

THE IMPACT OF CAREER ACADEMIES ON SUCCESS RATES OF MALE STUDENTS OF
COLOR: ACTION RESEARCH CASE STUDY

by

KELLY A. WALTER

(Under the Direction of Karen Bryant)

ABSTRACT

The educational system in the United States (U.S.) is not as competitive as it is in other industrialized nations around the world with regard to the quality or quantity of graduates produced (OECD, 2016). This discrepancy is considered to be a gap between the skill level of workers needed and high school graduates in the U.S. The unprepared workers in this country are also considered to be a burden on the economy. Minority students are especially vulnerable to dropping out of school or failing to achieve their full academic potential, therefore highlighting equity concerns in the design and implementation of the current K-12 public education system. One potential solution for this disconnect is the development of career academies, or schools within schools, in U.S. high schools. This solution could provide students with more individualized, career-focused education. Brick Road High School is one such high school that is attempting to use a career-focused school within a school to address these many concerns. Brick Road High School has both a high poverty and high transient population with a low graduation rate. Research shows that career focused schools have had positive effects in similar populations. This research project uses an action research process. Through a number of qualitative and quantitative data sources three research questions were analyzed and produced

positive results for career academies' impact on Black and Hispanic males' academic achievement.

INDEX WORDS: Career academies, minority males, and graduation rate

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KELLY A. WALTER

B.S., Auburn University, 1999

M.Ed., Auburn University, 2002

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KELLY A. WALTER

Major Professor:	Karen Bryant
Committee:	Sheneka Williams
	John Dayton

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2017

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Jeff and Sharyn Walter. I am so grateful I was chosen to be yours. Your never-ending love and support of me and my work has been what has sustained me through this degree and every milestone previous. We share this degree for we did it together. I hope this degree makes you as proud of me as I try to make you every day. I will continue to choose actions that ensure I can lay my head down on my pillow and be right with God. I will always remember who I am.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Context

The educational system in the United States (U.S.) is not as competitive as it is in other industrialized nations around the world with regard to the quality or quantity of graduates produced (OECD, 2016). This discrepancy is considered to be the source of disconnect between the skill level of workers needed and high school graduates in the U.S. Employers have reported a mismatch in their needs versus the students' preparation over the last 10 years (SREB, 2014). The educational concern of the number of drop-outs and ill-prepared graduates is no longer a problem just for the schools. In a study by Linnehan (1996), researchers found that students' grades and attendance in high school were strong indicators of their future job performance and work attendance, as well as future income earned. Significant research such as this leads one to see the need for a "balance" between academic and vocational learning (Linnehan, 1996). Unprepared workers in America are also considered to be a burden on the economy. Minority students are especially vulnerable to dropping out of school or failing to achieve their full academic potential, therefore highlighting equity concerns in the design and implementation of the current K-12 public education system is of utmost importance for these students as well as for the nation and its economy as a whole.

One such high school that struggles with the equity concern for minority students is Brick Road High School¹ (BRHS). BRHS has a high poverty and high transient population with a low

¹ Names of school, district, and study participants used in this study are pseudonyms.

graduation rate. Opening in 1966, Brick Road High School currently serves over 2,900 students.

In more recent years, BRHS has struggled with consistent leadership. More specifically, BRHS has had three different principals and one interim principal in just the last five years.

Additionally, the administrative team is young in years of experience, with five of the thirteen assistant principals having less than five years of experience in their current assistant principal role. The teaching staff at BRHS is also young, with slightly less than 50 percent of the teaching faculty, numbering more than 200 teachers, possessing classroom instructional experience of ten years or less (Point Break School System, 2016). BRHS was recently placed on the state's priority list due to its low graduation rates for the 2012 and 2013 school years. Placement on the priority list means that the State Department of Education is actively engaged in school operations and could eventually take over the school in the absence of significant improvements. Despite all the challenges BRHS faces, the school has recently undergone a rebranding campaign. It has recommitted to its school-wide focus on literacy and numeracy, while striving to implement new programs to increase the graduation rate. Though the development of the academy model was underway before the addition of the state's priority label, those efforts have become of utmost importance as BRHS must provide evidence of the actions being taken to increase the graduation rate at BRHS.

Problem Framing in Context

For the 2016-2017 school year, BRHS is implementing a career academy approach in an effort to increase the student graduation rate and overall student academic success. Although the student population at Brick Road is currently 2,800 students, 912 of the students are classified as freshmen while only 468 are classified as seniors (Point Break School System, 2016). The total

enrollment has seen some shifts in the last five years due to the redistricting efforts by school system to reduce overcrowding in certain schools as well as overall population shifts in the area.

Student Demographics 2012-2016

Table 1: BRHS Demographic Trends

	SY 12-13	SY 13-14	SY 14-15	SY 15-16	SY 16-17
Enrollment	3236	3376	3413	2890	2853
American Indian	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Asian	9%	9%	10%	8%	8%
African American	35%	33%	30%	26%	26%
Hispanic	47%	49%	53%	60%	60%
Multiracial	3%	3%	2%	2%	2%
White	6%	5%	5%	3%	3%
Special Education	12%	13%	10%	13%	13%
ELL	10%	10%	12%	12%	13%
Free and Reduced Lunch	81%	81%	83%	86%	86%

Brick Road's most recent (from Summer 2016) graduation rate is 63.13%. The student population consists of predominantly Hispanic (60%) and Black (26%) students, with 86% of all students receiving free or reduced lunch. Special Education and English Language Learner (ELL) populations are both 13% respectfully (Point Break School System, 2016).

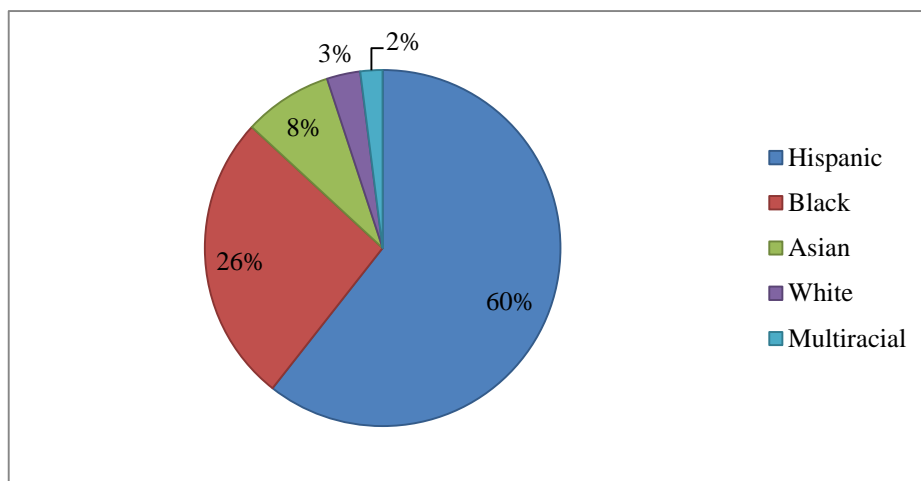


Figure 1: BRHS Demographic Trends

For the Class of 2018 (freshmen entering in the 2014 school year), according to the school's cohort analyzer, Brick Road has a projected graduation rate of 39%. Currently, 292 of the 9th graders are on track to graduate within a four-year timeframe (becoming the Class of 2022), while 374 of that same cohort are off-track to graduate on time and 86 of the same group have already dropped out of school, and have already negatively affected the ideal 100% graduation rate for the cohort (Point Break School System, 2017).

Graduation Rates

Table 2: BRHS Graduation Rates

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
STATE	70%	72%	73%	78.80%	79.20%
PBSS	71%	73%	75%	78.10%	79.60%
BRHS	58%	55%	58%	63.13%	65%

Description of System

Point Break School System (PBSS) is the largest and one of the most successful school systems in the southeastern portion of the United States. It is an urban school district located outside of one of the largest cities in the southern portion of the U.S. PBSS serves more than 180,000 students and continues to increase by at least 4,000 students each year. Currently, PBSS has 136 schools serving their students and communities. PBSS is an award-winning urban district that produced 11,000 graduates in 2014. The graduating seniors from that year earned post-secondary scholarships for continuing education in excess of \$148 million dollars (Point Break School System, 2015).

My Position to Lead Change

I am currently an assistant principal at BRHS. I was named and began my tenure at BRHS at the onset of the 2014-2015 school year. Uniquely situated in my current organization, I am an existing and long-term member of the larger organization, yet have not been an active member in my specific school for an extended period of time. My pre-understanding is two-fold. I have a variety of professional experiences within my current organization (BRHS) as well as experience as a member of the PBSS as a whole, having previously served in a neighboring school cluster at both the middle and high school levels. Those schools serve demographics similar to those I serve at BRHS. The 2016-2017 school year is my third year in leadership at BRHS. Having been employed with the district for 15 years, I am aware of the district's culture as well as BRHS's negative reputation from around the district. At BRHS, I supervise the counseling department and the Architecture and Construction Academy. The counseling department is of great importance for the charge to increase BRHS's graduation rate. One of the counseling department's responsibilities is to schedule students in appropriate classes as the students work toward class credit requirements for graduation. The counselors are also responsible for ensuring that students have completed all graduation requirements before diplomas can be awarded.

In an effort to improve BRHS's graduation rate, the school is implementing career academies for the 2016 school year. For the 2016-17 school year, BRHS has been organized into five total career academies (Architecture and Construction; Entrepreneurship and Leadership; Health and Human Services; Media Arts and Communication; and STEM—Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). The Architecture and Construction Academy, under my supervision, provides the students with training related to the field of work in which

they are interested, as well as their content classes, delivered through an architecture and construction perspective. My work with both groups—the Counseling Department and the Architecture and Construction Academy staff and students—has a direct impact on the school’s graduation rate. Additionally, my principal has positioned me in a number of other areas that will have a direct influence on the rise and fall of BRHS’s graduation rate, thereby giving me a distinct perspective from which to examine this nation-wide secondary school problem of practice.

Purpose

The purpose of this action research study is to explore the effects of developing career academies to increase the graduation rate for students at Brick Road High School and to specifically analyze the achievement of vulnerable students and their successful completion of high school in four years.

Research Questions

- What interventions hold the potential to increase the graduation rate for male students of color?
- How and in what ways could smaller learning communities with a career focus impact the graduation rate of Black and Hispanic male students in a large urban high school?
- What is learned by an action research team through the implementation of smaller learning communities with a career focus?

Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura (1989) developed the social cognitive theory to address human development. Social cognitive theory contends that learning takes place in a social setting, and the majority of

what a person learns is through observation. Through this thought process, there are substantial individual differences based on social practices that are fostered and those that are not. This theory espouses that not only does the environment affect the person, but also that the person impacts the environment. For example, teachers do not only affect students, but the students themselves also impact their educators. This is especially powerful for students as they are developing preferences and personal standards. The interactions students have with their teachers shape their future behaviors and influence their courses in life (Bandura, 1989).

According to Bandura:

During the crucial formative period of children's lives, the school functions as the primary setting for the cultivation and social validation of cognitive competencies.

School is the place where children develop the cognitive competencies and acquire the knowledge and problem-solving skills essential for participating effectively in society.

(Bandura, 1989, p. 65)

In addition, instructors' interpretations of students' successes and failures in ways that reflect favorably or unfavorably on their ability also affect students' judgments of their own intellectual efficacy. In other words, when a student shows failure in a classroom, if his teacher's views of that failure somehow suggest that it stems from the student's lack of capability, the student's own sense of self-efficacy is also affected. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory solidifies the notion that school has a profound effect on the development of an individual, and the instructor or teacher's opinion of the student will affect the student over the long term by having either a negative or positive impact on his future.

Social Justice Theory

The second theory that will be used to frame this study is the social justice theory. The selection of this theory was based on the current population of BRHS and the overwhelming discrepancy between minority student dropouts compared to their white counterparts. This research is framed using Theoharis' (2007) definition of a Social Justice Leader. The basis of a leader who practices Social Justice is one that will "make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice and vision" (p. 223). Social justice leaders seek to improve school structures, increase student achievement, strengthen school culture, and build staff capacity (Theoharis, 2007). This theory indicates that if the educational landscape is more equitable, then students will achieve at higher levels of academic success. One way that students, particularly minority or "at-risk" students, feel the effects of social injustice is when their teachers communicate low expectations of them, whether subtle or not. Students' perceived labels from teachers influence the relationship between students and teachers, which in turn has a direct negative impact on students' achievement. When students feel discouraged, they are more likely to dropout, which leaves a growing number of students pushed into the pipeline to prison (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In the high stakes testing world of education, students are quickly labeled based on their scores. Students who do not perform well are often blamed for their poor performance, which furthers the cycle of negative teacher perceptions of students' abilities. Teachers' perceptions of their students' abilities is the strongest predictor of student success (Sciarra & Ambrosino, 2011).

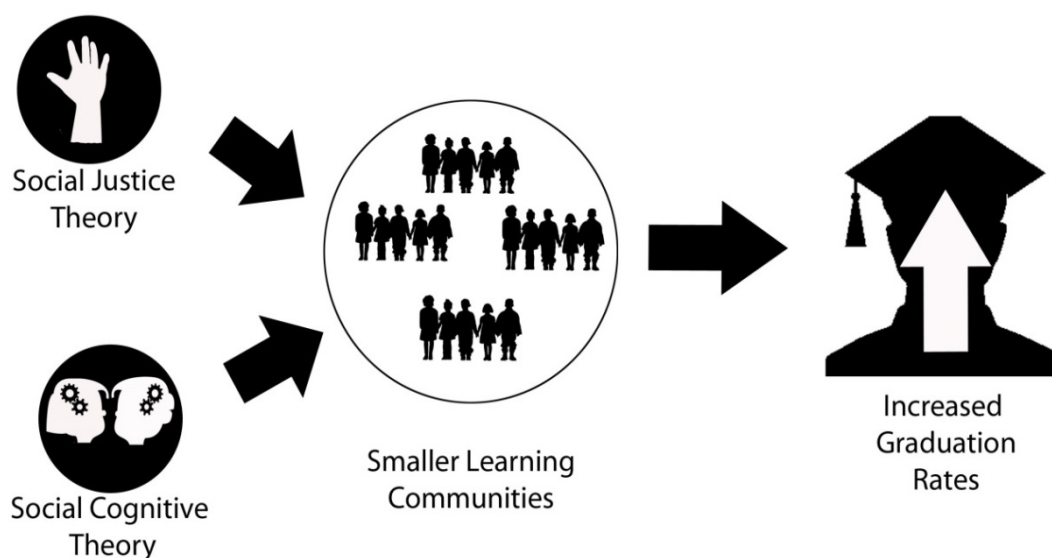


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

Justification of Framework

By creating a smaller learning community for the 9th grade and establishing career academies at Brick Road, teachers and students have been provided the opportunity to develop relationships and implement interventions needed to increase engagement and achievement. Through the social justice and social cognitive lens the educators at BRHS will have the opportunity to reflect and change their practice to ensure that each student is receiving an equitable education. And the goal of the smaller learning community design and the relevancy of college and career curriculum is a more equitable learning experience for each student, which holds the potential to produce higher graduation rates for BRHS.

Process of Engagement

To appreciate and obtain a clear understanding of the problem to study in this action research project, I repeatedly met with the principal of BRHS. Through these interactions, some formal discussions and some more informal, he was able to provide the backdrop to further understand the need for improving BRHS's graduation rate from a local, county, and political

standpoint. I also met with staff members who have been a part of the community for an extended period of time to gain their insights on the perceived problems BRHS faces, as well as the solutions they feel would work. The principal has agreed to be my sponsor for this study, and I am also working with six other assistant principals as we develop and implement the academy model at BRHS. Additionally, I work with an advisory board for the architecture and construction academy as well as the board for the academies as a whole.

The action research (AR) team for this study consisted of the six assistant principals directly involved in the academies and their development (5 academy principals and 1 curriculum assistant principal). The action research team met on a bi-monthly basis to oversee the implementation of the academies, to review the day-to-day operations of the academies, and to review research and interventions that would provide the appropriate structure and resources to students and teachers. These meetings were audio-recorded and coded. Each academy has a leadership triad (lead teacher, counselor and assistant principal), which also provided the researcher with important information to assist in the action research process. This qualitative data combined with the quantitative data collected on an 18-week basis of students' academic, behavioral, and attendance records developed a broader picture of the effectiveness of academy implementation on graduation rates for Black and Hispanic males at BRHS. The insight drawn from the AR team and data concerning student performance could then be translated to a larger context beyond BRHS' walls.

Inquiry

Statement of Inquiry Purpose

This action research study explored the impact of a career academy model on the graduation rate of an underachieving, urban high school's graduation rate. The purpose of this

study is to explore the effects of developing career academies intended to increase the graduation rate for students at Brick Road High School and to specifically analyze the achievement of vulnerable students and their successful completion of high school within four years. Employing the structure of a school-within-a-school model, academy students are housed together and share a team of content teachers to facilitate the development of relationships while providing the support needed for students to experience academic success. It is the goal of the researcher that by providing the freshmen students with a solid foundation through the academy model, they will successfully move to the next grade level and finish high school in the state allotted cohort four-year time-frame. Their progress will further be supported through utilizing career academies to support the students in grades 10-12 through relevant college and career curriculum.

Due to deep commitment from the school district and local resources to improve the school's graduation rate while increasing equity for all students and improving opportunities for local businesses to have greater access to a skilled labor force, there has been overwhelming support from both the local and district levels in the development of career academies at BRHS. The supports continued as we specifically explored the impact career academies have on the minority male graduation rate. However, there was resistance from the teachers when it came to the need for them to specifically examine the concept of race and inequality. As race and inequality are sensitive issues for most people, the topics proved even more so when teachers within the BRHS faculty were questioned about their own potential biases through the lenses of social justice and cognitive development theories. Though each school has its own identity and set of challenges, this research provided a foundational direction for the further investigation on how to obtain a more equitable school experience for all students. This initial foundation will, in turn,

potentially have a direct impact on schools' graduation rate. Additionally, the community as a whole will benefit from having a more educated workforce.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM FRAMING IN LITERATURE

High School Graduation Interventions

The transition from middle school to high school is a difficult one for many students. Research from Johns Hopkins University found that of the students who repeat 9th grade, only 10 to 15% graduate from high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). This research shows that failure in a student's ninth grade year is a strong predictor of dropping out from high school. According to *Education at a Glance Interim Report* (2015), the academic performance of students across the nation is declining (OECD). It is the responsibility of today's educators to connect students to their schooling and their future careers and to provide a safe environment for them to explore their educational boundaries. This is a major shift that can impact not only the current practice of teaching, but future teacher education programs.

In a 2014 case study by the Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB), one specific school was highlighted due to its increase of on-time graduation rate to 90%. The researchers found that in South Carolina, Fort Mill High School's focus on career studies and a support system for 9th graders were crucial to their success. School leaders added support to their 9th graders through the creation of a math course to further students' understanding of algebraic concepts. They also added an additional elective course to provide an in-depth look at future course offerings to all 9th graders, so they could become more informed about their upcoming selection of classes, while providing specific interventions targeted to ensure 9th grade students' success. Through the school's specifically targeted efforts directed toward 9th graders, the

graduation rate not only gained significant ground, but the students' performance on state testing also increased 15 percentage points above the state average (SREB, 2014).

Quint's work in 2008 discussed the strengths and weaknesses of academies in their high school setting. Her research examined three high schools implementing various academies to determine if the academies were achieving their goals of decreasing high school drop outs, while simultaneously increasing the number of 9th grade students successfully completing their freshman year within a one-year time period. The three academies varied in their approaches, but all consistently targeted the same central issues. The researcher found three lessons for school leaders: 1) Starting an academy cannot be successful without the support of the district; 2) Immediate, large-scale results cannot be expected; and, 3) Adequate time and commitment are both needed to truly assess successful implementation. Quint (2008) also found that two foundational elements are needed for high school reform: ninth grade students need to become a focus, and instructional improvement with differentiated instruction is needed throughout the organization to ensure impactful change.

Polytech High School in Delaware was a school that emerged due to a specific need within the community to provide students with the most up-to-date career exposure while offering the students the curriculum necessary to earn a high school diploma (SREB, 2001). The school was divided into five academies that included Educational Foundations, Industrial, Modern Technology, Professional Services, and Health/Medical career academies. The requirements for graduation not only met the state's requirements, but also included additional school-specific requirements, such as foreign language. As a result of these additional components, Polytech graduates completed their diploma requirements with the highest number of credits in the state. Polytech's staff not only added rigor and developed a School within a

School (SWS)/career academy model for students, but they also changed their instructional model and addressed areas of growth in writing and mathematics. To increase rigor for writing requirements, the school implemented a writing program in which students were required to be engaged in the writing process on a daily basis. This program was infused across all curriculum areas. To ensure implementation with fidelity, the teachers were provided specific staff development based on the state's writing rubric. To address mathematics, the school adopted a curriculum design using direct instruction and discovery strategies that eliminated algebra and geometry as stand-alone courses. With these curriculum changes, the school experienced an increase in writing scores of 18 percentage points above the state average and a 13% increase in mathematic scores. The most noteworthy change made by Polytech was the school-wide transformation in instructional delivery. The staff integrated academic and career studies specific to each academy pathway. Teachers engaged in on-going collaborative planning to develop integrated activities, and students were provided assignments that integrated at least two subjects to help develop the connections between the disciplines (SREB, 2001).

It is important to note that this interdisciplinary approach was a daily occurrence and considered a “way of life” as opposed to an occasional use of strategy. Polytech HS also provided a number of specific interventions for their 9th grade students to ensure a successful transition into high school. Ninth grade students who were achieving below standards in the 8th grade participated in a required, four-week summer camp prior to entering the 9th grade. The purpose was to expose them to the career academy offerings and integrated projects, which produced increases in math and reading scores. If students still did not meet standards, then additional courses were assigned in the fall semester to provide additional academic support. Polytech High School is an excellent example of a school that addressed the challenges of

transitioning to high school for 9th grade students. The school provided an instructional framework to deliver the material and to help students make connections to future careers while providing additional supports in writing and mathematics (SREB, 2001).

Recent research by Fletcher and Cox (2012) surveyed 15 students regarding their thoughts on the academy model and its impact on their lives. Through their research, they found a number of implications for educators who are seeking to develop an academy or make adjustments to existing academies. The researchers went into detail related to four themes developed through interviews: preparedness for post-secondary education, decreased amount of time for extracurricular activities, enrollment in career academy adding to their experience, and the connection of content areas to their career classes. The researchers found that 100% of the students surveyed intended to seek some sort of postsecondary education. The students who were enrolled in career academies found some of the benefits to their participation were hands-on training, development of sense of community, and the ability to discover more knowledge regarding their interest areas.

This information led researchers to suggest the addition of providing students with more work-based experiences. The non-career academy students' concern about time constraints call for school personnel to provide students and parents with a greater understanding of the benefits of participation, as well as an accurate picture of the time needed to participate. The report of students' inability to connect career and content areas seemed to be misguided and a greater use of collaboration among teachers would help to rectify the inconsistency and to provide students with a greater understanding of the connection. The researchers found that 77.8% of participants viewed their participation as benefiting their performance in core areas. This was contrary to the 88.9% of non-academy students who did not recognize that their career classes

assisted them on graduation tests. The research also highlighted the concern that students felt they were only prepared for post-secondary options (college or work) at an entry level and the success of male students was higher than female counterparts. There is a call for administration and staff to help students develop a greater understanding and address this disconnect between male and female students (Fletcher & Cox, 2012).

The increased attention to career exploration can also impact students and the post-secondary options they choose. By providing students more exposure to potential careers and professions, they can make more informed decisions about post-secondary institutions. This early exposure to career options will allow students to explore interest areas in order to develop a specific direction related to their major and potential career choices before beginning their post-secondary education. The more concentrated exposure to careers or specific professions can also lead to exemption from certain classes and help to develop students who are more prepared for course work. The direction created for students will also promote greater dedication among students due to their commitment and understanding of career choice.

Though there has not been an increase in academy student graduates versus non-academy students attending college, a study by Maxwell (2001) found that academy students were better prepared for the rigor of college and more likely to graduate from college. A study by Kemple and Snipes (2000) found that minority “students who enrolled in academies attended school more regularly, earned more credits, were more likely to participate in extracurricular activities and volunteer projects, and were less likely to be arrested” (p.17). The study also found the percentage of high school dropouts decreased from 32% to 21% when a school transitioned from a traditional high school organization to adopting the academy model. Stern, Dayton and Raby’s (2010) research found that dropout rates in academies average 7 to 8% over a three-year period.

As educators strive to increase student achievement and career preparation, while also decreasing the number of dropouts, the Schools within Schools (SWS)/career academy model demonstrates the potential to provide the connections necessary to increase student interest and commitment to the successful completion of high school.

Throughout the literature on SWS/career academy schools that achieve the most gains are the ones that are a focused or well-developed community. As Sergiovanni (1994) theorizes, our work is dependent on the praise we receive from others. In Lee and Ready's (2007) book, *Schools within Schools*, academies with strong community bonds were discussed extensively due to their success. In the descriptions of the Adams' International/Cooperative Learning Academy, the authors explain in great detail how each academy developed its own identity and took great pride in being a member of the subunit. Both subunit's faculties spent a great deal of time adjusting and developing integrated instructional programs to push students to higher levels academically and to develop relevant social skills necessary to be successful in the world outside of high school. The faculty of Adams' International/Cooperative Learning Academy even created a rotational leadership structure to effectively run the subunit. The researchers continually recognized and provided evidence to link meaningful change for the students directly attributed to the degree in which the staff members commit to developing a community and consistency for themselves and the students. In the findings, they dedicated a large part of their work to the concept of building a community for the teachers as well as the students, and the positive impact that environment had on the rest of the school and community.

Student engagement is a major component to take into consideration when discussing students' success in school. In 2009, Davis, Chang, Andrejewski and Poirier interviewed over 600 students who attended SWS model schools, in order to further understand student

engagement. Their research found that even though the structure of the school change did not impact students' cognitive engagement, it did impact student and teacher behavioral and relational engagement. This increase in behavioral and relational engagement is one of the major hurdles educators tackle on a daily basis. With the increase in relationship and decrease in behavioral concerns, the door is open to higher academic achievement. The researchers also expressed a need for the pedagogy and curriculum to change to see the full impact on the student achievement (Davis, et al., 2009). Although there is significant evidence in the literature of the importance and benefits of career academies, the idea of academies is still in its infancy. There is limited research on career academies and their impact on schools' graduation rates. This action research project served to further this area of research and to add to the literature on the impacts of academies and to consider the impact of academies on the world of education.

Although career academies have a foundation in research supporting that implementation can have a positive effect on students successfully completing high school, there is also research that identifies other interventions that yield positive results. For instance, Duan-Barnett and St. John (2012) investigated public policies related to math curriculum and student achievement. The researchers found that the math standards in school districts that require exit exams negatively impacted graduation rates. Other districts investigated that had rigorous math programs without mandatory exit exams did not show a negative effect on students completing high school graduation requirements. Researchers suggested that policy and curriculum impact students' completion of high school more than structural changes.

Freeman and Simonsen (2015) reviewed 1,519 research articles on high school drop outs to attempt to find commonalities in policies or interventions to increase high school completion rates. Their review found a gap between the causes for students dropping out of school and

effective interventions to address low graduation rates. Of the articles they reviewed, only 25% of the studies were considered experimentally designed, and 45% of the studies that investigated intervention showed positive results. The researchers cautioned educators to look at the issue of dropouts as a multi-tier problem that requires a multi-tiered solution; this is something the current research has not done. They did find that early intervention and multi-tiered programs have shown the most promise in combatting the dropout epidemic. They highlight that there is little empirical evidence supporting the current best practices research and call for more sound research in the area of high school dropout research.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Design of Study

This research project was an action research case study as it was an investigation of one school's implementation of career academies to address the consistently low graduation rate, especially for male students of color. The definition of case study used for this study is from Simons (2009):

Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a 'real life' context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence led. The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic. (p. 21)

There are a number of reasons why this research project falls into the case study category with the first being that the project was conducted over an extended period of time for the researcher to further understand the school's low graduation rate for male students of color. The study looked at the phenomenon through a number of lenses, with the first being quantitative.

Academic, attendance and behavioral data for male students of color was analyzed and used as baseline data for the research project. The second lens was qualitative, with an analysis of staff perceptions of the impact of social justice and social cognitive theories on student performance. The study also provided an in-depth examination of efforts to provide a more relevant education to high school students through career academy implementation. The research project involved a real life context as the project took place at Brick Road High School, in the Point Break School

System, during the 2016-2017 school year as the school implemented career academies throughout the whole school. The development of the research was evidence led, relied heavily on the action research process, and was guided by the social justice and social cognitive theories. It was the researcher's desire to develop a deep and rich understanding of the impact of career academies on the educational achievement of male students of color's educational achievement.

Table 3: Outline of the research questions, data collection and analysis

Research Questions	Qualitative	Quantitative
What interventions hold the potential to increase the graduation rate for male students of color?	Researcher's Reflective Journal Transcription of Action Research Team Meetings	Student Data 9 th grade student academic, behavioral and attendance
How and in what ways could smaller learning communities with a career focus impact the graduation rate of Black and Hispanic male students in a large urban high school?	Researcher's Reflective Journal Transcription of Action Research Team Meetings	Student Data 9 th grade student academic, behavioral and attendance
What is learned by an action research team through the implementation of smaller learning communities with a career focus?	Researcher's Reflective Journal Transcription of Action Research Team Meetings	AR Team's Pre/Post Surveys

The case study was conducted within the evaluation case study perspective as it falls within the three imperatives set forth by Simons (2009): distinguish value or success of the program, analysis of data develops the decision making of next steps, and the findings are meant

to lead to equitable allocation of funds and resources. This research project was designed to evaluate the level of success of the implementation of career academies, which satisfies the first imperative of an evaluation case study. The research was developed through the analysis of the data and will continue to be driven by the data that is developed through the research process. The focus on data aligned with the second imperative of an evaluation case study. Finally, it was the purpose of the research to investigate the effectiveness of the implementation of career academies specifically related to male students of color so that the results can be useful to other schools that are facing similar challenges as well as for the educational leadership community as a whole.

As one looks at research through a case study lens, there are various strengths, and a number of them specifically align with this research project. The first strength directly related to this project is that the case study model offers the researcher the ability to develop the study in an in-depth fashion that is connected to the socio-political context in which the problem lives (Simons, 2009). The case study design also allows the researchers to analyze a number of perspectives through exploration of multiple viewpoints to develop the story of implementation of career academies. The research project is built around the change of the school structure, teaching pedagogy, and view of the school's impact on students' current and future status. This organic and real life setting aligns with the strengths of the case study design. One of the most important advantages to using a case study model is the flexibility it provides the researcher and research process. As the researcher looks to the research project, there is a great deal of unknown. The beauty of the case study is that it allows for the unknown and shifts in the research process and allows for the research to develop the methods which best align with understanding the problem. Case studies allow for participants to be active members in the

research process. The participants' help in constructing the understanding of the phenomenon of equity in education, specifically high school graduation rates, ensures that all participants have equal power in the research project. Finally, the case study design aligns to this research project in that it provides the researcher an opportunity to relay the research in a way that is accessible and personal to others to provide a level of transferability to other settings (Simons, 2009).

Action Research Methodology

For this research project, an action research approach was used. Action research is an interactive and democratic approach to research. As Reason and Bradbury (2008) explained, "action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes" (p.1). Herr and Anderson (2015), defined action research as, "inquiry that is done *by* or *with* insiders to an organization or community" (p. 3). For this research project, the researcher specifically employed the definition of action research developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1987), which includes a goal of social justice related to education:

a form of *collective*, self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. Groups of participants can be teachers, students, principals, parents and other community members-any group with a shared concern (p. 6).

Kemmis and McTaggart (1987) viewed this research process as a reflective process that is purposefully and analytically embarked upon by the researcher or research team. Action research produces optimal results when performed in collaboration with others, especially with others who have a vested interest in the outcome. The action research process is designed around

cycles of actions that an organization has decided to take in attempt to address a specific issue or problem.

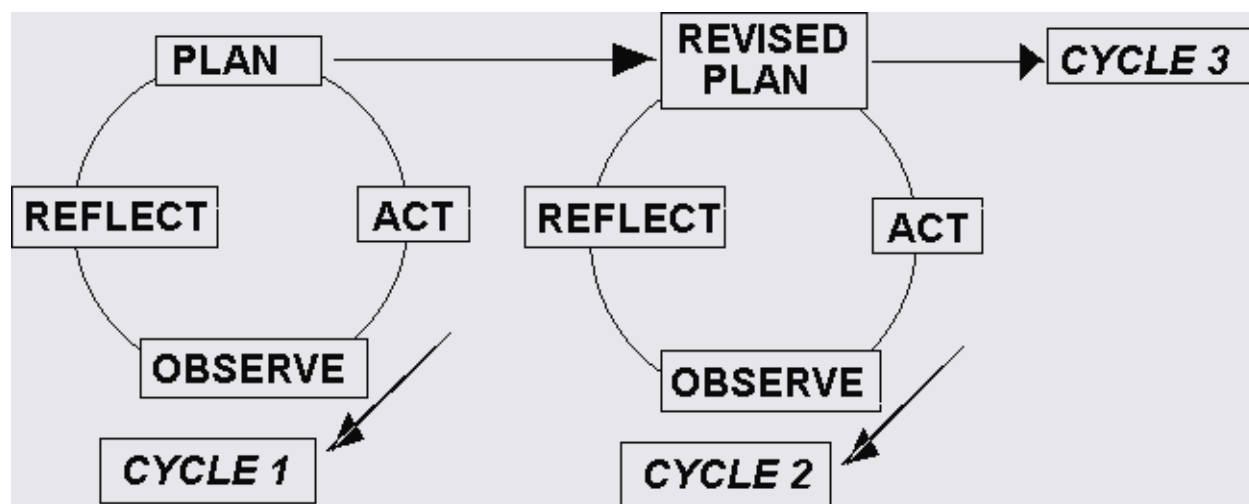


Figure 3: Action Research Process

(Riding, Fowell & Levy, 1995)

The action research process is compatible with work in schools because schools and the issues they face are continuously changing (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). Considered an effective practice to continually analyze the interventions put in place, action research design ensures all students the opportunity in real time to reach their academic potential. Action research is viewed as a process that attempts to solve real life problems, and schools could not be more real life.

There are two goals in action research:

1. Solve a problem (BRHS' graduation rate)
2. Contribute to science (Assist other schools facing similar challenges)

(Coghlan & Brannick, 2014)

The action research process provides the researcher with the flexibility and human element that will provide value to the research for the current school, Brick Road, as well as other schools that struggle with low graduation rates, especially with more vulnerable populations, including male

students of color. The action research process also provides a level of fluidity that is needed when investigating educational settings. The research will organically develop as the study is conducted while taking into account participants' viewpoints and ideas. As mentioned earlier, it is the researcher's goal to develop a further understanding of low graduation rates for male students of color and the potential impact of career academies on their success. This study holds the potential to inform the broader educational leadership community regarding equity and access for all students.

This action research team examined the graduation rate of BRHS and the career academies' potential impact on its growth. The research team implemented change, and they also took the time to step back and reflect on their actions. This act of reflection further developed the team's understanding of the problem and potential solutions. The team further defined the research questions to be addressed while defining specific outcomes for each question. The research team reviewed research on specific interventions to be implemented and decided on interventions that seem to hold the most benefit to the students at BRHS. The team implemented interventions and analyzed the impact of those interventions over the course of a school year. The interventions were analyzed continually and were altered based on the work of the action research team. This continual analysis is what makes the action research model beneficial for work in schools and specifically for the implementation of smaller learning communities with a career focus.

Data Collection Methods

Transcription

Transcription was vital to this research project. Transcription is often used in case studies and action research (Simons, 2009; Herr & Anderson, 2015). Transcription is defined as

the conversion of speech to text and is a vital component to social science research that uses qualitative methods. Oftentimes transcription is derived from interviews and focus groups. The sessions are recorded and then transcribed at a later date (Ross, 2010). For this project the action research team meetings were recorded and transcribed to extrapolate common themes. The team met twice a month throughout the research process where they analyzed data, developed interventions, and discussed concerns surrounding equity in education. Although some in the field are cautious of the use of transcription due to its ability to produce bias by the person transcribing and due to the fact the researcher could exert power based on assumption, realized or otherwise (Tilley & Powick, 2002). Silverman (2001) states that transcripts and the process of transcription produce a record that is exceedingly reliable.

Coding

Flexibility is key in action research studies so that the process of the research can naturally take its course while providing the researcher a general framework to rely on to generate transferability (Simons, 2009). This action research project utilized coded transcriptions from action research team meetings to extrapolate a deeper understanding of the career academies impact on Black and Hispanic males' success in a high school setting. The action research team meetings were recorded and transcribed. For this research project the researcher used the theoretical framework and research questions as a guide while coding (Raddon et al., 2009). Coding is a meticulous process in which a researcher analyzes data to seek out general patterns. This process can take the researcher through the process of reading the transcripts several times and on several occasions. By using this process, the researcher can extrapolate more abstract observations. These observations then become codes that develop into themes from which the researcher can cultivate results to answer the research questions (Raddon

et al., 2009). The researcher utilized the coding software NVivo throughout the research process. NVivo is software that supports qualitative and mixed methods research. The software has been developed to specifically help qualitative researchers in analyzing data such as the transcription of the action team's meetings (QSR International, 2016). One must remember that NVivo is not a program that performs the intellectual work for the researcher, but it further facilitates the process so the researcher can expedite the creative process and coordination of a number of data sources to ensure a more sound study (Ryan, 2009). The coding process allowed the researcher to pinpoint emerging themes which, when combined with the quantitative data, provided two data points to develop theories related to the impact of career academies on Black and Hispanic students in a high school setting.

Reflective Journal

This project used the researcher's reflective journal to develop insight and a further understanding of the research questions. The researcher kept a journal throughout the research process to provide a record of actions, feelings, insight, and next steps. To understand the importance of reflective journaling, one must consider Dewey's theory on mental processes. Dewey (1933) articulated two different mental processes: controlled thought and reflective thinking. Reflective thinking is the thought process in which one needs to examine situations of perplexity and uncertainty. The uncertainty prompts the person to further investigate the situation in an attempt to solve the problem (Dewey, 1933). The world of academia has supported this action of reflection and its importance to critically analyze and to develop insights. Reflection also provides a source of self-regulation, truth and knowledge (Epp, 2008). The reflection process provides the participant an opportunity to move from basic thinking to a place of critical inquiry (Cameron & Mitchell, 1993). Finally, the process provides the researcher a platform to explore judgments and decisions (Mantsouka & Jasper, 2004), made,

which provides a greater possibility to change practice for the betterment of all involved (Burton, 2000). In a research study by Epps (2008), reflective writing was found to produce greater confidence, which in turn led to better decision making for participants. This action research project is an attempt to develop interventions to positively impact vulnerable students' academic achievement in which a journal to record the researcher's reflective thinking could provide valuable insight on the research process and conclusions. Glaser (2001), named the use of reflective journaling as memoing. Memoing is the act of recording one's reflection during data collection and research process. This practice adds to the credibility of the research in that it provides the researcher does not have to rely on his or her memory and has a tangible piece of data from which to reflect. In addition, it helps the researcher develop ideas from the reflection. The added reflection piece further defines the memoing as theoretical memoing (Boychuk-Duscher & Morgan, 2004). Reflective writing has the ability to provide the researcher personal transformation and learning and a deeper understanding of one's self and self-actualization (Richardson & Maltby, 1995). This further understanding can provide both the researcher and the research with richer results to transfer to other educational settings.

Data Analysis

This research project analyzed data from four sources with the first being data points from the transcription and coding of the action research team meetings. Meetings took place twice a month throughout the first five months of the research project. The second data set was collected from a pre/post survey of action research team meetings. The survey is an adaption of David Mount's Social Justice Survey. The research project used attendance, discipline, academic, including credit attainment, to assess student progress as the third data point. The final data source used was the researcher's journal. The most complicated data set came from

the student data. The researcher looked at historical points related to credit attainment for Hispanic and Black males at Brick Road. Data was pulled by semester as well as the incremental grading periods (6 and 9 week's progress reports) for the past three years. The researcher then compared the data to the 2016-2017 school year as the career academies were implemented. Data analysis in this study used and compared semester grades in the four content areas (math, language arts, social studies, and science) before and after the implementation of academies for the Hispanic and Black males at Brick Road. The researcher also looked at discipline and attendance data, but since the research is based on graduation rate, academic data provided indicators of success or failure. The survey used for the action research team was designed to assess the value placed on equity in schools and their level of influence on ensuring an equitable education for students through the teachers they supervise. The survey utilized a Likert scale to assess change. In a research article by Leung (2011), the Likert scale was shown to be a reliable and valid tool to calculate change. The transcription was used to find commonalities as well as outliers through coding. The researcher depended heavily on Simons' (2009) work as they navigated through the transcription and coding, including her suggestion of photocopying transcripts, and cutting the transcripts up by themes to combine the coded transcriptions for a visual analysis. The researcher's journal provided data as the research unfolded while providing a narrative throughout the process. All of these data points were combined to assess the impact of career academies on vulnerable youth at Brick Road.

The researcher generated the data using the district's student information system (SASI), which is capable of accessing live and historical data. The focus on Hispanic and Black males was made after reviewing national numbers and the data at BRHS to pinpoint the greatest need.

The research reviewed averages of analyzed data with student information as well as analyzing the growth or regression related to the pre/post survey.

Progression of Research

Progress of Study

Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, recruitment and development of the action research (AR) team occurred. The AR team was comprised of administrators who vary in race, gender, age and years of experience. Once the action research team was established, the researcher obtained consent from each of the seven members and reviewed expectations required as a member of the team. The researcher then reviewed national and local data to provide context for the research. The researcher also reviewed the literature and theoretical concepts related to the research project. The AR team members each took the pre-survey and began discussing different interventions for the first cycle of the action research. It was decided that the AR team members would also implement a book study for the whole school. Two books were selected for the faculty to read with the first being Jensen's (2009) work, *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it*. Gorski's (2013) paperback, *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap* was chosen as the second book for the book study. The book studies occurred on a monthly basis through departments meetings. The discussions were led by administrators and followed a study guide with added resources provided by the researcher.

BRHS fully implemented career academies for students in grades 10, 11 and 12. The 9th grade students were in their own academy where the students were exposed to the five career academies throughout the school year. Each student was hand scheduled to ensure accurate placement in academic classes and academy related electives. Students shared content teachers

(language arts, math, science and social studies) who have an interest in their academy of choice so they could be taught through the academy lens. For example, if a student was in the Media, Arts and Communication academy, a student might be asked to develop a musical or artistic piece to explain the concept of tone versus taking an assessment over the topic. The academy teachers met twice a month to discuss students' progress on an individual and academy-wide basis. This was also a time for the teachers to discuss instructional pedagogy as well as to develop plans to connect content with professionals in the students' chosen fields. The academy implementation is designed to provide students with a more individualized education while providing relevancy through the connection of the students' interest area and career of choice. This added relevancy and individualization has been put in place to help students to enjoy their school experience and to see its importance to their futures, which will lead to an increase in graduation rates.

Subjectivity Statement

For this research project, the researcher is an active member of the school in which the research is occurring. With this insider action research study comes many strengths and limitations. The researcher holds an administrative role at BRHS. The role of administrator provides the researcher access to the organization and data as well as insight that might not be accessible to others. The insider knowledge as well as the research topic being embedded in the researcher's current work provided a greater richness to the researcher's understanding of the research context and results. Another strength for the researcher as an active member of the research site is that there had already been a level of trust developed prior to the research which helped to produce genuine results. The researcher was seen as an active participant who had the same vested interest in the active pursuit of solutions to the school's low graduation rate.

Though there are a number of strengths to conducting an insider action research project, there are a few negatives as well. The researcher's administrative role could be seen as a power differential that might lead to inaccurate results. There was also a risk that the action research team might provide information that was inaccurate in attempts to provide the researcher with what they thought the researcher wanted to hear versus the truth. The other limitation to the insider action research was that the researcher had to make a conscious effort to allow the research to develop organically rather than directing it. The researcher had to separate her role as an assistant principal and one of a researcher. It was the researcher's hope that she developed a deeper understanding of a career academy's impact on students' successful completion of high school with viable skills for the 21st century, while also evolving as an educational leader.

CHAPTER 4

THE CASE STUDY

Site Overview

When one walks into Brick Road High School, he or she immediately feels a distinct presence. This presence touches of your senses; a variety of visual effects that pull your eyes and a constant hum even when you are the only person in the building. At first, one might see the school as simply old, since it was built in 1976. Therefore, the impact on one's senses could be categorized as stemming from the past, and reminding adults that enter the building of their school days long ago. The sight that draws one's eye is due to the antiquated styling design of the building and the constant whine of the building, a sound that is quickly associated with the old pipes and infrastructure. With a deeper look through the eyes of one who is personally invested in BRHS, there is much more to see.

Yes, the school building is older and has been added onto over the years to make up a hodgepodge of a campus, but there is an underlying current, deep within the walls and soul of BRHS. Once you are open to the beauty of Brick Road, you no longer conjure up feelings of nostalgia, but rather one of change and anticipation as the school honors its past while transforming its future. You no longer see a timeworn building, but a vehicle to drive progress for its students and the educational process. The hum is representative of the learning and progress that takes place inside the school building. It is the sound of a staff and students who are dedicated to marching toward a new day for BRHS and each student's future. It is easy to make assumptions about Brick Road when one first walks in, but one must look harder, and

listen more intently to fully understand the identities and aspirations of the learning community at Brick Road High School.

Context and Purpose

Coghlan and Brannick (2014) identify a number of areas to contemplate during the pre-step phase of action research. The first step is the definition of the need for the research. After this need is identified, one moves to defining what the optimal future or outcome will look like. It is critical that collaborative relationships are developed with the key stakeholders surrounding the problem or issue (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). This three-step process develops the why and who of the research.

As I began this research process, I also started my tenure at Brick Road High School. My principal was transferred to Brick Road High School in October 2013, and I followed him to his new assigned location in August 2014. Though the school had a long-standing reputation as a challenging school due to the transiency and low socio-economic status of its population, the school had always risen above the obstacles to find many successes and accomplishments. In more recent years, the success BRHS once achieved had won tapered off. The school began to struggle with graduating their students within a four-year period and the dropout rate began to steadily increase. When I accepted the position as assistant principal at BRHS, I knew my main charge was to increase the graduation rate. This new position and new charge naturally influenced my research and research process.

Constructing

The first official step for this action research process involved engaging the key stakeholders to participate in a dialogue intended to identify global factors that may be contributing to the identified problem for the study. This first step may differ from other action

research studies. For example, some action research teams delve into the data as a means of defining the issues. Through this dialogue, the stakeholders helped to develop the theoretical and practical framework for the action research cycle (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). Though my charge and work within the school organization were clear, the steps to complete such a task were not well defined. I also had to tread lightly, as I was not only new to Brick Road, but I was also seen as the person the new principal brought with him, raising suspicions of favoritism, or intentions of spying or other covert actions as the principal's informant. I am not one to come into a new work environment and make grand changes and proclamations. As a trained counselor, I tend to listen much more than I speak. I capitalized on this skill set as I worked to better understand the school's history to provide me with a foundational background to assist me in this process. I could work with the others to develop Brick Road's future. This prompted me to sit in on several meetings in which I focused on developing relationships with teachers across content areas in the school, as well as students, parents, and community members. I also analyzed myriad school data to develop a richer understanding of the context. I reviewed the academic, attendance, and behavioral data, and I also carefully examined longitudinal perception survey data from the community, parents and students to identify trends. I familiarized myself with Advanced Placement information, the master schedule, teacher retention data, SAT and ACT scores, college and scholarship information, as well as budgetary data for the school. During this beginning phase of my research, I met with my principal and administrative team on a consistent basis to develop plans to move the school in a positive direction and to provide our students more opportunities. From the data exploration, I developed research questions and started on my action research journey.

Research Questions

- What interventions hold the potential to increase the graduation rate for male students of color?
- How and in what ways could smaller learning communities with a career focus impact the graduation rate of Black and Hispanic male students in a large urban high school?
- What is learned by an action research team through the implementation of smaller learning communities with a career focus?

Action

Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) next step in the cycle is action. In this step, the interventions that were identified collaboratively are put in to place. Once the action phase has taken place, the action research team evaluates the action taken and then evaluates its results. Coghlan and Brannick (2014) outline four questions for the evaluation phase:

- Did the original construction fit the problem;
- Did the actions chosen match the construction;
- Was the action taken appropriate;
- What leads into the next cycle of action research?



(Kolk, 2017)

Figure 4: Cycles of Action Research

As in the majority of action research projects, this action research project exhibited multiple cycles occurring simultaneously (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). The main cycle is the implementation of the career academies at BRHS. This central cycle is the broad action taken to improve the graduation rate for the students at Brick Road and more specifically, for our Hispanic and Black males. While this overarching intervention was being implemented, there were smaller actions taking place based on the recommendations of the action research team. The smaller actions included a school-wide book study that focused on teaching students in poverty, targeted interventions for students who were failing classes throughout the research process, development of academy leadership teams, hand scheduling each student at BRHS, integration of teaching through an academy lens and project based learning, community outreach, and transitioning from a traditional schedule to a block schedule.

Coghlan and Brannick (2014) provide an excellent illustration to assist in further understanding this concept in their book, *Doing Action Research in Your own Organization*. To fully connect this concept, you must first envision a clock and its ability to measure time in two different variations simultaneously. The hour hand measures hours while the second hand measures seconds. Both are important measures of time and provide different units of information. In this research project, the hour and second hands are recording different interventions to increase BRHS graduation rate. The hour hand was used to record the change in the overall academy implementation and the second hand represented the impact to Hispanic and Black males across time. To further extend this step a visual representation is provided through the visualization of the inside workings of a clock. The inside of a clock is made up of gears, screws and knobs. Each piece has a specific action that when combined with the other pieces and their action result in the movement of the hour and second hand which allows it to measure

time. In the same respect, the gears, screws and knobs of this action research (block scheduling, poverty reading, teaching through academy lens, etc.) all work in unison to make the clock of academy implementation work and record growth. See example below:

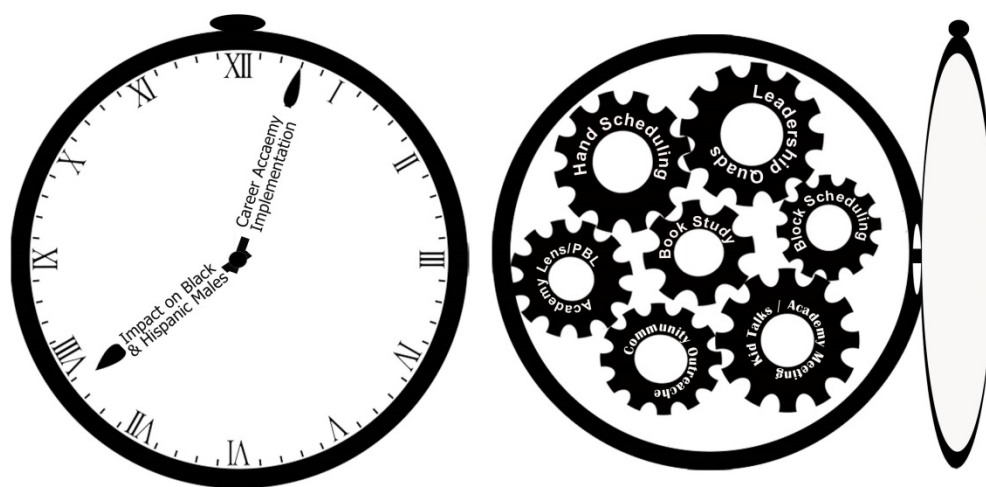


Figure 5: Watch Analogy

Dionysian Approach

For this research project, the researcher relied heavily on Heron's Dionysian approach. The Dionysian approach emphasizes the use of imagination and the implementation of strategic steps that integrate action and reflection versus the Apollonian approach, which is more rational and linear. Though Heron is cautious for researchers to use either two approaches exclusively, because this research project was being conducted in a school, it naturally lent itself to a less restrictive and adaptable approach (Heron, 1996). The use of the Dionysian approach was selected mainly due to the flexibility and latitude allowed by the district for BRHS to execute the plan for the implementation of career academies. This in turn was transferred to the staff by the administration throughout the research and implementation process.

The flexibility and resourcefulness allowed through the use of the Dionysian Approach were key characteristics that proved to be appealing to the action research team. All of the ideas shared were documented and considered, and the meetings transformed into an open forum for idea sharing and development of data driven decisions to increase opportunities for our students to graduate within a four-year period and increase the school's graduation rate. Though we did set benchmarks for desired achievement, and made what we thought were rational decisions, the team was not tied to the initial initiatives and let the work develop throughout the progression on the action research process. This encouraged the use of imagination, sparked a sense of freedom, and allowed us the license to develop our own path that transcended beyond the action research team to the students and staff.

Brick Road High School Career Academy Implementation

Academy Selection

As the conversations among the research team evolved regarding the implementation of the academy model, the natural question on everyone's mind organically emerged and slowly crept into frequent conversations: *Which academies would be offered to support the best interest of the students and community at BRHS?* As an administrative team, we had strong opinions about specific academy offerings, and we knew consideration of the district vision for academy schools would need to be honored as we moved forward with our school-wide plan. Consideration of both proved to be important factors when input from students was solicited.

We chose not to survey students or conduct interviews. Alternately, we sought input from the student body via *Career Cruising*, which is a web-based data collection system governed by the state. The *Career Cruising* program is designed to collect self-reported longitudinal career related data for students in the state. The district's counseling department

facilitates the program, and students participate in the program throughout elementary, middle, and high school. The students are exposed to and can explore careers, which over the years develop into a portfolio for each student. We wholeheartedly honored the cluster data produced from *Career Cruising*, and we then defined the specific academies and course selections that would be offered at BRHS based off of the students' most popular career choices. This allowed us information necessary to understand and analyze students' thoughts and desires concerning future careers without creating additional anxiety for students or interrupting precious instructional time for the educationally at-risk populations.

Along with the data from the career exploration tool, *Career Cruising*, we also looked at the job growth reports and employment projections for the county, state, and the U.S. As we compiled the data and began to conduct open discussions with key district personnel and local leadership along with the action research teams, we were able to narrow the options of potential academies while taking into consideration of our availability of facilities, currently established programs, and the availability of teachers. This led us to agree upon five academies and a 9th grade academy, intended to serve all incoming freshman and provide every student with a rich overview of the five career academies and the pathways offered by each. The five career academies and pathways were as follows:

Architecture and Construction: Architectural Drawing and Design, Carpentry, Electrical, Plumbing and Masonry

Entrepreneurship and Leadership: Marketing, Management, Entrepreneurship and Army ROTC

Health and Human Services: Culinary Arts, Sports Medicine, Emergency Response Services and Early Childhood Care and Education

Media, Arts and Communication: Audio/Visual Technology and Film, Performing Arts and Journalism

Science, Technology, Engineering and Math: Computer Science, Web Design, Programming, Engineering Drafting and Design and Robotics

Academy school visits

Our team was fortunate: we had more than a year to develop our academies and cultivate our collective implementation plan. We were also provided the opportunity to enhance our learning through access to six other high schools in our district that had successfully implemented an academy model in their schools the previous school year. A diverse group of BRHS faculty and staff members visited each of the other academy high schools as well as schools in other districts and states that had implemented the academy model and it was well established. In particular, the action research team members visited three of the other academy schools in our district to learn about and explore their scheduling processes.

In addition to site visits in our local school district, the research team visited academy programs outside of our state to broaden our perspective as we considered and solidified our own academy plan. This included a trip to an award-winning academy school in Virginia to enhance our understanding and discussion of scheduling our students in the most beneficial manner. These visits provided BRHS a unique opportunity to learn from mistakes and benefit from triumphs of other academy schools. We were able to compile and sift through all of the information to develop a plan that would serve our students and teachers in the most effective way. The visits took place over an eighteen-month period and continued as we learned from visits to additional career academy schools. Continuing with the Dionysian approach of

imagination and flexibility, BRHS is open to new ideas and developing an academy model that fits with Brick Road to provide our students with more opportunities.

Action Research Team

One of the major challenges faced by this action research project was the coordination of the action research team meetings. The action research team was made up of six other assistant principals whom were all intensely involved in the academy development and implementation. They were all excited to be involved in the research and the benefits that the team could bring to the creation of the career academies. Five of the assistant principals volunteered to participate before the recruitment process began, and one joined once we began to solidify the 9th grade academy. Once participants of the action research team signed and the members became “official,” I asked each one of them to take a pre-survey related to social justice. The survey was administered during our first official meeting. I asked the team to participate in the survey at their leisure and to return it to my mailbox outside of the meeting to preserve the anonymity of individual responses. The purpose of the survey was to gauge the viewpoints of the team related to social justice before we led our departments through the book study regarding teaching students of poverty and engaged in supplemental activities related to the same topic in our weekly meetings. The pre-survey was then followed up with a post survey once the research project had been completed to gauge any differences in their viewpoints from the beginning of the research to the end.

During the action research meetings, the action research team reviewed the progress of the academy implementation, prepared for the book study with teachers, developed plans for academy meetings, and participated in a deeper exploration of social justice issues. Additionally, the team explored a variety of other interventions to address issues, collaborate, and continue to

make plans for the future of the academies. In fact, one of the major topics discussed at the meetings was actually pulling everyone's calendar together to set aside time to conduct our meetings. Since all of the members of the action research team were assistant principals, it was a challenge to find time that would coordinate with everyone's schedule. When we agreed on a time and place to meet, inevitably an issue would come up for each of us that would prevent us from attending. We adjusted times and explored a number of permutations to include before, during and after school times, online communication, and face-to-face forums. Though the attempts to find a convenient time for everyone was frustrating, we continued to maintain our collective commitment to the team and we were finally able to pinpoint a time that would work best for everyone. We met on Thursday mornings during the school day once students were settled in first block. We also began meeting in the professional development room, which provided us a sense of quiet and official meeting space. We adjusted to having people come and go from the meetings as issues arose that needed immediate attention and participants worked together to ensure everyone was caught up and on track.

As the action research leader, I was specific and purposeful in our activities and agenda items, and I made sure the majority of our time was structured such that the meetings allowed for dialogue between the members to flow naturally. For example, during one particular meeting, I established the agenda to review some of our upcoming book study topics in preparation for our next department meeting, and my intent was for the team to review Peggy McIntosh's, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Instead, we spent the entire meeting discussing teacher observations. Although we did not address what I had intended, the conversation related to observations was much more important and timely. During the restructuring of BRHS to

transform into the academy model, we as supervisors had to change the way we had traditionally observed teachers.

In previous school years, each administrator was assigned to observe and evaluate a specific content department. With the implementation of the new academy design, the administrators were charged with observing the teachers in their specific academy. No longer were you able to work with one department, rather the academy assistant principals had to observe teachers across content areas and grade levels. This meant becoming well versed in not only all of the curricula, but also communicating with the different departments to know the expectations of each content area. We found that within each department there were different norms for classroom practices and teaching of content. For example, in some departments the practice was to post essential questions on the board while others would post “I Can” statements. We agreed that both are excellent means of communicating the instructional objective for each lesson, but with the number of departments (math, language arts, etc.), subjects (biology, chemistry, physics, etc.), and levels (advanced placement, honors, gifted, resource, etc.), it was difficult to recall from room-to-room what the established expectations were. Although there was a brief discussion about requiring all departments to unify and streamline practices across the building, it was inevitably decided that doing so was not in the best interest of the students or the teachers. How could we expect teachers to change their teaching methods to more student-focused, project-based learning delivery, but in the next breathe dictate what we required to be posted on the board? We decided that we collectively needed to do more to develop a further understanding of each of the contents and developed a central, electronic location to easily access each department’s protocols, goals and curricula. The action research process taught me and allowed me to become more flexible. It allowed for the team to guide its course, and in doing

so, we were able to address and develop a solution for an area of concern in order to better serve our teachers and staff.

The meetings also afforded us the opportunity to commiserate as a group as we trod through this newfound educational landscape. The adjustment for our students and teachers was extensive. We changed almost everything they had known for the length of their career at BRHS whether it was as a professional or a student. As leaders in the building of each academy, it was our job to alleviate those fears and to not show a moment of doubt that this *was* the appropriate direction for the school to take. However, behind the scenes we were adjusting with a great deal of change. We were charged with developing the academies from the ground up. The proposition was exciting, but the pressure to ensure we implemented the model with fidelity was at times overwhelming. Not only did we have to convince everyone that this was the right thing to do and gain buy-in from our school community, we also only had one opportunity to get it right. When we were brought into the fold of the academy development, we were told we would be the principals of smaller communities that connected to the larger BRHS. Though we all had experience in administrative roles, being charged to serve as a principal was a daunting and overwhelming thought. From budgets to meetings with community members, we were all thrown in headfirst together, so the weekly meetings provided us the support and sense of community we all needed to adjust to our new role. As the researcher, the action research process provided me with the flexibility of not needing to stick to a rigid schedule rather it allowed the work to develop organically. In the end, I think we all began to look forward to the meetings to not only develop further plans, but also to provide each other with the support needed to walk out of each meeting with the confidence to drive the initiative forward.

Meeting with community partners

Once the local businesses and community began hearing of the transition to academies, they began reaching out to the school to learn more about the initiative and to express their interest in assisting with its success. The academy implementation is not just for the students and staff at Brick Road, but also for the community. The community of BRHS suffers from a negative reputation, and property values in the area continue to decrease and give way to low-income renters and significant transiency. As with many communities across the country, a community's reputation is a reflection of their schools. Therefore, it makes sense for the community and the schools to work together to reinstate the positive reputation Brick Road and its community shared in the past.

In the infancy stage of development of the academy model, one such example of community interest had a direct impact on the academy I lead. Habitat for Humanity heard that we planned to develop a construction and architecture academy and representatives from the organization reached out to set up a meeting to discuss how they may be able to directly assist us as we began to develop our mission and goals. What they did not know is that when we were brainstorming ideas about the future goals of the academy, we discussed that we would eventually like to have our third- and fourth-year students design and construct a house from the ground up and donate the home to a family in need through a community partner, such as Habitat for Humanity. Though we were excited to meet with them, we were so young in our development we could not offer much in terms of immediate, concrete action. The architecture and construction leadership team made plans for the future and the connections to help make our plans a reality. Similar meetings occurred among the other academies, and we soon realized that if we removed barriers that traditionally did not send a welcoming message to the Brick Road

community, we could strategically develop mutually beneficial relationship since we were all working to accomplish the same goal: More opportunities for our community at large.

9th grade starting point

Since BRHS had more than a year to plan and implement career academies, this allowed the time needed to provide a slow, incremental roll-out of the academy model. It was decided that the ninth grade students would be required to participate in what we referred to as “a survey year” in which they would be exposed to each academy on a rotating monthly basis. The hope was that once they were introduced to each academy through the exposure to the PBL instructional model and the academy lens, they would be able to make a more informed decision when it was time for each of them to select an academy for the next year, and hopefully, the rest of their high school career.

Along with the students experiencing each academy to make an educated decision for their academy choice, they were also placed in teams. Each team included a shared math, language arts, science, and social studies teacher. Students travelled throughout the day with the same students and teachers to develop a smaller learning community for each student. The smaller learning community provided students with consistency and support during their transition to high school. With shared students, teachers were able to provide added support to their students. This support was exhibited through a variety of avenues. For example, the smaller groups of teachers were able to discuss student concerns and were able to address any issue that might arise from class-to-class. This also allow for a shared responsibility of parent communication, which was a new experience for most of the high school teachers. This led to more frequent communication, as well as something as simple as sharing calendars to ensure that students were not overloaded with assessments or significant assignments in one day or week.

The ninth grade students were housed in a separate and central area of the school to limit transition time and to increase ease of communication and access to content teachers. The ninth grade academy had a dedicated assistant principal as well as three other administrators housed in the ninth grade area to support teachers and students.

The ninth grade teachers officially met twice a month to discuss students, interventions and upcoming events, and they often met informally throughout the day and weeks. These meetings were vital to the success of the smaller learning community and provided all students an added layer of support needed to be successful. The whole academy met twice a month to align with the academy focus of the month, analyze data for their students and content areas, and address any issues. The ninth grade academy also held special events for students such as parent nights and field trips to increase engagement for all stakeholders.

Branding

A key component in the development of the academies was the branding of each academy. The career academy structure has a laser focus on building partnerships with the community, there needed to be a solid advertising campaign with logos and images to represent each academy and the school as a whole. For example, once it was decided that we would have the architecture and construction academy, within two weeks Habitat for Humanity was at BRHS to discuss a partnership in which they asked for literature to take to their corporate offices. Due to this taking place in the infancy of the implementation, the career academy assistant principals developed the logo and graphic for their particular academy.



Figure 6: BRHS Logos

Block Scheduling

One of the first structural changes planned in the career academy development was for BRHS to transition from a traditional schedule to a block schedule. The rationale for this change was to provide students and teacher a long period of instructional time to further develop students' understanding of the concepts being taught. The time period for block classes is ninety minutes versus fifty minutes incorporated in a traditional schedule. The transition required changes to the master schedule, but the most significant change was related to the teachers' use of instructional time. Teachers now had to adjust to almost double the amount of instructional time, and they would now see students every other day as opposed to every day. Teachers were

given the opportunity to explore the variations of block schedules and were able to vote on the type of block schedule that would be used by BRHS. They chose an A/B block schedule with Mondays being a skinny day. Students would attend all their classes on Mondays for a shorter period of time. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, students would attend four of their classes, and on Wednesdays and Fridays, they attended the other four classes in which they were enrolled.

Teachers were provided a series of professional development sessions including ways to plan and implement lessons using a block time frame, as well as a variety of ways to include the academy lens activities in their lessons. Teachers were provided release time to collaborate with their content area teams and fellow academy teachers to develop crosswalks. Crosswalks were developed by comparing instructional calendars across contents and electives so teachers could pinpoint similarities to plan cross-curricular activities or make connections across content areas in their lessons. Once the teachers were able to identify similarities, they were able to make the connections to the electives in their academy as well as other content areas. Even with the crosswalk activities, the teachers still experienced a great deal of stress related to planning for the extended period of time. To alleviate a bit of this anxiety, all departments were given additional release time to work on plans as well as paid planning days over the summer to revamp their plans. The administration's biggest concern was that the extra instructional time would not be utilized effectively, thus defeating the purpose of moving to a block schedule. To monitor this implementation, the team agreed to increase the number of formal and informal walkthroughs during the first semester of implementation to provide teachers with more support and feedback.

Teachers

Teachers were given placement preference forms at the beginning of the second term. The preference form included questions regarding their intentions for the next school year.

BRHS struggles with teacher and student retention. This information is invaluable as plans are being developed for the following year. The form also included inquiries into the grade level, content, course, level, and academy in which they were most interested. There was also a great deal of time spent in faculty, department, and professional development meetings responding to questions related to each academy so teachers could make the most logical choice for their future academy. The teachers were able to provide written responses, and they ranked their choices. These sheets were collected and then compiled electronically to ensure their requests were honored. Requests were also vetted by the curriculum and academy assistant principals to ensure certification requirements were in place that aligned to preference requests.

Students

In unison with the teachers completing their preference forms, students were engaged in course selection for the following year. Students worked with their teachers and counselors to select the appropriate classes for each student's sequence toward graduation. Teachers were responsible for recommendation of content and rigor level for the next year. The students selected elective courses and ranked them by interest level. Their academies were selected based on their selection of electives. Though students were not informed that their elective choice would dictate their academy placement, this was not done in a manner to deceive the students. Rather this placement method was enacted with the hopes of eliciting true selections of interest and not ones based on external influences, such as a friend's choices.

Once the academy and curriculum assistant principals compiled all the information, the students were hand-scheduled for the following school year. This means that each student's eight classes for each semester were manually entered into the scheduling system. Along with manually entering each student, the assistant principal selected teachers for each class so teachers

who were affiliated with the academy would teach the assigned student cohort. Though tedious and time consuming, this process was the only way to ensure true academies and accurate placement for the students. The other positive to scheduling students in this fashion was the attention to detail each assistant principal was able to give to each student. Unfortunately, many students at BRHS fail courses throughout their high school career, which places them off-track for graduation. This time and meticulousness led to a more accurate scheduling process for students. Many student conferences were held to discuss course selection for the coming year and to develop a plan to take the necessary steps for “on-time” graduation. Another unintended benefit of the scheduling process was that it provided the academy assistant principals an opportunity to get to know their students and their progress to graduation, whether through meeting with them or just through familiarizing themselves with the student’s course history. Though the time commitment was quite large, the outcome and benefits outweighed the arguments in favor of computer scheduling as opposed to individual manual scheduling.

Academy time

The action research team discussed the move to a block schedule, many concerns were brought to the table. The most concerning to the team was the fact that our students would now be taking eight classes in a semester versus the traditional seven. As mentioned earlier, our students historically failed a number of classes within their high school career, so to think they could handle the extra course load of an eighth course some thought would be unlikely. Therefore, we developed a class for students called, “academy time.” This ungraded class would be taught by one of their academy teachers, and the course could be used for a number of purposes. Students could use the class as a time to catch up on work for their other classes, retake tests or quizzes or receive extra tutoring from their academy time teacher or student peer

leaders. They could also use the time to utilize the media center or other labs throughout the building. Students who were passing all of their classes and in good standing could choose this time for enrichment. For example, if a student chose to do so, they could arrange with their academy time teacher and another teacher to leave the academy time teacher's room and work with another teacher in the building. So, for a student who really enjoyed art or robotics, he or she could spend his or her academy time in the art or robotic teacher's room, working on personal or extra projects to pursue their interests.

We initially thought and viewed academy time as being more for our students who struggled, and quickly realized that our advanced placement and high achieving students wanted to take advantage of the period academy time created in their schedule. We did not anticipate that rather than be concerned about the lack of credit in the class, students would use it as a time to catch up and stay on course in their classes. This happened across the spectrum of students. Some students wanted to have academy time so that they would have a built in homework time since many of the students worked many hours outside of school to support their families. For others, the extra time offered opportunities to pursue one of their interest areas, but had previously been unable secure transportation after school to participate. Academy time has been a bigger success than we anticipated, and has turned into a way we can provide another level of support for our students, regardless of circumstances.

Academy meetings

To help the transition and to ensure that the academy teachers were on the same page, the action research team decided that academies should meet twice a month. The academy assistant principal led these meetings with the assistance of the academy lead teacher and counselor. The academy meeting first began as more of housekeeping and team building time. With all of the

changes, it was important to provide the teachers a place to receive answers to their questions and a forum to address any concerns. It was also important to meet and develop a community for the academy and its members. Historically, teachers met as a faculty, as departments, and as a professional learning group with the teachers that taught the same subject area. Now, a certain degree of re-norming had to take place, and the teachers had to adjust to meeting on a regular basis with teachers outside of their content and, in many instances, their comfort zones. The academy assistant principals felt it was extremely important to establish a team atmosphere for each academy, and the additional scheduled meeting time provided a great forum to accomplish this goal. One of the main objectives for the first few meetings was to gather the teachers' insights and suggestions for how the academy meetings would run by developing norms, and the direction of each academy as a whole. So the main objectives for the first couple of months' meetings were to establish a team atmosphere, establish norms, help teachers' adjustment to academy implementation, and provide teachers a voice in the future of the academies.

Team building is an ongoing process; therefore, after two months, the meetings transitioned towards more of what the meetings were intended to be: a time to discuss teaching and learning of the students at BRHS. One of the most important and integral parts of a smaller learning community or academy is the individualized focus on students. Students' interest and class placement with common teachers provides a platform for a more watchful eye on each student. To help facilitate this process with BRHS teachers, each academy scheduled a time for Kid Talks. Kid Talks were a time where teachers who share instruction of and responsibility of a student meet to discuss individual student progress or lack thereof. It provided the teachers with a structured time to talk through what might be working or not working in certain classes, discuss information a student might have shared to provide insight to the other teachers, develop

a plan to assist the student in all classes, and assign a person to communicate with parents. Kid Talks not only provided teachers with insight they might not have had in the traditional high school setting, but also helped carry the load in communication with parents. Oftentimes, the student is included in the Kid Talk to gain the student's perception of what the issues might be and to be an active member of the solution. Kid Talks also show the student that their teachers are all involved in their progress and have a vested interest in their success. Each academy developed their own plan for carrying out Kid Talks. This variation was based on the size of the academy and the number of shared teachers for students. Regardless of the protocols for Kid Talks, each academy actively engaged in kid talks during every meeting.

Another key element of the academy meetings was an instructional focus on teaching through the academy lens and project-based learning. A major piece of the implementation of academies was the change in the view of instruction. Teachers were asked to integrate the academy focus in their lessons. They were not asked to make large changes in their lessons, but rather find small ways to incorporate their academy's focus. For example, a political systems teacher who was a member of the architecture and construction academy introduced a lesson on bills going before Congress chose to use a bill specifically related to construction. Another example would be an English teacher in the media, arts, and communication academy requiring students to choose an artistic avenue (piece of music or dance, etc.) to communicate their understanding of tone. Since this was a new concept for teachers, but such a vital component to the academy implementation, the academy meetings were to further explore the idea and to solidify plans for integration. Rather than the academy assistant principal standing before the group and telling the group what to do, the meetings were designed for the teachers to present their ideas or talk through what they had tried with their colleagues and to collaborate regarding

the initiative. One of the great and unexpected occurrences, since it was so young in the initiative, was how the conversations grew to such a level that the teachers began to plan academy lens activities across the curriculum. Having the forum in which the teachers could openly discuss their fears, failures, celebrations, and visions took the academy lens implementation to a level unforeseen by administration, especially so quickly. Below is a quote from a history teacher who was discussing his academy lens activity with his colleagues:

“I teach co-lab sections of U.S. history, so it is hard to keep everyone actively participating in what I have going on, but when I do an academy lens activity—even with the classes that are not my academy sections—they are so much more engaged and my test and quiz scores are higher. It does take more time to plan just because I am new to it, but it has really helped my kids.”

Researcher’s Reflective Journal December 16, 2016

The transition was not completely smooth, as some people did not want to alter their well-established plans, but the overwhelming majority of teachers did and continued to add academy related pieces to their work.

Project-based learning (PBL) is the other instructional component that is integral to the academy implementation. This is an area where we must still grow and learn a great deal. Project-based learning can be a huge undertaking. PBLs are designed to help students draw more connections to their academy interest and their other content classes. PBLs could be viewed as a large culminating project that typically ends in a presentation for a panel of judges to determine the best overall project. PBLs take a great deal of time and effort to plan and coordinate. When the idea of PBL came up in meetings with teachers, one could feel their anxiety levels rising, so in an effort to alleviate their stress levels, PBLs were placed on the

backburner and the instructional focus was placed on academy lens activities. Some teachers still elected to implement PBLs, which was welcomed, but an overall expectation for the school would not go into effect until the following year.

The academy meetings had a number of positives that outweighed adding another meeting to the teachers' plates. Academy meetings provided the time and space to build academy teams and for each academy to develop a unique personality. The students were able to see that the teachers were working together in their best interest (even though I am sure some of the time they did not enjoy it). Teachers had a forum to voice their concerns and help develop the future of their academy. Most importantly, the instructional conversations began to change and develop into a real career focus. Coming together twice a month proved to be invaluable in the transition and implementation of career academies for BRHS.

Book Study

The action research team implemented book studies for teachers to participate through departments related to the education of students in poverty. The book study sessions were held once a month during department meetings and covered two books: Jensen's (2009) work, *Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools can do About it*; and Gorski's (2013) paperback, *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap*. The books represented the two schools of thought related to teaching students who live in poverty. These two books were selected to allow for diverse and meaningful discussion that would hopefully lead to a fundamental shift in how all teachers viewed the students who occupied their classrooms on a daily basis. The intent was not to engage in a political or economic debate, but to equip teachers with a greater insight on how to engage, connect, and serve the students at BRHS. A discussion guide supplemented the

discussions, and academy assistant principals were given supplemental materials to provide rich facilitation of their department's book study.

For the most part, teachers were open to the book study and learning new ideas and strategies to put in place to effectively reach all students. Some were not as open, but the overall opinion was that the book study was worth the time it took. Beyond reading the books, it was the discussions with their colleagues that they found most beneficial.

Triad

The development and implementation of the academy was also not determined by the academy assistant principal exclusively, but rather via a triad of support through a lead teacher and counselor. The lead teacher is a role for content teachers (language arts, mathematics, social studies, or science) to assist in the instructional side of the academy. Their role is to assist and model for teachers delivering instruction through the academy lens and project-based learning. They assist in running academy meetings, meeting with advisory boards and community members, communicating with teachers through newsletters, emails, and electronic message boards, as well as working with administration to meet academy's needs.

Academy lead selection was thorough in its design because the roles and responsibilities of the academy lead teachers are so important to the success of the academy. The first step was to provide content teachers a deeper understanding of the position, specifically with the expectations of lead teachers. From there, the teachers were asked to submit their names and the academy in which they would like to serve to the academy administration. Once the names of interested teachers were compiled, those applicants were scheduled for an interview with the academy assistant principals. The interview process included generic questions such as, "Why are you interested in being academy lead teacher?" It also asked teachers what they saw as their

role and what ideas they had for the specific academy. Once they were completed, the five academy assistant principals met and made their final recommendations for lead teachers. The final two steps were for each finalist lead teacher candidate to meet with the principal and officially review and sign the lead teacher expectations.

The counselor selection was much easier since there were only five counselors available to work with the 10th through 12th grade students. The academy assistant principals met and discussed which of the counselors had the potential to most effectively serve each academy. From there, each counselor was asked which academy they would like to work with, and it just so happened that the assistant principals and counselor selections matched perfectly, so the process was able to stop there. From this point, the academy triads began meeting and making further plans for each academy.

The most important piece of the implementation of career academies is the instructional component. There were steps taken to help teachers with the transition such as block scheduling, hand scheduling to ensure common students, and crosswalk development to establish similarities across contents and elective courses throughout the first year of implementation, we still saw the teachers struggling with applying academy lens activities in their lessons. The action research team decided to have academy meetings in elective classrooms in the hope that the exposure to the elective classes would help the teachers make cross-curricular connections and highlight teachers who were using the academy lens effectively. However, the adjustment to integrating more academy activities was not increasing at the expected rate, so it was decided that the triad would become a quad. The additional member to the academy leadership team was an elective teacher so that more of the career and technical piece could be represented. This addition was

made at the end of the research process, and one of the final actions taken by the action research team.

Academy Coach

Since outreach to the community and providing students with opportunities outside of the school building was so important, a position was developed for an academy coach. This role was designed to be a liaison for the school and to make the connections necessary to provide students real life opportunities. The academy coach was selected by the principal and was a technical education teacher. He was relieved of his teaching responsibilities and worked full time developing relationships with businesses and community partners. He was able to spend a great deal more time exploring different avenues for each academy. His background in education as a content and elective teacher made him a perfect person to communicate the vision, needs, and benefits to committing to support BRHS and its academies.

Advisory Board

Through the academy coach connections and outreach, each academy was able to develop an advisory council. The advisory councils were made up of community and business leaders who had worked in academy related fields. For example, in the architecture and construction academy, the advisory board was comprised of seven professionals in the fields related to architecture and construction including post-secondary institutions as well as the academy leadership team. The advisory board developed plans for the academy including funding, external learning opportunities, guest speakers and overall academy development. The council was led by a construction company president and co-chaired by a retired architect who was still active in programs for educating future architects. The board members provided a great deal to the academies overall as they had current work experience and knowledge of what was

needed to be successful in their field of work. They also worked individually with their area of expertise elective teachers to influence curriculum and opportunities for students beyond the regular classroom. Though the academy implementation is in its infancy, the advisory boards are looking to the future for providing students extern and internships to enhance their preparedness for their career or continuation of schooling. The advisory boards meet twice a year and are fundamental in the outreach and success of each academy.

No More Action

As the application of the career academies continued at BRHS, the final step for the action research team began to take place: no more changes. Teachers were being asking to adjust to 90 minute blocks when they were accustomed to the traditional 50 minute periods. They were being asked to infuse academy lens activities to their lessons, to work collaboratively with teachers outside their content areas while continuing to work with their professional learning communities. They also had to adjust to being evaluated by an administrator who might not have experience in their content while their evaluations looked different. Their professional expectations had also been adjusted and increased, so that they were now required to meet twice a month for Kid Talks, to meet with community members, and to participate in a book study to challenge their views of students at BRHS. Teachers were having an extremely hard time adjusting to the loss of instructional time through the block. Even though the block is designed to provide longer stretches of time with students when the instructional time is calculated across a year or semester there actually ends up being less time with students overall. As the team reflected on the first semester of full academy implementation and next steps, it was decided to refrain from taking additional steps and to take a step back to support the teachers and school through current initiatives. Non-action is an action by slowing down and letting the execution of

academy implementation take place without further complication and stress. That is one of the great strengths of action research, in that the process is flexible and driven by data. In this case, the data was informal data collected from the teachers in meetings and individual conversations to slow down based on how overwhelmed they were. This added anxiety could lead to add stress to students, which would lead to the complete opposite of the academy implementation's intent.

Conclusion

The building is older and might not be the most beautiful school. There is a distinct feel and level of noise at BRHS. It does not, however, take a person long to realize the beauty that is Brick Road. It is not in the noise or visual appeal; it is in the people you meet once you walk in the door. It is the students, teachers, and community members' eyes as they light up when they are provided a chance to speak about all the great things happening at BRHS. It is the hum of change and promise. Though there are other schools across the US that are implementing or are currently academy schools, BRHS is changing the educational landscape for its students, teachers, and community. It is uniquely designed for them and no one else because the students deserve an education that is tailored to their needs, so they can have opportunities. BRHS cannot just be smelled, seen, or heard; it has to be felt. The school and this study are not only focused on increasing graduation rates, but also providing students options to break the cycle of poverty and seeing a future for themselves that they previously could not see, touch, smell or feel. Overall, the academy effort is about providing options for students to break the cycle of poverty, so that they can envision a promising future.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

With the United States (U.S.) spending more than other countries on education while still producing underperforming students and graduates compared to other countries—including those that spend less per student—there is a level of urgency to improve the educational system in the U.S. (OECD, 2016). Many factors contribute to the concern with the United States' educational system, including but not limited to poverty, transiency, absenteeism and dropout rates. One such school struggling with the above-listed factors and more is Brick Road High School (BRHS) in the Point Break School System (PBSS). With the support of PBSS, the high school is currently transitioning to a career academy model. As enacted at BRHS, the career academy model offers students the choice of five different career academies where they are taught through the career pathway lens they have selected based on career interests. Further adding cohesion to the academies, the students are scheduled and taught by teams of teachers who share an interest in the career path as well. This action research study examines the impact of the transition within the high school to a career academy model on Hispanic and Black males. At the study's onset, BRHS's graduation rate was 63.13%, and the Black and Hispanic males comprised the majority of students who dropout or do not graduate within the four-year time frame (Point Break School System, 2016). Research studies have shown a positive correlation between Black and Hispanic male's achievement level and career academy models (Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Kemple & Snipes, 2000).

This study was intended to explore the effects of developing career academies to increase the graduation rate for students at Brick Road High School and to analyze specifically the achievement of vulnerable students and their successful completion of high school in four years.

This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

- What interventions hold the potential to increase the graduation rate for male students of color?
- How and in what ways could smaller learning communities with a career focus impact the graduation rate of Black and Hispanic male students in a large urban high school?
- What is learned by an action research team through the implementation of smaller learning communities with a career focus?

Findings to Research Question #1

For research question one—What interventions hold the potential to increase the graduation rate for male students of color?—the researcher utilized data from the action research team’s pre and post survey data, students’ academic records and the researcher’s reflective journal, maintained by the researcher throughout the study. The rationale for the use of these data sources was explained in depth in chapter three. The pre and post survey were designed to look at changes in the action research team’s thoughts related to social justice and equity in education after leading a book study related to the education of students of poverty. The students’ academic records were used to understand whether or not a shift occurred in students’ achievement after the implementation of a career-focused curriculum. Finally, the researcher’s reflective journal was used to solidify and record the process to further develop the themes of the findings.

Pre and Post Survey

The survey consisted of six questions geared toward action research team members' feelings related to providing students with an equitable education and their role in that process. The survey was administered at the first and final action research team meetings respectively. Below, a chart depicts the survey's results:

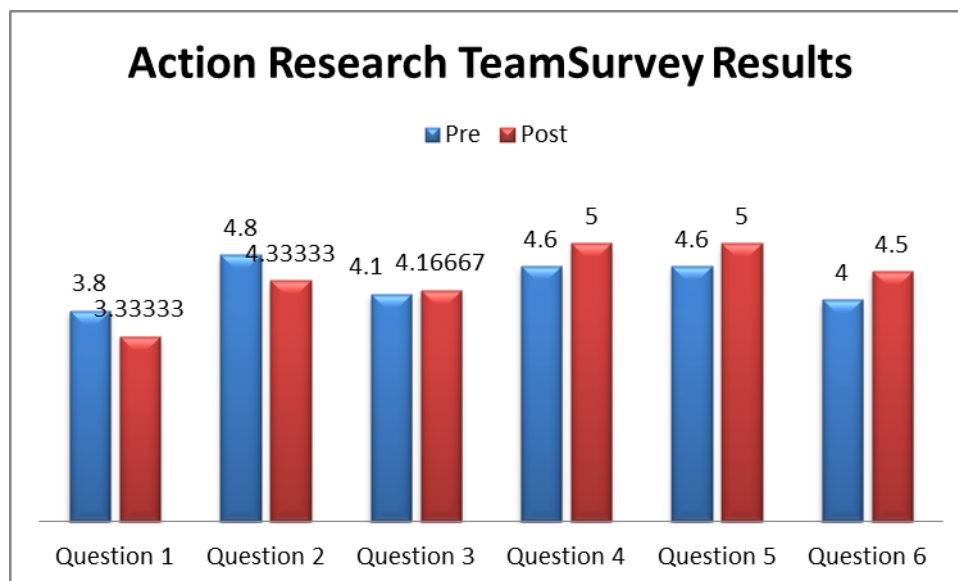


Figure 7: Action Research Team Survey Results

The action research team was comprised of eight members, including the researcher. Although the survey sample was small, the results speak to the interventions and steps educators can take to increase the academic success potential for male students of color. The three survey questions and their results that most correlate with research question #1 are the following:

3. I have examined how my background impacts my interactions with parents, students and teachers.
4. It is worthwhile to examine one's background as an educator.
5. Equity in education is a concern.

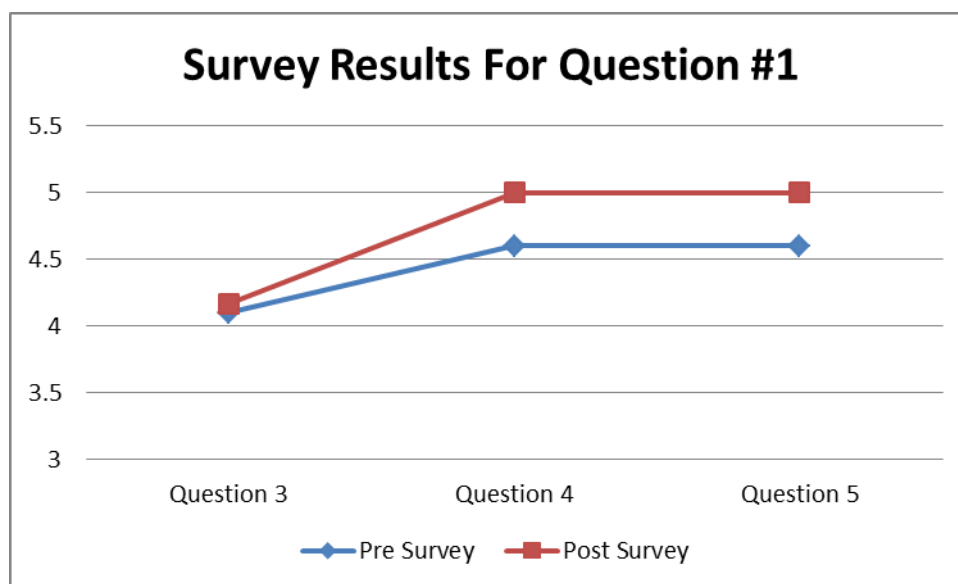


Figure 8: Question #1 Survey Results

For question #3, there was little to no change in the action research teams' responses over the duration of the study. With the survey's use of a Likert scale of 1 to 5, the results of a 4.1 and 4.2 exhibit that the team's participants felt they had in fact explored their backgrounds, and they did influence their interactions with members of the school community. The lack of change in responses is interesting for two reasons. First, one would think that participating and leading a book study related to the education of students of poverty would prompt participants to further examine their own backgrounds as related to the work within the school related to the study, but that does not seem to be the case. Though the respondents' scores did increase, the growth was negligible at best. One could surmise a number of reasons for this lack of change. For example, maybe the reading and discussions related to the topic of children of poverty was not as rich as it was intended to be for the purpose of prompting further reflection and self-examination. The second potential reason for the growth being so insignificant could be related to the individuals' reasoning behind their choice of workplace. When a person accepts a position at a school like BRHS, he or she must already have the heart and desire to serve students of poverty, and come

with a certain awareness of and desire to work within such a context. This calling may come from an examination of one's background prior to accepting a position to work with students of poverty, so the action research team might have not felt the need to explore their backgrounds any further. Though the change is not significant, the question's high ranking does speak to the fact that seven influential leaders in the school feel that an analysis of an educator's background does have a profound impact on their students. This examination of their pasts is an attribute to their leadership and personal desire to work with students of poverty.

The second question from the survey that correlates to research question #1 is: It is worthwhile to examine one's background as an educator. This question was scored very highly by the action research team on the pre survey and increased to a perfect score on the post survey. The difference between the pre and post survey results for this question was .4, which was the second highest related to an increase in weight among the survey's results. This difference leads one to assume that even though the action research team felt their previous assessment of their background and its impact on the students they served was sufficient, they did feel that their staff's participation in the process was of great importance. The results again suggest the importance of the leader's example and the importance leaders place on examining one's past to address any concerns that might arise with their work with children of poverty.

The final question that speaks to the first research question is the fifth question on the survey: Equity in education is a concern. For this question there was again a change of .4 to bring the overall response from the action research team to a five. The action research team made it clear that they felt equity was a major source of concern for educators. This concern seemed to be heightened through the experience of reading and leading the book study with teachers as well as the examination of the data for and throughout the transition to career

academies. The survey's response increase to this statement further solidifies the idea that the action research team members see the inequity in education in their school building and in general. The high ranking in the survey can be seen as more of a call to action for the team as leaders. That it is not only a concern, but also something the leaders within the school must continually work on addressing.

Action Research Team Transcription

The second data source that is connected with the first research question was the transcription of the action research team meetings. The meetings were transcribed and then coded utilizing a computer program NVivo. The researcher analyzed this information to gain further insight on the research questions. For the first research question, there were a number of key words and phrases that directly linked to interventions intended to support male students of color and graduation. The five words that were used the most throughout all the meetings were poverty, resources, academic performance, involvement and parents.

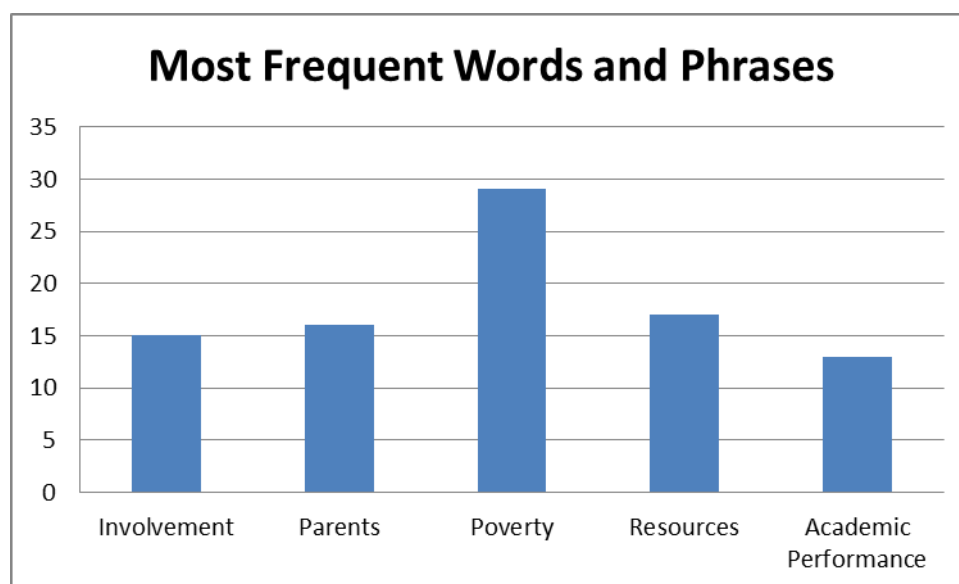


Figure 9: Frequency of Words and Phrases

Each member of the team led a book study on students of poverty with one or more departments at BRHS, which can explain the frequency of certain word and phrases. The high level of frequency of these words and phrases also speaks to the challenges that face the students and staff at BRHS. Below is an excerpt from an action team meeting:

“Financial limitations can hinder the well-being of students when they don’t have the proper nutrition, environment, health, etc. Appropriate nutrition is essential to students’ ability to engage in learning. Free & reduced meals exist at most schools based on families’ income levels to help support this area. However, there is still a significant portion of students’ performance impacted because their nutritional needs are not consistently met (i.e., not eating balanced meals at home, going to bed hungry). Students’ environments are another area that impacts performance like the classrooms their homes that need to meet their needs to thrive and perform. But financial limitations can impact them & their families have adequate housing where they can study, rest well, and prepare for school. Another area of concern faced by those in poverty is lack of access to appropriate medical care and treatment, which could lead to students not being at their best physically, mentally, etc. Poverty is not the only factor that impacts students’ academic performance. But the role it plays in access to important resources is significant.”

It is clear from the quotation above that the external circumstances of the Brick Road students and their families play a significant role in their education. This on-going battle between the life inside and outside of the school impacts not only the students, but also the staff that serves them. It is not fair to assume that the action research team points to poverty, lack of resources and parent involvement for an explanation on their struggles with graduation rate, but rather that it is a crucial factor that the school must make adjustments to and address.

“We can continue to utilize collaborative efforts with stakeholders; community entities etc. to provide resources and/or access to resources that support the social, emotional, mental, and physical well-being of students. The efforts should be strategically matched to meet students’ needs be it focusing on literacy or language development, connecting them resources for health care, getting tutorial programs in their communities etc. Whole, well-balanced students have chances of performing better academically.”

The action research team meetings lead one to see that the staff is not only responsible for addressing the challenges for student academically, but they must also address the challenges related to poverty. This data shows that though there is a need for academic interventions the students and community of BRHS also in need of interventions to help them combat living in poverty. The multifaceted view of interventions calls for leaders who are not only well versed in academic interventions, but also with interventions related to poverty and community revitalization. It is clear from the transcription that leaders need to see outreach with their students and the community they serve as a major responsibility and to spread that knowledge to the staff. This outreach derives from the overarching theme of awareness. It is not just enough to know the resources provided and needed for students of poverty, but the need for expanding that fundamental awareness to one of knowing what specific needs and which appropriate-applied resources will positively impact students and BRHS’ community as a whole.

Reflective Journal

The final data source for the research question related to interventions needed to support male students of color was the researcher’s reflective journal. The researcher recorded her thoughts and experiences in a journal for the purpose of reflection as the research process drew to a close. The journal served as an ongoing, real-time reference for the research process and

provided another avenue for the research to further investigate the experience. As the researcher reviewed the data from the pre and post surveys and the transcription, she was able to look back in her journal to find additional support for the ideas presented out of the other data sources. Throughout the journal, there were instances where the researcher discussed the challenges of working with a student population at BRHS. For example, on October 12, 2016, she wrote:

“We have just finished another AR team meeting and though I feel we are making gains with the staff about the book study I am still wary that it is not enough. We can examine and discuss ideas and research but does it really do anything when the students walk out the door? Seems as though we continue to talk about the challenges and potential solutions but nothing comes of it.”

So often the frustrations of working in a school like BRHS can overtake not only the successes in process of achievement, but also the energy of the staff required to make the changes needed to effectively support students who live in poverty, specifically the male students of color. Because the work needed is so vast, there is often a feeling of defeat or of spinning one's wheels, so it is up to the leadership to help alleviate these feelings and provide a consistent message as well as the support needed to provide the interventions to help students find success.

“After this week I feel sometimes we get lost in the all that we face here and don't focus on what we can control. I do feel that my book study got a little away from me this week. I don't feel the teachers left feeling better or reflective but more justified in the kids not performing and that there is nothing we can do about it. Time to stop supporting the excuses and pity party so I can make sure we are doing what we can with what we have!”

Reflective Journal November 3, 2016

These two reflective journal excerpts are merely two small examples that show not only the frustration but also the continual need to stay focused on the implementation of a systematic change—like the move to the career academy model within a high school organization—and not be pulled off track or become misdirected in focusing on all the obstacles that can justify failure. Once more, the leadership must continually reinforce the focus on the actual work and change at hand while acknowledging all the barriers that the members of BRHS face on a daily basis.

Research Question #1 Summary

The review of the data for research question number one leads to two overall themes. The first theme has been characterized as leader dispositions. The leader dispositions theme was chosen for a number of reasons. The first being that the qualitative and quantitative analysis made it clear that a leader's self-perceptions about themselves and their roles makes a difference in the message they communicate to staff and students. In the pre and post surveys, the action research team (who were also leaders at BRHS) indicated that equity in education is a concern, and though they have examined their own backgrounds, they feel it is very important for others within the school staff to do so as well. The concern for equitable education and for others to examine their backgrounds to address biases points to the concern for the education of Black and Hispanic males and an intervention the action research team deem as important in combatting the inequity in education. The action research team sees value in social justice for students and is aware of avenues to help alleviate those concerns for the students at BRHS. There are many challenges related to educators who choose to work in settings similar to Brick Road. With these challenges, there are great successes and moments of growth, but the leaders and their demeanor dictate whether the students, teachers and staff will succumb to the acceptance of circumstances

as limitations for students and excuses, or develop interventions and outlooks that go beyond poverty.

The other theme that came out of the three data sources for the first research question for this action research project was awareness. This awareness is found on many levels. The survey results solidify the importance of awareness of one's self while the transcription and researcher's reflective journal points to an awareness of not only the challenges that students of poverty face but also the interventions that can help students find success. It is one thing to have an awareness of the lived experience of a student of poverty, but it is another to know what steps an educator or school should take and what steps to avoid in order to help that same student achieve his or her academic potential. This awareness helps in day-to-day interactions with students, staff, parents and community members as well as helping to guide plans for successful intervention planning. As discussed in chapter three, the academies selected for BRHS were specific for the students and their community. They were selected based on the students' career inventories and community input as well as national workplace trends. The academies were chosen so the students could select from academies they were interested in and ones that could more potentially lead to future gainful employment. Awareness concerning the reasoning behind the academy selections is important at a fundamental level because it aids as a show of knowing needed resources for students of poverty and it helps guide conversations with students, parents, staff and community to protect, serve and honor the students they serve. Through a heightened awareness, the educator becomes a greater resource to and for students of poverty as they make meaning of their education and success there as it connects directly to their future economic and career standing and opportunities.

Table 4: Findings for Research Question #1

Data Source	Theme
Pre and Post Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader Dispositions • Awareness
Transcription	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness <p>(Focus on Outreach)</p>
Researcher's Reflective Journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness

Findings to Research Question #2

To further examine research question two—how and in what ways could smaller learning communities with a career focus impact the graduation rate of Black and Hispanic male students in a large urban high school?—the researcher used two data sources. The first data source was an analysis of students' academic record for the school years 2013-2014 through first semester of the 2016-2017 school year. The second data source was the researcher's reflective journal. These data sources were chosen because they could most accurately articulate whether or not a smaller learning community impacted the Black and Hispanic male students' success in their classes. The review of the students' academic record provided the quantitative data to further understand if the smaller learning communities were positively impacting students, specifically Black and Hispanic males' credit attainment. The reflective journal provided a qualitative record from which findings could be acquired related to smaller learning communities and their impact on Black and Hispanic males' academic progress.

Academic Records

By reviewing the academic data, the researcher was able to make a correlation between the implementation of the career academies and students' academic achievement. The creation and implementation of the academies was intended to assist BRHS with increasing the graduation rate. To increase a school's graduation rate, students need to earn credits by passing their classes. When looking through the academic data, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the plethora of data that is available, and without proper analysis and synthesis, can become meaningless. Therefore, it was essential to determine which academic data would yield the most insight relative to high school graduation rate. For this study it was decided to examine students' credit attainment in the 9th grade, since success in the 9th grade is a predictor of high school completion (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The four main and most consistent classes 9th graders take are Freshman Language Arts, Algebra I, Biology and World Geography. The rest of their schedule is completed with a wide array of elective classes they can choose from, such as art, dance, health, physical education, drafting, computer science and culinary arts. The researcher compared first semester grades for 9th grade students in their four academic classes with other 9th grade students for the three previous years. The data was then funneled down to another level in that the researcher looked at comparing BRHS's Hispanic and Black males' grade to the other male students in the school. When looking at male students' achievement in math, one sees a rise in students' scores, but Black and Hispanic males consistently earn lower marks in their 9th grade mathematics classes. Interestingly, in the 2013 school year, all male students performed poorly in Algebra I, and since then, the other males at BRHS have seen a steady increase. Yet, the same cannot be said for the Black and Hispanic counterparts. In fact, in the 2014 school year, Black and Hispanic males' performance in Algebra I dropped even further.

However, the school years since that point have seen an increase in their Algebra course performance, with a significant uptick in the Hispanic males' performance from 2015 to 2016, showing a closing of the gap between them and the other males. Black males' performances have maintained a steady increase over time, yet still lag behind the Hispanic and other males' performances in Algebra 1.

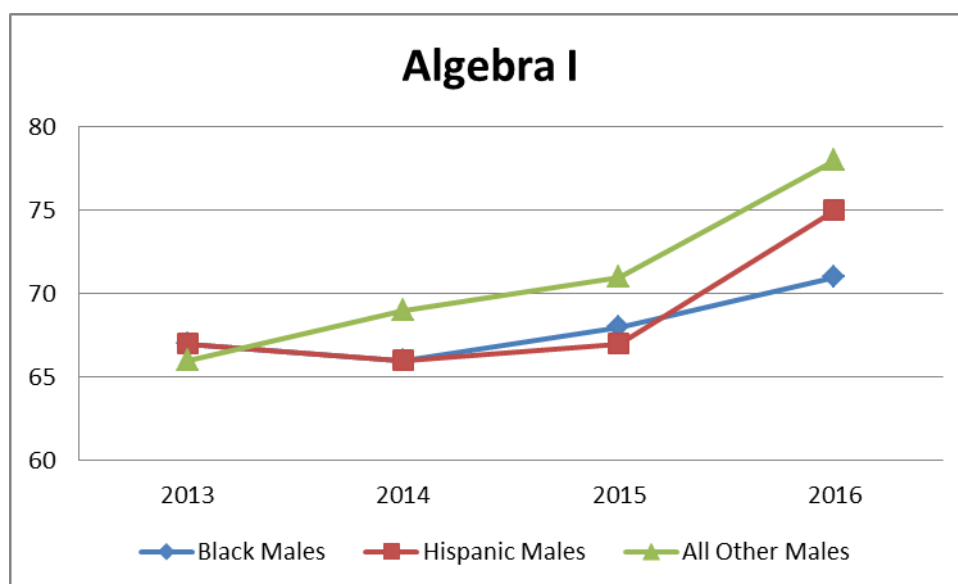


Figure 10: Algebra I Course Performance

The researcher then looked at male students' performance in their Freshman Language Arts class for the last four school years at BRHS. And though the majority of the data demonstrates that the Black and Hispanic males did perform lower than their counterparts, the 2014 school year did show a drop in the performance for the other ethnicities below Black and Hispanic males. Also in the current school year, 2016, the Black male performance dipped below their peers and saw a significant decrease. The Hispanic males have stayed relatively stable in their performance in their ninth grade language arts class.

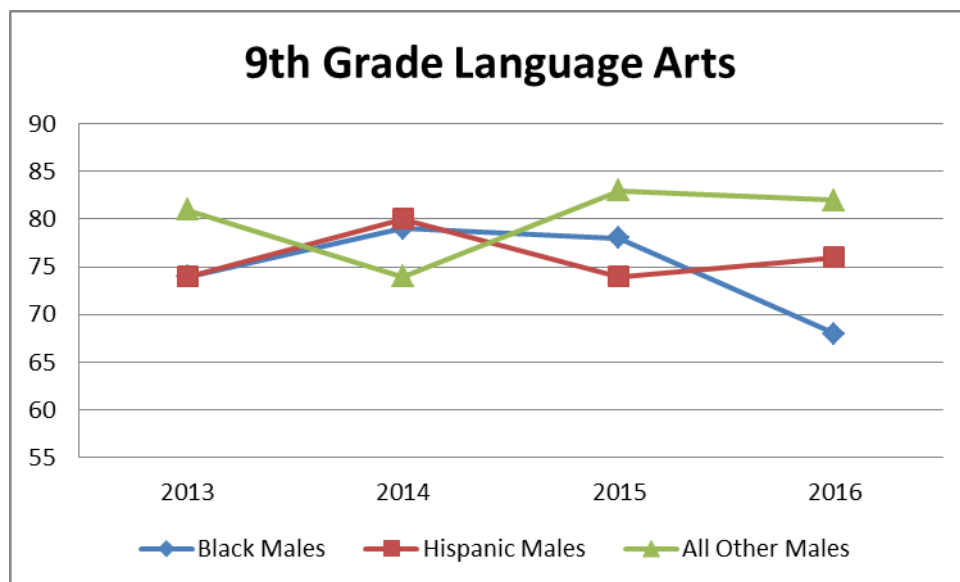


Figure 11: 9th LA Course Performance

Biology continues a similar trend in that Black and Hispanic student perform below the other male students at BRHS. They do post gains for the last year, but once again the Black males' performance has gone down from the 2015 to 2016 school years. On the contrary, the Hispanic males have seen a steady rise in their biology scores and outpaced the other ethnicities in their growth.

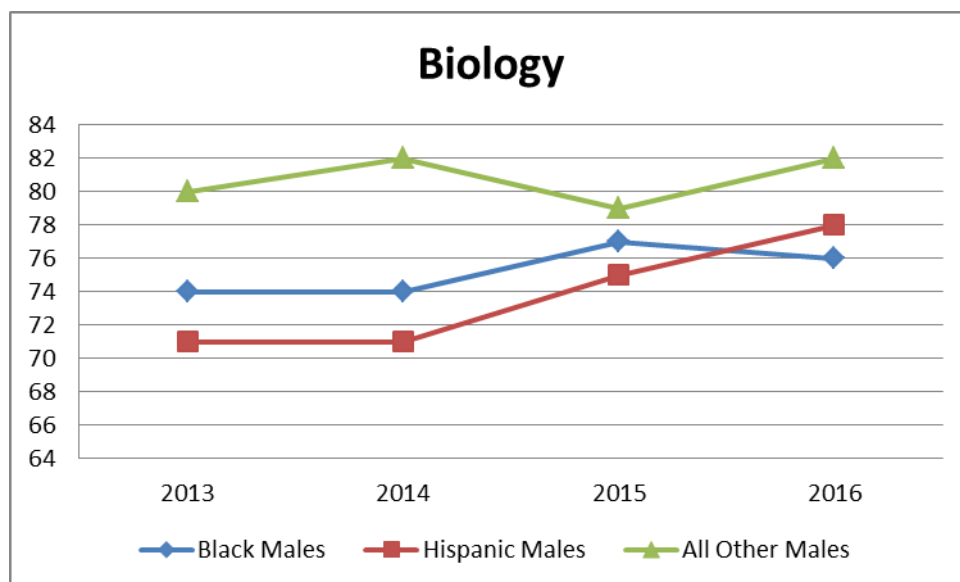


Figure 12: Biology Course Performance

Male students' performance in Biology follows the previous subjects' trend in that the other males at BRHS outperform their Black and Hispanic counterparts, but with the other subject areas, there were consistent gains for the most part. For World Geography, we instead see a decrease in overall performance across ethnicity for male students. In fact the other males have consistently decreased in their performance, whereas the Black and Hispanic males have seen minor gains at one point or another; yet, the ultimate four-year trend has resulted in poorer performance by and for all male subgroups.

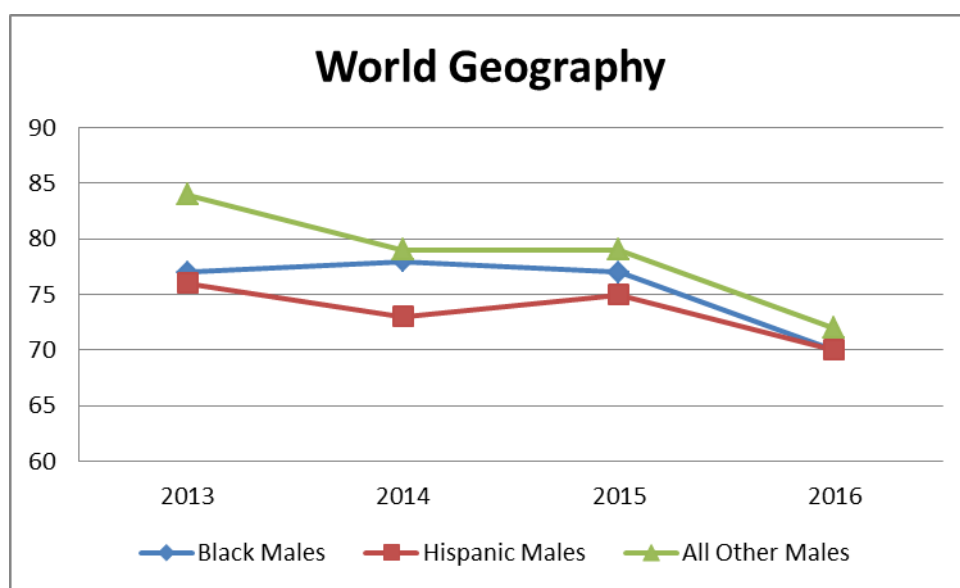


Figure 13: World Geography Course Performance

After reviewing the 9th grade students' performance, the researcher looked further into the data to see if a correlation could be made with the male students' performance and the implementation of career academies. It was decided that the researcher would analyze the male students who entered BRHS as freshmen in the 2015 school year. The ninth grade year for students at Brick Road is viewed as a survey year, where students are exposed to all five of the academies so they can make an educated selection about the academy they will participate in for the remainder of

their years in high school. Throughout the students' freshman year, they are taught through a lens of each of the five academies at least once and participate in activities exploring careers for all of the academies. Based on this 9th grade experience, the researcher decided to examine the data from a different angle by analyzing data of the students who experienced the year of exposure and their performance in their 10th grade classes. Below is a chart comparing the students' performance in their 9th and 10th grade classes:

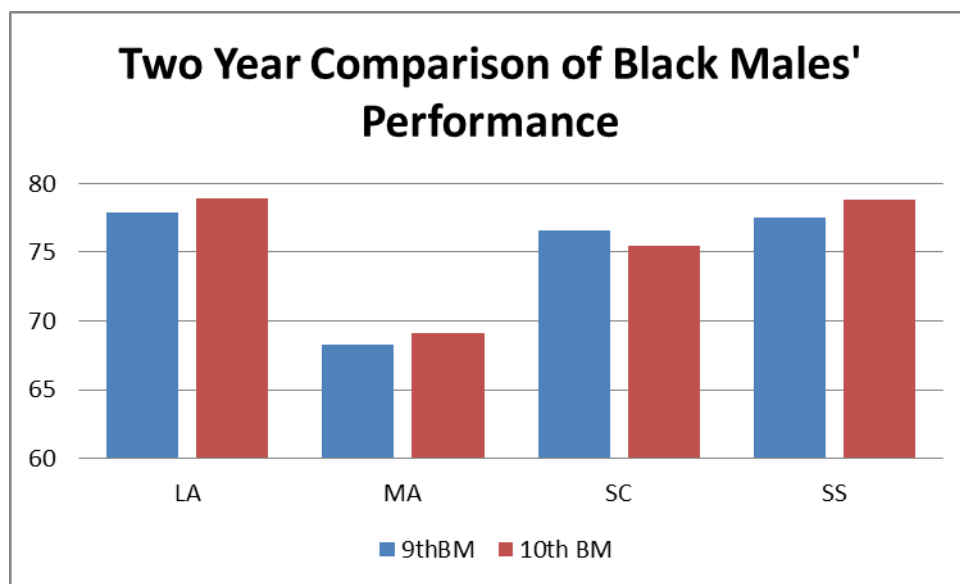


Figure 14: Black Male Two Year Progression

Review of the data reveals that black male students performed higher in all of the major academic areas, except for science. Furthermore, their data showed an increase in students' math grades that moved them farther from the failure demarcation (below 70%).

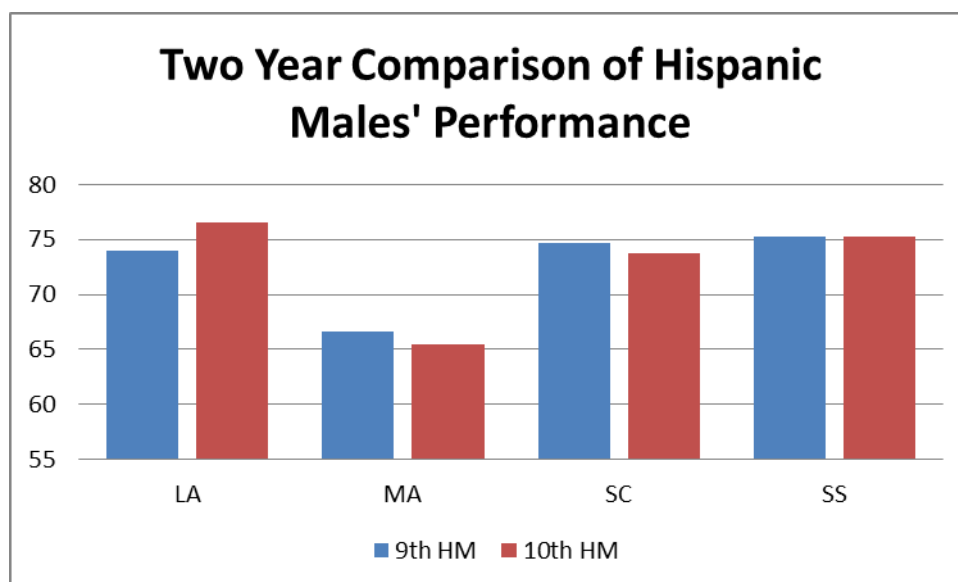


Figure 15: Hispanic Male 2 Year Progression

Unfortunately, the Hispanic males did not see the same gains when their data was studied similarly. Hispanic males performed lower in math and science. They achieved the same grades in their social studies classes while seeing gains in their language arts classes.

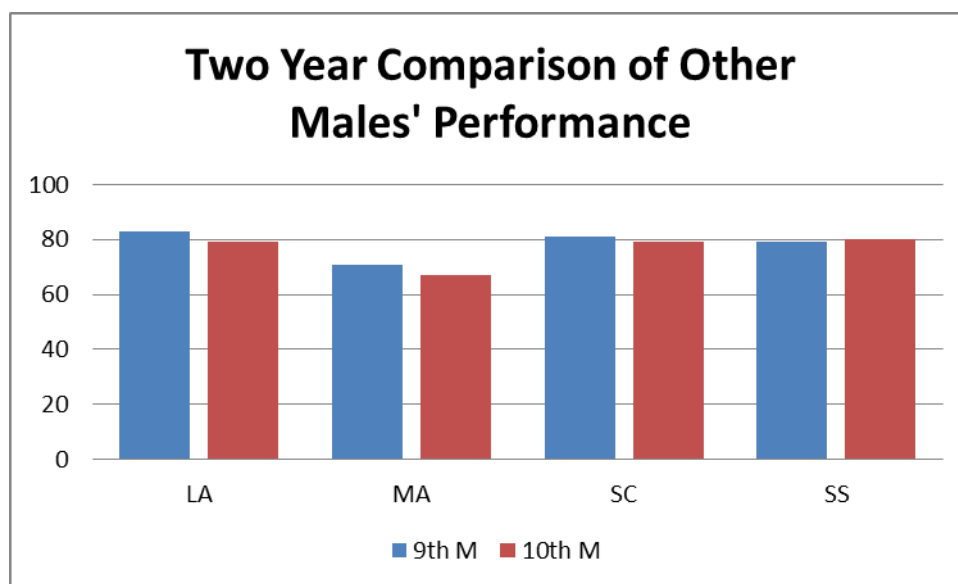


Figure 16: Other Male Two Year Progression

However, the males of other ethnicities did not fare as well as the Black or Hispanic males. They saw a decrease in all classes except a one-point gain in their social studies classes.

The course performance exhibits a variety of results related to the second research question regarding career focused smaller learning communities and graduation rates. Though the results were not across the board in all classes, Black and Hispanic males performed better in their tenth grade career-focused academic classes than they did in their 9th grade year. This increase in performance leads to the assumption that although the academies are young, they seem to be having a positive impact on the Black and Hispanic male students at BRHS. The performance increase seems to be more centralized on the Black and Hispanic males, which is promising as the other course performance data shows that Black and Hispanic male students historically perform lower than their counterparts.

Reflective Journal

The second source of data for research question two of this action research project was the researcher's reflective journal. The researcher's reflective journal served as an ongoing narrative for the researcher's thoughts and feelings throughout the research process. The journal provided a number of important anecdotes concerning the results of a smaller learning community on the academic success of Black and Hispanic males. Throughout the process the researcher wrote of her concerns related to the instructional shift that was essential to the implementation. One of the major reasons for the school's transition to career academies was to provide students with more relevancy in their day-to-day academic work. This relevance is key to any academies' success.

"I wish we would spend more time in our meetings speaking about the instructional shift that needs to be taking place versus talking about budgets and student hall passes. I know we must make sure all the procedures are in place but I don't want us to skip over talking about it all together. The teachers need help in this area and need to know it is of utmost importance. If the

students aren't able to make the connections between their classes and their future this will have all been done for nothing!"

Researcher's Journal August 5, 2016

The analysis of the reflective journal showed that both teachers and students enjoyed the academy lens lessons and found them to be more impactful.

"Today I was completing walk throughs and was lucky enough to see an academy lens lesson is a U.S. History class. The students were discussing the Great Depression and the economy related to the housing market. They then developed a plan for their dream house. From this plan they had to research the cost of building the house and develop a budget to afford the house. The assignment had been going on for a week prior to my observation so I was able to speak to the students and got positive comments from all the students I spoke to. They were really excited to explain their house design and why they had not included certain items. They were even able to connect it back to the Great Depression and how they developed a plan to not be in the same situation if the economy went down. I even asked a couple students if they enjoyed the activity being connected to their academy and they did. They said that they felt they learned more and it was so much better than lectures and notes"

Researcher's Journal November 1, 2016

The above excerpt further supports the idea that when provided with more relevant lessons the students exhibit more signs of enjoying the lesson while being able to articulate the purpose of the lesson.

"I met with a teacher this week. I just stopped by her classroom to check on her and the direction of the conversation went to her not finding enough time to either plan for or embed academy lessons. And I offered suggestions and reminded her it doesn't have to be big, but who

am I to really tell her what to do? She has tried a number of academy lesson activities and has really enjoyed them and she feels the kids however it is just hard to add that layer when she is already adjusting to planning on block. Though I left without a solution (didn't really think we were going to come up with one) I was happy that it was not only on her mind but that she had some concrete numbers to show that her kids' grades went up when she used an academy related activity. I asked her to bring it up at our next academy to not elicit support but help convince others that it was worthwhile"

This selection from the researcher's journal establishes that even though the addition of the academy focus requires yet another level of planning for the teachers, the academy lessons produce a higher level engagement for students as well as an improved performance on assessments addressing the required curricular material. This further demonstrates that by providing more relevant lessons and activities, the students and teachers have higher levels of engagement and success.

Research Question #2 Summary

The qualitative and quantitative data for this research question clearly shows that students perform and are more engaged when they are provided more relevant lessons and activities. The academic data shows that for the most part the Black and Hispanic males at Brick Road are beginning to experience more academic success through the career academy model. This was established by the 9th grade performance in the 2016 school year and by the cohort data of students who have experienced the academy model for two years. By providing students with a more relevant, career-focused curriculum, the students are able to make the necessary connections, understanding that what they learn on a daily basis can and will impact their future,

thereby, given value to the daily academic work and moving students away from a perception that it is a waste of time.

The data also does show that there is a downward trend in performance for World Geography, which is a concern. It would be interesting to explore how much the academy implementation is actually taking place in those classes to see whether or not there is a correlation between fidelity of implementation and student performance. There are other problem areas for BRHS, but overall the academic data shows a great deal of promise. The reflective journal further supports the idea that by providing more career-related lessons, the students and teachers did experience more success within the classroom. There is a chance that the teacher and students' exchanges with the researcher could be skewed due to the researcher being an administrator at BRHS, but one cannot be sure that was in fact the case. The reports of increase in students' grades when participating in academy-related lessons is further evidence to support that by providing students more applicable experiences, they are able to make the connections and increase their understanding of the content. Though the implementation is very young at BRHS, the initial quantitative as well as qualitative data does show great promise in an increase for all students, but especially Black and Hispanic males' success in high school.

Table 5: Research Question #2 Findings

Data Source	Theme
Academic Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevancy • Smaller Learning Communities
Researcher's Reflective Journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevancy

Finding to Research Question #3

For the final research question—what is learned by an action research team through the implementation of smaller learning communities with a career focus?—the researcher utilized her reflective journal, the action research team’s pre and post survey results and transcriptions from the action research team meetings. The researcher used all three of the data sources due to the fact that they all offered insight into what can be gained from an action research team’s experience carrying out a massive fundamental change in a large, diverse high school.

Pre and Post Survey

As mentioned earlier, each member of the action research team participated in an anonymous survey at the beginning and end of the research process. The questions were designed to measure their opinions related to social justice issues and their role addressing it in their school. The survey was limited to six questions and used a Likert scale to report results. For this research question, three of the survey’s questions were directly related. The questions were as follows:

1. I am well versed in Social Justice Issues related to education.
2. I make a conscious effort to ensure all students in my school are receiving an equitable education.
6. I am a social justice advocate.

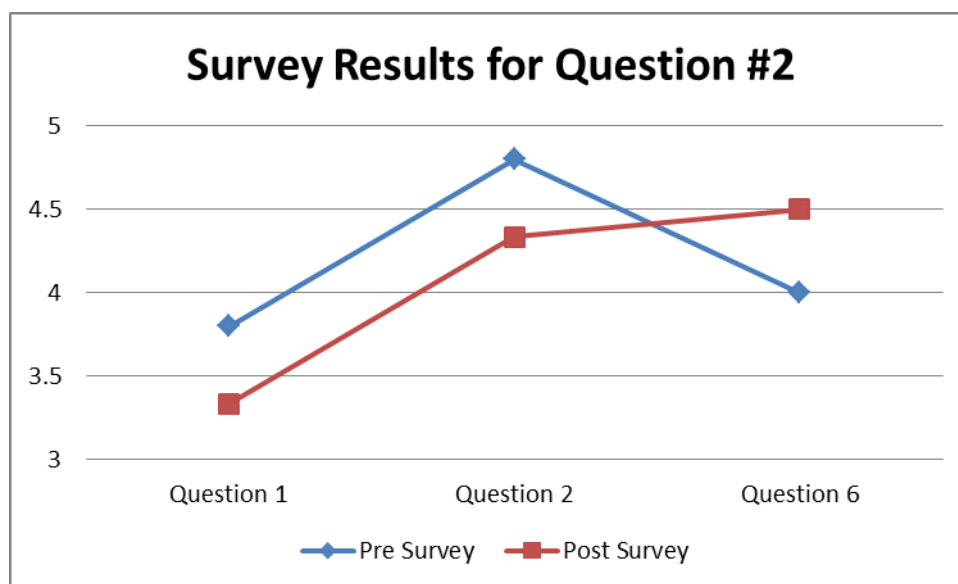


Figure 17: Survey Results for Question #2

The first question was designed to gauge the participants' knowledge of social justice issues and their impact on education. For the pre survey, the participants scored themselves fairly high with an average of 3.8 on a Likert scale of 1 through 5. The post survey scores showed a decline to an average of 3.3, which was a difference of .5. This drop was significant in that the post survey was administered after the participants had led a book study for their departments on the topic of teaching students of poverty. One can surmise from these results that through the process of the book study and further reflection of social justice issues related to education, they discovered that they were not as knowledgeable as they thought they should be. This is not to say they were in fact not well versed, but that the experience further solidified their resolve to study the topic more intently.

The second question had the participants take a closer look at their actions related to providing an equitable education for the students at Brick Road. For this question there was another decrease in .5 from the pre survey to the post survey, so it seems as with the first question on the action team survey, the team had time to reflect and explore more of the social

justice issues and their actions related to providing their students an equitable education. For the pre survey, the responses almost reached a perfect score on the Likert scale by coming in at 4.8. This high score was the highest of all the responses on the pre survey. Though the post survey results for question two were not the overall lowest for the participants, it was the second lowest score with the only other question being the first question. The decrease and correlation to question number one on the survey lead one to assume that the participants' experiences with the book study and exploration of social justice issues heightened their awareness related to the inequalities found in education today.

The final question from the survey that is related to the third research question is survey question six: I am a social justice advocate. Unlike survey questions one and two, the sixth question reported an increase of .5, taking the post survey average to a 4.5 from a 4. Though the score did not reach the highest score of a 5, the increase in scores from pre to post survey was the largest change. One could conjecture again the change in score was based on not only the participation in the book study but also the exploration of social justice issues in education and its impact on the students at BRHS.

The decision to have the staff participate in the book study was not only to have them explore the topic of students of poverty, but also to have them reflect on how they can be part of the change to help all students succeed, but especially the students of color. The results of the pre and post survey illustrate that the action research team learned a great deal by their participation in the action research team and the execution of the book study. These results continue to support the two themes discussed in the results of the earlier question of leadership dispositions and awareness. A leader's attitudes and actions directly impact the staff and students. This influence drives the focus and culture of the school, which has a direct correlation on the

teachers' interactions and views of students' abilities which directly impacts students' performance. All of this is driven by a leader's awareness of not only the challenges, but also the potential solutions facing the issues surrounding inequity in schools, specifically BRHS.

Transcription

The second data source used by the researcher to further explore the third and final research question was a review of the transcription and coding of the action research team meetings. Since the research question is directly related to the action research team and the lessons they took from the implementation of a career academy, the action research team meetings provided a great deal of data to address the research question. Though a review of all the action research team meetings shows a focus on poverty, parents and resources; a more extensive review of the data reveals another layer of important topics to explore. The other layer was an examination of academic topics over which the action research team has some control. When the outside factors are taken out of the coding, one finds a trend related to relevancy. The following chart illustrates the team's frequency related to academic topics:

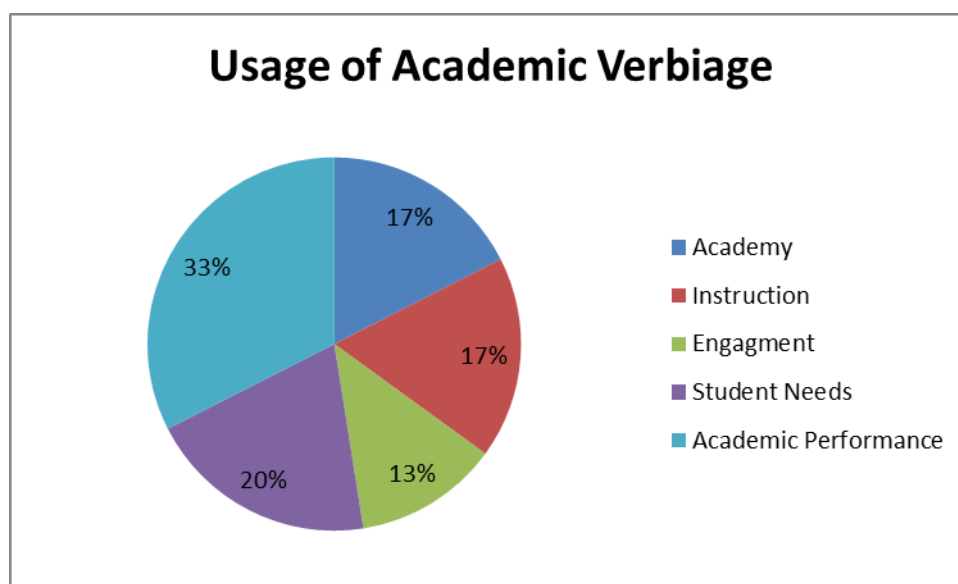


Figure 18: Academic Verbiage

Academic performance was a frequent topic of discussion throughout the action research team meetings. This frequency of the academic performance topic is not surprising in that the creation of the academies and instructional focus for BRHS were designed to increase students' academic performance, which would in turn have a direct impact on the school's graduation rate. Another major concern discussed at length by the action research team was increasing students' engagement through relevant lessons. The action research team discussed the notion that to achieve the level of relevancy needed, instruction must focus on the students and their academy focus. Below is an example of a culminating charge after a lengthy discussion on instruction at an action research team meeting:

“We need to be continuing to reinforce high level instruction (DOK, FIP) that is student centered and academy driven. That means it needs to be the focus in our academy meetings, observations and conversations with teachers. We know it works so we need to communicate that it is a priority”

Action Research Team Meeting September 15, 2016

When the action research team discussed needed changes in their leadership and actions for the second semester, they were able to reflect specifically on efforts they would make after their first semester experiences to further strengthen their own positioning as supports of the academy model components and leaders in helping teachers strengthen their implementation efforts in making the academy lens an essential part of lessons that strengthen students' engagement. Another action research team excerpt is included below to further articulate this realized focus on providing students relevant experience:

“My mind was geared toward schedules, daily instruction & Kid Talks. Although these are important, leading, facilitating, & tapping others for marketing, partnerships, job shadowing etc.

are huge parts to be addressed so the academy lens becomes that real-world experience for students.”

Action Research Team Meeting December 15, 2016

The team felt that though the procedural aspects of the academy were very important, the academic side of encouraging lessons that incorporate the academy lens must be addressed. Students need to be able to connect their daily classroom tasks and topics to their future interests. This relevancy is not only the cornerstone of career academies, but also it is of utmost importance to help students make the connections to stay in school and learn valuable skills, both of which will positively impact their future. Additional conversations and word usage that support this theme can be found throughout the action team’s transcripts further pointing to the need to provide students with more relevant lessons and experiences to ensure better outcomes related to their educational experience and beyond.

Reflective Journal

The third and final data source for the final research question was an analysis of the researcher’s reflective journal. The researcher’s reflective journal provided an on-going recording of the research process as well as her personal thoughts and feelings regarding the implementation of career academies at BRHS. Her journal was an important data source for the final research question as it is directly related to the personal lessons learned by the implementation of career academies.

The most interesting and powerful theme to come out of the analysis from the researcher’s journal was the idea of slowing down in the array of interventions to be implemented and providing teachers the time to adjust to the vast number of changes that are necessary within the implementation of career academies.

“I thought my (academy’s) teachers were the only ones so overwhelmed by all the changes and challenges of this school year but it seems the other academies are experiencing the same thing. We (the action research team) listed out all the changes they were being asked to do and once we saw it in black and white we knew we needed to do something. BRHS is a hard enough school to add all this on top of the teachers seemed unfair and we have so many great teachers we don’t want to lose them to the transfer process. So we decided to focus on the most fundamental interventions and not add to them. One of our biggest jobs is to protect and retain our teachers so this was one way we could do that. We did have a lot of ideas and areas we felt needed to be addressed but all those ideas could wait. We had to make sure that our implementation of the academies was done well and benefitted our teachers not just our students. Plus if the teachers weren’t on board would the changes we needed to take place even be done or done well? A lot was riding on this so we had to do what we could.”

Researcher’s Reflective Journal December 20, 2016

This concept of slowing down not only provides information related to research question three, but also the overall implementation of career academies at BRHS. From the action research team meetings and individual conversations with teachers, concerns continually emerged that the significant number of changes required by the shift to implementing the academic career academy model were simply overwhelming. This led the team to slow down its efforts, to not implement additional changes beyond those required by the first semester’s model implementation; but to focus instead on specific changes that the action research team felt were of the most importance to successful and strong implementation of the model. This theme of slowing down is important to the research question in that the action research team learned that

they must provide the teachers, students and themselves the time and space to fully implement the changes that are fundamental to each career academy.

Research Question #3 Summary

When reviewing the data that is pertinent to research question number three, four themes emerged and were developed. The first two themes are leadership dispositions and awareness. These themes are combined because there is a certain degree of awareness that contribute to the dispositions of the leader. The results of the action research survey show that the action research team learned through the experience of implementing the career academies and facilitation of the book study that they needed to increase their own awareness of social justice issues as well as continue to make a conscious effort to address those issues among the faculty members they lead. It was also learned that their experiences led them to see themselves as more of a social justice advocate then they did before their experience with the book study and career academy implementation. How a leader presents themselves and their communication of what is important is key to how the teachers and staff conduct themselves so when a leader exhibits behaviors that are of a social justice advocate with a knowledge base of resources they will follow suit. Leaders' values are exhibited through their actions and have a direct impact on their staff, which in turn impacts their students. Awareness of these factors is key for the leader to be effective in this setting and work, and the data suggests it is a necessary disposition for the leader to have an awareness, but also be willing to grow and develop even further awareness of the shifting context and complexities therein when undertaking the move from a traditional high school to a career academy model. Above all, these data points show clearly that a leader's influence—a using of his or her awareness and leadership dispositions in an open and flexible stance of advocacy—is of great importance when implementing a career academy with success.

The second theme gleaned from the action research team through the implementation of a career academy models is relevancy. A more in-depth analysis of the action research teams' meetings produced an understanding of the importance of providing students with more applicable experiences in and out of the classroom. The action research team did communicate that it was easy to focus on the procedural nature of their jobs, but also communicated that it was of extreme importance for them to use their leadership influence to provide relevancy for their students within their academies. This relevancy assists the learners to make the connections necessary to be successful throughout their high school experience, gaining more success within the classroom setting, and building greater knowledge and skills to be more prepared for life beyond the formal school setting, having achieved high school graduation. Providing and implementing these relevant experiences for the students needed to be a part of formal and informal meetings as well as a focus of classroom observations for the leaders to communicate to teachers and students the clear message that providing more of an academy-focused curriculum was of utmost importance, for students' short- and longer-term benefits.

The third theme for the research question regarding lessons learned by the implementation of a career academy was the idea of limiting the number of interventions and becoming experts of the implementation methods before moving on to other interventions. The analysis of the researcher's reflective journal established that the number of changes initially demanded in the change to the career academy model was overwhelming for the teachers of BRHS, and to achieve effective change with the academy implementation, there needed to be a focus on a fewer number of changes. Out of these concerns the idea of becoming experts in the fundamental changes needed for an academy before moving on to other interventions was solidified. This notion of slowing down was not only meant to relieve the teachers and staff at

Brick Road from their feelings of being overwhelmed, but also to allow the action research team the time and opportunity to focus on the essential necessary organizational and instructional changes ensuring fidelity in execution of the career academy model.

Table 6: Findings for Research Question #3

Data Source	Theme
Pre and Post Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader Dispositions • Awareness
Transcription	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevance
Researcher's Reflective Journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slowing Down

Absence of Expected Themes

It is important to point out that some themes one would assume would come out of the qualitative data did not. This research study was designed to examine the impact of the implementation of career academies on Black and Hispanic males' educational achievement at BRHS. With this research topic, one would assume that there were certain codes that would present themselves as the qualitative data was analyzed, but there were a number of codes that did not present as being valuable to the research. Upon analysis, the concepts of careers and graduation did not produce any significance to the transcripts from the action research team meetings nor the researcher's reflective journal. It would seem reasonable to assume a research study designed to measure the impact of career academies on the academic success of Black and Hispanic male students would certainly find value in the topics of graduation or careers, but this also was not the case for this action research project. Though the topic of careers did come up on

a limited basis, graduation was not mentioned at all in the data sets collected and analyzed within this study. This lack of qualitative data points to the idea that the purpose and focus of the career implementation was more geared to credit attainment and graduation would be seen as a byproduct. This lack of data points back to the final theme from the third research question in that by slowing down and focusing on smaller tasks, smaller gains will be made and recognized versus having too broad of a view, such as too many interventions or the achievement of graduation, which could have blurred the vision that any progress was being made. This is not to say that focusing on careers or graduation is a negative, but rather that slowing down and taking a more focused view of passing the classes and ensuring interventions are focused at that level is seen as more impactful. By examining the individual steps and achievements along the students' pathways, as well as along the journey of the career academy model implementation, forward progress become evident, and many small steps may be combined to ultimately yield a completed path to graduation. Though the themes and connections that are outlined above are of great importance when one is looking at this research's questions, there is also important information to be realized in the lack of data.

Summary of Findings

By utilizing a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, common themes have developed for each of the three research questions. Two of the major themes that were discovered were leadership dispositions and awareness. These two themes impact the implementation of a career academy in a large, urban high school. One theme that continued throughout the data analysis was the idea of relevance. Whether it was named relevance or it was described using other similar words, it was clear that providing students with relevant instruction and experiences was key in the implementation and success of Black and Hispanic

males at BRHS. The final theme that was shown to be of importance was the idea of slowing down with the number of interventions being implemented and rather allowing the time for leaders and teachers to become experts on the fundamental necessary interventions to build a career academy successful and positively impact students' academic achievement, specifically the success of Black and Hispanic males.

CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Analysis

Research has shown that career academies have a positive impact on minority students' academic achievement in high school as well as in their post-secondary endeavors (Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Kemple & Snipes, 2000). And with the unease of the United States' (U.S.) global standing in regard to education, even though the U.S. spends more money on their students as compared to other countries that are academically outperforming the U.S., the caliber and number of U.S. high school graduates are not where they should be in comparison (OECD, 2016). This concern of deficient numbers of graduates, specifically Black and Hispanic males, and research showing the implementation of smaller learning communities with a career focus was instrumental in Brick Road High School's decision to execute an overhaul of their instructional model and convert to a career academy model. This implementation process is the basis for this action research study. This action research study set out to explore what could be learned from the implementation of a career academy. The research study examined the career academies' impact on the academic success and on-time graduation for the Black and Hispanic males as well as what could be learned by an action research team through the implementation process. After a review of the school's data, three research questions were developed and answered through the action research process. The action research study used a mixed methods approach to provide a comprehensive overview of all available data sources to answer the research questions in the most thorough manner. This research project is important for not only

the students and staff at BRHS, but also for the larger high school education system. Though the action research project is specific to Brick Road, the results of the research can be applicable to other schools who are struggling with low graduation rates as well as to schools that do not.

Reviewing and analyzing academic models provides an overview for other educational settings and entities, which can be useful as they develop plans to offer their students the best education possible. As the U.S. continues to struggle with international educational status, a review of interventions to address the production of a viable and educated workforce provides benefits for all involved in public education.

The study answered the following research questions:

- What interventions hold the potential to increase the graduation rate for male students of color?
- How, and in what ways, could smaller learning communities with a career focus impact the graduation rate of Black and Hispanic male students in a large urban high school?
- What is learned by an action research team through the implementation of smaller learning communities with a career focus?

The research questions guided the data selection and analysis. From the three research questions and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, the researcher was able to ascertain a number of common themes that can be helpful to the continued implementation process of career academies at BRHS as well as to other educational institutions. The themes that were found across the research questions were leaders' awareness and dispositions as well as relevancy. The research also produced two smaller themes that were only found in relation to one research question. The smaller themes were the concept of slowing down and smaller learning communities (SLC). A closer review of the data also led to a surprising discovery in that there were a number of topics

or potential themes that did not produce statistical significance. The limited implications were helpful in further understanding the research questions.

Themes

Awareness

The most overwhelming theme from the analysis of data compiled for the action research project was awareness. This particular concept of awareness is focused and directed towards educational leaders. Through the qualitative and quantitative data collected for this action research study, evidence emerged that showed the level of a leaders' awareness on myriad concepts within such a layered school context was not only vital to the success of the implementation of a career academy, but also of great importance to addressing the inequity in the education for Black and Hispanic males. This concept of awareness is complex in that it is needed on a variety of levels. The leaders need to be well versed in their own backgrounds and their potential biases when working with students of other ethnicities and backgrounds different from their own. This awareness that comes from the exploration of the leader's history not only impacts their relationship with the students and parents with whom they work, but also serves as a model for the teachers and staff that they lead. Their interactions with students are an outward sign of the inward work they have completed to ensure they are as fair and unbiased as possible with the students and community they serve. It was made clear through the survey results and the analysis of the action research team meetings that the leaders of BRHS found social justice issues in education of great importance and that addressing these educational social justice issues is an ongoing lived process that cannot be put aside in the hectic nature of the day-to-day operations of a school. The awareness is not just of one's self, but also the inequities faced by students and the interventions as well as resources needed to help the students conquer the

inequalities they do and will continue to encounter. This understanding of resources and interventions not only helps students, but it also serves as a model for others in that they are knowledgeable about the gaps and are familiar with avenues to address the gaps.

This awareness that needs to be embedded in the leader's work and day-to-day interactions with all stakeholders refers back to the theoretical framework for this study. As mentioned in earlier chapters, but most explicitly in chapter one, this action research study was driven by two theories: Social Cognitive and Social Justice Theories. Social Cognitive Theory was developed by Bandura to further understand human development. Social Cognitive Theory states that learning is a social concept and a person's interactions with the educators in their lives not only shape their behaviors throughout their life span but also their belief in themselves and their capabilities (Bandura, 1989). This theory is demonstrated in the results from this action research study. The data from the study showed that the action research team felt that through their example, continued work on themselves and expectation of the same from their teachers would positively impact the relationships built throughout BRHS. Through these positive experiences and relationships built by educators, the students' self-efficacy—specifically related to their academic abilities—would increase and lead to higher performance in their educational setting.

The second theory for this research study supported by the results of the study was Social Justice Theory. This theory encourages leaders to address issues for students who are and have been historically marginalized. Theoharis (2007) called for social justice leaders to increase student achievement through the development of a positive school culture, increased staff capacity and improved school structures. In the case of this research study, the action research team did take the steps outlined by Theoharis due to the gaps and overall performance of the

students at BRHS. The quantitative data showed that through the implementation of a smaller community, there was an increase in student achievement, specifically with Black and Hispanic males who participated in the career academy. The qualitative data showed that the action research team saw a great deal of value and overall purpose of their job to continue to work on the social justice issues faced by their students and community. This awareness of one's self, the obstacles minority students faced—specifically Hispanic and Black males students—resources and interventions to help address the disparities in today's education system and clear vision of what steps need to be taken to provide students with more opportunities in and out of school mirror the theoretical framework for this study and was further supported by the results of this action research study.

Leader Dispositions

The second most frequent theme developed from the examination of the data was the concept of leader dispositions. This is the idea positing that the manner in which a school leader carries herself impacts the outcomes of a school. The leaders' self-reflection and purposeful actions directly impact the success of the students who operate under their leadership. The actions that the leaders model, in addition to their theories of action and vision and the manner in which they communicate these, guide the teachers and staff. The behavior that is modeled provides a clear message as to what is expected of the staff and students. For this particular action research study, it was hypothesized that educators have a direct impact on students' achievement and self-efficacy. It was also theorized that minority students are not served in an equitable educational system, so the educational leaders are responsible to develop and implement plans to close the achievement gap they experience. This belief was clearly supported by the qualitative and quantitative data collected and analyzed for this study. Through

the data analysis, it became clearly evident that the action research team did in fact see their role as one of a social justice advocate and example for the students, staff and community of BRHS. The action research team also reported the value and importance of social justice and social cognitive issues in their work and the success of the future generations. For these leaders, their work is the lived action of using one's position to further one's beliefs, and in this study and situation, daily acting as a social justice advocate by leading students, staff, and the school to higher academic achievement for all, with focus on the success of the most disenfranchised groups for the good of all, by way to supporting and furthering successful implementation of the career academy model.

The importance of a leader's dispositions or actions driven by core values found in this action research study mirrored Lee and Ready's (2007) book, *Schools within Schools*, which discussed in great depth about how successful academies had strong community bonds. This bond was not directed to the community at large, but within the academy itself. The development of the sense of community is directly related to the leaders and their core values. The example and consistent message of a leader not only influences the other stakeholders of the academy or school, but also helps in the academy developing its own identity, which has a direct correlation to the success of the academy. This leader-driven establishment of a community was recognized as a major contributing factor to the success of Adams' International/Cooperative Learning Academy (Lee & Ready, 2007). Leader dispositions are not only important at the local level, but are also important at the district level. Valuing the importance and providing the support to the local schools makes a vast difference for students through the execution of support, resources and interventions required to remove obstacles that keeping students from achieving their academic potential. Quint (2008) found that schools achieved the most gains

when they were fully supported by their district. This clearly suggests that leader dispositions are not only of value for the administrators in the local school but also with their district leaders. For a local school to find true sustainable success, particularly in the undertaking of an organizational overhaul such as a shift to a career academy model, it is imperative to have district leader dispositions which support the work. Just as no student can truly thrive in a classroom where a teacher operates in a way that suggests a hindrance to the student, so no school may thrive without the support and believe of district leadership, disposed to support work of this nature.

The concept of leader dispositions is complex and simple all at the same time. It is simple in that how a leader carries herself, what she values, and how she communicates such values and her ongoing pursuit of self-growth directly impacts her students' and schools' success. It is complex because the leadership is not limited to the administration in the local school building. The dispositions of the district leaders are fundamental in the success of an academy and any school. The common mission and vision for the school or academy is one that supports the district level's mission and vision as well. For the district to experience success, it must first support the schools in developing their plans to ensure all of their students find success through reaching their academic potential. The other layer of complexity is that the example of district and local leaders' dispositions directly impacts the teachers in the schools. The teachers in turn have a direct impact on the students to whom everyone is looking for success. Social cognitive theory identifies a teachers' opinion of a student as one of the most important factors in the student's belief in self and future performance so one can see that the teacher's belief in students is greatly influenced by the local and district leaders and their example. Below is a visual to further explain this circular relationship:

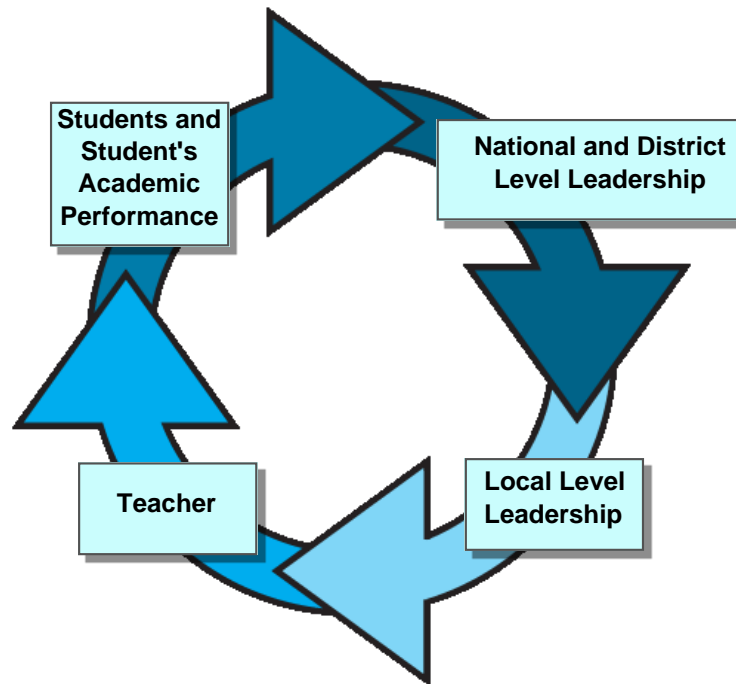


Figure 19: Circular Relationship

Though it is easy for educators to think in the terms of my school, my academy or my classroom, the problems and solutions cannot be compartmentalized in that way. Whether situated at the district level or in a classroom, the leader's core values and the expression of those values have a direct impact on the success of school and each student.

Relevancy

The idea of relevance was present in two of the three research questions. For the second research question, the concept of relevance was exhibited a great deal through the quantitative and qualitative data. In the third research question, the idea of relevancy was present in the quantitative data. The concept of relevancy was seen in the majority of this action research study and previous studies investigating career academies. Relevancy is continually seen related to career academies and the educational landscape today as it is seen as an important concept in helping students succeed. By providing students with a more applicable education, the students

will show higher levels of engagement. The connection between the curriculum they are taught on a daily basis and the curriculum's usefulness in their future is important in the engagement of students. Relevance is seen as one of the cornerstones to the implementation and success of career academies (SREB, 2001). By linking academic content to real-world applications, students are not only able to see the curriculum's value, but they are also able to understand the content through a different lens. For example, a student who is in an arts-driven academy with a determined focus area of dance might not understand the rationale for having to learn geometry as it may not seem to have much to do with their career choice. Their interest in and understanding of geometry could very well be peaked when they are taught about the math in a way that connects the angles of their feet in a pirouette to angles in a specific geometric figure. This connection could be taken one step further in that the geometry and physics instruction could be combined and extended to further the student's understanding of the academic concepts and its relationship to their craft. Career academies that have implemented this level of relevancy by connecting their academic classes with their students' career of interest have seen success in their students' performance and graduation rates (Davis et al., 2009; Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Stern, Dayton & Raby, 2010; SREB, 2014). The study by Kemple and Snipes (2000) found that minority students who were enrolled in academy schools earned more credits than minority students who did not attend academy schools. Researchers found that when a pedagogical and curricular change was made to look like the example used above, where geometry and physics were taught through a dance perspective or lens, then educators would see the full extent of a career academy's impact on student success. The qualitative and quantitative data from the action research study further supports the idea that when students are presented

concepts with a more relevant approach they are able to connect their efforts to learn the information with future goals in mind.

Slowing Down

The concept of slowing down pertains to focusing on a few interventions versus implementing too large a number of interventions at one time. The qualitative data from this action research study shows that by slowing down to allow the time and space to become more well versed in the foundational interventions needed to execute a career academy, the leaders, teachers and students' anxiety levels decrease, and they are able to concentrate on the most important aspects of the structural and curricular changes. Though this idea of slowing down is not referenced per se in the research, for there to be successful implementation and the creation of positive results from a career academy, one must provide sufficient time and commitment to the process (Quint, 2008). The potential benefits of a variety of interventions can easily be seen, but one must be careful in not becoming overzealous in the number of implemented interventions selected in any school setting. It is not to say this fervent desire to help students to succeed is done with ill-intent, but rather a more deliberate and focused plan of interventions will produce a more genuine implementation in that the teachers and staff will not be overwhelmed by the number of changes or interventions. Quint's (2008) work also outlined that for a school to see the full effect of the implementation of a career academy they must not expect to see the results immediately, and that time and commitment are needed. She also reported that improved instruction that included differentiation is key to the success of an academy (Quint, 2008). This shift in instruction is not something that should be taken lightly and needs to be allotted the time necessary for the teachers and students to adjust. One must remember this shift in instructional pedagogy is a profound change for most teachers, and they must be allotted the time to adjust

and become more familiar with the shift before they can be expected to implement other additional interventions. This idea of allowing the time and space for teachers to grasp a few key interventions, including the shift in education philosophy, allows the implementation to be done with fidelity, which will more likely yield the desired results. In effect, one must go slow to go fast and do less to do more.

Absence of Expected Themes

The further analyses of the data for this action research study held significant information. One would think that commonalities or conclusions drawn from the data of the implementation of a career academy to help minority students graduate within the four-year period would include concepts such as graduation and careers but these examples did not emerge from the data. The lack of support for assumed conclusions points to an interesting concept. This idea of lack of themes further supports the conclusion outlined above in that if one focuses solely on the final big picture or end goal, such as graduation, and does not primarily concentrate on the smaller, but vital steps (credit attainment) and pieces, not only will the implementation not be as successful, possibly neither will the overall results. Furthermore, a total concentration on the end product may create missed opportunities for even greater achievements and improvements throughout the process. Freeman and Simonsen's (2015) work encouraged educators to look at the problem of drop-outs and low graduation rates as a multi-tiered problem that called for a multi-tiered solution. So if the end goal is to ensure more students, specifically minority students, graduate and graduate within their four-year timeframe—but with ongoing consideration of the variety of variables that contribute to the number of students who drop out—there must be solid interventions to address all the contributing factors. These interventions can be grand, such as structurally and instructionally changing a school to a career academy, but if

the smaller steps and interventions are not effectively implemented, the school will not see its efforts come to fruition. So as seen from the qualitative data for this action research study, during the implementation of the career academy model as an intervention for the larger problem, the action research team's thoughts and concerns were not on graduation or careers, but rather on modeling behaviors to support teachers and students in closing the achievement gap and providing students with a relevant education day in and day out. Inside the lack of themes for this research study, there was valuable information in that it is important to be deliberate in not focusing too much in the larger picture and not assuming what is needed to successfully implement change; instead, focusing on what the smaller pictures have to offer and examining thoroughly what is not only needed, but required to implement successful change for the organization and the student and adult individuals within it.

Implications

Leaders at the local school level

Implementing a career academy is an enormous undertaking at any school. The transition impacts almost all—if not all aspects—of the school. Most importantly, it is a pedagogical and structural change for the teachers, students and administration, and the learning curve can be quite steep. This was the case for Brick Road. The master schedule was changed from a traditional 50-minute class period to a 90-minute block, students were scheduled by their academy choice and shared academy content teachers, lessons were to be taught through the lens of the academy, their typical parent communication protocol was changed, and the administrative duties shifted to a more academy-driven philosophy. The data from this action research study showed that the adjustment to these many changes were found to be overwhelming for teachers, students and administration. This does not suggest that the teachers, students, or the

administrators did not believe the changes would produce positive changes for the school, students and community, but the data for this action research study found it was best to focus on the fundamental changes to the career academy implementation rather than trying to add additional interventions throughout the model's implementation. Allowing the time and space for the effective implementation of a career academy is essential. Most of what is fundamental to the academy design is not what is important in a traditional high school, and the change is most drastic for the classroom teachers. Lesson plans and planning practices need to change, different supplies need to be used, and most importantly the lessons move from teacher-centered to student-driven. This release of control is vital and extremely scary for teachers. This fear is outlined by the following excerpt from the researcher's reflective journal:

'Not going to lie but doing this it will be a big step out of my comfort zone because it will be student driven . . . so let's hope it works'

February 21, 2017

The number and degree to which things change in an academy implementation is great, and the most important aspects of a local school administrator's job are not only to act as a barometer for the feelings of the teachers and students, but also to make adjustments necessary to alleviate their anxiety as much as possible. By allowing teachers the time and space with added assurance from administration, the teachers can change their instruction and provide the students with the relevant lessons to help them achieve their academic potential.

Another vital lesson that can be taken from this research is the impact social justice issues have on students, teachers and schools. It is imperative that local leaders are well versed in the issues that face their populations as well as the interventions to help alleviate such stressors. Leaders need to continue to seek ways to educate themselves about the on-going issues students

face, so they can then serve as an example to their teachers, students and other leaders as to how to provide students with the most equitable education possible. This research supported the importance of social justice issues and leaders' need to continue to address the epidemic of social injustice on a personal and professional level.

The three most important lessons learned from this action research study for local school administrators are to limit the interventions or changes during the initial implementation, to take steps to ensure the focus is on the change to the instruction, and to continue their own education and development of their social justice issues understanding. Leaders at the local school need to serve as role models in being social justice advocates striving to provide an equitable education for all students. Slowing down and limiting the changes teachers need to make in their classrooms provides the opportunity for teachers to embrace fully this change to their instruction. The idea of slowing down and becoming experts in their new-found instructional philosophy allows the transition to a more relevant and student-centered pedagogy, which will help students find purpose in their course work, thereby increasing students' credit attainment and graduation probabilities.

Leaders at the District Level

This action research study supports Quint's (2008) research in regard to district level leadership's assistance as a vital component of a school's transition to an academy model. Schools need district leaders to support their implementation through resources and financial means. District leaders also need to provide schools with the time and space to fully implement an academy. BRHS was fortunate to be supported by a district through all aspects of the academy implementation. They not only provided the financial support, but they also provided staff development, resources and freedom for BRHS to develop an academy program that was

individually tailored to their students and community. Their constant support was crucial in the development and execution of the academy model at BRHS. Along with their support of change initiatives in their school, district level leaders must also have a culture of expectation that all of their leaders and staff are doing all they can to be social justice advocates. This expectation needs to be represented in evaluations as well as in staff development offered and supported.

As district level administrations look to support their schools in taking on such a large scale change such as an academy implementation, it is important that they provide support to the local school on a number of levels. The first level of support is to provide the financial means necessary to alter and outfit schools to offer the classes and experiences needed. They also need to support the schools to ensure the staff is afforded the staff development necessary to make such a large and fundamental change. The district level's assistance is also vital in connecting the local school with outside entities to provide support and resources for the courses offered. Finally, and most importantly, the district must allow the school the time and space to fully adjust and implement the academy model. So just as the local school administration must afford the teachers supportive freedom to become comfortable with all the changes that are necessary for a career academy, the district must also function in the same capacity. District leaders must ensure all the supports are in place for the shift to academies and allow the local school to have the time to enact all the changes without anticipating immediate results. The district leaders need to serve as models for the local school in expectations of an equitable and relevant education for all students in their districts.

Leaders of State and National Level

As the educators in the United States (U.S.) strive to improve their country's standings in the educational forum, it is important for the leaders at the state and national level to provide the

resources and support to changes in the educational landscape such as career academies. Though not a great deal of research currently exists on the impact of career academies, the research that has been conducted shows promise (Davis et al., 2009; Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Lee & Ready, 2007; Stern, Dayton & Raby, 2010; SREB, 2014). It is imperative for state and national educational leaders to continue to support the exploration of programs and initiatives to provide students with relevant experiences that are connected to careers to ensure a more educated and qualified workforce. It is also just as important for the policy makers to take steps to ensure that local leaders and teachers are well versed in the challenges our minority students face. Specifically, for leaders in the education field, there needs to be more of a focus on educating them on social justice issues and how to address them. This continued focus on the achievement gap also includes providing students of poverty with the resources necessary to end the cycle of poverty.

Career academies are just one of the many initiatives that show a great deal of promise for helping the students of the U.S. reach their academic potential. Lawmakers need to be open to the initiatives designed to help students experience a more relevant educational experience. This is not to suggest they need only be open to the ideas of such innovations and initiatives, but they need to be willing to financially support the research behind and implementation of said programs. The leaders also must exercise patience as changes like these take time and space to truly come to fruition. Their support of providing a more student-centered education along with ensuring the leaders and staffs of schools are well versed in the challenges today's students face will start the movement to achieving the improved international standing the U.S.'s educational system desires.

Future Research

The research available for career academies is still in its infancy. There is a great deal of research related to the achievement gap and why students of poverty do not succeed, but there is not much research related to what helps minority students and students of poverty succeed academically. This research strives to be one of the studies that shifts the focus from inquiring why students of color and minority students do not succeed to a focus on the students who have succeeded, what helped them, and how we as educators might replicate those results for other students and in other settings. There is a need for more research in the examination of initiatives that seek to provide students with a more relevant and individualized experience. More research is also needed in the areas where schools and students of diverse backgrounds and poverty have found success in overcoming the struggles they face. Another area of focus for research is the exploration of programs to support leaders and educators in the pursuit of becoming social justice advocates. As the educational landscape continues to change in the U.S. and across the world, it is important for researchers to continue to seek the answers to addressing the achievement gap and the U.S.'s less-than-desired ranking in educational achievement results among the other countries across the world.

Limitations

This action research study does possess a number of limitations. First, the study was limited to an urban high school with a high minority and transient population in the southeast, so the results might not transfer to schools that do not share the same characteristics. Another limitation is the timeframe of the research study. The study occurred during the planning and initial implementation of a career academy model. This timeframe produced valuable results, but an extended research period could have been beneficial. A final limitation is in the research

design, was the focus on the leaders of the implementation. The research would have benefitted from a student voice sounding alongside the adult voice presented in the data. Though the research could have benefitted from some alterations, it nonetheless provided a solid examination of the implementation of a career academy to support the academic success of minority students who live in poverty.

Summary

The purpose of this action research study was to explore the effects of developing career academies to increase the graduation rate for students at Brick Road High School and to specifically analyze the achievement of vulnerable students and their successful completion of high school in four years. The research study followed an action research team through the development and implementation of a career academy model in a large, urban high school where the staff struggled to address the low graduation rate with a student population that was highly transient where the majority of students are minorities living in poverty. The analysis of the data for this research study led to a number of recommendations for schools seeking to implement an academy structure as well as for the leaders who impact today's education system in the U.S. The data called for educators to strive to provide students with a more relevant and equitable education through a limited number of interventions. The limitation of interventions comes from the analysis that often when there are too many interventions implemented for the purpose of improving a school's effectiveness, there is not enough time to fully actualize the interventions. The research also found that it is of utmost importance for educators to be well versed with the challenges that keep all students from receiving an equitable education as well as the resources needed to help alleviate the obstacles they face. This charge falls onto the administration as they are the examples from which the students and teachers learn. The study also revealed that it is

important to focus on smaller incremental steps to help students succeed academically. Initial data revealed that Black and Hispanic male students who experienced the academy model for two years performed better academically. This data shows promise in suggesting that those students who are provided relevant, career-focused instruction within a smaller learning community find more success in the classroom. It is this smaller step of focusing on individual students working to increase credit attainment that will lead to a higher graduation rate for the school and, in time, a more educated workforce for the community. The conversion of a school into a career academy is a large undertaking, but with the support from the district, state and national levels, the promise of producing more graduates can be on the horizon. BRHS's implementation of a career academy and the initial results show great promise in changing the educational experience for students and the school community.

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APPENDIX A
RESEARCH INVITATION LETTER

Date _____

Dear _____:

I am an EdD graduate student conducting a research study to fulfill my graduate school requirements under the direction of Professor Dr. Karen Bryant in the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration and Policy at The University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in this research study titled “The Impact of Career Academies on Graduation Rates of Male Students of Color” that is also being conducted as a partnership between Gwinnett County School System and Department of Lifelong Education, Administration and Policy at The University of Georgia. The purpose of this study is to investigate a large, urban high school’s transition to a career academy and its impact on the graduation rate of minority males.

Your participation will involve being part of an Action Research Team that will meet at least twice a month for an hour. Participants will be asked to participate in Action Research Team meetings twice a month for an hour. Meetings will be audio recorded to capture all comments from participants and recordings will be transcribed. Participants will also be asked to complete a pre and post surveys at the first and final action research team meetings. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

If you are interested to participate or have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact me. Thank you in advance for your consideration!

Sincerely,
Kelly Walter

APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORM

I, _____, agree to participate in the research study titled “The Impact of Career Academies on Graduation Rates of Male Students of Color” that is being conducted by Kelly Walter under the direction of Dr. Karen Bryant, both from the Department Lifelong Education, Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part without giving any reason and without penalty. My decision to participate or not in this study or to withdraw after I give consent will not impact my job performance evaluations or employment. If I decide to withdraw from the study, the information that has been collected from me up to the point of my withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless I request the researchers to remove, return, or destroy the information that can be identified as mine.

The purpose of this Action Research study is to implement a career academy model that improves student feelings of connectedness and high school completion among male students of color at a large, suburban high school. This study aims to understand implementation and development of interventions and apply that understanding to the development of effective procedures and resources to positively impact male students of color’s graduation rate. If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following:

- 1) Participate in the Action Research Team that will meet twice a month for 1 hour to engage in cycles of action research to study male students of color’s connectedness and

completion of high school. As a member of this team, I will review research and dialogue with participants regarding factors affecting student connectedness and best practices.

2) Engage in the evaluation of existing practices surrounding student achievement and the development of new interventions through action research team meetings held twice a month. These meetings will be audio-recorded so the researcher will be able to capture all responses through the transcription of recordings.

3) Complete a pre and post survey. Surveys will be given during the first and final action team meetings.

4) Participate in “member checking” (review of the transcripts of interviews for accuracy).

The benefit of this study is to understand how the implementation of career academies impacts the male students of colors’ academic experience and to develop an intervention program that utilizes best practices that respond to the specific needs of this student population. There is no risk expected as a result of participation in this study. At any time during the research the Action Research Survey participants can skip questions or choose to not participate. No individually-identifiable information about me or provided by me during the research will be shared with others without my written permission. Pseudonyms will be used instead of your actual name . I will be assigned a pseudonym in any publications or documents that emanates from this research. Internet communication is insecure and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed due the nature of technology itself. However, once the materials are received by the researchers, standard confidentiality procedures will be used. The investigator will emphasis to all participants that all information and comments made during focus group session will be kept confidential but it is

possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future leading to a breach in confidentiality

The investigator will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project. I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

Name of the Researcher	Signature	Date
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Telephone Number	Email Address
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Name of Participant	Signature	Date
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Please sign both copies, keep one and return the other to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding our rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia; 706-542-3199; IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX C

PRE AND POST SURVEY

Pre and Post Survey for Action Research Team

Please circle the most appropriate of each statement which corresponds most closely to your desired response

I am well versed in Social Justice Issues related to education.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

I make a conscious effort to ensure all students in my school are receiving an equitable education.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

I have examined how my background impacts my interactions with parents, students and teachers.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

It is worthwhile to examine one's background as an educator.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

Equity in education is a concern.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

I am a social justice advocate.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX D

BOOK STUDY GUIDE

2016-17 Book Study

Due Date	Topic	Guiding Questions	Chapter(s)
Aug. 25	Understanding Poverty	<p>Compare and contrast Jensen's and Gorski's characterization of poverty.</p> <p>How do their perspectives differ or align with your perspective on poverty?</p>	<p>Gorski –Ch. 1 pgs. 6-12/Ch. 3 pgs. 38-51</p> <p>Jensen – Ch.1 pgs. 5-6</p>
Sept. 29	Understanding Poverty	<p>Do you see examples of Jensen's explanation of the effects of poverty play out in your classroom or at BRHS?</p> <p>How, if at all, might Gorski's Equity Literacy approach (4 abilities & 10 principles) support or challenge Jensen's position on the Effects of</p>	<p>Gorski – Ch. 2 pgs 22-23/ 24-25</p> <p>Jensen –Ch.1 pgs 7-12/Ch 2 pgs. 13-45)</p>

		Poverty and how that plays out in behavior and academic performance?	
Oct. 27	“Culture” of Poverty	<p>How does Gorski’s characterization of the “culture” of poverty align with your perspectives?</p> <p>What does he suggest are the dangers of adopting belief structure around the notion that there is a “culture” of poverty?</p> <p>Considering Jensen’s description of the Effects of Poverty, which elements, if any, would Gorski challenge as a stereotype of the “culture” of poverty?</p>	<p>Gorski - Ch. 4 pgs. 52- 70</p> <p>Jensen – Ch. 2 pgs. 13-45 (repeat from previous month)</p>
Nov. 17	What can we do at the school level to support our students & community? Pt. 1	Compare/Contrast Jensen’s and Gorski’s suggestions for effective school-level practices.	<p>Gorski – Ch. 8 pgs. 117 - 131</p> <p>Jensen Ch. 4 pgs. 66 - 98</p>

Dec. 15	What can we do at the school level to support our students & community? Pt. 2	<p>What, if any, counterproductive practices that Gorski outlines do you see in play at Brick Road HS? In PBSS? Do you agree with his position? Why or why not?</p> <p>What can we do to ameliorate those concerns?</p> <p>How, if at all, do Jensen and Gorski align with regards to parental involvement?</p>	<p>Gorski – Ch. 7 pgs. 108-116/Ch. 9 pgs. 132-141</p> <p>Jensen – Ch. 4 pgs. 98-105</p>
Jan. 26	What can we do at the classroom level to support our students & community? Pt. 1	<p>Compare/Contrast Jensen's suggestions for effective classroom-level practices and Gorski's take on ineffective</p>	<p>Gorski – Ch. 8 pgs. 117 – 131 (repeat from a previous month)</p> <p>Jensen – Ch. 6 106-</p>

		practices	142
Feb. 23	What can we do at the classroom level to support our students & community? Pt. 2	<p>Considering Gorski's Equity Literacy approach, critique "A day in the life of Mr. Hawkin's Classroom."</p> <p>How does his classroom align to yours?</p>	<p>Gorski – Ch. 2 pgs. 22-23/ 24-25 (repeat from a previous month)</p> <p>Jensen – Ch. 6 pgs. 143-152</p>