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Madeline Dalton Roorbach   April 9, 2014

Chasing Reforms:
A Case Study of the Effectiveness of Small Learning Communities
as Educational Reforms

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Abstract

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This case study provides insight into the foundational ideas of six stakeholders concerning the purposes of public education and school reform. It uses these foundational ideas to interrogate and assess one educational reform, the small learning communities model, as it was implemented at Smith High School. As well, it uses these foundational ideas as a basis for an assessment of the history of education reform more broadly. Interviews with six stakeholders and a review of extent literature concerning small learning community implementation are used as data sources for the case study. The findings show that these foundational ideas are inherently linked to the transformation that took place at Smith and, in fact, these foundational ideas can be extrapolated when discussing education reform at-large. The findings suggest that education reforms could benefit from the incorporation of these foundational ideas into future reforms.

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Division of Educational Studies.

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CHAPTER I

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In the final months of my senior year at "Smith High School" I observed, and eventually

participated in, the preparations for a drastic change. Smith High School would be broken into

four small learning communities (SLCs) the year after I graduated. First developed in Oregon

and championed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the SLC model was sweeping the

country. It was now coming to Smith, as the district's central administration had stipulated that

four yet-to-be-determined academies would be created and every student would attend a smaller

school within the larger school. The community immediately rallied to question the decision.

Inquiries arose concerning the validity of the SLC selection process for incoming freshmen, the

fairness and equity of students being shunted into smaller schools managed differently from each

other, and the fate of the school's highly regarded extracurricular and artistic programs. There

was also concern about the impact on the school's magnet program, which had a reputation for

being a bastion of creative energy and a community of students and teachers committed to the

field of journalism and communications.

I owe my interest in education policy and reform to this transformation. As I dipped my

toes into the water of this volatile pool of education reform I found myself curious not so much

about the reasons for why the decision had been made—there would be no reversing of the

decision—but what the implications of the decision would be for the school, its students, and its

faculty in the months and years to come. As I graduated from Smith's magnet program, I became

very interested in how the SLC model would change the school and what the impact would be of

dismantling the magnet program and replacing it with a small learning community. My research

focus concerns the process and implications of replacing a magnet program with a small learning

community. More specifically, this qualitative study aims to better understand different stakeholders' experiences of and perspectives on this change. Lee, Ozgun-Koca, and Cristol (2011) write, "Small schools programs alone are not the answer to improve education…learning must be made a relevant, hands-on endeavor by supporting teachers to become more caring, helping administrators become more effective leaders, and increasing parental involvement" (p. 25). It is this type of theory in education reform—that smaller equates to better—that can be discussed when analyzing the reform to SLCs at Smith. Utilizing the tenets of the small schools theory, I am able to use Smith High School to interrogate the processes of transforming to small learning communities. As well, the stipulations for a successful small schools program, such as those of of Lee, et.al, can be identified and analyzed in the this transformation. As well, I will study the goals of the small schools programs to assess how these tenets and stipulations mesh and mold with the history of education reform.

Statement of the Problem

Small learning communities ostensibly provided an avenue for a large, inner-city school system to be able to ensure that each of the thousands of students in its nine high schools received an equitable education. Research indicated that in large comprehensive high schools students are more truant (Newman, King, Ridgon, 1997), more likely to "fall between the cracks" of the educational system (Ruggeiro, 2011, p. 4), and to be exposed to violence (Newman et al., 1997). The solution was the creation of smaller schools within extant high schools. Smaller communities would allow students to develop more personal relationships with teachers and administrators and allow resources to be more evenly allocated. It was also posited that more individualized instruction would increase the engagement levels of students and prompt more personal investment in the material. Small learning communities and small schools

seemed like the answer to a call for all students to be critical thinkers and problem solvers. This study aims to assess the extent to which one high school in the school system transformed from a comprehensive high school to four smaller learning communities with specified themes and responded to these calls. Though the switch to small learning communities occurred four years ago, the high school has neither the manpower nor the space to fully transform into small learning communities. For this reason, as the SLCs were implemented, changes to the design were posited and subsequently executed to incorporate some aspects of SLC design into a historically comprehensive high school. This study will also assess the implementation from a qualitative standpoint: that is, to understand how stakeholders assess the overall effectiveness of the reorganization of Smith that began in the fall of 2010.

The scope of the research will be extended to include an assessment of education reform in a historical context. By interrogating education reform in the context of one reform model there is the potential to identify overarching problems in education and potentially posit suggestions for reforms yet to come. I propose to explore both the positive and negative aspects of transformation at this particular high school and to investigate, four years after the fact, the successes, failures, and implications of transforming a high-performing comprehensive high school into small learning communities. I will also situate my findings in the research published about small schools and small learning communities. I will include research about education reform more broadly. This study seeks to contribute to the literature concerning education reform by illustrating how stakeholders understood it in relation to their beliefs about the purpose of public education. Finally, this study will interrogate the foundational ideas of the current ways in which education is reformed to offer suggestions as to how future education reforms could be

molded and improved to not only fix the problem at hand but also to provide lasting solutions to the problems inherent in the American public educational system.

Background

Much of the in-depth research on small schools and small learning communities had not yet been completed when the school system began its high school transformation initiative at the first of nine high schools. A year later, the school system received a $1.4 million investment from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to begin developing a strategic plan for the full transformation of all nine of its high schools. In 2007, the system received another $10.5 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to "accelerate and expand its high school transformation initiative" because the first school's students were "already showing gains in academic performance and attendance" (Gates Foundation press release, 2007). Over the next three years, the rest of the schools would be made to adopt the SLC model.

Slightly less than a decade after the initial push to transform high schools into small schools, Fouts and Associates (2006) reported that the process of remodeling the comprehensive high schools into smaller schools or learning communities is rarely welcomed. They further argued that because the comprehensive model and its accompanying philosophy is so deeply entrenched in American society—and that unless there was a concerted, cooperative effort by school personnel and families to ensure the success of the transformation—it was usually unsuccessful and forgotten. During and after the conversion process, Fouts & Associates noted that there was an affective difference in the school community itself—students were well-known by an adult, and the atmosphere was noticeably more positive—but there were no quantifiable differences in student learning and achievement on standardized tests. They also found that there

was an overall trend of resistance to the change if it was mandated from the administrative

offices of a district and not implemented with the support of the faculty and staff of the school.

The transformation process at Smith High School began in the fall of 2009. A pre-

planning committee was formed to begin discussing when and how to disseminate information to

the high school community about the transformation process and to discuss the best way to

collect feedback about the process as it progressed. At the beginning of the spring semester in

2010, four design teams were formed to begin work on the Design and Implementation Guides

(DIGs) for each academy. The high school's community at-large—students, teachers, parents,

and community stakeholders—had been polled and asked to select, from a library of themes, the

four themes it wished to see implemented. The tentative themes were announced as

communications; law, government and public policy; technology; and business and

entrepreneurship. The design teams, along with each community's SLC consultant, began

meeting once a week beginning in early February to write the academies' individual DIGs and to

begin to assess what the pathways would look like for each academy and how they would follow

the CTAE (Career, Technical and Agricultural Education) guidelines for each theme. The only

exception to this was the Communications and Journalism Academy, which replaced the magnet

program and was modified to adhere to SLC guidelines. This exception was made in light of the

history of the magnet program as a successful smaller community, as well as to acknowledge the

support that the magnet program, and therefore Smith, received from stakeholders in the Smith

community. Work was completed in mid-May and the DIGs had been scheduled to be presented

to the district's Office of High Schools over the summer. Though the presentations were never

given, the DIGs were a required component of implementation and created to guide the pathways

for the small learning communities that were implemented in August of 2010. The four

academies have the following themes: Communications and Journalism; Public Policy and

Justice; Technology; and Business and Entrepreneurship. These themes had been selected and

then molded to fit the extant programming at Smith, as well as to allow room for the

communities to grow as they came into their own. The communities are now in their fourth year

of operation and are scheduled to graduate the first class of students in the spring of 2014.

Theoretical Rationale

In 1993, Linda Darling-Hammond penned an article titled "Reframing the School Reform

Agenda: Developing Capacity for School Transformation." In this she posited that an era of

change was upon the great American school system. Schools were feeling pressure to produce

students who had both studied the curricular material as well as students who had understood the

curriculum and its implications on further actions: there was a need to produce students who

could comprehend and engage at a high level.

This is the elusive search for a building block of the American Dream: educational

achievement—an inherent part of success. This capacity for higher understanding had long ago

required significant changes to the systems of old, as "the complexity of citizenship in a

democracy was already demanding critical thinking skills" (Tyler, 1987, p. 278), and so

legislators, policy makers, and innovators set out on a quest to find the next great model of

education. Tyler suggests the problem in this quest is the willingness of politicians and educators

to hastily propose solutions to "alleged" problems with "little consideration… given to evidence

that a proposal is practicable and will accomplish what is claimed for it" (Ibid, p. 279).

With this lack of forethought, many times the reforms created are unable to ameliorate

the root problems in specific schools; rather, an assumption is made that each school suffers from

the same aliment (Tyler, 1987). With different socio-economics, geographic conditions,

ethnicities, and backgrounds, school systems appear in direct opposition to most reforms' one-size-fits-all approach of solving different problems in different places in the same way.

Tyler (1987) further posits that proposals for reform in education are often unsuccessful because their plans for implementation are not fully thought-out and are not accompanied "by the requisite resources for effective implementation" (279). Darling Hammond (1993) points out that "reforms that rely on the transformative power of individuals to rethink their practice and to redesign their institutions can be accomplished only by investing in individual and organizational learning, in the human capital of the educational enterprise" (p. 754). Lacking the requisite human capital in this enterprise of public education, especially when attempting to patch problems rather than to identify root causes, only perpetuates the cyclical and ineffective nature of education reforms. The result is that "few individuals can remember the reforms that were adopted in an earlier period" (Tyler, 1987, 279) as they are no longer applicable nor in effect.

When the city school district began to restructure its high schools into smaller schools and small learning communities in 2005, the goal was to redesign its institutions to cater to individualized (insofar as small schools and SLCs can be considered individualized) learning. This change came as pressure mounted from the stipulations of 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, which required that all students be 100% proficient in all subjects by 2014. The transformation to small schools and small learning communities stands out as one of the ways reformers proposed to seal the cracks of secondary education to allow schools to meet the now-defunct goals of 100% proficiency by 2014.

Darling Hammond (1993) wrote eight years prior to the implementation of NCLB that, "Schools and teachers must work to ensure that all students learn to think critically, to invent, to produce, and to solve problems…this goal requires responding to students' non-standardized

needs" (p. 753). Part of the problem in responding to the nonstandard but pressing needs of every student in America is the very essence of a school itself (Marsick, Watkins, Boswell, 2013). It is this that my study will interrogate: how can a school as a system with structure, processes, culture, and history be formed and shaped to respond to the changing pressures of the outside, reform-insistent world while still addressing each students' non-standardized needs? Reformers, politicians, and those in positions of power often conceptualize schools in highly de-contextualized arenas wherein "school" is a cookie-cutter image not swayed by environment, and events that "seem to challenge America's self-esteem precipitate a barrage of criticism aimed at the schools and concomitant calls for reform" (Tyler, 1987, 278).

It is important to examine the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the mandate to massively restructure a living entity such as a school. The theoretical framework and research methodology used in this study will examine the concept of transformation and the impact of such a large-scale change on the ever-changing variables of structure and culture within a school. As well, this study will interrogate the change to small learning communities to determine if it was a researched, comprehensive solution to the problems facing the educators in the school or if it is considered by the six stakeholders to be another ineffective reform model. These six stakeholders were selected because of their knowledge of the transformation at Smith, as well as their willingness to be interviewed and the comfort level of the researcher in approaching each of the six for an interview. More specific constraints and details about the six stakeholders is provided on page 27. For the sake of transparency, however, it should be stated that these six are not necessarily representative of the Smith High School population; they represent a small subset of the population in terms of racial and socioeconomic status and all have similar affiliations to the school through the now-defunct magnet program.

Research Questions:

The following four questions will guide this study of one high school. Six stakeholders' perceptions about the effectiveness of the transformation from a comprehensive magnet high school into small learning communities were obtained to holistically assess the basic instigation for reformation, both historically and contemporarily, in the public school system.

1. What are six stakeholder's foundational ideas about the purposes of public education and school reform?

2. How do these foundational ideas influence their understanding of the implementation of the small learning communities at Smith High School?

3. Do these foundational ideas express themselves in the ultimate construction of the small learning communities at Smith High School?

Research Goals:

Using a truncated case study of one urban, southern high school this study seeks to gain stakeholder's perspectives on the purposes of education and the meanings of reform in the American educational system The research has two interrelated goals: first, to use interviews with stakeholders at Smith High School to interrogate the purpose of public education and reform, and secondly to assess the relative success of the transformation at this particular high school.

Educational Significance:

Though I cannot draw broader generalizations from my work concerning the high school about small learning communities, my study intends to elucidate and clarify the changes that were made at Smith High School and the changes that were not made at Smith, as well as to extrapolate what administrators and teachers could do at Smith to further use the implementation

of small learning communities to help the students succeed. These elucidations will be used to position the transformation at the high school within the larger context of educational reform in America and to interrogate the notion of "reform" in schools. Examining the transformation in context could provide insight into the "why" of reform, especially when considered in conjunction with the foundational ideas concerning education and education reform.

The notion of educational success using the small learning community model is no longer in vogue in school reform models. Though the original purpose of the reform was not realized, there was another outcome. Students were engaged in learning and in school activities through an idea being "known-well"—that is, a teacher or administrator has fewer students under his or her liege and can therefore better monitor and support the student. In 2003 the National Academy of Sciences reported that involving the students is the key to academic motivation and success, and it is under this mantra that the small learning communities at the high school are now operated. Illuminating the ways in which one school modified a reform to suit its students may offer considerations for teachers and schools in the future to consider when faced with reform. As well, addressing the perceptions of stakeholders is an important, and under-utilized, piece of the reform puzzle, as understanding how stakeholders conceptualize and interpret reforms can provide insight into why a reform succeeds or fails.

Definition of Terms

Small Learning Community (SLC): Generally contained in one structure, small learning communities are small academies within one high school. These SLCs are generally structured to include thematic elements that differentiate each SLC. This is different from small schools, in which physical separation by building occurs and each school has an individual administrative staff.

Magnet Program: A model of high school reform that came into vogue in the 1980s. A small, selective school with a theme would be created within an extant, comprehensive public high school that would ostensibly attract the high performing students.

Design and Implementation Guide (DIG): Once the transformation was announced at the high school four teams were created. Each team was assigned to a small learning community theme, pre-determined following a community-wide vote, and was tasked with crafting a DIG, which would act as the skeleton for the creation of the SLC.

School Reform: A model of education brought into a school or school system to alleviate problems present in the school or system. It should be noted that the concepts of success and failure are not mutually exclusive, but for the sake of this thesis reforms are occasionally discussed as failures because, while they may have succeeded to a point, they were eventually re-reformed and a new, "better" model took their places in education.

Foundational Ideas: These are the notions, opinions, beliefs, and general positions of a person concerning, for this thesis, education and educational reforms. This includes a person's own experiences as well as any opinions or outside knowledge about education.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The failure of the public school system in America is a well-documented and extensively researched phenomenon. Social stratification, school-to-work pathways, tracking systems, inequality in resources, and instructional inequalities are all facets of an increasingly complicated argument faulting the public school system for failing to prepare a nation's upcoming generation. Implicit in these arguments are suggestions and pathways for how to solve the crisis in public education based on the identification of these insular problems. Reformers and politicians, it seems, often fall prey to the allure of grandiose schemes and plans to solve these problems in the schools, but rarely do they ever consider education policy that focuses less on "fixing" school and more on changing understandings of the purposes of public education.

It is important, then, to revisit the history of reform in public education before delving into the singular events of one reform movement in one school system. This historical overview provides an ability to contextualize the present reform—the transformation to small learning communities—within the greater trend of public education reform. It also provides a better understanding of how reform movements are born, run their course, and give way to the next reform movement. This research will begin with a brief look into the history of reform in public education, a more philosophical interrogation of why most reforms are considered "failures," and conclude by contextualizing this history in the movement to transform comprehensive high schools into small learning communities. By ending with the contextualization of research into one particular movement this literature review will allow further interrogation of the move to small learning communities in a case study of one urban high school in a southern school district

and possibly allow conclusions to be drawn as to how future reform movements might better realize their intended outcomes.

Reforms from the Start: Bureaucracy in Schools

Public education has been undergoing significant alterations and reformations since its inception, beginning with the "separation of secondary schooling from the traditional village school," moving to the "formal and systemized" schools, and ultimately ending with the bureaucratic organization of schools and school systems that are extant today (Lee and Smith, 1995, p. 242). Perhaps the very first reform, a movement from a traditional village school to a bureaucratic entity, precipitates the idea interwoven in education reform literature that there is a displacement of goals in modern education that favors the need of the bureaucracy over the child (Tyack, 1974). Once school systems were created, these systems being inherently bureaucratic, there was the obvious next step of incorporating bureaucratic rules, systems, measures, and accountability practices into the functioning of the system. While having standardized practices is important to the functionality of school systems, the casualty in implementing bureaucratic rules and procedures was "the dialogue that would allow real problems to emerge" (Darling-Hammond, 1993, p. 760). Essentially she argues that the bureaucracy provided structure but it cloaked the root problems in layers of red tape, which makes it hard to see the real issues through the bureaucratic noise.

The incorporation of schools into a bureaucratic system provided the fundamental basis for school reforms to be marketed idiosyncratically to a larger, national audience. School systems have little to no continuity across district, county, or state lines (Perry, 2010), but as it would happen bureaucracies (and American public education is bureaucratic) function most appropriately when there is a top-down control. Webster's Dictionary (online, 2014) defines

bureaucracy as "characterized by specialization of functions, adherence to fixed rules, and a hierarchy of authority." There is indeed a hierarchy of authority within each individual microcosm of education, but there is local, state, and federal control, each with different motivating factors and each with separate goals and incentives. Each reform is motivated by one of the bureaucracies' interest in achieving a goal. Moskowitz and Lavinia (2012) write that:

> "Americans have been wringing their collective hands over the shortcomings of our public education system for a half century or longer. As a country, we've repeatedly thrown money at the problem and tried reform after reform to make schools better. Presidents from Dwight D. Eisenhower (the post-Sputnik National Defense Education Act) to Lyndon B. Johnson (Head Start, Title I) to Ronald Reagan (the *A Nation At Risk* report) to George W. Bush (the No Child Left Behind Act) all made passes at the problem but came up short" (p. 9).

The idea that school reforms and educational policies were predicated and created because of outside influences, especially political ones during turbulent and trying times in American history, is not one that only Moskowitz and Lavinia propose:

> "When the Russians put Sputnik into orbit, for example, that event challenged the American public's notion of national superiority, causing Congress to enact the National Defense Education Act, which offered substantial financial assistance to bolster science, mathematics, and foreign language programs in the schools" (Tyler, 1987, p. 278).

Sputnik, as well as the *A Nation At Risk* Report, and the globalization of business all precipitate American bureaucracies influencing educational policy because of occurrences completely separate, and perhaps arbitrarily so, from the public education system. The result of this was school reforms becoming top-down approaches in a variety of systems across the country that could not and did not benefit from such an approach. This created increasing "disenfranchisement of local communities in decisions about schools and in discussion about the contents of public education" (Perry, 2010, p. xiii).

Not only has public education provided a platform for political and foundational bureaucracies to impose self-serving reforms, it has also become an "ideological battleground in our struggles to gain access to the rights of equal citizenship under the law" (Mizell, 2010, p. xvi). As well, "education is…complicated because it does not occur in isolation from other issues" (Cortes Jr., 2010, p. 96) and because "we don't have an agreement of what constitutes quality education, nor does there seem to be a clear pathway…guaranteeing quality education" (Perry, 2010, p. xi). Education is marked as the great equalizer, as "the foundation necessary to sustain our democracy and modern civilization" (Cortes, Jr., 2010, p. 93) but there is no standard for what quality of education is required to serve our society, and "without the capacity to engage, question, argue, interpret, and contextualize experiences and encounters, authority is left unchallenged and individuals are left open to misdirection" (Ibid, p. 93).

It is no wonder, then, that school reforms have little to no influence in the grand scheme of achievement and progress in public education. Each reform, each movement, each demand for some facet of education to be revamped is contingent upon outside influences. These changes arise not as responses to the performance of the schools, on "who is teaching, what is being taught, and how those key elements are funded" (Jennings, 2012, p. 6), but have arisen as "responses to conditions and events that have had little direct connection with education" (Tyler, 1987, p. 277). Essentially, school reforms rarely produce the intended—the planned—results.

The Failure of Reforms

The next piece of the reform puzzle is situated on a system of reforms already disassociated from the fundamental goal of teaching basic educational elements. In the prologue of his book "The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education," David Tyack (1974) writes,

"Indeed, one of the chief reasons for the failures of educational reforms of the past has been precisely that they called for a change of philosophy or tactics on the part of the individual school employee rather than systemic change—and concurrent transformations in the distribution of power and wealth in the society as a whole" (p. 10-11).

This is perhaps the most succinct explanation for the overall emotive underpinnings of theoretical, philosophical, and case study research into the vast and numbered educational reforms of the last decades, and a reason for the failure of reform. As well, there is not one understanding or agreement of what public education should aspire to achieve because many reforms in the past have been stimulated by events not directly related to the schools and so "the leaders of those movements have not had dependable information about the actual achievements of education readily available to them" (Tyler, 1978, p. 278). Without dependable information and irrefutable data, "when the public came to believe that there was something seriously wrong with the schools, political and educational leaders established committees or commissions to propose solutions to the alleged problems" (Ibid, p. 278). This is highly problematic for two reasons: first, alleging a problem does not necessarily entail identification of the actual problem, which contributes to the second half: that "there is much talk about the 'problem' of urban education, much research to study the problem, many policies enacted to address the problem, but little belief that anything will ever really change" (Delpit, 2010, p. 167). Essentially, the failure of reform is predicated on three problems inherent in reform: first, reforms are not systemic changes but a change of tactics; second, there is no consistent and defined understanding of what education is or should be; and third, there is little faith in the efficacy of the reforms.

Undoubtedly, there are real problems that precipitate the creation of school reforms, such as the need for individualized instruction or differentiated learning. As well, pressures from both

outside the school or school system and within contribute greatly to the urgency that surrounds

school reform. There is rarely, however, a clear definition and identification of the problem at

hand (Tyler, 1987) and "the reform 'bandwagon' moves fast" (Lee and Smith, 1995, p. 244). The

need to respond to outside pressures, to political and socioeconomic events, and to the demands

of the varying bureaucratic entities that support and charter the school systems often leaves

reforms struggling to stay afloat. They become appeasements directed toward any number of

events, people, and monetary incentives and unfortunately, more often than not, do not "take into

account what is known about the conditions for effective learning" (Tyler, 1987, p. 279). The

reforms are not directed at basic educational needs and pursuits; ergo, "the most noteworthy

shortcoming of these [reform] movements [of the last 50 years] is that they mostly sought to

influence what went on in the classroom—the heart of education—through external means"

(Jennings, 2012, p. 6). Tyler (1987) also addresses the final capstone piece of the problem:

"rarely do the committees and commissions identify in their reports the kind of schools in which

given problems are found; they seem to assume that most or all schools are encountering them"

(p. 279). The result of this is that schools not impacted by the problems that a particular reform

targets still have to implement them.

It is no surprise then that these fast-moving reforms, without a plan for implementation or

the resources for implementation, often fail (Tyler, 1987). They are one-size-fits-all approaches

to education that are created in absentia of the real problems faced in schools. Children do not

learn in identical fashion; schools are not given equal resources; families have different

backgrounds and needs; it is nonsensical to address these multivariable problems with a blanket

approach. Ilg and Massuci (2003) write that, "over the past two decades, a far-reaching debate

has raged over the efficacy of schools, particularly high schools, to deliver quality education," (p.

63) and it is with this debate in mind that the move to smaller, more intimate schools—not reforms, per se, but restructuring—was first proposed.

Small Learning Communities: Restructuring, Not Reform?

First and foremost the public education system in America aims to provide all children with the necessary skills to participate and articulate opinions in a democratic society (Lee and Smith, 1995; Tyler, 1987; Perry, 2010). With this lofty goal in mind the reforms of the past decades have been awash in reforming the "paradigm that has guided educational policy and practice for the last 200 years" (Boykin and Noguera, 2011, p. viii), a paradigm that attempts to achieve equity via educational opportunity (Tyler, 1987). Linda Darling-Hammond (1993) identifies an important moment in this reforming of the paradigm when she observed in the early nineties that, "over the last decade the rhetoric of school improvement has changed from a language of school reform to a language of school restructuring" (p. 753). Referencing Oakes (1985) and Powell et. al (1985), Ilg and Massuci (2003) note that "reformers have long considered the large, urban high schools as tough, confusing places where students can easily get lost and where the quality of the school experience is suspect at best" (p. 69). The answer presented to the confusing problem of the failures of comprehensive secondary education was small schools and small learning communities.

Fine (1994) notes that small size is important when attempting to reform, or restructure, urban schools, and this notion was shared among reformers across America. In stark contrast to the movements of the 1950s, which consolidated smaller high schools into larger, ostensibly more efficient comprehensive high schools, the trend in the late 1990s and early 2000s was the breaking of comprehensive high schools into smaller, autonomous schools within the shell of an extinct school, or small communities within a school (Ilg and Massuci, 2003). The Bill and

Melinda Gates Foundation, a philanthropic organization known for large donations to the

educational community, released this statement as it prepared to support the creation of the

Coalition of Essential Schools Small Schools Project:

> "Large, impersonal high schools, where students tend to get lost in the shuffle,
> can exacerbate low achievement and poor graduation rates," said Tom Vander
> Ark, executive director for education at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
> "The CES Small Schools Project will help create smaller, more focused high
> schools that provide personal attention and rigorous coursework to help all
> students succeed." (Gates Foundation press release, undated).

Small schools could provide the antidote to the problems of the public school system. Bolstered

by George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the push to create small schools and

small learning communities across the country appeared to provide the personal attention and

personnel to the schools to comply with NCLB's "requirement that schools produce evidence

that all children, regardless of their status or background, are learning" (Boykin and Noguera,

2011, p. viii). The small schools movement rested on the theory that the small learning

communities would show a "change [in] the relationships within schools so that teaching [could]

be more collaborative and personalized to take into account varied experiences, interests, and

learning styles" (Klonsky and Klonsky, 1999, p. 40). There would be an affective difference

(Fouts and Associates, 2006) in the learning styles of students, and students would feel supported

in their secondary educational careers. As well, the educational outcomes, such as scores on the

National Assessment of Educational Progress, state-specific standardized tests, and most

importantly the graduation rates of individual schools, states, and the nation were projected to

soar in the small learning communities model.

There is much research to support the notion that children, when sustained by a

supportive community, perform better educationally (Delpit, 2010; Tyler, 1987; Darling-

Hammond, 1993). As well, there was a pervasive notion in the transformation to small learning

communities nation-wide that there would be fewer incidences of truancy, behavioral problems,

and apathy regarding school if teachers had a more personal relationship with their students

(Fouts and Associates, 2006).

Fast-forward to 2013: small learning communities had been implemented across the

country. The literature, however, had changed regarding beliefs about the efficacy of the changes

to small communities in formerly comprehensive systems. Whether because of the

incompleteness of transformation as a result of a lack of buy-in on the school level, the SLC's

did not bring the desired results. As Oxley and Kassissieh note:

> "Currently, it is common to find small learning communities operating only at
> entry-level year, often as 'freshmen transition academies', or involving only
> adjunctive student support such as student advisory or peer mentoring and leaving
> instruction essentially unchanged. Yet, a commonly shared, basic notion of small-
> unit schooling recognizes that small size and more supportive relationships are
> not ends in themselves" (Oxley and Kassissieh, 2008, p. 281).

Much like the vast majority of 20th and 21st century reforms, the restructuring of comprehensive

high schools into small learning communities, "has not been bold enough or comprehensive

enough to substantially improve public education" (Jennings, 2012, p. 1). Even worse, research

began to show that the small school movement could have negative impacts on schools because

they required such a drastic restructuring of both the administrative and educational processes.

Fouts and Associates (2006) succinctly describe the problems of the transformations and the

continuing strain on instructional and educational pursuits in schools:

> "In many schools we evaluated, the conversion process proved to be much more
> difficult than almost anyone anticipated. In fact, educators expended so much
> energy and political capital on creating the SLCs that there was little time or
> energy left to focus on the *reasons* SLCs are desirable—to allow for a more
> personalized learning experience for students, to improve relationships between
> students and teachers, and to allow for improved instruction. Unfortunately, in
> many schools we found that several years into the process the educators were
> still focusing on schedules, teacher assignments, or parental discontent, with

scant or no attention being given to matters that might improve the educational experience for students" (p. 4).

It seemed the shining jewel of the education reform world had not succeeded in the massive way it was intended to succeed. Reformers, researchers, and educators had called for a significant, decisive restructuring of the American school systems and finally one had come along (see Darling-Hammond, 1993; Tyler, 1987; Lee and Smith, 1995). Once again, however, it seemed the Achilles Heel in education reform had been struck in the small learning community and small school implementation: there had been no research into *why* the educational community needed reform; rather, there had only been an attempt to reshape educational models in an attempt to ameliorate the results of a still-unidentified problem. Reformers, politicians, and monetary backers were "demanding answers to questions or solutions to problems" as they are wont to do while the root cause remained undetermined (Cortes, Jr., 2010). As Cortes Jr. further argues, "Rarely does anyone ask: is this the right question? What's behind this question? It is properly formulated or have we rushed to judgment without considering all of the factors" (Cortes, Jr., 2010, p. 96).

Conclusion

Looking forward the research seems to suggest that there are key aspects of the education world and the reform world that do not mesh. American public education has a history of turbulent changes and bureaucratic involvements, which affect the daily lives of those in the trenches in schools. Because of these interventions and involvements the trajectory of reform is one of failure and one that reflects the ever-changing political, social, and economic situations of the United States. Small learning communities and small schools were marketed as the next great model of reform, as many reforms are, and as they have gone through different phases of

implementation the history looks as though it may be written to include small schools and small learning communities in the ranks of the failed reforms.

A question to consider now is where the world of education goes from here. Is a new, better reform the answer? Or, have we ignored the vital step of identifying the root problem, if there even is a problem, thereby handicapping our schools with the implementation of endless and pointless change? The literature would suggest that the history of education is one of continuous, ill-researched reforms contingent upon influences unrelated to education. Perhaps the answer, then, lies in problem identification. Perhaps the answer is much simpler than cyclical, systemic, expensive reform movements. Perhaps the answer does not lie in reform after all.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Restatement of Purpose

This qualitative case study includes interviews with six community members and stakeholders who are knowledgeable of the transformation that took place at Smith High School. The purpose of this work was to investigate and analyze the foundational ideas of these six stakeholders about the purpose of public education, how those foundational ideas influenced their understanding of the implementation of small learning communities, and also to assess more broadly how the conversational partners received the event as it relates to the overall meaning of reform in education. Situating the transformation at Smith High School into the larger problem of urban school reform allows for the interrogation of the transformation at a theoretical level.

Specifically, this study questions the foundational ideas that inform six stakeholders' opinions about school reform and school change, such as personal experiences in school, with this change or any other school change. It provides context for considering the meaning of reform historically and assessing the complementation or negation of these ideals in the SLC system, and allows for the investigation of the true functionality of the SLC system at the case study high school. The study may also offer considerations for future reforms as one of the guiding questions of the study asked participants to think critically about the ways in which reforms could be more comprehensive, better researched, academically motivated, and generally more successful.

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative interviewing method as a way of investigating the transformation process at the high school as well as personal theories and opinions concerning reforms in general, and acts as a truncated case study. Though Rossman and Ralis (2003) write that case studies are usually considered to be a strategy as opposed to a genre of research, case studies are generally in-depth explorations of a single event or process and "seek to understand the larger phenomenon through close examination of a specific case and therefore focus on the particular" (p. 104). This study was truncated, however, due to the time constraints of the honor's thesis. Using the qualitative interviewing method to implement a case study, it is hopeful that the research will provide different explanations of the event, how differing perspectives and opinions shapes perceptions of that outcome, and will allow the researcher and readers to utilize the "thickness of description" from multiple sources to "interpret and decide the applicability of case learning's to another setting" (Ibid, p.105). The particularistic focus of research allows the complexities of the situation to be explored through interviews and the extant literature concerning the subject.

The interview process complements this modified case study model, which assumes prior knowledge of the situation. As Rossman and Ralis write, "case studies are descriptive or explanatory; that is, they depict events, processes, and perspectives as they unfold—the "real-life" context—and often build an explanation for those events or outcomes" (p. 104). They also consider the case study model to be "methodologically eclectic" (p. 105), giving the researcher license to cultivate a working relationship with the conversational partners and the extant literature that is exclusive to the study and does not depend on codified methods of data

collection; essentially, the process is unique to this particular case study, which allows for a more iterative approach.

The strategy behind this case study of describing a setting and using the setting to contextualize opinions concerning education reform generally relies on the accessibility of the conversational partners and their knowledge of the case study reform and their opinions of education reform as a part of their own experiences.

Research Setting

Smith High School is a Title I high school in an urban, public school system located in the Southeastern United States. One of nine high schools in the system, the high school sits directly across from the largest public park in the city, and pulls students from a circumference around the school that encompasses neighborhoods of a wide variety of socio-economic statuses. Three hundred and thirty-nine students comprised the graduating class of 2011—the most recent data available on the state Department of Education website—of these 339 students 216 were black, 96 were white, and 14 were multi-racial. Approximately half of the graduating class of 2011, 138 students, was classified as "Economically Disadvantaged" on the school's NCLB report card. With the graduating class at 330 students, 292 were granted regular diplomas; 34 of the students who did not graduate regularly were black and only 3 were white. In looking at the disaggregated data from the state's End of Course Tests administered at the end of each school year the disparity between white students and black students vis-à-vis passing versus failing the test is enormous, as well as the rate of failure of students classified as Economically Disadvantaged.

Socio-economic status and test scores aside, the high school flourishes in the heart of the city. At the epicenter of every major event held in the park, the school provides parking for those

willing to pay and the funds are used to support every athletic team, the debate team, the Model U.N. and mock trial teams, and the arts program. Maintaining the integrity of these side programs, particularly the arts, once the switch to small learning communities came about was a topic often discussed in community meetings held at the school in the year prior to transformation as the school boasts two musicals and a handful of plays each year, an orchestra and marching band, and many other artistic endeavors. Each of the four small learning communities was designed to incorporate marketable skills into the framework of the curriculum. The Biomedical Science and Engineering Academy (previously Technology) offers students a chance to intern in their senior year or to design a major engineering project. The Communication and Journalism Academy provides training in graphics and design, video production, and advanced composition. The Business and Marketing Academy (previously Business and Entrepreneurship) trains students in the legal environment of business and marketing and then allows them to choose sports, fashion, or entrepreneurship as their focus. Finally, the Law and Investigations Academy (previously Public Policy and Justice) offers dual pathways in the study of Criminal Law and Forensics or enrollment in the JROTC program.

Each person interviewed for this research maintains a strong connection to the school, and though interviews were not conducted in the school, the setting can still be considered valid for contextual and theoretical purposes.

<div align="center">Initial Questions to Guide the Dialogue</div>

1. What are the foundational ideas that inform opinions about school reform and school change and how have those ideas influenced our reform models?

2. How does the transition to SLCs at Smith validate or negate those foundational ideas that inform our opinions about school reform and school change?

3. Does Smith High School truly function within the SLC model post-transformation?

Profile of Participants

1. Julie is a white, middle-aged mother of four who lives in a neighborhood that feeds into the high school. She grew up the daughter of a nurse practitioner and cardiologist in a city known for its universities. She is employed as an attorney and was highly involved in the transformation, serving on a design and implementation committee, and was and continues to be quite involved in supporting the programs of the school. Her oldest two children graduated from the high school, her third dropped out in the eleventh grade, and her fourth is freshman at the high school. In fourth grade her elementary school was racially integrated.

2. Patrick is a white, middle-aged father of two children, both of whom attend the local middle school and are slated for the high school, and teaches U.S. History at the high school. He was not directly involved in the planning for or implementation of the transformation. He serves as the Chair of Social Studies at the high school. His memory of reform is the switch to New Math in the seventies, which dictated the use of the metric system among other differences. His mother is a college professor and his father was a lawyer in Alabama.

3. Meredith is a white woman in her 70s and a mother to three children and grandmother to two children. She holds a doctorate in health education and is a professor emeritus who began her career at a local elementary school in 1957. Though she has some knowledge of the transformation at the high school she was chosen for an interview because of her knowledge and experience with many different educational reforms, most notably

integration in the south but also the development of Individualized Education Plans and

Special Education in schools.

4. Claire is a white, middle-aged mother of three children, two of whom graduated from the

high school and one who is a sophomore at the high school. She was involved in the

transformation and continues to be involved in school activities. She is an attorney by

training, though discontinued her practice to be at home with her three children, and is

now an education advocate who lobbies at the Capitol.

5. Henry is a white, 16-year-old male at the high school who is enrolled in the

communications-based small learning community. Both of his older siblings had been

enrolled in the defunct magnet program at the high school.

6. Michael is a white male in his mid-20s who currently serves on the Board of Education

for the school system. He matriculated at Smith High School, and after graduating from

college, returned to the school system to teach for two years before being elected to the

city Board of Education last fall. As a student he was a member of the magnet program at

Smith High School, and subsequently taught U.S. History for two years at another school

in the system.

<div align="center">**Data collection and analysis**</div>

I chose to speak with stakeholders and community members from a wide swath of

affiliations with the school to account for personal opinions and views as well as the educational

histories and backstories of each conversational partner. It should be noted, however, that this

wide swath was within the bounds created by the researcher's affiliations. Each partner was

chosen for his or her perceived knowledge of the subject as well as willingness to engage with

the topic and with the more theoretical aspects of the topic. I chose members of the major

stakeholder groups who I felt would be able to accurately assess the change over time in a school, would be able to and feel comfortable situating the change in the larger context of education reform, and with whom I had personal connections.

The history of the transformation process, documents from the time of the transformation at the high school, and face-to-face interactions and dialogues with participants were all collected as potential sources of data and research on the topic of school reform broadly and the particular reform implemented at the high school was used in conversation with the data collected.

I used a series of open-ended questions to guide the dialogue with the participants, which I had sent to them via e-mail in the days prior to the conversation in the hope that the participants would have the time to constructively consider them prior to our conversation. Although the questions had been given prior to the dialogue commencing I asked each conversational partner to use the questions to guide their thinking about education reform, the high school's transformation, and their own educational experiences but to not limit themselves to these questions alone. As the interviews progressed, often different, engaging questions organically arose that clarified and further elucidated the opinions of those interviewed. Interestingly, the process of interviewing did not always follow the exact themes of the prepared question guide, but the main ideas of each crafted question were addressed over time. Each conversational partner incorporated his or her own experiences into his or her answers, which provided a personal slant to each interview. As well, often times the conversations with previous partners added depth to the next conversation as themes, ideas, and questions arose in each conversation that prompted the refinement of some avenues of thought. One conversation informed the next, providing a more complex lens through which to view the question of education reform.

I met each participant at a location and time convenient for him or her. Each conversation was recorded electronically using the GarageBand application on a MacBook pro laptop and the microphone application on an iPhone as a measure of protection against any potential loss of data on the computer. Conversations were transcribed immediately following the interview. Once transcribed, the interviews were read over to identify possible areas for coding. Although more codes were added as analysis continued, the initial codes were useful in structuring the initial reading of the transcriptions. Using a color-coded Coding Guide, the transcriptions were then analyzed using the pre-determined codes. If a new code emerged all previously read transcriptions were re-read to ensure fidelity. Once first level coding was completed (i.e. the initial step), second level coding was undertaken. This involved gathering together the theme-specific quotes and information from the transcriptions to allow a larger picture of the theme to emerge.

The transcription was shared back with the conversational partner for his or her feedback as well as perceptions of fairness and truthfulness in the represented stories. Each conversational partner was roughly aware of my knowledge, as each understood my involvement in the transformation process for the Communications and Journalism Academy in the spring of 2010. As well, each conversational partner gave consent to be interviewed for the honors thesis and understood that each interview would be under the condition of anonymity and that names of people, places, or events that could be identifying would be redacted from the written thesis.

Profile of the Researcher

The fall of my senior year of high school, the initial steps were taken to begin the implementation of the system-wide high school transformation. As a writer for our newspaper I chose high school transformation as my "beat" and wrote several stories about the first phases of

the process—essentially the background of high school transformation, because school-specific information was not yet available. In November I was nominated by my newspaper advisor to sit on the pre-planning committee for the high school's transformation. Though I was not elected, I was made an alternate, and was therefore required to attend all of the meetings that the student representative could not attend; as he missed a significant amount of meetings, I sat in on at least half of the meetings that fall. When it came time to begin work on the four academies individually, all members of the pre-planning committee were asked to select a first and second choice academy of which to be a member. I elected to sit on the design team for the communications-themed academy because I was finishing my fourth year in the communications magnet program, knew the magnet coordinator well, and felt most comfortable discussing pathways for the communications program.

As we began work on the framework I had a good grasp of the school system's high school transformation to that point, and the push for small schools or small learning communities nation-wide, but, not uncommonly, knew very little about how the transformation process would be framed at my high school. Each design team had a representative from the various stakeholder groups associated with the school (student, parent, teacher, counselor, etc.), a representative from the high school's three feeder middle schools, and community stakeholder with ties to the high school. I was the student representative on the communications design team. Starting in February, our design team met every Wednesday afternoon to begin writing and editing our Design and Implementation Guide (DIG) which would serve as the backbone of the academy once implemented the following August. For each of the DIG's six sections, every design team member was asked to respond to several questions posed within each broad category. Using the responses for each theme—some dealt with student-faculty-staff relationships, others with

curricular issues—we began to construct the DIG. As the semester progressed I began to have a greater understanding of the transformation process and the benefits and burdens of transformation.

As I began to brainstorm ideas for my thesis, the first that came to mind was the school system's transformation to small learning communities, because my involvement in that transition prompted my declaration of a major in Educational Studies. Having studied educational systems, history, and reform for three years at Emory, coupled with my prior knowledge, I was curious to know what the eventual outcome of transformation had been and curious to engage with those in the community concerning their thoughts and perceptions of how the reformation at Smith fit into the trend of failed secondary reforms nation-wide. As a high school senior I was privy to conversations with student and parents concerning their frustration about the lack of information given about the process, conversations with teachers and administrators about the hardships in restructuring a high-performing school simply because it was mandated, and conversations with my design team about the pluses and minuses of a small learning community. With this background, I set forth to delve into the transformation and into the literature of reform.

It should be known that I was interviewing people with whom I have relationships, and whom I knew would be honest in giving their opinions of school reform and the high school's transformation; I did not have to form and develop relationships. I have done my best to remain objective and to assess only the literature and interviews in my writing. There are instances in the interviews, however, where the conversational partner assumes my knowledge of person or circumstance when describing a situation, and so I have, to the best of my ability, explained that assumption with as little bias as possible if necessary to include that information in my writing.

It is also important to specifically state my biases in selecting a topic and selecting conversational partners. As I came out of the magnet program and maintain relationships with those associated with the magnet program or its successor SLC, those I interviewed generally share my associations. To tackle each of the communities would have been overwhelming in the short eight months of my thesis process and therefore my tendency to associate with the now-defunct magnet program is evident. This was not a decision I made consciously but an outcome I realized long into the process. I fully understand that conversations arose in my interviews about certain subjects, such as the racial divisions between the academies, and that I occasionally mention those points without providing a sufficient counter balance (i.e., an interview with a parent with no connection to the magnet program). There are very evident biases in my work concerning my interview pool, and to that end I attempt to be clear about my associations with my conversational partners and the conclusions I draw. The conclusions are highly specific to the experiences of those with ties to the magnet program and the magnet program was 76% white and 34% black (please see Appendix E). My academic experiences in high school were not solely with those of my own race, but this study does not include the experiences of any student, parent, or teacher of color. I do not attempt to broadly generalize the results of the transformation in a specific school, only to offer suggestions concerning the reasons the educational system undergoes so many reforms and the success, benefits, and consequences of such, using the school (and defunct magnet program) as an environment from which to draw inspiration, sources, and stories.

Protection of Human Subjects

This research followed the guidelines and procedures set for by Emory University's Institutional Review Board and was classified as "Exempt" from IRB approval as the research

will not contribute to generalizable knowledge. As the questions asked were related to personal stories and personal knowledge of the transformation there is identifiable information contained within the answers. To protect anonymity the PI asked questions of each participant concerning each aspect of transformation within the school system as well as education reform at large and implored the participants to speak generally about the topics. The PI knows the names and affiliations of the participants and this information is secured on a single document, protected by a password, on a password-protected computer. In all assessments and analyses the participants are referred to using a pre-determined code. Only the PI will have access to the document linking the identification code to the participant. All writing and data—digital voice files, transcriptions, and notes—will be identified using only the predetermined identification code.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter, I hope to provide insight into the process of reform and the successes of a particular reform at Smith High School. Using six interviews with stakeholders from the Smith High community I will interrogate the literature concerning the history of reform in education, how historical reforms fit into the small learning community reform movement, and the efficacy of the reform at Smith High School by contextualizing those findings into the reform model at Smith. Common themes from across the six interviews will be interwoven to create a picture that will illuminate and, hopefully provide clarity, in response to the three research questions that guided this study.

1. What are six stakeholder's foundational ideas about the purposes of public education and school reform?

2. How do these foundational ideas influence their understanding of the implementation of small learning communities at Smith High School?

3. Do these foundational ideas express themselves in the ultimate construction of the small learning communities at Smith High School?

This chapter will address each of the research questions in order and Chapter V will provide a final synthesis of the information from the conversational partners. For more information concerning the affiliations of the conversational partners chosen for this study, please see Chapter III.

Research Question 1:

What are the six stakeholder's foundational ideas about the purposes of public education and school reform, and how do those ideas influence their perception of reform models?

In 1848, in a report to the Massachusetts State Board of Education, reformer and public education advocate Horace Mann wrote, "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of man—the balance-wheel of the social machinery" (Mann, 1848). It is the need for this great equalizer, this balance wheel, upon which the public education system in America is founded. To understand why we reform schools, change models, and are always seeking the solution to the problem of education, first we must understand why we educate. According to Claire (2014) there is an inherent need in our country for education. We compel students to attend school "so we can have an educated citizenry that can decide on the issues that a citizenry ought to be deciding on…[there is a] need in a democracy to have an educated population" (p. 4). In American society at the turn of the twentieth century schooling was used as a way to propagate and disseminate "a common shared set of values"—a position it still holds today in our society (Claire, 2014, p. 4) and to teach "reading, writing, and arithmetic, so you had the basics in order to manage the farm [or work in the factory]" (Julie, 2013, pg. 2). There has been a distinct shift in the paradigm, however; no longer is schooling "worked around everything else" but "the focus is that school is everything" (Julie, 2013, pg. 2). Such a distinct reversal of roles should suggest there was a distinct overhaul—a massive reform and change—of the ways in which schools operated. There was not a massive reworking, however; "the model that we're using… is still the factory model, because that's where we started" (Julie, 2013, p. 2). Without a decisive overhaul it would seem that the foundational ideas of school reform and school change are not mounted on a conscious, informed

vision for education but on a history of fleeting "flavor of the week" reform models (Michael, 2014, p. 1). Perhaps, offers Claire:

> "We continue to do these cyclical [reforms] because we as a nation have not grappled with the issue of education [in terms of] where we want America to be and how we would, in a thoughtful manner, get there…We're not ready to grapple with that so we continue to put more Band-Aids of the day on the issue" (Claire, 2014, p. 3).

Lost in the shuffle of these cyclical reforms is the one question Julie points out should have been asked long, long ago: "why do we educate?" (Julie, 2013, p. 8). There is the previously discussed use of schooling as the distributor of values and as the purveyor of reading, writing, and arithmetic, but Julie questions that foundational idea in a society as evolved and complex as ours is today. "Do we educate so that we are more informed and knowledgeable people? Do we educate to make sure that you can get a job? Maybe that's what this is all about" (Julie, 2013, p. 8-9).

Across the six interviews there is a common theme: there is no one answer to the question "why do we educate?" There are suggestions, there are theories, there are ways in which the question can be answered to acknowledge the role of schools in society, or the roles of school in financial stability and mobility, but there is not a singular, definite answer to the question. "We don't have a strong national policy on education," Claire stated, striking the arm of the chair to emphasize each beat (2014, p. 2).

With no foundational answer to the question of "why do we educate?" and lacking as we do a national stance on education it came as no surprise to many of the conversational partners that they were unable to identify a specific reason that reforms are implemented. As Claire noted, "I think [reforms] are often attempts to fix problems we haven't quite identified" (Claire, 2014, p. 2). These reforms are, at times, "bandwagon" initiatives that attempt to "reinvent the wheel"

(Meredith, 2013, p. 6, 7), or are the "Band-Aid of the day" (Claire, 2014, p. 3). Just as the ice cream shop has a flavor of the week to appease its customers it seems that the world of education reform also has "flavor of the week" models intended to appease the constituencies of school districts nationwide.

From the outset, however, it seems as though there should be an easy enough answer: we reform because something needs to be changed or altered. "In a broad sense we are reforming because reform means, in my mind, to change with the attempt of making something better because what we have now is lacking," said Michael (2014, p. 4). This broad sense is useful because it is quite nearly impossible to qualify all reforms as stemming from the same root problem, but as Claire offered once earlier, and then again later in the conversation, "we [try] to fix a problem before we have identified the problem. So, I think, number one, issue identification is huge" (Claire, 2014, p. 7). Here lies what appears to be the inherent problem in the reform movements of recent memory, and perhaps reform movements long before that: the problem— the original, root problem—is not isolated and researched and investigated and qualified before a reform is put into place. Reformation means, as Michael stated above, to change the existing model to improve the quality of the output because the current model is not performing in the ways in which it was intended to perform. This seems to be the great *non sequitur* in education reform: improving without a solid grasp on what needs to be improved.

Claire offers, however, that there is a reason for this lack of problem identification: it is not that identification is lacking but, in fact, there might be too much identification without enough cohesion.

> "Somebody said the other day at the capitol that when you're talking education at the capitol everybody's an expert because everybody's been to school and everybody's got a kid, so unlike almost any other issue with 50 people in a room

you've got 50 opinions on what's going to work with education" (Claire, 2014, p. 11).

Michael echoed these sentiments: "Everybody thinks they're an expert on school because they went to school, right. Even if you don't have a kids you still remember your time in high school, therefore that's going to, you know, always color your views on things" (Michael, 2014, p. 3). When asked what reforms they had experienced in their own educational careers each of the conversational partners had many stories to tell of the many experiences that colored their own views.

> MR: Did you go through any reforms when you were in school?
> Patrick: Oh my god, yes. I will never forget… I remember maybe in elementary school, and it was the 70s, and the whole nation was going to switch to new math… it was a five year period of being very confused about math, and then they said "oh, no, this didn't work—we're going back to the old way," and I was lost in the middle somewhere. … Then one reform that was national… they built a new elementary school in what they called pods. It was a giant open classroom concept…. Well all it turned out to be was chaotic and they had to wind up putting in walls eventually (Patrick, 2013, p. 1).

Many of the other conversational partners recounted their experiences with various reforms; some were similar to those mentioned by Patrick, and some were entirely different.

> MR: What has been your experience with reforms?
> Claire: I started in this system with my first child in 1995. And here I am—how many years later is that? 18 years later… 18 years later and there have been so many different school-based reforms that have been idiosyncratic to ours… The three different math things my kids have seen—different curriculum. My kids have seen—I'm not sure whatever our ultimate goal was with that and how then we know if we're meeting that goal; why we need to change mid-stream. There's a lot of changing with changes in personnel that I don't think necessarily is for the best of students. I think they're often individual driven initiatives. It's a new superintendent or it's a new principal at your school, you know, so that they're not as much centered on a consistent, what's a best practice educationally (2014, p. 1, 2).

In Michael's case, some of the experiences of reform triggered a desire to return home after college, teach in one of the system's schools, and then run for a seat on the city Board of

Education because of the realization that the education he was being provided in high school did

not match the level and quality of the education that was being provided to other students in the

same building.

> MR: What was your experience with reform? And that can be reforms you've
> experienced as a student or anything that's happened post-high school.
> Michael: I guess the first time…that I feel like I remember doing something
> different would have been the challenge program. When I got to high school I was
> in a magnet program. [I] took a lot of honors and AP classes and it was through
> those three programs that I sort of noticed that I was kind of attending a different
> high school than the people at Smith… and that kind of rubbed me the wrong
> way, to the point that at the end of my four years of college…I came back home
> and started teaching at a small high school that was on a campus with three other
> small high schools. (2014, p. 1).

The number of reforms and school remodeling addressed in just three personal experiences sheds

light on the points made by Claire and Michael earlier: reforms are cyclical and come and go so

quickly because of the different people and different administrations taking charge of the reform

movements.

The final piece of the foundational motivation for school reform and school change can

be attributed to one very important facet of the conversation: funding. Specifically Michael

(2014, p. 3) and Julie (2013, p. 9) noted that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as Smith

High School and its district underwent the transformation to small learning communities as a

result of a large contribution for that specific reorganization from the Gates Foundation.

It should be noted, however, that none of the conversational partners were insinuating

that the intentions of the reformers is malicious. "I think the intentions are good…I think the

intentions are honorable. I don't think anybody thinks 'let's screw things up.' I really think

people think they have the right idea" (Patrick, 2013, p. 15). As Claire notes, however, having

many "experts" in the field brings many "right" ideas to the table: "You know if you ask me

something about running a small business I'm not going to know anything about it, but as me

something about [education] and I've got an opinion" (Claire, 2014, p. 11). Patrick echoed this sentiment: "It's going to keep going and going and somebody's going to come up with another thing and it's going to—maybe I'll come up with the next best thing—who knows? Here we go, Arne[1]!" (Patrick, 2013, p. 16).

Multi-faceted experiences, opinions, and a history of cyclical reforms: these are foundational ideas that inform opinions about school reform and influence perpetual reform movements. These reforms are highly influenced by 1) the lack of direction and cohesion in identifying what the purpose and goal of education is on a local, state, and national scale; 2) the absence of root problem identification when instituting broad-sweeping reform movements, which contributes to the cyclical nature of reforms; 3) the fact that "everyone has enough of an experience [in education] to feel justified to tell you" (Claire, 2014, p. 11); and 4) the power that money holds when discussing what reform to institute and the ways in which the reform will be implemented (see Appendix F for a chart of these foundational ideas). Succinctly put, "[Education] is very complicated. They really ought to start all over" rather than continually instituting the next best reform model on top of a fractured system. (Julie, 2013, p. 9).

Research Question 2:

How do these foundational ideas influence the six stakeholder's understanding of the implementation of the small learning communities at Smith High School?

In 2005, in large part due to an influx of money from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the school system made the transformation to small schools and small learning communities.

> "The Gates Foundation pumped in a whole lot of money for [the transformation] and that was based on research that somebody did that suggested that small schools were more effective and I think what we've found is that the size of the

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[1] Patrick is referring to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

school matters less than the quality of the principal and the quality of the teaching staff that they send into their classrooms." (Michael, 2014, p. 3).

The transformation followed in the footsteps of many reforms nationwide in that the decision was passed down from the administrative offices of the district without any assessment of what was good for the individual high schools; the money was there, so the transformation was happening even though "the way the program was implemented… I think it caused some very severe frustrations with people who didn't think that was what was best for their school" (Michael, 2014, p. 4).

A common frustration woven through all the conversations with the six conversational partners surrounds the way in which the reform was implemented on the district level and school level. "I think a lot of people believe we try to force everybody to kind of follow a certain model or to conform to a cookie cutter model that everybody has to do this and everybody has to do that, whereas I think some people at Smith might have said this isn't what we need to do" (Michael, 2014, p. 4). This isn't an isolated incident, however: frustrations regarding the lack, or nonexistence, of a voice in the conversation to reform, insofar as the community can be involved, is something that happens nation-wide (Fouts and Associates, 2006). "I guess the problem for me becomes who decides what's best practices, you know. Do we have smart enough people doing that in the administration?" (Claire, 2014, p. 7).

Much to the chagrin of the community the transformation was announced without a researched, critically considered look at the education being provided by the schools in the district (Claire, 2014, p. 4; Julie, 2013, p.2). Once announced it became clear that a vital question had been overlooked: "I would say that I don't know that there was ever…the thought of the question 'why do we educate?' I don't think that was ever a consideration in discussing [the] reform" (Julie, 2013, p. 8). The "cookie cutter" approach to reform did not include a

comprehensive rethinking of the education that was being provided; it simply restructured the method of delivering that education.

Small learning communities are not the first attempt by education reformers to change the structure of a school in an attempt to fix a problem inherent in the school. All of the conversational partners remembered some form of restructuring in their school experiences, whether it was the integration of the school system (Julie, 2013, p.1), or the creation of open floor plan (Patrick, 2013, p. 1), or the creation of special education programs in the 1970s (Meredith, 2013, p. 6). This is to say that sometimes the structural alterations are important in affecting change in the school, but sometimes they mask the real problem. "[Instruction] is frankly a much harder problem to solve then the size of the building or the size of the student body, but [size] seems to be the thing that everybody is latched onto now" (Michael, 2014, p. 3).

To be sure there have been some successes in the new model, but Claire questions the cost of the financially driven district transformation.

> "I think the advisers tend to know their kids a lot better than they used to. So I think that piece has been good…. [but] I don't know if we have paid too high a cost for what little value we've gotten…if we could vote to not have SLCs I would do it now, but I [also] would have done it many years ago" (Claire, 2014, p. 6).

Though Claire may wish the transformation never occurred, Julie and Michael both insinuated that, while they might not have been in favor of the transformation at the time, the good to come from it could outweigh the bad. It is an important note, however, that after four years Claire is still miffed by the transformation.

Perhaps what caused the most irritation for those in the community, suggests Claire, was the fact that at the time of transformation at Smith there was a publication prepared for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Fouts and Associates Report, 2006) that suggested small

learning communities were not operating as expected. The cycle of reform was perpetuating

itself at Smith and the community "could make ourselves come in line last [to be transformed],

but we couldn't not do it. We could do it a little differently, but we couldn't not do it" (Claire,

2014, p.6).

Some in the community believed that this transformation was just the latest in a perpetual

line of reforms. "I said just jump through the hoops for now and know that this is not going to

last. It's another, and to me, personally, all of these educational reforms are just a joke" (Patrick,

2013, p. 2). Both Patrick, a teacher, and Michael, a school board member, noted that each year

there is an inevitable uncertainty concerning the future of this reform; whether it will stick for

another year or whether it will follow the path of its predecessors into the history books as

another failed attempt to ameliorate the symptoms without identifying the problem.

> "When they started these academies, several of us, myself included, said this will
> never last, don't worry it won't last, and every year as we reach February
> everybody invariably says 'have y'all heard if the SLCs are going away next
> year? I mean we're waiting for it to happen. We will go back to it being a magnet
> school and that will be the end of it. It's just a matter of time. Just like everything
> else, all the way back to the 70s with the math" (Patrick, 2013, p. 4).

Interestingly, Michael, who is a member of the school board, is fast to admit that the small

learning communities might be on borrowed time and that the solution to failings of the small

learning communities is another reform.

> "I think the conversation that will happen going forward when we hire a new
> superintendent next month is let's evaluate where things are right now and do [the
> small learning communities] still make sense and are they curricularly and
> financially rewarding. And if they're not how can we reform them to make them
> effective for kids…I suspect the 2014-2015 school year will include a fairly
> lengthy city-wide conversation about whether these things come back the year
> after that" (Michael, 2014, p. 6).

This is not to say, however, that the transformation to small learning communities is a

total failure. Two of the schools in the system now have graduation rates double that of the rate

in 2005, which was prior to transformation (Michael, 2014, p. 6). Meredith (2013, p. 8) noted

that while "it's not academic" there are successes in this model. Julie also noted: "we reformed

to provide more individual support. I think that was the focus" (2013, p. 3). The individual

support is certainly a component of the move to small learning communities, and is marketed as

one of the crowning achievements of small learning communities. Julie says:

> "It wasn't bigger picture motivated. This wasn't why are we educating, this is
> what can we do to provide more personalization for each student. I think that they
> felt like the magnet model worked well for those kids, and they wanted to try to
> replicate it with other kids and that was to have more focus by one person, to have
> a gatekeeper, almost" (Julie, 2013, p. 3).

Overall, however, the mood surrounding the transformation to small learning

communities at Smith seems to follow the mood of the literature concerning transformations to

SLCs and small schools on a national scale. "I think we had implemented without thinking

through the ramifications of some of the policies we had in place" (Claire, 2014, p.7).

Perhaps, then, the problem lies not in the way in which the small learning communities

validate or negate the foundational ideas that inform our opinions about school reform and

school change, but in the way that instruction is given at the schools. "We keep trying to invent

all these little tricks," said Patrick (2013, p. 5), "but, again, you have to just do it." To illustrate

his point, Patrick offered an anecdote from his own collegiate experience:

> "When I started in college I had to take US History and I knew that a family
> friend of mine taught it. So I took Dr. Johnson's class because I knew her and I
> knew she was interesting… and one time she said 'Ladies and Gentlemen, how
> many of you are education majors in here?' and people raised their hands and she
> said, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, I see some of you walking around with your little
> posters that you have to make for your classrooms: "Snoopy Says Learning's
> Fun." Ladies and Gentlemen, Snoopy is full of bulls**t. Learning isn't always
> fun, it's necessary.' And you know, that's exactly it" (Patrick, 2013, p. 5).

Essentially, Patrick offers, school should not be predicated on the successes of reform

movements or catchy slogans or inventive ways of presenting information. Learning can

be fun, he said, but there still has to be the fundamental pedagogical component:

sometimes the best way to learn is to forget the gimmicks and reforms, sit down, and

learn.

Research Question 3:

Do these foundational ideas express themselves in the ultimate construction of the small learning communities at Smith High School?

According to Michael, prior to implementation at Smith, the former Board of Education

representative from Smith's district fought a long, hard battle against the superintendent, to

prevent what she saw as a problematic reformation of the school.

> "She was very opposed to it and fought [the superintendent] a lot about it because
> she thought it wasn't the right thing for the school, and she thought it would
> divide the community. [She thought] going to academies was not a good thing.
> And was worried it would do exactly what it did do, which was divide academies
> against each other" (Michael, 2014, p 4-5).

In the fall of 2009, however, there was no looking back: the small learning community

and small school implementation happened at Smith and there was nothing the school

community could do to stop the transformation. In light of this realization, the best alternative

was to "mold [the transformation] in Smith fashion" (Claire, 2014, p. 5). Claire believes that one

of the strengths of the Smith principal is his ability to more or less "ignore a lot of district-driven

junk" in order to preserve the integrity of the school's programming and successes in educating

its students. With the knowledge that transformation would take place the next step, according to

Julie, was deciding how to present the transformation to the community in a way that would

alleviate tensions. The avenue chosen was to present small learning communities as "replicating

the magnet program" to the general Smith community; "we were going to provide for all kids the

support that we've had for the magnet program" (Julie, 2013, p. 5). In fact, Patrick believes,

transformation on a system-wide basis was an attempt "to try to level the playing field" (Patrick, 2013, p. 2).

Always a contentious subject at Smith was the perceived status of the magnet program as the "protected baby" of the school (Claire, 2014, p. 4). Historically there was the idea that the non-magnet section of Smith "was a different high school" than the magnet section (Michael, 2014, p. 1). By presenting the transformation as a way to provide a magnet program to every student at Smith the intention was to create the idea of better support and resources for all the students:

> "Smith created four learning academies and they tried to pick the right ones for us and they did everything right by getting the community involved and helping to pick what they wanted. In the end I think it was nothing more than a way to say, all right, Smith is a racially divided school. We're going to try to stop the racial division by creating academies. Well, guess what? Now you have black and white academies… and I don't even think it's a black and white thing. I think that you can take it that it's a socio-economic thing" (Patrick, 2013, p. 3-4).

In fact, there had always been racial disparity between the magnet program students versus the non-magnet students (for information regarding this, see Appendix E), and when the academies were rolled out in the fall of 2010 the racial divide was as present as ever: "We had this mostly white magnet program that then turned into a mostly-white academy and that set up a racial and socio-economic divide between that academy and the other three academies that, you know, was easier to see when it wasn't the magnet[2]" (Michael, 2014, p. 4). It would seem, according to Henry who is now a sophomore at Smith, that the SLCs are "fairly segregated" and many of his peers at Smith share that same feeling (Henry, 2014, p. 8). Smith is now openly a school viewed by students as very segregated (Henry, 2014, p. 8; Claire, 2014, p. 5). Perhaps,

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[2] Reasons given for why the magnet might have hidden this racial disparity at Smith include: 1) the magnet model allowed students from out-of-district to apply to the magnet and attend Smith, and 2) you had to have a certain GPA to apply to the magnet.

Michael offered, the silver lining in the implementation was the clarity shed on the racial and

socioeconomic disparities between the communications academy (formerly the magnet program)

and the rest of the school. "I think it showed the painful truth, which was everything at Smith

was not created equal. And I don't think that's something that should have been hidden at all.

The academies deserve credit for forcing us to have that conversation" (Michael, 2014, p. 4). As

well, Julie offered that the small learning communities forced the conversation concerning racial

and socioeconomic disparities at Smith, but also provided the basic structure for the

administrative staff and teachers to begin to address some of those concerns:

> "[In the SLCs] you can provide in high school more support to try to uplift the
> kids that are not tracked, and I know we don't track, but we'll just use that as a
> loose term. To the extent that you can identify issues with kids, and try to figure
> out how to support them [in schools] …the problem there is that its so, I mean,
> when social services come into play, social services are labor intensive and
> expensive. To support someone like that is; it takes a lot of people power and a lot
> of money… the bottom line is I think you get tracking of those kids [of lower
> socioeconomic status] and you need to work to break down the barriers where you
> can. I see reform in high school, the small learning communities, as being a way
> to support lots of different things, and maybe it is indirectly why do we educate…
> it's supporting something other than the traditional model, which is saying that
> you go to school and learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. [The model] is how
> can we give these kids skills that they can use in the world" (Julie, 2013, p. 7-8).

For these reasons, and for others about to be discussed, it seems the implementation of

the small learning communities has been "less bad than I feared it would be" (Claire, 2014, p. 5).

Michael echoed Claire's sentiment: "I don't think anybody would say the academies and small

schools worked perfectly. But I also don't think anybody, including I, would say they were a

total failure" (Michael, 2014, p. 5).

More individualized attention for each student in the school—having a child be "well-

known" by an adviser—was one of the selling points of transformation when it was first

announced, and many of the conversational partners agree that this piece of the transformation

was achieved. "One of our biggest goals I thought at the time of the small learning communities was to try to get a hook in kids to make sure that kids didn't come through with no place they felt was theirs, so I think [transformation] has done a good job of having advisers in each [academy]" (Claire, 2014, p. 6).

The small learning communities and small school model itself has been shown to have some affective differences in the communities of schools, as mentioned in Chapter III, but the differences never quite reached the academic performance as they were intended. At Smith, however, the "typical Smith fashion" (Claire, 2014, p.5) of implementing changes and interpreting regulations seems to have contributed to the ability of the school to manage the changes mandated by the conversion to small learning communities while still retaining some of positive aspects of the comprehensive model.

Assigning specific teachers to specific academies was one of the headiest points of contention when the transformation was announced, but by attempting to do so, "all you're doing is creating animosity with your teachers" (Patrick, 2013, p. 4) because of notions concerning to which academy it was better to be assigned. "At the beginning there were four different ninth grade lit teachers and that was what caused a lot of unrest because people were upset and trying to fight to get to communications" (Michael, 2014, p. 5). This fight to get to communications was ostensibly predicated on the long-standing history of the communications magnet program, and Julie mentioned that there have been some "internal adjustments" concerning how the academies are presented, how the academy leaders handle themselves, and how the administration at Smith has made a conscious effort to make the communities equal from a marketing standpoint (Julie, 2013, p. 6).

While these internal adjustments may have alleviated some of the tension surrounding academy choice, it also soon became apparent that certain stipulations of the small learning community model were going to have to be violated in order to keep the high school functioning for all its students. "When we started on [transformation] the idea was that teachers were going to be assigned to an academy, and they were initially. And they are no longer. Core teachers are no longer assigned to specific academies" (Claire, 2014, p. 4). This change was vital to the continued operation of Smith because there simply aren't enough teachers and enough space in the building for each of the academies to have a specific teacher for each of the core subjects. Now, "kids from various academies get assigned to any given ninth grade lit class" (Michael, 2014, p. 5) and because of this, "no [teachers] give a d**m about academy placement" (Patrick, 2013, p. 4). It also would seem that parents and students no longer care quite so much about the academy to which the student is assigned on paper. For instance, Julie placed her ninth grade son into the engineering academy because she felt he would benefit from the engineering classes and because she knew he would be able to "passport" into the various classes offered by other academies with no difficulty (Julie, 2013, p. 2). Henry (2014, p. 8) says he moves around to many different core classes that just so happen to be contained in the hallways of different academies, and that when he has the same students in his classes, it is because the classes are AP classes of which few sections are offered.

This flexibility to move between academies is, in large part, due to the size of Smith and the number of teachers that Smith employs. To Claire, it was inevitable. "One of the huge implementation questions that we always had was how do we do that [contain core teachers in a specific academy]? And it proved to be impossible. Shockingly" (Claire, 2014, p. 5). One of the other implementation questions was what to do with Smith's strong arts program. The answer

was to create an art "minor" for students to declare from all academies. "[They] have been trying to create what they call the Arts Minor, so that you've got your focus, but then because the arts are suffering, because Smith really should have, that should have been one of our SLCs, is the arts, now they're trying to create something" (Patrick, 2013, p. 5). The question now, it would seem, is what the longevity of these programs will be. In response to those attempting to create the arts minor, Patrick says, he does not get involved in something he believes will be gone soon enough, as his belief is that if the small learning communities are disbanded the arts minor will be tossed out with them (Patrick, 2013, p. 5).

The system has hired a new superintendent as of the last week in March 2014 and it was a common opinion throughout the interviews that the new superintendent will bring change (Michael, 2014, p. 6; Julie, 2013, p. 2). "I think [reforms] are often individual-driven initiatives. It's a new superintendent or it's a new principal… [the reforms] are so-and-so's new theory of the moment" (Claire, 2014, p. 2). As well, the long-held animosity surrounding the now-defunct magnet program haunts the communications academy, so much so that Claire believes that there is a "dynamic now where parents are so upset at what they see as perceived injustices that there's a whole political movement to…see the downfall of communications" (2014, p. 5). These perceived injustices, Claire explained, is the way in which the communities still reflect the school of old. Communications remains the idealized SLC and it still holds the power that the magnet did to divide the school.

If the small learning communities are removed, however, will it really make a difference at Smith, given that Smith operates within a modified iteration of the small learning community model? The answer seems to be yes and no depending on the context of the question. There certainly are still four small learning communities at Smith to which each student is assigned but

"we're making them more permeable so that they almost have no point" (Claire, 2014, p. 9).

Because of this permeability, illustrated by the lack of specific-academy teachers, the ease of the

"passport" system, and the arts minor open to all students, Patrick doesn't believe the small

learning community system at Smith will last in its current iteration. "I see it going away. [But],

maybe it won't go away. Maybe they will keep [the SLCs]. You will choose one of those four

academies and they will just continue to say 'yes, you're a part of the, you know, fill in the blank

academy, but it just doesn't mean anything" (Patrick, 2013, p.10).

The good to come from having a small learning community program that is essentially

operated as if it were still the comprehensive high school of old is that it brings to the forefront

of the conversation an important question: what was the point of this transformation, and how

can we alter the next reform to prevent the same problems from arising again?

> "It's kind of left me with thinking about whether small schools are better or small
> learning communities or great big high schools and I think the conclusion I have
> reached is that all of those are just structures and that you can have a 1500-person
> high school and be really successful and you can have a 1500 person high school
> that's terrible and the same is true for every other model which kind of goes back
> to your earlier point which is that reforms by and large seem to fail when you
> try… the scale issue always seems to be where something goes off the track. I've
> seen small schools that are really successful and I've seen large schools that are
> really successful; we just can't seem to [be successful] everywhere yet. And we
> keep trying different things. Middle school was a reform model back in the 60's
> as a way to try and fix what some people perceived as a problem transitioning
> from elementary school to high school, but now we've got people… that want to
> go K-8, 9-12 as a reform, but it's actually just going back to how its always been
> done… We seem to latch on to all of these different ways of trying to fix what's
> broken but we haven't really figured out how to do it yet" (Michael, 2014, p. 2).

Perhaps one day, offers Julie (2013, p. 9), there will be a concerted effort to re-evaluate

the basic tenets and structures of education. Until then, Michael (2014, p. 2) believes that we will

continue to waver between reform models; unable to decide which model is best suited for our

children. Patrick believes that it's not that reformers are uncaring: "Again, I think with

everything they do the intention is good. And the road to hell is paved with good intentions"

(2013, p. 2). Meredith echoed this belief that the reforms must be forgotten and that teachers,

must be provided more support, prestige, and monetary compensation. "There are a lot of, what

do you call it, trends, or we jump on bandwagons in education because we think, 'oh, this is the

solution.' Of course, I'm an old time-y one. I believe there is no solution. You've got to stand up

and teach" (2013, p. 6).

CHAPTER V

DICUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The findings from the study provide insight into and contextualization about experiences

and feelings concerning educational reforms both broadly and historically as well as concerning

the specific reformation of Smith High School from a comprehensive high school into small

learning communities. This study was predicated on the following three research questions:

1. What are the six stakeholder's foundational ideas about the purposes of public education
   and school reform?

2. How do these foundational ideas influence their understanding of the implementation of
   the small learning communities at Smith High School?

3. Do these foundational ideas express themselves in the ultimate construction of the small
   learning communities at Smith High School?

Discussion

*What are the six stakeholder's foundational ideas about the purposes of public education and
school reform?*

As explicated in Chapter IV, there were four major themes that appeared when

attempting to synthesize what the foundational ideas are that influence opinions about school

reform and school change. The first theme, concerning a lack of direction in identifying the

purpose of education, struck a cord with many of the conversational partners because of how

closely linked it was to the second theme, which was the absence of problem identification when

instituting reforms. These two are inherently linked, because without a decisive vision of what

education means and why we are educating our children, it is hard to reform the current models

to better suit the vision. I was intrigued by the frustration that was interwoven in the interviews

concerning the lack of vision in education, and vis-à-vis the lack of vision in reform models. It seems there is an unspoken confusion in the world of education in respect to why education is still as "unsolved" as it is in the public sphere. This leads into the third foundational idea that appeared in the interviews: inevitably every person in the conversation about education reform has an opinion concerning what is best and what is good for the schools and the system. This then leads into the fourth foundational idea: money dictates what, how, and when reforms will be instituted, and often without the input or opinion of those the reform will affect. These four foundational ideas present a solid basis for an investigation into how they affect the basic ideas of school reform and school change.

Many of the conversational partners asked what I had found in the literature concerning the questions that I was asking them; each time I relayed what the literature said concerning reforms, which is essentially that reforms are cyclical to the point that they are useless, many of them outspokenly agreed with the literature. The foundational ideas that we all rest our opinions of anything, education-related or not, are situated in personal experience. It is human nature to relate goings-on to personal stories because it contextualizes the event into something we understand on a visceral, innate basis. The problem then in school reform and school change is that every person alive in the United States, and much of the world, today was conscripted into attending school for some period of time. Many proceed past the point of conscription, whether to pursue a high school diploma, a bachelor's degree, or even a terminal degree, and enter every known field. But, there is still one thread that runs through every person's educational story, and that is the fact that they all, at one point, attended school.

Then, when the time comes for the reformers of present to remodel the extant educational model, reformers look to their own experience for guidance. Everyone went to school for

different reasons: financial, because their parents made them, to learn trade skills, or for the general enjoyment of learning; ergo every person in a position of reform power believes that the best and most efficient way to educate is what they, in their own personal experience, saw succeed. As Patrick said in his interview, this is never a malicious practice—no good reformer sets out to harm students, though reformers are rarely reforming from within schools. Reformers observe as third parties. There is simply no continuity. There is no identification of best practices that will work no matter location, socio-economics, or size. There are models created based on one school system in one place that are projected onto another system, such as the small schools movement from Seattle, without any consideration as to the eventual efficacy of the project. Reformers and those searching for the next great reform model are enticed and seduced by the successes of other models, and by the money offered by foundations to implement these models, that there is rarely careful consideration of how the reform will affect the school or the school system.

This brings back the first foundational idea, which is the lack of direction in education today. How can we suppose to find the "right" educational model if there is no direction and purpose for education today? This is not to say that we as a nation need to establish directives for education (obviously there is great division between local, state, and federal regulation of education), but it would behoove each entity to create concrete, specific goals. Once there are concrete, specific goals, solutions will flow more easily. Until then, however, the struggle will continue to identify the correct reform model. Every person in the United States will still be required to attend school until age 16 and foundations will continue to have large amounts of money to put behind the next greatest reform movement. It was for those reasons that the

conversational partners seemed to suggest that the reform "flavor of the week" would continue

ad nauseam.

How do these foundational ideas influence their understanding of the implementation of the small learning communities at Smith High School?

The easiest way to begin the conversation concerning the validation or negation of the

foundational ideas is from the fourth idea that was identified: the power that money holds when

in conversation about reform. Smith was transformed into small learning communities because in

2005 the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provided a large sum of money to facilitate

transformation. The SLC model had succeeded in other parts of the country at the time the

transformation was announced in Smith's district, and the research had yet to show that those

successes were not necessarily academic. For this reason the fourth foundational idea is clearly

validated by the transition to SLCs at Smith. The other three, however, are less easy to pin down.

Conversational partners, in thinking about the reform at Smith and in their own

experiences, explicated the first and second foundational ideas that concerned the lack of

direction in education and in education reform. Many of the conversational partners noted that

the transformation was and is still seen as a "flavor of the week" reform that will be cycled out of

practice. With varying levels of buy-in, most of the conversational partners noted, however, that

they had begrudgingly accepted that in order to keep the school functioning at a high level the

reform had to be embraced—it was happening whether they liked it or not. Many did not like the

reform, the conversational partners suggested, because they felt as though the school was

performing and did not need to be "reformed" or "restructured." In fact, there was the pervasive

notion that the transformation of the school to small learning communities would tear apart some

of the positive attributes of the school. Several of the conversational partners noted the fear

present at the onset of transformation that the reform, while attempting to ameliorate or fix an

unidentified problem, would create more problems in its wake. Many of the conversational

partners suggested that issue inherent in the lack of problem identification was the unintended

consequences of the transformation. The transition to small learning communities at Smith

validates the first and second foundational idea about school reform and school change, which is

that without a clear understanding of the goals of education we cannot possibly have a clear

understanding of what we should or should not be reforming in the educational system.

The third foundational idea that arose in the conversations with the interviewees was the

perception that almost everyone has an opinion about schools because almost everyone has gone

to school for at least some period of time. It was an interesting, and unforeseen, foundational

idea, but one that sheds great light on the problems in education today. There is no perception of

education reform as untouchable. Every person has his or her own version of what is significant

and helpful in education, meaning that every reform will be colored by each person's perception

of what is best. This contributes to the validity of the third foundational idea identified in this

research; that is, that every person feels qualified to solve the problem of education. At Smith,

this was not necessarily validated because of an influx of opinions from the Smith community

but was validated because those in charge of guiding Smith's educational vision were not given

the opportunity to express their opinions and each of those persons has an opinion as to what's

best for the school of which they are a part. Not being given a voice in the conversation

automatically disenfranchises those in positions of authority at the school, as it did at Smith,

which creates a feeling of unrest and of powerlessness.

Without a clearly stipulated, realistic, concrete plan for what the educational system will

provide to its students, the failed implementation of "flavor of the week" reforms is unsurprising.

At Smith, each of the four foundational ideas was expressed in some form or fashion by the

process of transformation. This is not to say that successes were not felt at the school, but the foundational ideas appeared in the implementation and delivery of the small learning communities. The question then became, for many of the conversational partners, how do we operate within the constraints of this monetarily driven, disenfranchising reform?

Do these foundational ideas express themselves in the ultimate construction of the small learning communities at Smith High School?

The answer, it would seem, is yes and no. Smith High School, for the past four years, has operated with four small learning communities present on its campus. Each of the four small learning communities has an academy leader, a counselor, and a fleet of teachers who teach both thematic and non-thematic materials. Technically, teachers are placed onto the hall of the academy to which they "belong" and students are obviously assigned to one academy out of the four. The reality of the situation, however, seems to be that Smith High School has managed to circumvent just about every stipulation of the small learning community model.

Students have the ability to "passport" between the thematic offerings of different academies with ease. There are not core teachers assigned to specific academies because Smith is simply not big enough and does not employ enough core teachers to have a teacher for each core subject for each grade level in each of the four academies. The AP classes are still open to every student in the school and the arts minor has been created to establish a pathway for students to opt-in to the arts program no matter to which academy he or she is assigned.

There are some of the tenets of small learning communities that the model at Smith upholds, however. Many of the conversational partners noted that students are better known by their advisers in their specific communities, which is one of the core changes the SLC model is best known for propagating.

Unintentionally, it would also seem that the small learning community model at Smith brought to light some of the more sensitive topics in Smith's history, including the notion that the magnet program (now the communications academy) was the "protected baby" of the school, and that the racial disparity between the magnet and the school was maintained when the small learning communities were created. The white students still migrated toward the communications academy and the black students migrated away from the historically white academy. Each child is given the choice as to which academy he or she will be placed into, assuming the academy is not yet at capacity, but the history of the magnet program seems to have permeated the academy selection process. Several conversational partners mentioned that this tension created racially divided academies, but this racial division did not need to be hidden and the small learning communities should be lauded for exposing a painful truth. It is important to note, however, that the small learning communities only illustrated this truth—they did not provide a way to ameliorate the problem. Students rank their academy preferences one through four and are then placed into the academies by the four academy leaders. The racial disparity has been maintained because students either consciously or subconsciously self-select and racially divide the academies.

The final piece in determining if these foundational ideas express themselves in how Smith High School was ultimately transformed is to analyze the overall opinions of the conversational partners. Many of them believe that the program has been modified to the point that, if the funding for the small learning communities runs out or is pulled, the school will continue to operate as is. Overwhelmingly it is believed that the small learning community program will be gone in the years to come, and that perhaps that time is coming sooner rather than later. Does Smith operate within the bounds of the small learning community model? Yes,

and no. This ambiguous answer, however, seems to best suit the school and best suit the needs of the students served by the school.

Recommendations

As this study was primarily a case study of one high school, the findings are not necessarily generalizable because they relate specifically to the experiences, frustrations, and overall perceptions of one group of people from one school. The findings are, however, indicative of a larger problem in the world of education. This study could prompt further studies into the notion that education reform, historically and contemporarily, is a cyclical storm of flash-in-the-pan ideas. The conversational partners interviewed for this study all independently suggested that before real progress can be made in terms of educational success there needs to be extensive further studies into the fundamental basis of education. Moving forward they all suggested that problem identification, as well as involving those in the educational trenches (i.e. teachers and administrators), needs to become the convention and not the exception.

By contextualizing the extant literature into one particular case study, the findings from this particular study offer a glance into the reality of education reform and prompt a deeper exploration of the way in which reform models are structured and implemented. This study contributes to the literature concerning the fast-moving, ever-changing reform movements and the reasons for and impacts of these cyclical reforms.

Conclusion

This research provides insight into the foundational ideas of six stakeholders concerning public education and school reform, how those foundational ideas influenced and continue to influence their understanding of the implementation of the small learning communities at Smith, and provides a contextualized understanding of how these foundational ideas play out in the

ultimate construction of Smith. The implementation and continuation of the small learning

community model raises many questions, concerns, and realizations about the underlying

assumptions of why we educate, why we reform, and if and how we can continually improve this

important component of society. It is my hope that the work done on this research prompts the

consideration of these questions, even if just in the minds of those whom I interviewed. As a

collective society we need to be continually refining and improving our educational systems,

because as Horace Mann (1848) said, "education, then… is the balance wheel of the social

machinery." In order for the balance wheel of society to function, however, it too must be

correctly calibrated. It is my hope that asking the questions of this study is a step down the path

to that balance.

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APPENDIX A: INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION

EMORY UNIVERSITY | Institutional Review Board

September 16, 2013

Madeline Roorbach
Division of Educational Studies

RE: **Determination: No IRB Review Required**
        Title: *Transitioning from a Comprehensive High School to Small Learning Communities: a Mixed-Methods Study of the Effects of Transformation at* ▆▆▆ *High School*
        PI: Madeline Roorbach

Dear Madeline,

Thank you for requesting a determination from our office about the above-referenced project. Based on our review of the materials you provided, we have determined that it does not require IRB review because it does not meet the definition of "research" with human subjects as set forth in Emory policies and procedures and federal rules, if applicable. Specifically, in this project, you will assess the implementation of the SLC model at ▆▆▆ High School and determine what aspects have been positive, which have been negative, and what changes have truly been made juxtaposing ▆▆▆ pre-fall 2010 and post-fall 2010. The IRB has determined that this study is not "research", as you do not intend to contribute to generalizable knowledge and the work done at ▆▆▆ High School is very specific to the school and those who were implementing the change, not to SLC transformation at-large.

Please note that this determination does not mean that you cannot publish the results. If you have questions about this issue, please contact me.

This determination could be affected by substantive changes in the study design, subject populations, or identifiability of data. If the project changes in any substantive way, please contact our office for clarification.

Thank you for consulting the IRB.

Sincerely,

Leslie J. Garrett, BS/BA
Research Protocol Analyst

APPENDIX B: LETTER OF INITIAL CONTACT

Madeline Roorbach
Emory University Division of Educational Studies
mroorba@emory.edu
September 11, 2013

Letter of Initial Contact

Dear Potential Participant,

      I am writing to ask you to consider participating in a truncated case study focused on understanding Smith High School's transformation to small learning communities. I would greatly appreciate your assistance and your willingness to read this letter before advising me of your response.

      The project is designed to assess how the SLC was actually implemented at Smith in the 2010-2011 school year, how the implementation of the individual communities and subsequent amalgamations of these communities have been shaped and molded in the four years since implementation, and how the SLC model is working at Smith today.

      There will be one conversation with each participant, lasting approximately 45 minutes, and each conversation will be audio recorded. The conversation will be guided by a set of pre-determined questions that center on the transformation and its implementation. The expectation of each participant is that he or she be willing to openly discuss Smith's transformation to small learning communities, as well as the successes and failures of this transformation, and then to read and respond to the written narrative accounts.

      Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and, even if you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time. Your anonymity as well as the anonymity of other participants is protected. Your name will never be used and all names, such as the school and school districts, will be changed. All information collected will be safeguarded to ensure confidentiality. There is no compensation for participating in the study.

      My research request and methods have been reviewed for their adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Emory University's Institutional Review Board and Division of Educational Studies.

      Please contact me by phone at 404-695-5852 or email: mroorba@emory.edu to request additional information and/or to arrange to participate in the research. Your time and interest in this study are much appreciated.

      Sincerely,

      Madeline Roorbach

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE QUESTION GUIDE

1. What was your educational experience?
   a. Traditional high school
   b. College track?
   c. Did you ever experience some kind of overhaul in your schooling?
   d. Can you relate that overhaul to the transformation to SLCs?
2. How do our own experiences (educationally or otherwise) shape our perceptions?
3. How do you see schools?
4. What's the point of school change/school reform?
5. What are the foundational ideas that inform opinions about school reform and school change?
6. How do SLCs compliment those foundational ideas?
   a. How do they negate them?
7. How does the way a reform is pitched/managed influence the way it is received?
8. What does it mean to "reform" or "remodel" a school?
   a. What did it mean originally at Smith?
   b. What does it mean now?
9. What were your trepidations? Did you have any?
10. What were you looking forward to?
11. What was your involvement in the transformation?
12. Did you understand the changes that were to take place? Did they take place?
13. During implementation did you notice any major roadblocks?
14. What did you think was the point of the SLC implementation?
15. What was the argument that was given to support SLC implementation?
16. Why do you think we educate?
    a. What's the point of "education?"
    b. Is education equal?
    c. Is education fair?
    d. Should we be doing more to educate children?
17. How can we "fix" education
    a. What are the holes
    b. How (or not) did the SLCs manage or alleviate this?

APPENDIX D: SAMPLE TRANSCRIPTION

CP4: Yeah, but it was a horrid program. But we were trying to fix a problem before we had identified the problem. So I think, number one, issue identification is huge. I'm not sure we do a very good job of that on a real local basis as opposed to the district, the district of ████, or any district, has such a continuum of needs within that district, so I think part of what ███ would talk about, I think if you, I've spent a lot of time talking with him about all of this, is most, giving more flexibility to the individual schools within the district so that ████ can identify it's greatest needs and put its resources there, so instead of a top-down model which is what SLCs were and so I think, personally I think we need to really identify whatever the issue is that we're trying to tackle. And a best practices approach, I mean, I guess the problem for me becomes who decides what's best practices, you know, do we have smart enough people doing that in the administration at ████, not at ████, no, but definitely at ██ administration. I mean I think there's a real problem with who's, who our curriculum people are, but I don't know that that's a helpful answer to you.

MR: Or even thinking about the SLCs. What would have been good to think about when we did that that wasn't thought about? Was it that we just didn't need it?

CP4: Well there are so many details that we didn't think about, just in terms of implementation, I don't think we handled implementation particularly well and I think that's…

MR: At ████?

CP4: At ████ We totally didn't handle implementation well. In that, when they took kids in they decided how there would be so many spots and the kids would get to pick them and yada yada yada… well, shockingly, communciations got filled. So the new kids coming to the school didn't get a chance to ever get in that. They would have to be assigned to whatever was left. So, and then the next year we thought great because everyone who applied got their spot but again we forgot to leave space for new people coming in during the year. We had a lot of problems because we didn't let kids transfer. That took a year or two to… so I think we implemented without thinking through the ramifications of some of the policies that we had in place. I think that a huge issue that's coming down the pike in education is that, and it's here already, is this whole career-readiness idea, and that piece of the ████ thing that we're, people are upset to find out in ninth grade that they've got to decide what track to be on? We're getting ready to put it back to kindergarten. There's a bill pending in the legislature now about work readiness…not readiness. Work something, I can't remember what it is, and the idea that you should be, you know, looking at anybody's potential now in kindergarten is mind-boggling to me, you know.

MR: Well it's funny because you're not allowed to track kids anymore, though.

CP4: But we do! With challenge, right? We do, you know? We just can't use that terminology, but yeah, we do so I think we could have implemented better than we did at

APPENDIX E: SMITH MAGNET PROGRAM RACIAL BREAKDOWN

Total B=			32	36%
Total W=			53	59%
Total M=			3	3%
Total A=			1	1%
Total H=			1	1%
Total=			90	
		Female=	61	68%
		Male=	29	32%
		Total=	90	

Magnet - 65% W
33% B
2% A, H, Multi

67% Female

APPENDIX F: THE FOUNDATIONAL IDEAS

Foundational Idea #1	What is the goal of education?	Education is a confounding conglomeration of local, state, and national influences. FI#1 concerns the need for a cohesive purpose and goal for public education. Having such a purpose and goal could allow for the overhaul of the public education system in a way that would then mean education reforms could also be pointed and directed programs.
Foundational Idea #2	Problem Identification	In many cases, reforms are created either without input from those "in the trenches" or are created in the "one size fits all" mindset. As all schools are not privy to the same resources and experience different problems in educating their students, identifying the problem at a particular school and working to correct that very specific problem could enhance the successes of reforms.
Foundational Idea #3	The question of expertise	There is a fallacy of expertise in the world of education. Every person attempting to create reform is an "expert" because he or she attended school and has an idea of what worked in his or her experience. True experts in the field, such as researchers or experienced educators, are often not as involved in the discussion of reform as they should be— politicians and reformers (i.e. not "experts") are making decisions.
Foundational Idea #4	Money	Very often tied up in local/state/federal stipulations, money is an essential element in education, as in all enterprise, and if money is tied to a certain reform movement the reform is often implemented if only to secure funding for the school or school district. This is illustrated by the Smith High case study, as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation flooded the district with millions to transform into SLCs. By the time transformation reached Smith, SLCs were no longer in vogue. Unfortunately the money had been given to transform, and so Smith was transformed.