on their participation in CORE (an SLC) as well as their designation as at-risk, the students I surveyed and interviewed are well suited to my research questions.

Ms. Brown (pseudonym), an Academic Workshop teacher, administered the surveys to participants. I chose Ms. Brown because she has natural access to the students through her class, she has a trusting relationship with them based on their work together this year, and she's not personally involved in the study. I feared that if I administered the study, my presence may have been too visible, so as to create a participant observer bias. I did conduct the in-depth interviews, because I know the students well and was able to elicit useful information from them via follow-up questions.

As part of the interview process, I had students create pseudonyms both as a reminder to them that their identities would be protected, and as a useful tool for transcription and, later, analysis. In the first small group session I interviewed 2 girls and 1 boy (Brooklyn, Natasha, and Bentley). In the second group session I interviewed 2 girls and 1 boy (Rebecca, Artemis, and Rambo). Of the girls, 4 out of 5 are African American and of the boys 1 is African American and one is white, but he grew up in an African American community and ascribes to many of its

cultural norms. All are 10th graders enrolled in my CORE classes as well as Academic Workshop. I met all students over the summer between their 8th and 9th grade years during the Transitions program. A brief profile of each student is below.

Brooklyn is a white female student who is hyper social and struggles with focus and assignment completion. A top tier athlete, Brooklyn often seeks negative attention, particularly from boys, by speaking and dressing provocatively. Although she comes from an affluent family, Brooklyn receives minimal academic support at home and elected to enroll in Academic Workshop in hopes of having the structure she needs to pass her classes.

Natasha is an African American female student who comes from a large family. Two of her brothers are currently enrolled at the same high school she attends. Although she possesses relatively strong reading and writing skills, Natasha displays a lack of motivation and her work is often incomplete or incompatible with her true ability. Conscious of the stereotypes that persist about black students, Natasha has frequently complained of discrimination by other teachers (“They only pick on me because I’m black.”)

Bentley is an African American male who comes from a single parent (mother) household. Bright and thoughtful, Bentley is sometimes teased by his peers for trying too hard in school or “acting white”. Bentley has applied and been accepted to an interdisciplinary academy for 11th and 12th graders, where he will be among the only black students. Soft spoken and shy, Bentley is difficult to draw out in class, where he tends to be passive and quiet.

Rebecca is an African American female who comes from a single parent (mother) household. She is young for her grade and displays emotional immaturity. During her ninth grade year she was frequently defiant and combative, both with teachers and peers. Quick to

anger, she was known to de-rail an entire class with an outburst. Social and outgoing, she has become well known and well liked around campus.

Artemis is an African American girl who suffers from a range of medical and emotional problems. Artemis would cut class and hide in the bathroom her freshman year for fear of “being looked at”. Recently Artemis was tested for learning disabilities and was found to have significant attention deficits. Also prone to defiance, Artemis was frequently disruptive her freshman year sometimes resorting to bizarre behavior, like painting her face with markers in art class.

Rambo is a white male who grew up in predominately African American community. He sports tattoos all over his body and is frequently in trouble with campus security. Over the past two years he has been caught stealing, fighting, and in possession of drugs, all of which he has been suspended for. Anxious and easily embarrassed, Rambo shies away from attention, but attracts it from peers nonetheless as a result of his appearance and demeanor. He reports a desire to succeed in school, however seems to believe that he can get other people to do his work for him.

Knowing these students well, I asked specific questions of specific students and followed up with questions that I hoped would better allow them to express themselves. All interviews were conducted in the Book Room (a small secluded room on our campus) and all interviews were recorded on my cell phone. Students were given back their surveys just prior to interviews so that they could review their responses. Interviews lasted approximately one hour per small group session.

Overall Findings, Themes

Survey

Responses to the surveys were cursory and largely echoed the same themes. Most students felt confident in their ability to graduate high school in four years. When asked whether they felt more confident or less confident than they did as incoming freshman, answers varied. Many said more confident, as a result of maturity, perspective, or past success, while a few pointed to a specific subject (particularly math) that they reported might hamper their chances of graduating.

Overwhelmingly, students reported that enrollment in CORE had helped them academically and socially. Some students were unable to illuminate how CORE had helped them. I addressed this during the interview process. Those who did identify particular benefits pointed out improved student teacher relationships (“my teachers know me and I know them”), as well as peer-to-peer relationships (“I have become very close to the people that are in both of my CORE classes.”)

When asked about other supports that were beneficial, many students from the impoverished neighborhood identified community specific programs that provide mentoring and afterschool tutoring. Most were unable to imagine a new support, not already in existence, which might help them further.

Interview Session #1

When reviewing the transcripts of interviews, I focused on statements of particular interest and, in the interest of incorporating student voice, have chosen to include some of those statements, verbatim, in this section.

When asked about how CORE has affected their interactions with peers, students replied:

Well I think it's helped because you get to know them really well and if you get to know people pretty well and they're in your same classes and you're more comfortable with raising your hand and saying answers out loud and not being afraid to say something even if you think it's wrong, cause they're all pretty much your friends cause you've been in the same class with them for so long,– Brooklyn.

Cause like when you assign projects, like how you tell us to write on the little paper who you want to work with, I don't put anybody because you don't know who's a good worker. Like when you look on the outside you never know whether they're good at working or not good. And just to be able to work with different people is nice. But then once you work with them you become closer cause you worked on that same project together and so you have to be familiar with each other. I guess from the projects and stuff we do, like since I know them because we did a project together it makes it easier to talk to them I guess, - Bentley.

Because well most of the kids already knew each other, but just the past two years, all of us became closer and it helped more students become more comfortable around the others. And I guess, like for me, I get the work that is given to us, I get it more easy, I understand it better, because if I needed help, I don't have to like necessarily ask the teacher, I could ask a student and they wouldn't have a problem with just helping me, - Natasha.

When asked about how CORE has affected her relationship with teachers, Bentley replied:

I feel like I know my CORE teachers better than my other teachers that I, like, just got, because I already know how these teachers act, like what do they like to see what they don't like to see, like how to maintain in that class, how to do well in that class. Cause I know how like what type of work you guys give and... Yeah, I know their teaching style better than the other teachers... Yeah, cause they know what stuff I respond to better. Like what type of stuff I excel in and what kind of stuff I struggle in, more than another teacher would. Like what my strengths are or what my weaknesses are, – Bentley.

When asked why they believe CORE would be effective for four years (a sentiment independently expressed by students prior to the interviews), students replied:

Because I seen it on "Freedom Writers" and like all the students like they were all basically a family. Like at first they were really untamed and they didn't know how to act and once they got to know the teacher, like, they started respecting her and like everything, like work started coming in easy to them and they started to get the work. And they fought for them to have it all four years and it made a positive impact on them, so I think that if we have it that way, it would kind of do the same thing, like it would, like make us more successful in high school. And, like, our teachers, we've already had them for two years, so like just to go to another teacher would be really different, – Natasha.

Just getting to know the class better, and like, having the same teachers really helps. Like, I'm not good with transition really and having the two same teachers who know me and know like, what Bentley said, your strengths and your weaknesses, really helps, because a new teacher is

just trying to get to know how you learn and like how you do in class and all that and you guys pretty much already know because you've already had me as a student in for two years. And I know how you guys like to teach, I know what your rules are and your teaching styles and everything, so that also helps me, – Brooklyn.

When asked how CORE affected their academic performance, students replied:

Well I think it positively affected my grades, because like when you'd assign something Dr. Early (history teacher) knows that we're doing a big project in there so she'll probably do something that relates to that project to help us with the bigger project or we'll also just not do as much work, like she doesn't assign us a big project. Like if we have one due in your class. And like I've had other teachers do that, assign a lot of homework or a test because they don't talk to each other, they assign it on the same day. So I think that helped, – Bentley.

It does help, like, because in history and English it's like you don't have to worry so much in both classes because you're kind of like joint, like similar, and like all the lessons kind of tie in together, – Natasha.

Interview Session #2

When reviewing the transcripts of interviews, I focused on statements of particular interest and, in the interest of incorporating student voice, have chosen to include some of those statements, verbatim, in this section. Responses from Rambo are not included because he had to leave the interview early on to be part of an investigation into a stolen cell phone.

When asked what made them “shut down” during 9th grade, students replied:

What made me frustrated in the group was everybody was moving too fast and trying to rush and do things, like I couldn't keep up with that stuff. I didn't even want to do it because I couldn't keep up, - Rebecca.

Last year, it was more people than this time that I just didn't care for. So I was going through a social problem with people... Last year was more new, everything was just new and I wasn't used to the school; I didn't know it was going to be that many people. It was a big shock to me. I didn't know how to deal with it, so I would shut down and not do work and not come to class, – Artemis.

When asked how CORE affected their relations with peers students replied:

CORE allows you to be yourself and act like yourself. Everybody becomes friends. Everybody talks to everybody. You can't help making friends after so long. Two years is a long time to not like anybody if you're in the same class. Like it's a waste of time to not like anybody, – Rebecca.

Last year when we first started I was uncomfortable because I didn't know anybody. And this year I know pretty much everybody that's in your CORE and it's really fun. It's more comfortable. I can walk in and say hi to everybody and everybody knows me. And I've met like a lot of new people and made a lot of new friends from this CORE because a lot of them know me now. I didn't really like anybody that was in my CORE last year in the beginning and then once I like kept going to class and stuff and seeing everybody, they were really open and very cool. At first I pre-judged them, cause I always used to mug people and then once I got like more used to seeing these people, I kind of opened up to them and we started becoming friends, - Artemis.

When asked how CORE affected their relationships with teachers, students replied:

Because I feel like they know me. If I had all new teachers, I'd come back to school and be like, 'what am I supposed to do now?' At least now I know that I have someone there who actually cares. I'm scared for junior year – Rebecca.

When I get a new teacher, I'm not going to be used to the way they're teaching. My two CORE teachers have been in a lot of my meetings, talking about me personally. When I get new teachers it's going to be really different. This was like a relief (coming back to school sophomore year), – Artemis.

When asked whether the CORE program provides a sense of community, students replied:

I feel like the way we were divided was perfect. The way they divided every kid in a different CORE. It's fun to be like "Team Ms. Springer or Team Dr. Early (history teacher), – Artemis. I feel like there's no just 'me'.

We're all one - because we've been together for so long. – Rebecca.

Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

Summary of Major Findings

The aim of this research was to determine whether or not an SLC (CORE) benefitted at-risk students. Based on this study, the answer is a resounding yes. Where the complexity lies is in determining specifically what are these benefits. Again and again my field research led me away

from the academic benefits of CORE to the social-emotional benefits. The most compelling student answers, and, frankly, what they wanted to talk about, was how CORE made them feel - as a person, as a student, and as a member of a group. Based on this, I would conclude that a two year, heterogeneous, interdisciplinary SLC does provide real benefits, and these benefits are primarily social-emotional.

Throughout my research, I kept coming back to the idea of an affective filter because of how many student responses centered around the language of this phenomenon. Reports of feeling “safe”, “calm”, “relaxed”, and “comfortable” in CORE classes led me to conclude that CORE lowered or reduced at-risk students’ affective filters.

As the research on affective filters suggests, a raised affective filter effectively blocks all learning. For a student who feels threatened, agitated, on high alert or uncomfortable it is nearly impossible to process and integrate new information (Buffum, 2012). It makes sense that a small population of low SES, at-risk students coming from an insulated environment into a large high school filled with high achieving, affluent teens, would experience raised affective filters. This phenomenon was born out in my research with students reporting feeling, “mad”, “angry”, “frustrated”, and “hopeless” during their freshman year. Conversely, their feelings as sophomores seem to suggest some tipping point between the one and two year mark where students began to feel comfortable in their learning environment based on a newly gained trust of their teachers and peers.

Another major finding was in student perception of teaching and learning. Many students reported that they had become acclimated with their CORE teacher’s style including content delivery, assessment, and policies and that this comfort had increased their chances of academic success. As compared to other “one and done” classes, like math, students reported that they

were better able to navigate their CORE classes because they had experience with the instructor. Correspondingly, students responded that their CORE teachers understood them as learners and, being highly attuned to their strengths and weaknesses, were able to tailor curriculum delivery and assessment to meet their needs.

In sum, this study suggests that CORE enabled student learning because students were more accustomed to the teaching style of their CORE teachers and CORE teachers were more accustomed to the respective learning styles of their students. Research into school involvement shows that students who feel a sense of connectedness to their school are dramatically more likely to graduate than those who do not, (Buffum 2010). Based on this study, 2 years of a heterogeneous, interdisciplinary SLC can successfully acclimate at-risk students to high school and, by making them feel like a part of a community, or a team, greatly improve their chances of graduation. But this is only a piece of the puzzle. The question remains, if such an affective filter tipping point exists, what does it mean for students' academic achievement? Once students are acclimated, how likely are they to be able to complete coursework required for graduation? Does CORE provide the academic support and remediation when necessary to enable at-risk students to successfully pass their classes?

Additionally, this research begs the question: What can be done after students are past their 10th grade year? Many of the students interviewed reported a desire to remain in CORE for 4 years. One of the students reported that he was joining a selective upper division visual arts academy because he thought it would be, "like CORE". This research supports the need for a continuing SLC beyond the 10th grade year. Students feel like they still need it, and it's hard to envision the detriments of a continued sense of belonging and a lowered affective filter.

Comparison of Findings to Previous Research

My findings support the previous research in determining that SLCs can benefit at-risk students. However, no where in my research did I find a discussion of the affective filter, a primary finding of this study. Furthermore, this study focused on a very small and unique population, minority, low SES, at-risk students within a predominately white, affluent high school. Given these demographics, I believe this study sample provided a portrait of an SLC model which did not previously exist.

Whereas most of the previous research focused on quantitative data, grades, test scores etc. or qualitative data in the form of teacher feedback, this study focused on student voice, as gathered through in depth interviews. No where in my research did I find students directly quoted on their SLC experiences. Finally, this research finds a need for a continuation of an SLC based model for at-risk upperclassmen. In my research I found studies of upperclassmen academies, but nothing detailing a 4 year SLC model for at-risk students.

Limitations/Gaps in the Study

This study was extremely small in scope and focused on a very specific population. As such, it is potentially limited in its applications. In total, 9 students were surveyed and 6 interviewed. This sample represents only a small percentage of the total population of the student body enrolled in CORE. There may be a variety of opinions about CORE not represented in this study. However, the aim of the study was to focus in depth on at-risk students. Since the at-risk population enrolled in CORE is relatively small, this study was able to profile approximately half of the students I consider to fit the at-risk profile who are currently enrolled in my CORE classes. Another limitation of the study was breadth of interviews. While the interviews were in-depth, with more time they could have covered a greater range of topics. In the process of conducting

the interviews, many other interesting subjects were raised such as group work and teacher/student bonding. Additional interview sessions would have shed greater light on these topics, as they relate to my subject. Also, I was unable to interview the students I surveyed who were not members of my CORE classes. Due to access issues and time limitations, these 3 students were only surveyed.

As a participant observer, there is an inherent danger of bias. The students profiled in this study are my students and we have a close relationship with one another. In order to mitigate any potential bias, I had another party conduct the surveys, told them their answers would remain anonymous and did not share any of my findings with them while I was interviewing them. Additionally, I surveyed students outside my CORE and found their answers to be largely aligned with those of my students. Nevertheless, there still remains the possibility that our relationship influenced student answers during the interview process.

Finally, it should be reiterated that the school profiled in this study represents an extremely rare demographic make-up. The school is 90% white and overwhelmingly middle and upper middle class, with a significant amount of affluent families. The students profiled, with the exception of two, are all low SES students of color. Their experience is likely to differ dramatically from other students who represent the dominant culture of the school. It was the aim of this study to focus on these students' experiences in particular, but it bears repeating that their perceptions are not necessarily representative of the larger student body.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest a need for further research into the benefits of an SLC that spans beyond the 10th grade year. What benefits emerge as students complete their third and fourth year of high school as members of an SLC? Perhaps most significantly, following at-risk

students through to the end of high school and beyond would provide the most compelling research in support of SLCs. Do graduation rates improve for at-risk students enrolled in SLCs? What do these students pursue after high school and with what success? A longitudinal study of at-risk students could potentially answer these questions.

Another major issue raised by this paper is scientific inquiry into the effect of SLCs on the affective filter. A quantitative study which drew on student perceptions and measured levels of cortisone and other stress related hormones could verify the benefits of an SLC in decreasing the negative effects of the affective filter.

Overall Significance of the Study/Applications

This study has significance on several levels. On a national level, the debate over what to do about the high school drop out-rate is escalating. The necessity of a high school diploma in today's job market is well established. If we cannot graduate at-risk students from high school, we have a population of at-risk adults. The potential detriment to society that stems from this failure cannot be overstated. Many high school dropouts report feelings of disconnectedness and disenfranchisement from school. If SLCs can help acclimate and integrate students into a high school community, they are a valuable piece in the puzzle of student retention.

On a local level, the issue of students from the impoverished neighborhood not finding success at the high school level has been on the radar for decades. Much has been done, in terms of funding, collaboration, community involvement and political dealings, to address the issue, but the problem persists. It is my belief that the SLC model emulates the small school setting students from the impoverished neighborhood are used to and thus makes the high school experience culturally relevant to them. If this is true, SLCs, CORE in particular, could be at the center of continuing efforts to engage and retain this population.

On a personal level this study was bittersweet. On the one hand, it seemed to affirm many things I hoped to be true about CORE. Students feel safe, they feel a sense of belonging, and they feel connected. There were also unexpected happy findings such as the peer-to-peer relationships that have developed and been nurtured by CORE. An increase in collaborative learning and improved group work dynamics were also reported.

However, the students profiled are still not where they need to be. Although they sound happy and relatively well adjusted, they are still failing some of their classes. They still have major skill deficiencies that are not being addressed and they still face significant hardships outside of school, which affect their ability to function as students. In other words, they are still at-risk. What will happen to these students in the years to come? Will leaving CORE be a shocking or traumatizing experience for them? Did CORE only prolong this negative experience and will it be enough to turn them off from school or will their CORE years have fortified a sense of belonging? I worry about where they will go from here as they worry for themselves. As one student put it, "I'm scared for next year."

While this study only focused on a small sample at a single school site, I believe there are potential applications for schools nation and potentially worldwide. SLCs are nothing new, but the student voice in support of them is novel and compelling evidence that the school experience must be personalized to meet the needs of each students, particularly those classified as at-risk. In order to be meaningful, students must feel seen, they must feel heard, and they must feel accepted.

Teachers are already overworked and cannot possibly build a one-to-one relationship that will sustain and nurture every one of their students. Alternatively SLCs like CORE harness the power of community. Through an SLC community seems to grow organically, and

exponentially. Students find nourishment from each other, often in unexpected ways. The teacher's job becomes easier because he or she is part of the team too. Everybody wins.

About the Author

Chelsea Springer has been teaching high school English and academic support classes for 5 years in the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as serving as the Activities Director for 4 years. She became passionate about at-risk students through her work with the Transitions program for at-risk youth.

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