Demographics Shaping Learning Communities: A Collective Case Study of Career Academies in Public High Schools in San Diego

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Abstract

Career academies emerged as part an education reform effort and, like smaller schools within schools, have drawn attention for their success in motivating at risk students to stay in school through graduation. This article draws on career academies in the southern, border region of California, not to reinforce the value of the career academy concept as an educational practice, but as a field of investigation for how public schools either change or reproduce patterns of stratification, depending on their demographics. Based on interviews and student performance data from nine career academy programs embedded within large urban high schools in San Diego, California, the study produced a typology as a framework of analysis. In this article, a case study of an Inclusive-&-Interconnecting career academy will be contrasted with an Autonomous-&-Exclusive one, in order to examine how the demographics of the school appear to be related to reinforcement of, or conversely a breaking with, socially reproductive patterns and practices, thus either upholding, or compromising the original intentions of educational reforms designed to reverse stratification and uneven representation.

Introduction

Career academies were developed in the late 1960s with some notable successes in keeping at-risk students in high school through graduation (Kemple & Snipes, 2000) and even increasing the numbers of under-represented students entering and completing four-year colleges in some studies (Maxwell & Rubin, 2000). Ideally defined, a career academy is a clustering of career-related courses with academic ones, forming a small learning community of students and teachers. The reform is intended to make academic subjects more vital through real world applications of the learning, and to personalize the high school experience by keeping students and a teaching team together for more than one class, and more than one year. The teaching team, in this ideal model, brings personalization about by working closely together, collaborating on curricula, and working closely with students, as a close-knit community of learners. Structural factors - including classrooms that are close together or even interconnecting, block-scheduling that allows longer project time, students scheduled together, and shared meeting times for teachers - are all features that intensify the reform. As you will see, policy, as well as individual choices by teachers and students, can either facilitate or sabotage any or all of these features. The demographics of schools, I will argue, make the sabotage or facilitation more or less likely to occur.

A learning community such as the career academy is well-targeted as a way to break patterns of social reproduction (that is, the repetition of unequal patterns built into the institution (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971), if and when its structuring and implementation allow the formation of new social networks (Lave & Wenger, 1991) necessary for the building of new forms of social capital in the high school context for students who have been marginalized by schooling. Tracking in schooling leaves a mark that persists into adult life. According to the 2004 California Labor report, from the Center
for Labor Research and Education at UCLA: “Occupations and rewards in the California economy vary with gender, race, ethnicity, and nativity. U.S.-born Latinos have lesser educations than African Americans and Anglos, lower level jobs, and less income. Differences in benefits are particularly troubling in light of the uneven distributions of jobs across gender, racial and ethnic lines” (Milkman, 2004). The pedagogy of career academies, as described above, can lead to a reversal in patterns of stratification by bringing students together in courses unmarked by the set layers of tracking built into today’s schooling. In Ann Davidson’s in-depth ethnography of three California high schools over a three year period, both African-American and Latino/a students interviewed expressed the difficulties they had experienced convincing counselors to place them in non-vocational or regular track classes, despite high GPAs upon entering high school.Some describe the profound change in perspective they experienced when (and if) they were finally involved in classes that included college-bound students (Davidson, 1996). Career academies can bring students together in new ways, if implemented in such ways as to bring students together in social networks other than those inscribed by birth and perpetuated in the structures of schooling.

Angela Valenzuela provides several useful tools for discussion of how marginalization and its opposite, entitlement, work in our schools. Based on interviews with Latino/a students in a longitudinal ethnographic study at a majority Mexican-American high school in Texas, she found that “relations with school personnel, especially with teachers, play a decisive role in determining the extent to which youth find the school to be a welcoming or an alienating place” (1999). As a way of offering an alternative to the subtractive and competitive approaches still prevalent in our schools, Valenzuela points out that students coming from schools in Mexico, and even second and third generation U.S.-born students of Mexican heritage, carry on the expectation that “learning should be premised on a humane and compassionate pedagogy inscribed in reciprocal relationships” (1999). According to Valenzuela, the role and purpose of schools conveyed in the word educación is “conceptually broader” than the English definition of the term “education,” “including competence in the social world” beginning with what is learned from the family and including moral, social, and personal respect for the dignity and individuality of self and others, placing equal emphasis on the importance of connectedness and authentic caring as essential to student success. Valenzuela suggests that schools in Mexico treat achievement as a more social process, taking interest in the quality of interpersonal relationships. This viewpoint and approach will be of significant application to the first career academy case study in this paper, and significantly absent in the second.

This paper works to deepen and humanize as well as to further politicize the ways these concepts can be understood pedagogically and proactively, through a comparative analysis of students and teachers in two very different career academy programs and schools, examining how they adopt or reject - value or devalue - the collectivist versus individualist approaches to learning (Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield & Trumbull, 1999; Greenfield, 2003).

**Setting of the Study**

The district of this study is representative of many large urban centers in the United States, and particularly border regions. The diversity of the area has been increasing exponentially over recent decades, due to extensive and increasing employment in telecommunications and biotechnology industries as well as temperate weather. During the year of my study (2002-2003), the district composition by “race”/ethnicity was 39.7% Latino/a, 26.6% Euro-America, 16.4% Asian-American (which encompasses all Eastern heritages) and 15.6% African-American. More than one third of the students were categorized as English Learners, and more than 64 languages
were spoken at home by student families. The socio-economic make-up of the district was 56.3% ‘eligible for free or reduced meals’ (low income). The seven high schools in my study ranged from 70% Latino/a-American at one high school, to 70% Euro-American at another. These demographics correlated with the schools’ Academic Performance Indexes (API); in other words, the school with the demographic of 70% Latino/a-American had an API of 2 out of 10 possible points, while the school with the demographic 70% Euro-American had an API of 9 out of 10 possible index points. I will later argue that this indexing not only results from particular priorities but also creates priorities that bound the likeliness of inclusion for students in marginalized positions vis-à-vis schooling and social capital.

Methodological Approach

For this research, I spent a great deal of time at each of the nine career academies, observing in classrooms and talking with students, teachers and staff. I interviewed 300 of the 600 career academy students, half of those in each academy, randomly selected, using a semi-structured interview instrument. The interview responses were categorized by a general framework for content analysis. In addition, I compiled performance records (GPA and test scores) for all 600 students, for five years, preceding and including their years with the career academy. Demographic and standardized test score data were compiled on the academies and the schools in which they were situated. This blend of qualitative and quantitative data resulted in a typology of career academy approaches.

In this article, I draw from a framework representing the spectrum of career academies, from closest to the original intentions of the reform – i.e., Inclusive & Interconnecting (I.I.) - to farthest from the original design, or Exclusive & Autonomous (E.A.) The top of Table 1 contains the descriptors Inclusive and Exclusive referring to student selection or participation in, 1) “race”/ ethnicity and gender, and 2) academic performance. Along the left side of Table 1, Interconnecting or Autonomous refer, rather, to the architecture of the academy, put in place by the teachers and the school. Interconnecting relates to the physical closeness or connectedness of classrooms and to the connectedness of curricula, through active teacher collaboration. The two career academy case studies in this article serve to exemplify the two most polar opposite of the typology; the first case study is Inclusive & Interconnecting (I.I.), which embodies the ideal outlined in the introduction to this article. The second far short of the ideal and is hence representative of the Exclusive & Autonomous (E.A.) type. Most of the other nine career academies in the study fall in varying degrees of I-I, A-I, or E-A. No academy was found to be Exclusive yet Interconnecting in this study.

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1 The Academic Performance Index (API) is a system adopted by the California Department of Education in 2000 to give schools a ranking according to a set of performance measures. The Office of Policy and Evaluation sanctions or rewards schools based on the academic achievement of students.
Table 1: Typology of Career Academies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusive</th>
<th>Autonomous</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I-I: Inclusive/Interconnecting-</td>
<td>A-I. Autonomous/Inclusive-</td>
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<tr>
<td>This model transforms schooling</td>
<td>This academy model includes a broad</td>
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<tr>
<td>by combining a broad range of</td>
<td>range of students but fails to adopt</td>
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<tr>
<td>students and interconnected</td>
<td>practices that transform schooling</td>
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<tr>
<td>classrooms and curricula;</td>
<td>with interconnected classrooms and</td>
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<tr>
<td>meaningful interdisciplinary</td>
<td>curricula, maintaining a traditionally</td>
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<td>projects, cohorts of students</td>
<td>autonomous approach to teaching,</td>
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<tr>
<td>moving through the school day</td>
<td>both in distanced classrooms and</td>
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<td>together, ongoing, visible</td>
<td>in lack of teacher collaboration on</td>
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<td>teacher collaboration and</td>
<td>interdisciplinary projects</td>
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<td>team teaching.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Exclusive</th>
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<tr>
<td>I-E: Interconnecting/Exclusive-</td>
<td>E-A: Exclusive/Autonomous-</td>
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<tr>
<td>This model adopts practices</td>
<td>This model is the most reproductive of</td>
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<td>of an interconnecting learning</td>
<td>old patterns of under-representation;</td>
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<tr>
<td>community but is exclusive</td>
<td>it does not break stratifying patterns</td>
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<tr>
<td>regarding under-represented</td>
<td>with inclusive practices in selection</td>
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<tr>
<td>students by race/ethnicity,</td>
<td>by race/ethnicity, gender and</td>
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<td>gender and/or achievement level.</td>
<td>achievement level, and does not</td>
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<td></td>
<td>establish a collaborative learning</td>
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<td>community.</td>
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First Case Study: An Inclusive-Interconnecting (I-I) Academy

Midfield’s Travel & Tourism (T & T) Academy had gained a reputation among students during its previous 8-year history as a Business Tech program, similarly integrating academic courses with career (business) subjects. The teachers who developed this program had already established their program as offering usable skills in a flexible and personalized atmosphere. Students recommended it to each other from year to year with obvious enthusiasm: “My older brother was in it, and he was always telling me how great it is, you know, the benefits of being in here. It was the B&T academy then, you know, Business & Technology, but most of the teachers are the same.” Male Euro-American student, Interview, Spring 2003, Midfield T & T.

The “legacy” effect is a powerful source of student agency that is often ignored. As observable in this study, students develop an anticipatory imaginary regarding a class or program, based on information they receive from fellow students. This phenomenon has the power and potential to vitalize or to sap a program of energy; ignoring it, in turn, robs students of the shaping of their learning environments. The early eradication of programs in order to replace them with new reforms, usually designed by policy makers at a distance from the cultural-historical realities of the local program, disallows the values of the legacy to come into being. For the T & T at Midfield, formerly the B & T, the legacy or symbolic capital had been allowed to build. I will argue that this allowance was related to the demographics of the school itself.
Midfield High School is located in a mid-city area, halfway between downtown San Diego and the suburbs of north county. Mixed older residential and apartment blocks buttress large shopping malls and small businesses such as auto repairs and hair salons in the blocks surrounding the school. The high school has little distinction among students in the other high schools of the district; it is considered neither elite nor ‘tough.’ Fittingly, Midfield’s Academic Performance Index (API) was at the center as well, with an API of 5 out of 10 possible points (an unacceptable level, according to the state department of education).

Inclusive

This academy was 64% Latino/a, while the campus as a whole was 40% Latino/a, and 62% were labeled with LED (Limited English Development) codes with the district. Only 28% of the students in the academy were Euro-American, well below the nearly 50% of the whole high school. The academy had one African American student as opposed to the 5.4% of the campus so that inclusiveness by “race”/ethnicity is a relative term in this case. In another school in this study, an IT (Information Technologies) Academy had an equal number of Latino/a students in the whole school, yet a far smaller number included in the academy, which was majority White. I categorized that academy as Exclusive, mainly because an ideal objective of career academies in public schools is to reverse under-representation in high-paying fields. This brings up a conundrum, since Travel & Tourism is a service industry by employment standards; therefore, is inclusion of a majority Latino/a students in travel and tourism an act of inclusion? The same question applies for gender. The gender makeup of the academy exactly matched that of the school as a whole. Yet women are not under-represented in service industries.

One possible objective within a career academy that appears to involve mainly work that one enters with or without a high school education is the possibility of moving students from dreams of a vocation that can begin with work in a field immediately after high school to possibilities of reaching for careers that require a four-year college degree. For instance, most students entering the Construction Tech Academy are interested in carpentry and construction, yet through combining hands-on building with advanced computer design and rigorous support in math and physics, many change their plans toward architecture and engineering. Though the field of Travel & Tourism offers a smaller range of fields, students utilized the affordances of the academy for business skills and the academic support. Examining the demographic makeup of this academy is, therefore, mainly for the purpose of assessing who chose to take part in the academy, demographically, to embrace the benefits it offered on an academic level, perhaps in making the learning more interesting by its applied nature in projects but not necessarily with intentions of entering travel and tourism as a field. In other words, inclusiveness in this case does not necessarily hold promise for advancing students into a high-paying career but rather includes them in the engaging, project-based and personalized approach to academic work. Additionally, many students expressed interest in the business aspect of the academy more than the hospitality theme, thus indicating that students themselves identified more symbolic capital with business than with travel and tourism, or hospitality.

As far as inclusiveness in academic achievement, by grades, 38% of the seniors and 20% of the next cohort, the juniors, had carried GPAs below 2.0 the year before entering the academy. I point this out only to show the inclusiveness of the academy, which involved more students with

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2 Teachers did remark that they intended to promote a more multi-cultural image in posters on their classroom windows in order to encourage a broader racial/ethnic range of students to apply.
3 The Construction Tech and this phenomenon of shifting ambitions is a chapter of my dissertation.
GPAs under a 2.0 than any other academy in the study.\textsuperscript{4} During participation in the academy, the average GPA stayed relatively even, between 2.36 and 2.58, so that, if being judged as a success by improving their academic performance, this might appear not to be a strong example. I persist in suggesting that this program had the strongest academy implementation, based on interviews and the high pass rate for senior exhibitions (further elaborated below).

As far as standardized test scores, in Language, only 30.43\% of the academy students scored over the 50\textsuperscript{th} percentile as opposed to nearly 50\% of the whole school. However, the academy students were closer to the whole school in Math, with 44.74\% scoring above the 50\textsuperscript{th} percentile, compared with 49.8\% above the 50\textsuperscript{th} percentile for the whole school. Standardized test scores fluctuated up and down from year to year in both language and math but generally these students were testing below the average of the school consistently before and during their participation in the academy. Consistent with national studies, participation in career academy did not appear to raise standardized test scores, but probably also did not reflect their true abilities. For instance, their ability to articulate their ideas in interviews seems to belie the Language assessments of them. The wide up-and-down fluctuations merely attest to the unreliability of standardized tests to represent student progress. These measures do show in a very general way, and in the way students experienced schooling and worried about their futures, that they could well use the extra academic support they were receiving in the academy.

The influences named by students that brought them to the academy were distributed evenly across: 1) counselors or teachers, 2) friends or relatives in the academy, and 3) the presentations given by academy students to all sophomore English classes about the academy. This broad range of recruitment and the distribution of influences that caused students to join the academy program indicate that the voluntary nature of career academies is only one factor in inclusiveness; active recruitment across the student body also evens the playing field.

Interconnecting

The T & T Academy was located in two interconnected classrooms, one of which had been adapted from a traditional classroom into a computer lab, with computers set on standard high school tables pushed together in clusters throughout the room. The other room was set up in the traditional mode, with rows of desks. Both rooms were somewhat shabby and worn out. The teachers at the academy apologized to me several times about the ceilings having stains and the carpets and walls being deteriorated, saying that refurbishing had been promised to them for several years. This did not seem to deter either the learning or the students' participation; in fact it could be said that students felt relaxed in this environment, which begs a question: not that students or teachers deserve shabby accommodations but do they sometimes also indicate more leeway on the part of the administration? If less is being invested into amenities, is there also likely to be more allowance for obscuring set rules and parameters? There may be less comforts and concessions provided but also more room for experimentation. In this case, teachers had to give up their own after school time to meet since no shared prep time was scheduled for them, so that 'being ignored' came with a price.

\textsuperscript{4} This is remarkable mainly because the district's policies prevented most students struggling students from taking part in career academies or anything involving electives by imposing required literacy and math blocks.
The Academy, then, was comprised of two classrooms in the center of the school. Students were scheduled in “pure” cohorts; that is, all students in the career academy courses were part of the academy. Four teachers taught the classes, pairing in two teams; English teamed with U.S. History (or Government-Economics for seniors), and Business Math for Travel & Tourism teamed with Computer Applications. All four teachers worked together to form projects involving all 4 subjects in an integrated way. They covered both junior and senior year levels of required courses in these subjects, but shaped the academic courses to include the career theme, both within the coursework and with interdisciplinary projects. They also planned field trips behind the scenes in related industries; for instance, while I was visiting the program, they toured a luxury ship, spoke to people who worked at all levels of the operation, and were treated to a catered lunch.

The two classrooms where academy students and four academy teachers spent several hours of every other school day were not only contiguous but the door between them was kept open and used continually for flexible movement between the two classrooms. As one student explained to me: “When we have our English classes, it’s not just the English class. It’s in AOTT and it’s together … all connected. It has something to do with our Economics and everything. For projects, we have to be moving around. We can be looking for information, research, and it’s better [than] just sitting listening to lessons.” (Midfield interview, Euro-American female student, 2003.) A natural flow took place between lecture time and group project activities. Flexible time at the computers for project work allowed conceptual scaffolding with a blend of first and second language use by students. The architecture itself, I would argue, as well as the mediating work at computers, allowed students who shared a first language to scaffold conceptually for each other.

The full benefits of the arrangement were made far clearer to me when I interviewed the students than merely through observation: “… like the project we just did …” a student explained. “I wouldn’t say it was easy but it was enjoyable. You came to class and […] you wanted to go work on it…. because we have the computer class over there mingled with our English and History class. Instead of going to History for two hours, you come to history, get a lecture, take a test, […] then go do computer work. And same thing for English. Like for this project, we had to write a paper, we had to do a PowerPoint, we had to do a budget. […] For the history part, he [the history teacher] helped out with the budget, and for English, we worked a lot on [the paper], and for the PowerPoint and all the Excel stuff, that was computer class - the class over there (indicating the next room). They all put their own angles. I learned a whole lot.” (Student interview, Midfield, 2003.) Students placed great value on seeing the teachers work together as well as on the ongoing and meaningful communication between teachers, among teachers and students, and between the students themselves: “[The teachers] talk to each other... they make sure they correlate” and “I like how the teachers work together, and we have time when we have our class here. […] They help each other, talk to each other.” Latina student. Interview, Midfield T & T, Spring 2003.

**Summing up the Inclusive/Interconnecting (I.I.) Academy**

By far, the most common view expressed by students was that the teachers in this academy talked to each other, about the curriculum and about the students, and cared enough to make sure the work was getting done, that the learning was taking place, and that the senior exhibitions

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5 Block scheduling allowed for all academy courses for juniors and seniors every other day, juniors one day, seniors the next.
6 Students shorten Academy of Travel & Tourism to “AOTT” based on a national academy foundation which tries to promote the programs in schools throughout the country.
and essays were passed. The students at Midfield’s Travel & Tourism Academy’s responses in interviews can be quantified for their overwhelmingly enthusiastic regarding the features of their program. They volunteered these points with surprising self-awareness and specific articulations of the pedagogies, demonstrating both appreciation and a sense of ownership. Prompted only with the open-ended question, “What difference does the academy make in your high school experience?” 96.7% fell into the A category of responses: “connection of subjects, teachers working together, staying with the same students, connected classrooms, being like a family,” with 37.9% combining their A response with B: “learning about fields through internships, work experience, industry speakers, job fairs; the real world application of learning, job skills”; with C: “extra credits and/or certificate, and/or with D: “computer access and learning computer skills.”

Student after student expressed appreciation for the teachers knowing them and being aware of their progress. “I have … friends that are not in the academy. They have the regular English class and they’re doing the same things we are, but they are so stuck … they don’t make the effort. It’s like they don’t know how to make an effort, they can’t, they don’t [get] help.” (Latina student, interview, Midfield, 2003.)

The need and desire for extra help seemed to come into play most obtrusively, in interviews, around the senior exhibition. According to the academy English teacher, the school as a whole has a 55% pass rate on the Senior Exhibition Essay: academy students all pass it. One student expressed her awareness of the difficulty, and the value of help with the senior exhibition and senior essay: “I don’t see how any of the other students that aren’t in the academy could complete their paper because they don’t have… we have so much help. Tthey prepare us for it with activities that are sort of related, but not directly, to our senior paper.” Latina student. Interview, Midfield T & T, Spring 2003.

Despite mixed results on what would be measured as success in the academic domain (GPAs and standardized test scores), students conveyed unequivocally their valuing of a flexible and helping learning environment, both from the standpoint of closeness to other students and in quality of interaction with teachers. “They interact with you more than other teachers and I really like that.” Latino student. Interview, Midfield T & T, Spring 2003.

I like the teachers. They’re really nice and they’re caring. [You have two years with them] so they know you better, too. (Female Euro-American student, Interview, Spring 2003.)

It makes a big difference, the teachers working together. They’re communicating. They’re getting to know the students better… If one teacher is not here and the other is, they know what’s going on so you can ask for help. (Student interview, Midfield T & T Academy, Spring 2003.)

Beyond, but also within the teacher caring, awareness and support, the power of computers to open and make possible a dynamic and fluid learning environment is apparent. Students also appreciate the computer skills themselves as a symbolic and human capital, which, when explicitly expressed, reveals the likelihood that their past experience has encompassed little access to learning computer skills:
You learn a lot of stuff that you pretty much won’t learn in other classes. Like computers. You use computers here a lot and that’s basically … no matter what, you’re using computers in real life, in all working areas. (Latino student, Midfield T & T, 2003.)

The many statements by students that explicitly include the benefits of access to computers will stand in stark contrast to the second case study, along with all features of the academy and the school itself.

**Second Case Study: The Exclusive / Autonomous Career Academy**

Rainy Springs High School had the highest API of any school in the study (9 out of 10 possible points). The school was 53.5% Euro-American, making it least non-White school in the study, making it relatively similar to Midfield in Whiteness but not in the other races and not in income. Situated in the district’s northeast suburban region, the school was backed by hills with large homes. This area’s median household income is $92,270 (2000 Census). The median income for a family in the county overall was $53,060. In the downtown area, which is closer to Midfield, the average family income is half the national average; about a third live below the poverty line (based on 2004 census data).

**Exclusiveness by “Race”/Ethnicity, Gender and Academic Performance**

Rainy Springs Finance Academy matched the school’s overall percentage of Latino/a-American and Euro-American students, with *only* 8.4% Latino/a students in the school and 7% in the academy. The academy exceeded the school's percentages of African American, Asian and Indochinese students. However, Filipinos, who comprised 13.5% percent of the school, represented only 4.5% of the academy. Thus the school itself is exclusive compared to much of the district. The academy was 77.3% male, where the school itself is 41.2% male. Since women are under-represented in finance, especially at the higher levels of pay, this could be said to perpetuate patterns of under-representation.

Exclusion becomes much more pronounced in the area of academic achievement. Only Advanced Placement (AP) academic courses were included in the academy, neglecting the premise of the career academy concept to the extreme. The academy students actually had standardized tests scores *above* the whole school; 55.6% scored above the 50th percentile on Language, as opposed to 30.8% in the whole school, and 38% scored above the 50th percentile on Math versus 31.3% of the whole school. As far as grades, none fell below 2.0 and the average GPA over the years of the academy was 3.55, unweighted.

If any had been lower, it would have been unfortunate since the teachers expressed no intention of giving academic support to academy students. According to the history teacher, “We were able to step up some students who were not advanced [i.e. counselors would have allowed it] but they wouldn’t do well.” According to the AP English teacher, basic English students placed in the Advanced Lit class in order to be part of the career academy “qualify for D’s” (another counselor “concession,” though the reward, for the student, eludes me).

The academy English teacher also told me: “Some feel like a group. The ones with the least sense of it are the low-achieving students.” My interviews did not corroborate the teacher’s perception; achievement level made no difference in which of the students knew about the academy. This teacher also explained to me that “[the teachers] are hesitant to send [low-achieving students]...
on internships.” Not including low-achieving students in internships is one more indication of a lack of awareness of, or lack of intention to follow, the original purposes of career academies – that is, to re-engage low-achieving students in schooling through the inspiration of internships and career connections. His final remark was, “But they understand that ‘I’m part of the academy’ … and I remind them.”

All recruitment for Rainy Springs Finance Academy, significantly, was from computer applications and business classes. By choosing not to actively recruit students from struggling or under-represented segments of the student population, and merely inviting those who had already shown an interest in finance and accounting, the academy took a stance by omission.

Autonomous

The Finance Academy at Rainy Springs High School comprised two accounting and business courses, and two AP academic courses. The computer lab, the center of the academy if it could be said to have one, was located at a distance from the academic courses. Few students shared classes other than their business one(s). Some seemed unaware of the existence of a Finance Academy to which they purportedly belonged - “I actually don’t know what [the Finance Academy] is at all. The only reason I took this class [the main finance class of the academy] is because I wanted to be the web site designer for it” (Student Interview, Rainy Springs, April 2003). Others seemed to deliberately distance themselves from it: “What do we do during the class? Internships. We’re never in that class. We’re always on internships. We don’t get mixed up with the academy. [...] I guess having Ms. S for Economics is what qualifies me to be in the academy.” (Interview, Sunny Springs High, May 2003.).

No classrooms for the academy were scheduled contiguously, and computers were not integrated in project work with the academic subjects; they were used specifically for accounting or “Virtual Business.” Implementation of the career theme was applied by individual teachers autonomously by slipping business-related subject matter into the regular standardized curriculum, and sometimes as extra assignments for the few academy students in their classes. The American Literature and Government/Economics teachers chose lessons on their own that tied in with business and finance themes rather than working through a team teaching approach.

The distance between classes makes it difficult and unlikely for teachers to collaborate regularly. The head teacher of the Finance Academy told me she hadn’t “felt free to apply the strengths” of what she had done in other schools in the past to developing the academy because of outside guidelines and pressures. “People don’t want to put in the extra time. I have to tippy-toe [sic].”7 “Am I benefiting the kids?” she defended. “Yes! Through the internships.” This was a singular or isolated benefit – appreciated by students, but very much one of the autonomous aspects of the academy, where interconnection was neither formed nor sought – of classrooms, of students, of teachers or of curricula.

Perhaps the clearest sign of the autonomy, or lack of a community, at Rainy Springs’ Finance Academy was the students’ response to the open-ended question, “What difference does the academy make in your high school experience?”: 81.8% answered either B: “the internships and industry skills and experiences, or E / F: “it makes little or no difference to have the academic and career-focus subjects connected as an academy.” These are, you might note, mutually exclusive to the Midfield academy student responses.

7 Interview, Business and Accounting teacher, head teacher of the Finance Academy, Rainy Springs High School, Spring 2003.
Summing up the Exclusive/Autonomous (E.A.) Academy

It could be argued that this school was demographically positioned not to form a successful and actively implemented small learning community. The high income level of the area and school is reflected in signs of privilege, such as students making no mention of access to computers, despite their high-end computer lab with new carpeting and padded swiveling chairs. The expensive lab classroom often sat empty while students went to internships off campus. Students also did not occupy this space with the kind of collaborative involvement that was apparent at Midfield. It was not architected to do so.

One possible conclusion is that to establish an exclusive academy begs the result of an autonomous one as well. By taking the stance of prioritizing Advanced Placement (AP) students over finding struggling students and building community, what resulted was an academy where teachers participated in social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). These students already feel empowered by the dominant culture and did not perceive any need to form a community. As Bourdieu and Passeron aptly put it, “Membership in this economic cosmos implies unconditional recognition of the stakes taken for granted ...[and] misrecognition of the value it confers on them” (1977). These students were very enthusiastic about learning business on their internships, and the freedom of getting away from school, but most expressed openly that they did not have need for a community within the school or in inter-related classes.

To be fair, the teaching approach was autonomous so the students had no opportunity to experience a pedagogy of interconnection. They were only together in their career-related course and did not experience teachers collaborating regularly. But even if the architecture had been designed with classrooms that were close together, creating a community, it seems likely, based on interviews that exclusively selected and oriented students (who qualify for AP courses) would not have embraced the limitations of choice inherent in an academy structure when fully implemented.

Conclusion

It is not my intention with the title of this article to suggest that the demographics of the school provide a formula for predicting the extent of program implementation; in fact the school with the lowest number of students graduating, the lowest API (an API of 2 out of the 10 possible points), 70% Latino, and the lowest in income level (free or reduced lunch) did not manage well implemented career academy programs; although its Finance Academy included mostly Latino/a students, the achievement demands were so high that few students remained in the program, making it exclusive in the achievement dimension. Nevertheless, I suggest that demographics, in our current system, play a strong role in the possibilities and likelihood for deeply transformative implementation of career academies, due in part to the structuring and reward/penalty system of API ratings for schools, as well as other requirements, and embedded teachers’ and administrators’ conceptual frames. In the district of my study, policy eliminated the possibility of at-risk students being involved in academies, immediately setting aside many of the students who could best benefit from the career academy approach.

The title of this article is not meant to be determinist or essentialist - that demographics should, or always will, shape learning communities. On the contrary, it is my intention to illuminate an apparent and disturbing relationship between demographics and how learning communities in public high

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8 This case study is elaborated in my dissertation chapter “Soft Skills or Conditioning for the Working Poor: The Finance Industry enters High Schools through Career Academies.”
schools take shape. There is always the hope of new ways of envisioning possible reversals in the traditional direction of learning through architecting spaces that cross the boundaries. As Vygotsky and others who take a cultural-historical approach to learning have insisted, human minds develop in social situations. Lave & Wenger show learning to be an integral part of generative social practice (1991). From this point of view, learning will take place in a richly constructed environment where there is social engagement and participation. This concept reverses our education policy’s usual approach of deciding what must be learned, and seeing social factors as just an unruly byproduct. Our education system continues to ignore the relationship of creating the social environment in order for the learning and engagement to follow.

Australian education researchers have pointed out that, while students are “split between present commitments and possible futures, the emphasis in schools is on the future role that students will play in the economic life of [their country]” (Hirst & Vadeboncoeur, 2006). They remark further that this emphasis is not easily changed by practitioners, as “daily survival keeps teachers focused on the present and their individual concerns, rather than being afforded the time necessary to plan ahead and undertake collegial activities” (Hirst & Vadeboncoeur, 2006). White (1990) similarly implicates the managerialism in education and the labour-market orientation of the school, “its ideological functions and its preservation of social contradictions between the economic role of the school and its presumed egalitarian role” (p. 78).

In the Inclusive-Interconnecting academy, a rare case where teachers did take the initiative and did find the leeway within their school, students embraced the opportunities for networking and building social and symbolic capital. Their appreciation of team teaching expressed eloquently the value they placed on the ongoing personalization by teachers and among students, clearly highlighting a contrast with what they had experienced in the past. On the other hand, at the Exclusive-Autonomous academy which adopted a strategy of exclusive selection (in academic performance record) and autonomous teaching strategies, students expressed little or no need for a connection of classes or a feeling of community. By not seeking out a broader range of students who might be struggling or marginalized in the school, teachers at the E-A academy maintained the dominant pattern of tracking and reproduction of a stratified school where dominant culture continues to retain the lion’s share of social capital potential and perpetuating the competitive modus aparandus of entitlement.

Even if the students of Rainy Springs Finance would have been willing to embrace an academy in its full implementation, the demographics of the school itself dictated a prioritizing of “A-G” requirements and AP courses. As one teacher explained to me, “Counselors are evaluated on how many students meet A-G.” It is simplest to go with the naturalized hegemony that perpetuates stratified schools and competitive orientation toward individual progress. Thus, students’ desires and schools’ flexibility are mapped demographically. Between these two defining forces, individual teachers remake or break patterns. In this era of penalty or reward - not for reaching out or for innovating, but for meeting a standardized system of measurement that is faulty at best - to break them can come at a high cost. The most difficult place to implement a new innovative and cross-curricular approach was the highest-achieving school in the study. What we see evolve, from the teachers’ point of view, follows the paths of least resistance, and these paths are the ways to reproduction of dominant culture.

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9 A-G is a set of high school requirements defined as minimal for entrance to the Universities of California system. These requirements define nearly all classes that fit into a student’s four years of high school and although one year of art is included, they leave little room for electives so that participating in a career academy for those aiming for the UCs.
Regardless of the school’s policies and teachers’ practices, students either embrace the small community and supportive learning opportunities as life lines through high school toward greater hope for the future, or conversely, take them for granted or reject them altogether, relying instead on the individuated trajectory they have come to assume. There is the factor of legacy which may do more than all else to draw students to an academy and dictate the nature of their involvement. As we saw at Midfield, teachers can do a great deal to increase student enthusiasm for a learning community, to create the legacy that is positively embraced by students. Besides teachers personalizing schooling, classroom configuration and flexible use of computers can turn into a legacy that students actively pass on to classmates and to future generations. Connected to the legacy, then, is the importance of longevity as part of the strength of a program; innovations need time. Students and teachers need the chance to build the legacies, and build with them, to revise them over time.

Opening the doors between classrooms and increasing the flexibility of time and space (i.e. shifting the chronotope of the regular school structure (Lefebvre, 1991) was embraced with enthusiasm by students at Midfield who expressed the difference it, along with teacher caring and project work, made in their experiencing of school. They could scaffold for each other, through shared language, and through technologies that allowed dynamic group work. The concept of community might not have been rejected by students at Rainy Springs had this interconnecting architecture involving interdisciplinary projects been offered, even to the more entitled set of students. Perhaps if it was not embraced at first, the idea of community rather than entitlement as a value may be one well-learned in any circumstance. Unless it is done in an inclusive way, proactively involving under-represented students with those who were born entitled, nothing is done to break the barriers built into the fabric of schooling that causes marginalization in the first place.

Is there any need for small learning communities in high-performing schools or for high-performing students? Perhaps there are funds of knowledge, missing from the entitled students. As in the notion of educación, perhaps we overlook a certain fund of knowledge, even cultural capital of that is not, as yet, dominant, that seems to go lacking in many middle class schools and communities, which becomes the dialectic of marginalization. Dominance is built on the basis of there being the dominated. What is termed cultural capital may be not what is already considered of value but what we’ve ignored in subtracting cultural wisdom and strengths from our educational practices, in our subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999).

Space constructed to allow open access between classrooms also afforded a new positioning in which students felt empowered. Augmented teacher communication translated to greater caring about students’ welfare in, and relationship to, schooling. “The emphasis on space as both constitutive of and constituted in social practice […] makes visible […] the ideologies at play in the construction of hegemonic practices. Once visible and understood they may be countered, reducing their power to marginalise people” (Hirst & Vadeboncoeur, 2006). Again regarding changes in the space itself, Kostogriz writes: “The re-mediation of cultural-semiotic forms of injustice in education entails the production of new learning spaces in which cultural differences are positively reevaluated” (2006). We are up against deeply embedded values and personal ideologies that tend to make change difficult; hopefully these case studies offer grounds for positive pedagogical reworking of the system: rearchitecting spaces and activities even through high school, giving reforms time and teachers the respect for envisioning, and hearing student voices, when a new structure is attempted, with or without a career theme.
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