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 of an education reform effort in the late 1960s. As small, career-focused programs within larger public schools, they 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, where career academies were introduced into a variety of schools and were not limited to at-risk students. Based on interviews and student performance data from nine career academy programs embedded within large urban high schools, the study produced an analytic framework introduced in this article. A case study of an Inclusive-&-Interconnecting career academy will be contrasted with an Autonomous-&-Exclusive one. This article argues that by either upholding or compromising the original intentions of the educational reform, schools reinforce or break with socially reproductive patterns, in the sense of Bourdieu and Passeron's theories of social reproduction of inequity (1977). Furthermore, restructuring space and transforming communicative practices through team teaching and computer-based project learning, offer means of breaking with such reproductive patterns, in part through increasing student agency, yet it will be argued that such restructuring is limited by the demographics of the school.

Introduction

The career academies that have spread across the nation since the late 1960s have shown 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 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, schools, 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, 1977), 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:

Occasions 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.” (Fligstein & Sharone, 2002, pp. 68-69)

The pedagogy of career academies 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. Evidence both of tracking practices and the positive effects of detracking are made clear 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 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 ways that 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, sense of 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 relationships 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 (Valenzuela, 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 notably 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 et al., 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-American, 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 approximately two weeks full 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 (see Table 2). 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 an analytic framework offering a typology of career academy approaches.

In this article, I draw from the analytic 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 and participation by demographics, i.e. “race”/ethnicity and gender, and by academic performance. Along the left side of Table 1, Interconnecting versus Autonomous refers 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. Conversely autonomous indicates that the career academy is not implementing extensive interdisciplinary pedagogies.

The two career academy case studies in this article serve to exemplify the two most polar opposites 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 case study falls far short of the original ideal that has defined career academies for the past three decades. The question that will be raised through this empirical data, presented in the form of case studies, is what the differences in implementations indicates about patterns of social reproduction built into schooling, and particularly
what affect current national policies have on the ability and desire of educators to strive for the implementation.

Table 1: Typology of Career Academies

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

Midfield High School is halfway between the city center, where the average family income is half the national average and about a third live below the poverty line (based on 2004 census data) and the wealthy North County suburbs. The median income for a family in the county overall was $53,060. Midfield High School is located both mid-district and mid-county. The students at Midfield are 35.7% low SES (qualifying to receive free or reduced lunch). Mixed older residential and apartment blocks buttress large shopping malls close to the school. Other businesses include auto repairs and hair salons. Major streets and freeways intersect on all sides within less than a mile. The high school has little distinction among students in the other high schools of the district, considered neither elite nor ‘tough’ on a social level of reputation. Fittingly, Midfield’s academic performance was at the center as well, with an API of 5 out of 10 possible points, placing it in the middle range of schools in the study and in the state, and at an unacceptable level according to the state department of education.

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 business-oriented math and computer applications. 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, as one male student expresses: “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.”
Inclusive

It should be noted from the outset that teachers at Midfield T & T said they accepted pretty much everyone who applied for the academy. This, however, leads to the subject of how students were recruited.

Recruitment: In looking at selectivity and inclusiveness, it is important to observe the method used by the teachers (and sometimes counselors and administrators) to inform students about the academy: how broadly they disseminated information and what forms of encouragement were used, if only a select group of students learned about the academy or if teachers and counselors made the information available to all students. It must be noted that although not all academy teachers do try to reach all students, teachers intending to inform a broad range of students may be thwarted by counselors. In the case of Midfield’s T & T, teachers sent groups of academy students to present to all sophomore English classes in the school.

In addition, the teachers at Midfield told me they invited the counselors for coffee and doughnuts each year, and made a special effort to explain what their academy did. This seemed to pay off not only in students being scheduled in cohorts for the academy but also in counselors recommending the academy to students.5

Inclusiveness by Race/Ethnicity and Gender: This academy was 64% Latino/a, while the campus as a whole was 40% Latino/a (see Table 3 for a full demographic breakdown); 62% were labeled LED (Limited English Development) by the district.6 Only 28% of the students in the academy were White, well below the nearly 50% of the school as a whole. The academy had one African American student as opposed to the 5.4 % of the campus7 so that inclusiveness by “race”/ethnicity is a relative term here.

This brings up a conundrum: one premise for inclusiveness in career academies by race/ethnicity and gender would be to reduce under-representation in higher paying fields. Yet since Travel & Tourism is a service industry, is inclusion of a majority Latino/a students in travel and tourism a relevant act of inclusion? The same question applies for gender. The gender makeup of the academy exactly matched that of the school as a whole. Women are not under-represented in service industries.8

Yet what appears to count is not so much what career theme the academy is anchored to, but instead how it helps students move through high school, academically and socially. Though the field of Travel & Tourism offers a relatively low number of high paying jobs, students utilized the affordances of the academy for business skills, the academic support and the sense of family. 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 academic and social levels, and not, for most, with intentions of entering travel and tourism as a field of work. In other words, inclusiveness in this case does not necessarily hold promise for advancing students into high-paying careers but rather includes them in the engaging, project-based and personalized approach to academic work and in those ways adding to the promise of their futures. 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 the academy’s legacy related to business than with travel and tourism, or hospitality.

Inclusiveness by performance: As far as inclusiveness in academic achievement, by GPAs, for five years, before and during the academy: 25% were above 3.0, 30% below 2.0. This indicates inclusion of a broad range of performance. This academy, additionally, involved more students
with GPAs under 2.0 than any other academy in the study. During participation in the academy, the average GPA stayed relatively even, between 2.36 and 2.58. The benefits are most tangible in how positively students perceived their experience with the career academy, based on interviews. Tangible evidence of academic benefit can be measured more concretely, however, by academy students’ high pass rate on senior exhibitions (further elaborated below).

As far as standardized test scores, in Language, only 30.43% of the academy students scored over the 50th percentile as opposed to nearly 50% of the whole school. Yet we are speaking of a group that is 62% LED (Limited English Development). The academy students were closer to the whole school in Math, with 44.74% scoring above the 50th percentile, compared with 49.8% above the 50th percentile for the whole school. Thus, on all measures of academic performance, the academy was inclusive of a broad range of achievers, and a large percentage students who could use the extra academic support offered by the academy, in alignment with the intentions of the reform. The need, and desire, for extra help seemed to come into play most obtrusively 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 had all passed in recent years. One Latina student expressed her awareness of the difficulty, and the value of help with, the senior exhibition 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 and they prepare us for it with activities that are sort of related but not directly related to our senior paper.

The voluntary nature of student involvement in the academy, as well as active recruitment across the student body, gives the students who need either academic or social cohesiveness a chance to take part in a program ostensibly offering a career pathway as a means to get through high school, but also as a place where more teachers are aware of each student’s situation in regard to schooling. How this works becomes clear in the next section, regarding the Interconnecting aspect of the academy.

Interconnecting

The T & T Academy was located entirely in two interconnecting classrooms. One was a traditional classroom adapted into a computer lab, with an array of older computers on standard school tables, pushed together in clusters throughout the room. The other was a standard classroom set up for lecture, with rows of desks facing the front. However, in that room, I observed not only lecture time but also student presentations, and open time when some students met one-on-one with the teacher, a student took out a guitar and played it softly, and other students sat and discussed their projects (or interviewed with me in one corner). Neither of the classrooms was newly decorated; in fact there were stains on the ceilings of the computer lab room, for which the teachers apologized. Carpets and walls were somewhat shabby.

The students at the academy commented on the benefits of the arrangement. A student explained:

…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.
[The teachers] talk to each other... they make sure they correlate. 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.12

This explanation reveals that the visibility of teachers coordinating with each other makes a difference to students, indicating a value of team teaching in a connected structure that goes beyond just the integration of curricula across subjects. 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.” The visible teacher collaboration gave the students a sense of teachers caring about them because they talked about them with their fellow teachers, knew their names, and took the trouble to coordinate activities in the interest of students other classes. Students at this academy repeatedly 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.13

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. Students in interviews made comments such as: “They interact with you more than other teachers and I really like that,” “I like the teachers. They’re really nice and they’re caring. They know you better, too.”

The two connected classrooms tied together the socially mediated learning activities of “pure” cohorts of students (that is, all students in the career academy courses were part of the academy) and their four teachers. Four teachers taught the classes by pairing into 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 four of their 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 two school days per week14 were not only contiguous but the door between them was kept open and used continually for flexible movement between the two classrooms. Flexible time for project work at the computers allowed use of a blend of first and second languages among students. The architecture of connecting rooms, as well as the mediational role of computers, allowed students who shared a first language different from English to bridge understandings for each other.
A student explained an example of one of their projects and the way all the teachers' roles fit together and contributed:

… like the project we just did. I wouldn't say it was easy but it was enjoyable. You came to class and […] you wanted to go work on it…. Like for this project, we had to write a paper, we had to do a PowerPoint, we had to do a budget.15 […] For the history part, he [the history teacher] helped out with the budget, and for English, we worked a lot on [the paper]. For the PowerPoint and all the Excel stuff, that was computer class - the class over there (indicating the computer lab). They all put their own angles. I learned a whole lot.16

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

The “legacy” effect is the most final vote for such a program in which students take part voluntarily. To pass word on from student to student recommending the program 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. In other words, as with any socially or culturally sanctioned activity, the positive anticipation prepares students to value the program; therefore they experience it and contribute to it with more quality and greater self-determination. Coming from the trusted source of fellow students, recommendations have the power and potential to vitalize program of energy.17 Those who, in designing learning environments, ignore this powerful factor, rob students of the shaping or production of their learning spaces.18

By far, the most common praise 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 and that the senior exhibitions and essays were passed. The students’ at Midfield’s Travel & Tourism Academy’s responses in interviews can be quantified for their overwhelming enthusiasm regarding the features of the 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.” (See Table 2 for the full set if interview questions and response categories).

Also salient to making the career academy the dynamic learning community the power of computers to open and make possible a dynamic and fluid learning environment is apparent. Students appreciate the computer skills themselves as a symbolic and human capital, which, when explicitly expressed in statements like “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,” reveals the likelihood that their past experience has encompassed little access to learning computer skills. Along with contrasts across the board, the many statements by students that explicitly include the benefits of access to computers will stand in stark contrast to the second case study.
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. Situated in the farthest northeast region of the district, the school was backed by hills with large homes. This area’s median household income is $92,270 (2000 Census). The SES for the school was 11.2% Eligible for Meal Program (see Table 3 for a comparison of the two academies and schools). The Finance Academy at Rainy Springs High School was mainly centered in a 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. Though the academy was officially comprised of two accounting / business courses and two AP academic courses, these classes functioned as separate entities in far distant sections of the campus. The most popular feature of the Rainy Springs Finance Academy was the paid internships that took students off campus.

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

Recruitment: 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.

Exclusiveness by Race/Ethnicity and Gender: While Rainy Springs High School was 55% White, the Finance Academy 53% White. The school was 8.4% Latino/a and its Finance Academy was 7% Latino/a. The academy exceeded the school’s percentages of African American, Asian and Indochinese students. However, Filipinos, who comprised a considerable 13.5% percent of the school, represented only 4.5% of the academy (see Table 3 for a full breakdown). Thus, though the school itself is exclusive compared to the district; by race/ethnicity its career academy was fairly well distributed. This was not the case by gender or academic performance, however. The academy was 77.3% male, where the school itself is a low 41.2% male. Since women are under-represented in finance, especially at the higher levels, this could be said to perpetuate patterns of under-representation.

Exclusiveness by performance: 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,” a counselor concession or administrative concession. 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.” Achievement level, in fact, made no difference in which of the students knew about the academy, as far as interviews. 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.”

**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, indicated by one student’s statement: “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.” Others seemed to deliberately distance themselves from the academy, saying, for example:

> 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.

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 tip-toe [sic].” “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.” (Again, see Table 2 for the interview questions and response categories). These totals contrast starkly with those of Midfield academy student responses.
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.

To establish an exclusive academy may automatically result in an autonomous one as well. In other words, 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: 183). 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. Even if the program had restructured the learning environment with classrooms close together or connected and cohesive cohorts of students, and significant teacher collaboration, creating a small learning community, it seems likely, based on the interviews with students who distanced themselves from the academy, that students who have experienced schooling with a sense of entitlement rather than feeling marginalized will not embrace the more collectivist approach. Yet the counselors did not allow either the scheduling of students together or the location of classrooms together for the academy even when requested by teachers. One could argue that by not including struggling students, the academy did not justify prioritization in scheduling or location. However, another career academy on the same high school campus – a Travel & Tourism Academy – include a much larger portion of struggling and LED students and still the counselors did not accommodate them by scheduling students and classrooms together. I argue that this justifies making the point that the school prioritized its API standing over innovative interdisciplinary approaches.

Conclusion

Ultimately, these two case studies are stories about agency. In the first case study, two business teachers had, by their own initiative, established the Business Tech that eventually became Midfield’s Travel & Tourism Academy. At the school of the second case study, Rainy Springs, a similar teacher initiative had brought about a second career academy on the campus, the T & T briefly described at the end of the second case study above. But the Finance Academy at Rainy Springs had a different story. The district’s School-to-Career program had obtained cooperation of the school administration to establish the Finance Academy by bringing in an accounting/business teacher from another high school. New to the school, she lacked loyalty and leadership with the other teachers and found little enthusiasm. There could have been resentment in the fact that she was brought in for the innovative program. Thus teacher and student agency, and the demographics
of students and school, shape program implementation. Their agency is limited by school and
district policy structuring, through reward/penalty system of API ratings for schools, but within those
limits, individual students’, teachers’ and administrators’ conceptual frames determine whether the
boundaries formed by the policies will be pushed.

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 schools take shape. There is always the hope of new ways of envisioning possible
reversals in the traditional direction of learning through producing 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 (1991) show learning to be an integral part of
generative social practice. From this point of view, learning will take place in a richly constructed
environment where there is social engagement and participation. This concept counters our current
educational policy’s 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 Hirst and Vadeboncoeur 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]” (2006: 208). 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” (208). 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 personalized interaction between teachers and 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. 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 based on
meeting a standardized system of measurement that is faulty at best - to break out of the mold 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.

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 and revise innovative programs over time; the program needs time to become a legacy within the school in order for student agency to take hold.

Opening the doors between classrooms and increasing the flexibility of time and space 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 bridge 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 (Moll et al, 1992), missing from the entitled students. As in the notion of educación, perhaps we overlook a certain fund of knowledge, even cultural capital that is not (as yet) dominant, that seems to go lacking in many middle class schools and communities. 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 affords students a new positioning with regard to the learning, their fellow students and their teachers. Augmented teacher communication at Midfield’s T & T 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. Based, in part, on Lefebvre’s insightful theories regarding the production of social space (1991) as well as their own research in Australian schools, Hirst and Vadeboncoeur write: “Once visible and understood they may be countered, reducing their power to marginalise people” (2006: 206). 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: 184). Hopefully these case studies offer grounds for positive pedagogical reworking of the system: acknowledging the importance of student and teacher agency in structuring spaces and learning themes, providing access to technologies, giving reforms time and teachers the respect for envisioning them, and hearing student voices in the social production of their learning spaces.
References


This pedagogy has been at times applied to whole magnet schools, such as an “oceanography magnet” or “performing arts magnet.”

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.


In the second case study, it will be noted that similar efforts did not pay off in a school with a different (much higher) API and SES.

See Table 3 for a full demographic breakdown and comparison between the academies and the schools.

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.

At times the terms inclusive or exclusive had to be decided upon based on the most salient feature, due to such complex contexts.

This is remarkable mainly because the district’s policies prevented most struggling students from taking part in career academies or anything involving electives by imposing mandatory literacy and math blocks for anyone with GPAs of 2.0 or under.

Passing of the senior exhibition essay is required by most California high schools now. The exhibitions are judged by panels selected by the school.

In the conclusion, a case of negative student reporting is referenced from another study. In the conclusion, a case of negative student reporting is referenced from another study. I never encountered negative student myths or attitudes regarding career academies during my study and interviews, but we may see the effects of them in the next case study.

This idea will be pursued further in the article’s conclusion.
22 Interview, Business and Accounting teacher, head teacher of the Finance Academy, Rainy Springs High School, Spring 2003.
23 Ibid.
24 There were other extenuating issues in only including advanced courses. According to other teachers in the school, no teachers wanted to include the finance theme in their courses. Even the two AP teachers were reluctant to be very involved and included very little business theme in their courses.
25 In many of the career academies I studied, it was the vocational or ROP teachers who found the leeway and flexibility to initiate innovative programs, with the desire to bring the passion they saw in students when give the agency to strive toward specific career goals, and to apply that to the academic subject they so often find to be abstracted from any meaning in their lives.
26 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.