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**THE SEMINARTS EXPERIENCE: RESTRUCTURING A  
NINTH GRADE TRANSITIONAL PROGRAM IN A  
WHOLE SCHOOL ARTS ACADEMY**

by  
Mari Celi Sanchez

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
Rowan University  
April 2011

Dissertation Chair: James Coaxum III, Ph.D.

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Mari Celi Sanchez

## **Dedication**

*To my family*

*Julio Sanchez, my rock*

*Sara Aleida, my spirit*

*Diana Maria, my soul*

*Julio David, my energy*

*and to my parents*

*Carlos and Mercedes Guevara, my guides*

—

*I am what I am because of you*

*I do what I do for you*

*All my love and gratitude*

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## **Abstract**

Mari Celi Sanchez  
THE SEMINARTS EXPERIENCE: RESTRUCTURING A  
NINTH GRADE TRANSITIONAL PROGRAM IN A  
WHOLE SCHOOL ARTS ACADEMY  
2010/2011

James Coaxum III, Ph.D.  
Educational Leadership

The potential problem with a student's high school experience may begin as soon as he/she enters the high school. Freshmen students experience increased changes in school environment, as well as new friends, teachers, rules and regulations, and challenging courses. They need to maneuver all of these experiences with complex social-emotional and physiological upheavals associated with adolescence. For some students, this transition to high school has negative consequences that lead to achievement loss and dropping out of school. Because of this, effective transitional programs that assist new ninth grade students into high school are needed. Freshmen require procedural, social, and academic supports before they enter high school and during their first year in the new school. Personalization and social advocacy by caring adults, academic rigor, and curriculum relevancy are important aspects for student success.

The purpose of this action research study was to examine the effectiveness of a ninth grade transitional program in a new high school arts academy. An additional purpose of this study was to integrate the freshman faculty into the decision-making process of this program. The research study used both qualitative and quantitative data of

the academy's transitional programs. This included a bridge program for ninth graders called Success Seminar in the first year of the academy. This seminar class offered organizational, study, and social-emotional skills for the new high school student. Because the school failed to offer an arts class for ninth graders when it opened, a *Seminarts* (seminar plus arts) blocked transitional program began the following year. It incorporated both the seminar skills and an arts component as a ninth grade program. The effectiveness of both programs, and the comparisons between them became the basis of this study. Data were retrieved through teacher and student surveys and focus groups, teacher interviews, class observations, committee teamwork, and an analysis of student achievement documents.

Descriptive statistics of study findings indicated that freshmen can articulate clearly what they expect from their arts academy and what they need to be successful. They described caring, experienced teachers, project-based cooperative learning, and increased school arts experiences as aspects that will help them succeed. Freshmen saw the value of the seminar skills, but did not always see the validity or importance of the seminar activities. They did clarify their desire for an arts program as soon as they entered the high school.

Teachers also expressed what was needed for freshmen to prosper in high school. They spoke passionately about their educational and personal values and how they wanted the best for their students. Teachers expressed their values in the classroom setting, in lesson plans, in interviews, and focus groups. Yet there was a disconnect between the low-level tasks students were performing and the rigorous objectives expected of them. Teachers followed the seminar curriculum but watered down the

challenging aspects of the assignments, or modified the pace of the lessons. Even with improvements in the second year of the academy, student achievement was not reflective of lasting learning where students used higher thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, or evaluation.

In committee work, team members planned and coordinated a variety of programs to anchor the freshmen into their school. Teachers gave many innovative ideas on how to provide artistic experiences to students, develop a vision for the school, and establish initiatives to reach out to the middle schools. Through all of the various data findings, the staff targeted issues of scheduling, curriculum, professional development, and communication issues, within the school and to the feeder schools, as aspects for the success of *Seminarts*. Armed with this knowledge, the action research study enabled a core group of arts teachers to continue to plan for an effective ninth grade transitional program in the high school arts academy.



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## Chapter I

### Problem Statement

The beginning of high school offers new challenges for the young adolescent. Many times students are not equipped with the skills necessary to navigate all the new rules and regulations, expectations from their teachers, and the need and desire to fit in with their peers. Students need to have opinions and choices, to establish identity, and to become organized and focused all within the structure and procedures of the new high school. “The vulnerabilities students experience during school transitions may result from the potential mismatch between the youth’s stage of development and the demands of the school environment” (Eccles et al. as cited in Benner & Graham, 2009, p. 356). The potential problem with a student’s high school experience may begin as soon as he/she enters the high school (Benner & Graham, 2009; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; McIntosh & White, 2006; Smith, Akos, Lim, & Wiley, 2008). Smith states, “ninth grade students exhibit higher rates of failure in courses, decline in test scores and more behavioral problems than students in all other grade levels do” (as cited in Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 32). This is caused by an increased bureaucratic system in high school, depersonalization, competition, and a shift from nurturing the whole child to a focus on instruction of academic subjects. The transition to high school has negative consequences for some students that lead to achievement loss and “dropping out shortly after they enter high school” (Mizelle & Irvin as cited in Akos & Galassi, 2004, p. 212). Effective transitional programs that assist the new ninth grade student into high school

are sorely needed and are now a major focus in several national high school reform models (Herlihy, 2007).

These high school reform models have been a part of the American educational system since the 1980s, when the federally-sponsored groundbreaking report, *A Nation At Risk* (1983) was published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 1983). In the archived report, the tone and rhetoric are serious and strong. The nation was at risk due to failing schools and undereducated students in “a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people” (USDE, 1983, p. 1). The report findings galvanized policy makers to stem the tide of underachievement for high school age students and improve the standing of American high schools among the developed nations of the world. The National Association of Secondary Schools’s (NASSP) guides *Breaking Ranks* (Miller, 2001) , and *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* (NASSP, 2004), and the National Center for Educational Statistics’ *Condition of Education* report (USDE, 2009a), all point to an alarming trend once students enter high school. This trend consists of continued academic failures, dropout rates, and low graduation rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the term dropout refers to “16 to 24 year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential - either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a General Educational Development [GED] certificate” (USDE, 2009b). However, there has been some success. The total dropout rate in the United States has steadily dropped from 1980 to 2008, from 14.1 percent to 8.0 percent (USDE, 2009b). The total number of African-American and Hispanic high school dropouts has also improved within this timeframe. But in 2008, the



totals for these two aforementioned groups still remain alarmingly high at 9.9 percent and 18.3 percent respectively (USDE, 2009b). To improve these dropout figures for all students, a continued focus should be placed on the ninth grade student. “Unsuccessful high school transitions contribute to high dropout rates, low on-time graduation rates, and low achievement in American high schools. Therefore it is vital to identify what works to ensure that all students make it through this important gateway” (Herlihy, 2007, p. 1).

Two initiatives are present in various reform models that incorporate an attention to personalization, relevance, and rigor by forming strong relationships with students. They are small learning communities, or schools within schools, and career focused academies (Legters, 1999; Stern, 2000). Within these models, students are assigned school mentors or advocates that assist them in a variety of ways. These structures are especially significant to freshmen because students are able to rely on a small group of adult educators to assist them in a myriad of situations. Examples of freshmen issues include how to solve scheduling problems, how to open their locker, what to do if being bullied, or how to ask about tutoring resources. Small learning communities also assist freshmen by bringing educators together to work, plan, and support their limited population of students. Teachers usually have a common preparation period to enable struggling students to visit all their teachers at one time. Parents can also attend these one-stop meetings for their student. Positive relationships emerge between teachers, parents, and students. Additionally, many of these communities are attached to themes or career pathways as a way to provide relevancy to the students’ high school learning. Some are even stand-alone ninth grade academies with their own grade administrators and support staff. All of these configurations attempt to establish relationships and

connections (personalization) that help focus students on their learning by providing outlets for problems and concerns. Small learning communities that are most successful offer structured support to students, personalization, relationship-building, and curriculum rigor (Olson, 1994, Quint, 2006, Stern et al., 2000b.)

In these communities, freshmen students begin to feel supports and structures that enable them to stay in school and continue their high school learning. Transitional programs that assist students to graduate from high school can halt the tide of dropouts in high schools. Cohen and Smerdon (2009) provide reasons why students drop out of high school. They range from classes not being interesting (50%), students not motivated to work hard (70%), personal reasons (33%), and due to their own failures (33%). A disturbing fact is that 70% of high school students surveyed said they *could have* graduated, and 80% said they would have stayed in school if classes were more interesting and related to real-world learning. Added to this, “high school graduation is a 50-50 proposition for many low-income and minority students (Cohen & Smerdon 2009, p. 178). “Research on motivation shows that many young people give up when they do not believe their efforts will pay off. Furthermore, researchers have confirmed the damage that can occur when student popularity is linked to lack of effort at school and school achievement is associated with “*acting white* or being a *nerd*” (Steinberg & Allen, 2002, p. 22). Steinberg and Allen (2002) describe students’ high school experience as the following:

In focus groups conducted for the National Commission on the High School Senior Year, recent high school graduates reported that 1) what they learned in high school left them unprepared for college, work and the adult world 2) their senior year was a waste 3) they found high school to be pointless, boring and not challenging and 4) socializing was more important to them in high school than academics. (p.8)

These student concerns should be addressed as soon as the student enters high school. The high school experience is not just about academics. Ninth grade students need to fit in and feel secure in a new environment. They need to be exposed to real world experience and require relevant coursework that should be tied to future career goals. Increasingly, academic failure during the transition to high school is highly correlated to the probability of dropping out (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

### **Purpose of study**

The purpose of this study was to critically examine student achievement in the ninth grade and to collaboratively restructure into an effective ninth grade transitional program for a high school arts academy. Teachers needed to buy in to the new freshmen seminar program by making decisions with the administrators regarding the new class. When teachers are given a voice and freedom to develop a program, they understand the curriculum better and can demonstrate to their students the validity and importance of the initiative. The goal of all stakeholders was to plan and participate collaboratively on the learning experiences of the students in the academy, and make decisions related to the academy and to best practices. “JB Smith (1997) suggested full transition programs that involve complete support have the greatest positive effect on high school retention and experiences” (as cited in Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 181). Akos and Galassi (2004) describe complete support as “three separate but interrelated components - academic, procedural and social” (p. 218) that are collaboratively planned by all the stakeholders involved with incoming freshman.

This research study primarily gathered qualitative data with a few quantitative data instruments of the academy’s first year Success Seminar freshman class and the

existing *Seminarts* blocked transitional program. As stated, an additional purpose of this action research was to integrate the Success Seminar and *Seminarts* faculty into the decision-making process for their program. Teachers worked with these transitional programs for almost two years now. They provided valuable suggestions and comments regarding curriculum, scheduling, activities, support services, middle school outreach, and professional development. Teachers felt a level of trust with the researcher that enabled them to participate fully in the study activities. Stakeholders were empowered through the Relational Model of Leadership for Change (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007) with capacity building becoming a natural consequence of this endeavor. A relational leader is caring, empowering, ethical, inclusive, and has vision. My relational leadership framework for change was used throughout the study and is described in further chapters of this document. I am attuned to relational leadership because of its emphasis on building positive relationships. It is also closely aligned to Fullan's (2007) steps for change in organizations. Fullan notes that capacity building is multifaceted in that it involves new skills, knowledge, competencies, enhanced resources, and stronger commitments for stakeholders. These characteristics evolved for the core group of teachers in the study.

### **Rationale for the Study**

The high school arts academy in this study became a whole-school career academy in the 2009-2010 school year through district mandate. Students in eighth grade applied online to the academy of their choice. The arts academy allowed incoming students to audition to their preferred arts strand in the spring before the academy's opening. They were accepted based on a rubric completed by adjudicated panels of arts

teachers. Other freshman did not audition, but were placed at the arts academy because they chose the school as either their first or second choice on the online application.

In the first year of the academy, no arts program for ninth graders was planned. The district required a Success Seminar class for the arts academy freshman, a world language requirement, and blocked classes in language arts and mathematics along with other requirements. Because freshman had a full schedule, students were not grouped into the artistic strand they auditioned or applied for. These artistic strands included drama, visual arts, band, chorus, guitar, T.V. production, dance, graphic arts, and creative writing. The Success Seminar's curriculum served as a type of mentorship program, where teachers gave lessons on organizational, academic, and social skills. Many of these teachers only saw their freshman students in seminar classes. Most teachers had limited training and professional development for the Success Seminar program.

Due to the data derived from the 2009-2010 school year, a *Seminarts* blocked transitional program replaced the Success Seminar class in the freshman schedule for 2010-2011. This new program meshed the skills of the seminar class with an arts component of the student's interest. The arts teachers primarily taught *Seminarts* and time was also given during the school day for teachers to collaborate together.

Administrators and teachers felt that an arts program as soon as the students entered high school would help freshman focus on school and their career choice.

This action research study examined the factors that provided a successful transition of the adolescent from middle school to high school. The study was perceived as a need due to the district's constant program and staff fluctuations in all schools. It was also important due to the high failure rate in the ninth grade in this academy. For

example, when the study began in 2008-2009, there were 288 freshmen enrolled in the arts academy. Two years later, the number of freshmen who were now juniors in the school was 143, which is almost half of the class population. These downward statistics are similar in four of the six high school academies in this urban district. The exception to this occurs in the two gifted and talented high school academies in the district where class totals of freshmen remain relatively stable to junior year. As the researcher and an administrator in the arts academy, I evaluated the ninth grade transitional program to curtail this alarming population decline. I examined what aspects of a transitional program were most effective to keep students in school. A further goal was to present findings to the school administration, central office, and the board of education for review and reconsideration.

The perceptions, opinions, teamwork activities, observations, documents, and artifacts on the freshman transitional programs in the arts academy are all part of the cycles of this action research study. Data were gathered through student and teacher surveys and focus groups, teacher interviews, classroom field observations, teacher committee work, photographs, and an analysis of student achievement documents.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

- 1) How did a whole school career academy approach support students academically as they transitioned into high school and during their freshman year?
- 2) How did staff collaboration provide for an effective freshman arts transitional program?

- 3) How did my leadership impact the restructuring of a high school arts academy transitional program?
- 4) How did a restructured transitional program assist freshmen students in the arts academy?

### **Significance of Study**

High school education in the United States is at a crossroads. A review of reform models that transfigure the traditional high school experience have resulted in generally lukewarm achievement and advances for the adolescent student. (Castellanos, Springfield, & Stone, 2002a, Legters, 1999; Trybus, 1997; USDE, 2009a). Many studies point to the success of small learning communities, personalization, rigor, relevancy, and relationships (Allen, Almeida, & Steinberg, 2001; Cotton, 2001; Imel, 2000; Legters, 1999; Steinberg & Allen, 2002). These promising aspects will be closely examined for freshman entering this high school arts academy. “Every high school reform initiative should include a focus on middle to high school transition and successfully moving students through ninth grade” (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 177).

“Success or failure during the freshman year sets the tone for a student’s entire high school career” (Hertzog et al. as cited in McIntosh & White, 2006, p. 41). Additionally, “schools reduce opportunities for student decision making as students’ desires for autonomy are growing” (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006, p. 16). Because of this, it is important that students and staff are empowered to design programs and supports that allow choice and motivation in student learning. These transitional programs will begin to involve students in their academic and artistic endeavors and their future, as they also begin to clarify their identity, and their social relationships. This is accomplished through

increased exposure to the community and the arts, academic supports such as tutoring, socialization activities, and school committees such as student council and various arts clubs.

The study is also important to stem the tide of “mediocrity” for new freshmen in this particular high school. It will examine if a strong transitional program will improve students’ resiliency in school and assist them in solving all types of problems without dropping out. This action research study will benefit all the stakeholders including middle to high school educators, parents, and most importantly the freshmen students as they transition into secondary education.

### **Conclusion**

Due to the constant reorganization of staff and programs in the district’s schools and the importance of high school success beginning in ninth grade, freshmen students needed a quality structured experience as they entered high school. Offering young adolescents a choice of their career academy without a strong transitional program and effective support systems in ninth grade does not enable successful student achievement in high school. With a restructured ninth grade transitional program in the arts academy, future incoming arts freshmen will begin to experience a positive high school experience.



## Chapter II

### Literature Review

This literature review focused on research regarding a ninth grade high school transitional program in a whole-school career academy. My action research project examined a freshmen transitional program, entitled Success Seminar, in my capacity as a vice-principal in a high school arts academy, and the *Seminarts* transitional program that followed in the 2010-2011 school year. Most academy students applied and auditioned into a career arts strand in this high school. These arts strands simulate small learning communities by incorporating personalization, relationships, relevancy, and rigor. As each incoming ninth grade student was placed in a career strand of their choosing, the ninth grade transitional program became pivotal. Because of this, the seminar freshman class was designed with organizational, study, and social-emotional skills necessary for adolescents to begin a successful high school experience. Lacking in this initial freshman program was a connection to the arts, quality professional development for the staff, a coordinated transition team, and a strong integrated curriculum which was discussed later collaboratively as the study evolved. The *Seminarts* transitional program replaced the Success Seminar class the following year to offer an arts component to freshmen and to begin to address the other areas of concern.

Literature reviewed to inform this project included statistics on high school achievement, graduation and dropout rates in the United States, research on ninth grade importance for high school success, transitional programs from middle to high school,

and career academy research. The role of inter-disciplinary curricula that includes career education and academics, and small learning communities also added to the literature reviewed.

### **American High Schools**

The phrase “Our Nation is at Risk” began the landmark report that sent a wave of concern and action in our country (USDE, 1983, p. 1). The report’s introduction stated:

While we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. (USDE, 1983, p. 1)

In this important report, high schools were highlighted with the following recommendations:

- strengthening state and local high school graduation requirements
- adopting more rigorous and measurable standards
- requiring higher expectations for academic performance and student conduct
- structuring more time for learning in the New Basics (English, Math, Science, Social Studies, Computer Science and Foreign Languages)
- improving the teaching profession to result in a more rewarding and respected profession, and
- holding educators and elected officials responsible for providing the leadership necessary to achieve these reforms. (USDE, 1983)

The era of standardized testing and increased accountability thus began in states and districts across the nation.

Years later, educational reform in the United States still has not produced the level of high school achievement that was expected. According to the U.S. Department of Education report entitled *The Condition of Education* (USDE, 2009a), the average freshman graduation rate (an estimate of the percentage of an incoming freshman class that graduates 4 years later) in 2005-2006 was 73.4%. This constituted a 1.3% *decrease* from the previous school year. The state in which the action research was conducted had an average freshman graduation rate in 2005-2006 of over 80%, yet it had seen a *decrease* of greater than 5 percentage points between the years of 2000-2001 to 2005-2006.

In the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for twelfth graders, reading and science rates between 1992 and 2005 decreased six points and three points respectively (USDE, 2008). There are no recorded mathematics scores in this report. “The number of General Educational Development (GED) credentials issued rose from 330,000 in 1977 to 487,000 in 2000. A record number of 648,000 GED credentials were issued in 2001” (USDE, 2008, p. 3). According to the NCES report of 2008, the status dropout rate includes persons in the 16-24-year-old age group who are not enrolled in school and who have not completed a high school program, regardless of when they left school (people who went on to receive a GED credential are not treated as dropouts).

Between 1987 and 2007, the status dropout rate declined from 12.6% to 8.7%. Although the status dropout rate declined for both blacks and Hispanics during this period, their rates (8.4% and 21.4% respectively) remained higher than the rate for Whites (5.3%) in 2007. (USDE, 2008, p. 3)

This has all occurred within a shift of the makeup of the population of students in public schools.

The percentage of public school students who were White decreased from 78% to 56%, and the percentage who were members of other races and ethnicities, increased from 32 % to 44 %. This increase largely reflects the consistent growth in the percentage of students who were Hispanic, which rose from 6% of students to 21% of students during this period. (USDE, 2009a, p. iv)

### **Transitional Programs in Ninth Grade**

The importance of a successful transition from middle school into high school cannot be overlooked, yet is lacking in the literature. Much information can be found to advise educators on the transition of elementary students to the middle school level, but research is not as abundant and rich for the middle to high school transition. Districts and schools are beginning to experiment with programs that assist ninth graders as they enter high school. “Although these programs are developing slowly, initial research suggests that those that involve students, parents and teachers in the transition process have the greatest effect” (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 180). The renewed high school focus on the ninth grade examines aspects of adolescent learning and social adjustment. In terms of learning, “for many students, entry into ninth grade is their first exposure to a completely departmentalized curriculum, extensive academic tracking, ordering of ability via class rankings, and recurrent reminders of graduation requirements” (Benner & Graham, 2009, p. 356). Added to these demands, during transition, socialization is paramount as students begin to exhibit lower self-esteem and fears about new social situations with older students. They worry about managing time and academic stress. They are often frustrated, anxious, and can cause negative and disruptive behaviors (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). At this point in students’ lives, they are developing their own identity, have greater autonomy from parents, and depend more on peer relations (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). “In fact, peer conformity has been found to peak at ninth grade. Cliques become

especially prominent and students engage in gossip, teasing and bullying to maintain social status” (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006, p. 16).

Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) discuss other student concerns as they enter high school. These vary from socialization skills to logistics of being in a new building. Students stress about being in the right group, making friends, getting along with older students, dealing with bullies, joining clubs and sports, liking their teachers, and dressing up or taking a shower in gym class. They also worry about finding their classes, having enough time to get to classes or to eat lunch, opening their lockers, knowing school and classroom rules and the consequences for breaking them. Students’ perceptions are that teachers think they are more mature and need less monitoring of schoolwork. They also think some teachers are unapproachable, too busy, or belittling. “All struggling ninth grade students in one study made negative comments about their teachers” (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006, p. 17).

“In order to reduce stress in this transition, ninth grade programs can help students acclimate to their surroundings” (McIntosh & White, 2006, p. 41). Meaningful transition programs are necessary to help the new student navigate a myriad of issues and problems. “Although less well-known to educators, resiliency research points to a number of features of positive developmental settings – such as high expectations, supportive relationships, community membership and opportunities for youth service and leadership” (Steinberg & Allen, 2002, p. 9).

We know that the high school transition is accompanied by less personal student-teacher relationships. However, if students are able to form a close relationship with a teacher early in the ninth grade, this might buffer some of the negative effects and bolster some of the positive effects of the transition. (Benner & Graham, 2009, p. 373)

This relationship building is a cornerstone to several high school reform models, including small learning communities and career academies. Relationship-building in these models takes the form of advisory or mentorship programs with the students (Legters, 1999, Stern, 2000) and are seen as critical components for ninth grade transition.

Other characteristics of effective transitional programs are their strong connections to the feeder middle schools. “Successful middle school to high school transition programs attempt to address the information gap between schools’ middle school experience and their expectations of what the high school experience will be like” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 41). “Schools can prepare students for the transitions by becoming aware of students’ needs and by taking a proactive role in addressing those needs” (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006, p. 15). Many times, middle and high school teams are set up to coordinate every student’s needs and articulate the best program for the incoming ninth grader. Spring and summer programs address further student and parent concerns *before* the student enters the high school. These articulation teams may be comprised of middle and high school teachers, counselors, and administrators. Issues to be addressed include a challenging curriculum in seventh and eighth grades, advising middle school students to be more responsible for their learning, and providing skills and strategies for middle school students to learn on their own (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). One area that high schools cannot ignore is the social concerns of new ninth grade students. High schools seem to be doing a better job at the academic and procedural concerns of incoming ninth graders.

However, social goals of students will not go away, and if the schools do not address these social needs, students will put energy into dealing with those issues. Ultimately, concerns about social goals will detract from the academic focus of students. (Cauley & Jovanovich, 200, p. 1)

The following tables by Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) provide transition activities for academic, procedural, and social challenges faced by freshmen students. Many of these academic strategies outlined in Table 2.1 need careful planning by the transition teams set up in both the middle and high schools. Some of these strategies may be suggested or required depending on the structures and other variables of the new high school. Table 2.2 provides suggestions for transition activities for *procedural challenges* faced by students new to the high school. Most high schools do attend to procedures, discipline consequences, scheduling, and other rules and regulations. Both academic and procedural activities are implemented to some degree in a majority of high schools.

Table 2.1

*Suggested Transition Activities for Academic Challenges Faced by Students*

| Issue/Concern  | Strategy/Intervention  |
|--|--|
| Students not understanding scope of work at next level | In the spring, provide information about the academic program and resources.<br>Invite students to shadow a high school student.   |
| Assisting weak students                                | Encourage students to attend summer programs.<br>Assign weakest students to strongest teachers.<br>Provide tutors or after school programs.<br>Reduce course load for struggling students. |

Table 2.2

*Suggested Transition Activities for Procedural Challenges Faced by Students*

| Issue/Concern   | Strategy/Intervention  |
|---|--|
| Introduce school procedures during the spring before entering | Invite students to tour the school. Provide school presentations. Send guidance counselors to middle schools. Give feedback to students on what is a “typical day” at the high school. |
| Support following new procedures                              | Distribute school handbook ahead of time to incoming students and their families. Hold a freshmen-only first day. Use upper classmen as student ambassadors.                           |

Table 2.3 has some important strategies to ease the all-important *social challenges* that incoming ninth graders are greatly concerned about, and that educators do not place a heavy emphasis on. By implementing several of these strategies with the help of the transition team, students will look forward to September in their new school and know what to expect in terms of social interactions.

Table 2.3

*Suggested Transition Activities for Social Challenges Faced by Students*

| Issue/Concern  | Strategy/Intervention   |
|--|---|
| Help students with social concerns <i>before</i> entry | Sponsor big sister/brother programs. Create sub-committees of learning. Provide counseling for at-risk students. Develop freshmen-only activities. Provide teacher-student mentors. Organize freshmen awareness groups. |



Additional tables provided by Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) describe activities for parents of incoming ninth graders, and for counselors, teachers and administrators.

Other transitional middle to high school grade programs structure ninth grade academies, or wings, which become professional learning communities in themselves. McIntosh and White (2006) discuss a freshman wing with core classes, its own vice-principal, counselor, common prep period for the teachers, freshman lockers, special lunchtime activities, student council representatives, annual freshman retreat for teachers, and transitional programs in spring and summer including a three-hour orientation in August. Other programs in high schools hire an additional intervention specialist or licensed social worker along with an aide to work with at-risk students before they enter grade nine. Very creative ways to meet student needs are provided in different transitional programs throughout the country. “Transition is not a one-size fits all mentality. Rather it demands a variety of adaptable approaches for the greatest positive effect” (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 34). In contrast, programs that target only a single aspect of the transition (students, parents, staff) showed no independent effect on these outcomes” (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 181). It is up to the high schools to collaborate with the feeder middle schools regarding their incoming freshman students.

### **Career Academies**

The arts academy in this action research study was a whole-school career academy. In 2008-2009, the school district decided to split up a 5,400 populated comprehensive high school into six separate high schools, each with its own career theme or program. Middle school students in grade eight applied to the academy of their choice, and in the arts academy they additionally auditioned for acceptance into the academy. It

was felt that students would benefit from choosing their career focus and thus be better motivated to succeed in their high school.

As part of an emerging school-to-career movement, career academies provide increased relevancy in learning and student engagement at the high school level (Legters, 1999). They are touted as effective reform models for large comprehensive high schools. Career academies differ from traditional high schools in their use of college preparatory curricula with career-related themes (Stern, Dayton, Raby, Lenz et al. 2000a). Stern (2000) describes this duality as an integrated, or interdisciplinary curricula. All of these descriptions are a step away from the old, traditional, vocational education programs that did little to prepare students for post-secondary education. “According to federal law and historical custom, vocational education traditionally has been directed toward occupations not requiring a bachelor’s or advanced degree” (Stern, 2000a, p. 6). Due to shifts in the labor market requiring many jobs to have post-secondary education, the attraction to traditional, vocational education has been reduced. High schools now need to provide students with rigorous learning, and connections to work and post-secondary majors. The connections students make in an arts academy include performances, showcases, internships, community programs, professional auditions, exposure to other artistic venues, master classes, assembling professional portfolios, guest speakers, college opportunities devoted to their craft or arts, and part-time jobs in their field and competitions. “Career academies present a potentially powerful manifestation of school-to-work effort because they combine the relevance of a career focus with the personalized environment of a self-contained small learning community” (Legters, 1999, p. 10). Students find meaning in the study of core subjects through their chosen careers and in

the strong partnerships fostered with community agencies and employers (Smith, 2008). The main purpose of this secondary reform is to motivate students to stay in school and attend to their studies (Stern, 2000).

There were an estimated 2,500 career academies in high schools across the country in 2000 (Stern, 2000). They began 40 years ago with 30 students enrolled in the Philadelphia Electrical Academy at Edison High School, sponsored in collaboration with the Philadelphia Electric Company. California followed in 1981, with both a Computer Academy and an Electronics Academy. This state began funding these types of academies in 1985. Illinois, Florida, and Hawaii also provided funds for career academies in the 1990s. New York City implemented Academies of Finance with the American Express Company in the 1980s. The American Express Company later joined other companies and established the National American Foundation (NAF) which today provides curriculum and technical support to career academies as well as professional development for teachers and staff (Stern, 2000).

Career academies are almost always schools within schools where incoming high school students apply to their academy of interest (Stern, 2000). Yet there are also many variations to the configuration of these academies, the size in population, and the selection criteria. In the arts academy audition, a panel of arts teachers scored students on a rubric and recommended acceptance or non-acceptance. The whole school was divided into artistic strands, and accepted students took required courses and electives in their chosen area of interest. The strands in the arts academy included: instrumental music, vocal music, drama, visual arts, dance, creative writing, TV production, and graphic arts. Even though students followed the scope and sequence of their strands, there was a

possibility for students to take arts courses of other strands if they had room in their schedules. This model offered further challenges in scheduling and teacher expertise. Other districts designed the ninth grade as a stand-alone academy, offering services and resources for a smooth transition into high school. The students then integrated into career academies beginning in grade ten. At the arts academy of this study, ninth graders did not take an arts class in the 2009-2010 school year, despite the fact that they had auditioned and had expressed an interest in an artistic strand. Their only elective was the Success Seminar transitional class. This gap of an arts class for accepted ninth grade students was a focus for restructuring the transitional program the following school year.

Additional strategies for at-risk students were described by Steinberg & Allen (2002). They discuss the five Cs that provide “youth development approaches with contextual and authentic learning” ( p. 19). They are caring relationships, cognitive challenges, a culture of support, community, and connections to high-quality postsecondary learning and career opportunities (Steinberg & Allen, 2002). The integration of career curricula with high academic standards, while providing teachers with professional development, is a promising approach (Kemple & Snipes, 2000). Career academies “coordinate curriculum and activities around a single industry that needs workers in the local labor market. Core academic subjects are integrated with vocational or technical laboratory courses and emphasize the relationship between academics and the workplace” (Maxwell, 2001, p. 623). Academies select their career themes to “meet the labor market needs, provide students with certification that lead to higher paying jobs and meet the interest of students” (OPPAGA, 2007, p. 1). Some common careers that have emerged in academies include: hospitality, finance, health

care, technology, leadership, law, vocational and technical studies, agriculture, visual and performing arts, and international studies. These are selected on the basis of student and staff surveys, teacher certifications, district resources, parent and local business interests, job trends, career research, and available community partners. This was not the process in the high school studied. At the arts academy, the arts theme evolved through a centralized district decision. Nevertheless, school leaders decided to integrate tiers of collaboration as it began its second year as an arts academy in September of 2010.

### **Effectiveness of Career Academies**

The literature reviewed focused on the effectiveness of a career academy as a school reform model, especially for disadvantaged, at-risk urban high school students.

Castellano, Springfield, and Stone (2002b) offer this definition of students at-risk:

We define disadvantaged students as those living in poverty (indexed by participation in the federal free and reduced-price lunch program), and those who are members of groups that have been historically discriminated in U.S. society [African-Americans, Hispanics, and immigrant groups for whom English is not their native language] (p. 6).

Olson (1994) defines at-risk youth with the fulfillment of three of the following four categories: a past record of irregular attendance, underachievement, low motivation, and poverty. Research shows that these students benefit from the career focused academy.

“Findings suggest that the academy improves educational outcomes among high school students at high risk of dropping out by reducing dropout rates, improving attendance, increasing academic course-taking, and increasing the likelihood of having enough credits to graduate on time” (Maxwell, 2001, p. 21).

Other authors note the culture of alienation that permeates high schools. Sizer describes urban students’ many concerns about their schools. They complain of boring

classes, lack of caring adults, and too few engaging activities (as cited in Legters, 1999). “High schools have been widely criticized for leaving too many students woefully unprepared for increasingly technological workplaces that are demanding not only a high school diploma, but high level skills and post-secondary training as well” (Legters, 1999, p. 1). Imel (2000) states that urban public schools are often heavily criticized for producing students who cannot meet the knowledge and skill requirements of the labor market. Other concerns in large comprehensive high schools have been class size, curriculum tracking, increased violence, departmentalization, teacher-centered instruction, rigid schedules, and not enough transitional programs from middle schools to high schools. Added to the list is a “growing number of minority immigrant students who do not value education or speak English, a breakdown of social institutions, changing nature of the labor market that requires job training beyond high school, and low academic and career expectations” (Dayton, Raby, Stern, & Weisberg, 1992, p. 540). “Surveys consistently show that high school students do not meet employers’ standards in a variety of academic areas as well as in employability skills such as attendance, teamwork, collaboration, and work habits” (Bangser, 2008, p. 4). “In urban districts,” state Steinberg et al., “educational reformers are increasingly looking to school-to-career approaches not just as a pedagogical approach but as a lever for change across the school” (as cited in Imel, 2000, p. 3).

All of these concerns have spurred the secondary school reform movement.

Reports such as *Breaking Ranks* (Miller, 2001) by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), clearly describe recommendations that must be present in high schools for sustained change and consistent, high-level achievement. Recommended

attributes such as coherency (a tie to the outside world through career choices and interrelated curricula) and personalization (student advocacy, mentorship, and relationships) are found in career academies.

“Evidence suggests that academies may be raising, rather than lowering, the educational aspirations of many students” (Olson, 1994). More students graduate, go on to two or four year colleges, and improve their attendance as opposed to non-academy students. Maxwell (2001) found that academies helped low-income students finish not only high school, but also college. Student connections to their teachers in small learning communities, less alienation, and increased engagement provide avenues for success. Researchers reiterate the positive effects of academies on student performance, dropout prevention and college attendance (Stern et al. in Legters, 1999). The study of the career academy approach in high schools, showed that “students earned, on average, 11 percent more over an eight-year follow-up than individuals in a control group who did not attend academies” (Kemple (2008) as cited in Quint, 2008, p.35). Olson (1994) further describes positive results of 10 school sites in a California study that matched academy students with a comparison group. It found that academy students had better attendance, failed fewer courses, earned more credits, got better grades, and were more likely to graduate than their peers. The estimated net benefit to taxpayers, from dropout prevention alone totaled \$1.75 million. Warren (1998) confirms that academies are especially good for attendance, credits earned, and grade point average scores. Highlights of several studies on academic performance and high school completion are offered by Stern (2000a). These results point to two of the new three Rs; relationships, and relevancy, which are both cornerstones of career academies. These ideas of support, motivation, and career

relevancy are not new in educational reform. Hoachlander (1999) reminds us what John Dewey pronounced in 1916 in *Democracy and Education*: “education through occupations...combines within itself more of the factors conducive to learning than any other method ” (1999, p. 2). “What makes academies exciting is that they are at the crossroads between the school-restructuring and school-to-work movements” (Ivry as cited in Olson, 1994, p. 2). As discussed in Stern et al (2000a), many studies have been completed that showed the effectiveness of high school career academies. Several studies are highlighted in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4

*Academy Performance and High School Completion Data*

| Author(s) – Dates       | Main Findings  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Reller – 1984-1985      | Academy students earned more course credits than comparison group  |
| Synder, McMullan – 1987 | Graduation rate for 1981 sophomores in three business academies was 77%, compared to citywide average of 67% for freshmen.                                       |
| Hayward, Talmade – 1995 | Academies showed generally better results than other programs in high schools.   |
| Kemple, Snipes – 2000   | Among students at highest risk of school failure, academy students were more likely to participate in extracurricular activities, and less likely to be arrested |



Career academies also provide solace to adolescents in a smaller educational environment instead of in a complicated bureaucratic structure of responsibilities, rules, and regulations. Mentors and advisory programs in career-themed small learning communities help students cope with high school demands and challenges. Coffee and Pestridge (2001) also report how career academies provide at-risk youth with an alternative to joining gangs, and offers these youth an opportunity to become assets to their communities through mentorship and other activities.

There is a twist to the success of career academies. Rigor is the third part of the three Rs and it is not always evidenced in these academies. According to Kemple and Snipes (2000), career academies did not improve student standardized test scores, and concluded that these scores are not the best measures for the type of learning taking place in career academies. Dayton et al. (2007) confirms that it may take years for these changes to affect state test scores. Maxwell (2001) presses this point when she states that “career academies did not improve standardized math and reading achievement test scores” (p. 624). Smith (2002) questions if performance standards can be used to judge a school. He asks if the themed focus of an academy detracts from test performance or from the motivation to take tests. Another concern is if academy students are as well prepared as students in traditional school settings to take these tests. Yet with the federal *No Child Left Behind* law, and high stakes testing on everyone’s mind, a new approach that focuses on how to merge student motivation and interests, future career paths, rigorous interdisciplinary curricula, and state tests, is urgently needed. The area of weakness seems to be the departmentalized, isolated, archaic curricula that is still part of the typical high school. “High schools can no longer be depersonalized institutions that

rely on long standing traditions of departmentalized instruction delivered in tidy 50-minute segments” (Trybus, 1997, p. 1). Purposefully aligning academic standards and career industry standards (integrated curriculum) with the knowledge and skills tested on state assessments, is a step in the right direction. “Academies should find ways to ensure that their students succeed in the standardized testing environment. They need to find innovative methods that are consistent with their distinctive educational approach to adjust to tests” (Smith, 2002, p. 21). Part of this action research study in the ninth grade transitional program called Success Seminar was to review and analyze the curriculum collaboratively and suggest how to integrate the arts and important academic skills along with organizational, study, and social-emotional skills in the subsequent *Seminarts* freshmen program.

### **Small Learning Communities**

Small learning communities (SLCs) in high schools were inspired by the “widely publicized success of Central Park East High School in New York City and highly influenced by Sizer’s Coalition for Essential Schools” (Legters, 1999, p. 7). These programs began to appear in large city high schools in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Baltimore, as well as in many parts of California.

Small learning communities offer similar philosophies to Sizer’s model and are especially effective for low socio-economic (SES) communities. Student advocacy and time to meet with students are built into these structures. Relationships and connections insure that students keep on track and have outlets for problems and concerns. Evidence of equity and positive teacher and parent attitudes are inherent in these smaller learning

communities. Building strong ninth grade transitional programs ensure systems are in place that promote positive relationships and ongoing communication.

Thus far, research regarding career academies has predominately focused on small learning communities (SLCs) and academies within a large high school (Allen & Steinberg, 2001, Castellano et al., 2002b, Coffee & Pestrige, 2001, Cotton, 2001, Imel, 2000, Legters, 1999, Maxwell, 2001, McIntosh & White, 2006, Steinberg & Allen, 2002). These small communities nurture students in a variety of experiences towards graduation and post-secondary education. Stern (2000a) further describes small learning communities and career academies in the following way:

First, academies are small learning communities. An academy comprises a cluster of students who have some teachers for at least two years, and who share several classes each year. A group of academic and vocational disciplines are scheduled to have only or mostly academy students in their classes, meet with each other on a regular basis, and share in decision-making related to administrative policies, curriculum content, and instruction. One of these faculty members assumes lead responsibility for administrative tasks and usually serves as a liaison to the school principal and other building administrators, school district officials and employment partners. ( p.4)

The important distinction is that career academies are autonomous and address their staff and students' needs collaboratively within themselves and not by top-down hierarchy.

This was also true of professional learning communities at this arts academy. By having common time to plan, learn together, and meet with students within the career strand of their choosing, educators began personalizing the high school experience.

Cotton (2001) sums up and describes a variety of school types and terminology for small learning communities. They include: autonomous small school, focus school, alternative school, freestanding school, school-within-a-building, house plan, career academy, pathway, pod or cluster, mini-school, multiplex, charter school, or magnet

school. They all have different degrees of autonomy and their range of work differs. Raywid acknowledges that “no school’s autonomy is total...but unless subunits are granted some degree of freedom to determine how to manage themselves, they will find it almost impossible to establish a distinct identity” (as cited in Cotton, 2001, p. 21).

According to Raywid, another element of success for small learning communities is “separateness that is both literal and metaphoric. There must be some psychic distinctiveness that sets this community apart” (as cited in Cotton, 2001, p.23). Students and staff feel special, a part of a group, with their own values, goals, and positive attributes. This has been seen in the arts academy’s distinct career strands of this action research study.

### **Conclusion**

Much research has been developed describing the positive effects of small learning communities in large comprehensive high schools. Many districts are attaching career themes to these small learning communities to enhance connections to the world of work and higher education. Dayton, Clark, Tidyman, and Hanna (2007) report a natural affinity between career academies and small learning communities. How transitional ninth grade programs simulate aspects of a small learning community around career strands was an added focus of this action research project.

## Chapter III

### Methodology

Today, as adolescents enter high school, their chances of graduating on time in four years are 73.4% (USDE, 2008). This is due, in large part, to problems associated with beginning high school. Students experience a myriad of changes, emotions, conflicting messages, and new structures and responsibilities that impact on how they feel about their education and how they achieve. The effective transition between eighth and ninth grade is pivotal in helping the young adolescent maneuver all the new experiences and feelings thrust upon them.

This action research study attempts to improve practice (Hinchey, 2008) by restructuring an existing ninth grade seminar class, and developing an effective transitional program in an urban high school arts academy. The purpose of the research is to determine the successes and failures of this class, and incorporate components of a successful transition program that anchor ninth graders in their academic and artistic classes. Freshman students' social and emotional needs are also examined in establishing a quality transition program.

Another equally important purpose of this study is to provide the school district with guidelines that support students before they enter their high school academy and during their first year. High schools and middle schools need to work collaboratively to design transition programs that meet the needs of the student and set realistic expectations (Smith et al., 2008 ). As they enter high school, students are undergoing social and emotional development with a strong reliance on peer relationships. If these

issues are not attended to “cliques become especially prominent and students engage in gossip, teasing, and bullying to maintain social status” (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006, p. 16). Transition teams need to address both academic *and* social aspects of the new ninth grader for a successful high school beginning.

Following a heuristic strategy of learning or problem-solving (Hinchey, 2008), the initial inquiry of this study emphasized student achievement in a high school career academy. The study progressed to the egregious problems facing freshman students in this new academy, and their struggles to fit in socially, academically, and artistically in a large urban high school. Therefore, the following research questions inform the reader on the focus of this action research study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The research questions are:

- 1) How did a whole school career academy approach support students academically and developmentally as they entered high school and during their freshman year?
- 2) How did staff collaboration provide for an effective freshman arts transitional program?
- 3) How did my leadership style impact a high school arts academy with structure, programs, and resources that positively affected ninth grade student outcomes and achievement.
- 4) What impact did a restructured transitional program have for the freshmen students in the arts academy?

## Research Design

I followed an interpretive, constructivist approach as the action research model (Hinchey, 2008). The goal of this study was to make sense of the social interactions and affective qualities in schools that correlated to student achievement as students began their high school experience. This implied that I reported based on my “perceptions of the world – not some independent reality”(Hinchey, 2008, p. 22). Knowledge is the meaning assigned to what is observed and all knowledge is socially constructed (Hinchey, 2008). I sought knowledge and understanding of what was observed and collected.

“Interpretivists believe that understanding the multiple perspectives of stakeholders involved in a situation is a prerequisite to designing strategies for improvement” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 29). These strategies constituted the findings of this study and how they affect student achievement in this academy and for the school district.

As part of this action research in an interpretivist epistemology, I took field notes of various types, analyzed observation data, gathered artifacts (mainly achievement documents), used surveys or questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews.

“Triangulation of data indicates collecting at least three different types of data relevant to the same question in order to increase the likelihood that findings are not idiosyncratic or unreliable” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 75). I attempted to triangulate the data by incorporating “multiple kinds of sources” (Glesne, 2006, p. 36).

### Data Collection Strategies

This research study primarily compiled qualitative data with an aspect of quantitative research. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), qualitative research has five distinct features. First, qualitative research is naturalistic and has actual settings as the direct source of data with the researcher as the key instrument. This correlates to the

interpretivist research model where the researcher makes meaning of his/her surroundings through observations. In this interpretation, qualitative research is also descriptive. Descriptive data in this research study included interview transcripts, observations, drawings, field notes, personal notes, memos, emails, and focus group data. Photographs were also used. These descriptions were written in narrative form and nothing became trivial in these descriptions. The third feature of qualitative data is that it is more “concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 6). With descriptive data gathering, qualitative researchers derive meaning to what people do in schools. This attention to interpretation is what informed the findings. “Qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 6). They do not prove or disprove a hypothesis, but work from the bottom up with many disparate pieces of data. The researcher derived a *grounded theory* by inductively using qualitative data.

The fifth feature is *meaning*. The perceptions of the participants and the meaning the researcher derived from all the data was a key aspect in the qualitative research of this study. Interviews, observations, focus groups, student achievement documents, and photographs were included in this study. Other triangulated data used were professional development agendas, various school committee documents, professional learning community meeting notes, and curriculum of the transitional program. The emergence of themes or patterns within these data dictated the coding process. It followed the framework as described by Saldaña (2009), with analytic memo writing, or critical journal entries, to reflect on the patterns, sub-categories, and themes that evolved.



Quantitative data took the form of descriptive statistics (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I compiled and analyzed official school records regarding demographics, retention and failing figures, report card grades, and district testing scores. Survey instruments were administered to a non-random sampling of ninth grade students and faculty that taught the ninth grade transition class. These quantitative data were compiled and coded to inform trends or themes that constituted the descriptive statistics of the research. I was interested in how these data supported, or contradicted, subjects' understandings or perceptions of their experience in the transitional program. (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

### **Change Theory Framework**

“American schools exist in a destabilizing flux” (Evans, 1996, p. 12). Presently, we are witnessing business interests encroaching in schools and districts, an expansion of diversity in the student population, and politics and power both gunning for control (Anderson, 2010; Evans, 1996; McLaren, 2007; Tyack, 1974). Within this ever-changing environment, the federal government has a larger role in public education (Anderson, 2010; McLaren, 2007) and is causing shifts in school reform, requirements, and accountability. These prescriptive remedies to combat the tide of underachievement make school environments “volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous” (Murphy as cited in Duffy, 2006, p. 16). “We need a new worldview to navigate this chaotic time” (Wheatley, p. 2006, p. x).

Within this new paradigm and throughout this doctoral program, I have been struck by the web of theories behind organizational relationships in a variety of scholarly readings and class discussions. I have reflected and continue to focus on the renewed importance of relationships, because I value them in my professional world. I cannot

envision change efforts in schools without the priority of strong, trusting school relationships. This priority is congruent with my leadership theories-in-use (feminist, social justice, servant) and my espoused leadership style (transformational). Because of this mindful reflection, I have recognized that the Relational Model of Leadership (RML) perfectly fits with my work in schools and how I synergistically approach school change endeavors.

The Relational Leadership Model is “not a theory, but an aspirational model in developing and supporting a healthy, ethical, and effective group” (Komives et al., 2007, p. 75). Within its framework, there are five primary components: purpose, inclusion, empowerment, ethics, and process. The model is purposeful because it supports collaboration to facilitate positive change. It is also inclusive by enabling the relational leader to build capacity among the organization’s stakeholders. Fullan (2007) agrees when he states, “a core strategy [for change], then, must be to improve relationships. All successful change initiatives develop collaboration where there was none before” (p. 52). The relational leader accepts all views, and allows for a shared decision-making process of values, beliefs, and vision that establishes a “dynamic connectedness” (Jantsch as cited in Wheatley, 2006, p. 25) within the group.

This connectedness allows the relational leader to empower stakeholders with a sense of ownership, buy-in, and involvement. The leader facilitates opportunities that offer collaboration, open communication from disparate views, and trust. This is relationship-building that reformulates stakeholders’ worldviews. Second-order change can take hold by “altering assumptions, goals, structures, roles and norms” (Evans, 1996, p. 5). This empowerment is accomplished through the lens of ethical and moral

leadership. Relational leaders walk the talk and set example to the group within their agreed-upon organizational values and beliefs.

All the components of the Relational Leadership Model together “create[s] energy, synergy and momentum” (Komives et al., 2007, p.103) in change initiatives. The work essential to the Relational Leadership Model includes: reflection, feedback, collaboration, civil confrontation, community building, and meaning-making (Komives et al., 2007). These indicators reminded me of the work we have done individually and in groups in this doctoral program that was transferrable into the processes in schools.

### **Relational Leadership Model and Change**

The Relational Model of Leadership is well correlated to Kotter’s (1996) eight-step change process. There is a sense of urgency established to change problems through articulation and open-communication. A guiding coalition is established to formulate a shared vision and values through collaboration and empowerment processes. Short-term wins provide impetus and further give the stakeholders a sense of pride, accomplishment, and ownership. Constant evaluations take place, data continue to be collected, and all views are accepted as the change initiative takes hold. This is a fluid endeavor and a new organizational learning paradigm towards success is set in motion. These steps towards second-order change are all couched in the structure and purpose of positive relationships in schools and districts. Acceptance, inclusion, giving voice to all groups, empathy, dignity, respect, and emotional intelligence all contrive to enable change to occur in the organization.

## **RML and the Action Research Project**

Since my leadership style encompasses transparent collaboration, listening to student voices, and a focus on relationships, I began the study by asking high school students their perceptions and feelings towards the new arts academy. I realized that “no innovation can succeed unless it attends to the realities of people and place (Evans, 1996, p. 91). The findings and data analysis of this student survey gave direction to subsequent data collection which included teacher and student focus groups, a school vision steering committee, a school-wide arts committee, classroom field observations of the freshman transitional seminar class, and teacher surveys and interviews. Achievement documents of the freshman students were gathered as well. All data collection was accomplished with informed consent, and respect for the privacy and rights of the participants. Active listening skills and a sense of checking of biases provided an ethical environment. The Success Seminar curriculum was also reviewed and included in the data. All of these practices were consistent with the way I work as an educational leader and administrator. I am now able to place a name to my modus operandi; the Relational Leadership Model, which neatly encompasses all my leadership styles and my espoused framework for change.

### **Setting**

The arts high school academy is located in a large urban city in the mid Atlantic part of the United States. The city’s population totaled 124,969 with a 3.7% growth rate in the 2010 Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Based on data from this census, the city had the third largest Latino share in the total population of the city in state figures. The ethnic composition of the study district is illustrated in Figure 1.

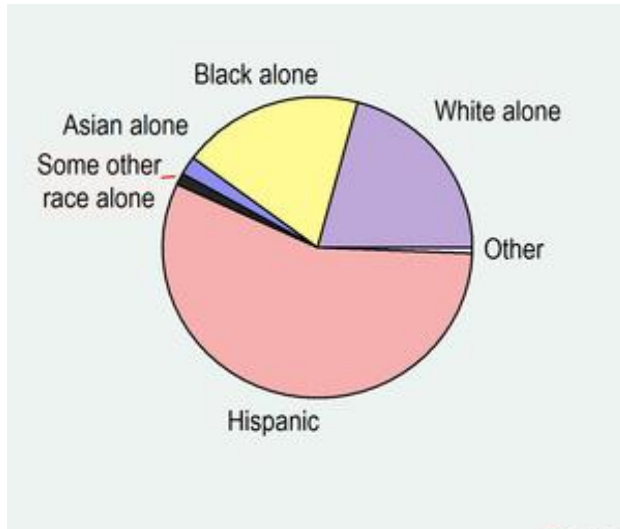


Figure 1 Ethnic and racial composition of study district

Table 3.1 describes the academy's statistics for the two major years of this study (Study District Power School Website, 2011).

Table 3.1  
*Arts Academy Statistics*

|                                 | 2009-2010 | 2010-2011 |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Total student population        | 926       | 848       |
| Total freshmen class population | 386       | 313       |
| Total school attendance rate    | 89.2%     | n/a       |
| Total school dropout rate       | 3.3%      | n/a       |
| Total graduation rate           | 96.3%     | n/a       |

At the beginning of the study, there were 14 sections of a required Success Seminar transitional class for all ninth grade students. The curriculum was written in the summer of 2009 by a group of district educators for several high school academies. The

curriculum was not tailored to each academy's program, vision, or theme. This was a problem from the beginning because "...without a vision to guide decision-making, each and every choice employees face can dissolve into an interminable debate" (Kotter, 1996, p. 8). The main focus of the Success Seminar curriculum for all academies was to anchor ninth grade students in organizational, study, and social skills that would equip students' learning throughout their high school experience. An arts addendum was hastily compiled to personalize the Success Seminar curriculum to the arts academy. Freshman students at the arts academy were placed in any of the 14 Success Seminar course sections based on the period in their schedule where it fit. Because of this, visual arts students were mixed in with drama, music, creative writing, TV production, and dance students. There was little opportunity to modify the curriculum assignments to integrate all of these students' artistic interests. Selection of teachers for this course was based solely on availability in the teacher's schedule and included teachers of varying subject disciplines.

Freshman students who had an interest, and had auditioned and applied to the arts academy, did not have the opportunity to experience a class in their selected arts strand until their sophomore year. This was due to the block schedule for language arts and mathematics, the other core subjects, a physical education, and world language class, and the required Success Seminar class. Because of this schedule, there was nothing different for a freshman attending the arts academy than a freshman attending the other academies in the district. The arts academy *did not* offer accepted students any stimulating arts classes in their freshman year. This plan not only stifled the freshman accepted students and hindered a successful transition into high school, but also discouraged incoming ninth graders from applying to the academy.

In the following school year, 2010-2011, freshmen students did receive an arts class with seminar skills in a blocked program called *Seminarts*. This schedule change by school administration was directly attributed to opinions and suggestions of the students and faculty.

### **Participants**

Most of the students in the study were freshmen of the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years. The exception were 30 students from the tenth and eleventh grade in the first perception survey conducted in the spring of 2009, and several upperclassmen who were student council members in the Vision Committee described in Cycle II. A total of 102 arts academy students participated in two student surveys, two focus groups, and in the vision committee throughout the cycles. The selected students in both surveys were a non-random sample of convenience. Students did not identify their name on any document included in the study to protect their anonymity. These student participants represented the different strands in the high school which included visual arts, music, theater, graphic arts, dance, creative writing, and TV studio production. Students were also observed in their freshman seminar classes or art classes. Additionally, achievement data were gathered for freshmen students in the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years.

Teachers of both the Success Seminar and *Seminarts* class participated in this action research study. Data collected from the staff included surveys, interviews, classroom visits, an arts committee, a vision committee, and focus groups. These activities evolved naturally from the cycle findings. One arts academy vice-principal (not the researcher) was involved formally in a focus group and in implementing the *Seminarts* blocked program in the 2010-2011 schedule based on recommendations from

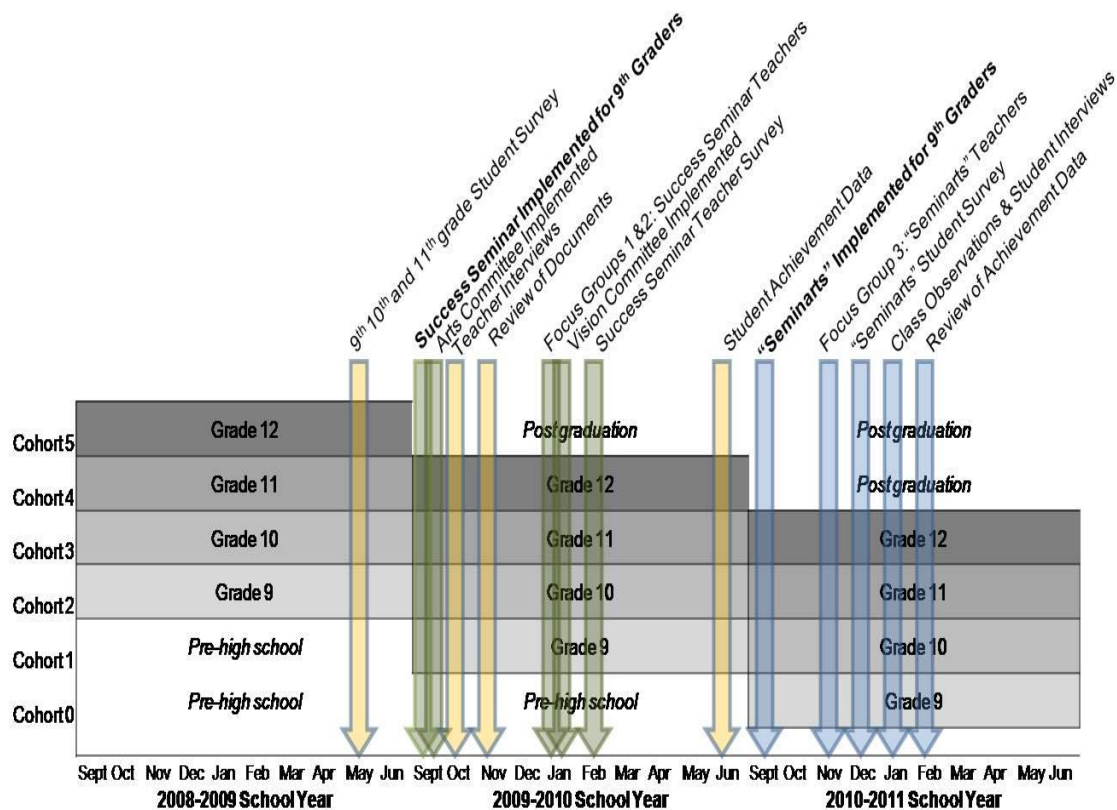
this study. The total number of teachers involved in the various cycle activities was 43. All teacher respondents received and signed an informed consent document, which remains on file in the researcher's home. Participants' names have been altered in the study to protect their identities.

### **Action Research Project Overview**

Students in high school academies in the district were allowed to choose their high school career path. Because the main thrust of this academy division was to increase scores on state tests, and because of the alarming statistics of freshman achievement in high school, I designed an action research project that focused on the ninth grade transitional program for arts academy freshman. This study also explored the twin pillars of high school reform: structural changes and instructional improvement (Quint, 2006). Therefore, a careful analysis of the transitional program curriculum, instructional practices, student and teacher voices and opinions, and collaborative team efforts were explored as variables affecting student achievement.

The study evolved into three distinct cycles. The first cycle explored a beginning perception from student and staff regarding their new arts school. Data included were a student survey, teacher interviews, class observations, and analysis of achievement documents. The second cycle examined teachers' work in the 2009-2010 transitional program called Success Seminar. Data retrieved were a survey, focus groups, and committee work. The final cycle examined the newly established *Seminarts* program through student and teacher focus groups, freshman surveys, classroom observations, and an analysis of student achievement. The following figure illustrates the different research activities of each cycle.





**Yellow arrows**      Cycle I  
**Green arrows**        Cycle II  
**Blue arrows**         Cycle III

Figure 2 Cycle Research Activities

### Action Research Cycle I

#### Purpose

The first cycle in this action research study began by attempting to identify student support systems needed upon entering the arts academy. As stated by Hinchey (2008) “action research is a process of systematic inquiry usually cyclical, conducted by those inside a community rather than outside experts; its goal is to identify action that

will generate improvement the researchers believe important” (p. 7). Because of my intention (with my colleagues) to establish an excellent arts academy for students, I began to gather data with a non-random sampling of students in a survey instrument (Appendix A). The survey served to answer this study’s first research question: How does a whole school career academy approach support students academically and developmentally as they enter high school and during their freshman year? These students participated in a survey to identify their expectations and perceptions of the new whole-school arts academy. I first acquired district approval and then used a survey instrument (Appendix A) and developed a codebook. Major conclusions derived from this 2009 student survey are included in the cycle chapter based on frequency distribution information, cross-tabulations and a 14-step approach (T.C. Monahan, personal communication, May 5, 2009).

### **Next Steps**

In Cycle I, as students articulated their needs and expectations to be successful in an arts academy, I began to conduct teacher interviews, observe freshman Success Seminar classrooms, and collect freshman achievement data and other documents. This constituted triangulation of data to provide validity in the research. These multiple data sources were also planned to determine whether or not a disconnect existed with the students’ perceptions of what they should experience in an arts academy and what teachers said and accomplished in their classrooms.

Findings of two teacher interviews, 10 classroom observations, report card grades, and ninth grade failures of students in the sample were classified and analyzed. The analysis of the Success Seminar Curriculum completed the data collected for this cycle.

## **Action Research Cycle II**

### **Purpose**

This cycle began to focus more on the teachers and their ideas for the arts academy and a successful freshman transitional program. The actions in this cycle attempted to answer research question two: How does collaboration provide for an effective freshman arts transitional program? Several school committees were formed by the researcher. A school vision steering committee with volunteer members and six meetings were held throughout the 2009-2010 school year. The goal of this committee was to begin the process of articulation on what the arts academy will look like in the future, and what the school community most values for the school.

A whole school arts committee was also formed to collaboratively plan and schedule the activities of the different arts strands. The entire committee decided on the monthly arts calendar and how to coordinate activities to avoid conflicts. Over 50 field trips were organized and many performances, after-school clubs, competitions, and master arts classes were developed.

Data collected for these committees included various documents, such as meeting agendas, sign-in sheets, arts calendars, values surveys, and my emails and field notes on the meetings. Additionally, in the 2009-2010 school year Success Seminar teacher surveys were distributed and several seminar focus groups were conducted and audio-taped. The data were analyzed for emerging patterns or themes.

### **Next Steps**

All of the above collected data for Cycle II were analyzed and coded. Emerging themes in group collaboration and teamwork, effective strategies for decision-making,

teacher classroom practices, and norms and group values that affect freshman achievement were described in Cycle II. These cycle findings required additional data that began the next cycle's data collection.

### **Action Research Cycle III**

#### **Purpose**

In Cycle III, a new teacher survey instrument, a new ninth grade student survey, and staff and student focus group meetings, and classroom observations were conducted for the 2010-2011 school year with permission of the new school principal. The new teacher survey and focus groups attempted to compare the freshman Success Seminar class and the newly implemented *Seminarts* freshman transitional program for 2010-2011. The student survey of the new ninth graders gathered data on their views of *Seminarts* and their seminar and arts components. Additional achievement documents of the first semester grades of the ninth graders were collected.

The arts academy is under new administration and budgets have been drastically cut in the entire district. Nevertheless, a new plan last June was to provide freshman students a blocked class for the arts in their strand (visual arts, music, theater, dance, creative writing, TV studio production or graphic arts). Part of the block would be to present the agreed-upon important skills and knowledge of the old Success Seminar curriculum, as well as an arts curriculum that students and staff clamored for. *Seminarts* teachers would also have common planning time, which facilitated professional learning communities to plan teaching lessons, projects, student resources, arts activities, and assessments. The block also facilitated professional learning time for the arts staff, and committee meeting work. Therefore, I conducted data collection of the *Seminarts*

program through surveys, focus groups, classroom field observations, committee work, and collection of student achievement data.

In this cycle, analysis of all data and coding with patterns and themes was completed by February of 2011. These included all actions that answered the three research questions developed for this action research project.

### **Data Analysis**

In this action research project, data and artifacts included quantitative data in the form of demographic information, report card grades, and various surveys. It also included qualitative data in the form of interviews, transcripts, observations, field notes, photos, focus groups, meeting documents, emails, and journal writings.

The data analysis began by focusing on the research questions, transcribing the data, and looking for themes that emerged. These bits of information, or themes, were categorized into folders for each of the cycle bins. These are “cooked data,” as opposed to raw data, because they are summarized or organized in some fashion (Hinchey, 2008, p.87). An index was maintained and patterns emerged to provide for coding.

As described earlier, I provided credibility by using a variety of data sources. I looked for negative case analysis, or data that contradict emerging findings (Hinchey, 2008). I asked other school administrators (peers) to member check by responding to the initial interpretation of the data. I also produced “rich, thick description to allow [others] to enter the research context” (Glesne, 2006, p. 38) and to provide for trustworthiness.

To ensure internal validity, I focused on the integrity and accuracy of the study. I reviewed for non-bias data collection and checked for subjectivity. This was done by self-questioning techniques and reflection. External validity was analyzed by answering if this

study's findings were generalizable to a larger population. Broader inferences were made to other career high school academies. Yet, it is felt that generalizability may not be derived from this research. This was due to the non-random sample used in this study, along with the specific parameters of this particular whole-school arts academy.

### **Leadership Study**

As I progressed in this action research study, I continuously reflected on my role as a leader and how I impacted teachers and students. I kept a reflection journal of this doctoral program to describe new learning regarding my leadership. This enabled me to restructure my leadership platform with a discussion on ethics and policy formation, as well as how I, as a leader, formulated a scholarly dissertation, worked with doctoral colleagues, and began the process of instituting a change effort in the arts academy high school.

### **Conclusion: Forces of Change**

Due to state and district budget restraints and the district reorganization of schools, I recently became a vice-principal again in a gifted high school academy in this district. I had been in a teaching position from September, 2010 until March 1, 2011, similar to all the other vice-principals in the district. In both capacities, I was able to gather research data at the arts academy, but I had no role as an educational leader in an administrative capacity of the study school. Even though I was given access and permission to continue to gather data for the school, I did not have administrative duties to help implement the change that we had worked for in this study. Additionally, the principal of this arts academy was no longer part of the study school. But there is hope for the arts academy. Recently, the other vice-principal was again appointed to her

original position in this academy. I will share the findings with this colleague so that she may implement the recommendations of this action research study.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Cycle I – The Beginning**

The purpose of the first cycle of this action research project was to gather data on the perceptions, feelings, and experiences of students and teachers in the new high school arts academy including the support systems needed for an effective freshman transitional program. The arts academy had been recently established and a new transitional program – called the Success Seminar class- was put in place for all freshmen. Data were collected through student surveys, teacher interviews, class observations of the freshmen transitional class, and an analysis of freshmen student achievement documents. This constituted using both qualitative data with a quantitative survey instrument in this cycle. As the researcher, I needed to quickly gather data from students in a survey. As the student survey data unfolded, it was observed that I needed to follow up with teacher perceptions in interviews, and later fieldwork in the Success Seminar classrooms. I wanted to see if there was a disconnect in what the students said they needed or perceived was an arts academy with what the teachers said and did in their classrooms. The variety of data collection in this cycle provided triangulation of data to enable validity. This was necessary to ensure “...the likelihood that findings are not idiosyncratic or unreliable” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 76).

#### **Student Survey**

The survey instrument used included a non-random sampling of students (Appendix A) in grades 9, 10, and 11. A non-random sample did not give equal chance of participants to be selected; the selection was hand-picked by me due to time constraints. It was a sample of convenience, because “respondents were conveniently available for



participation in a study” (Patten, 2001, p. 74). A questionnaire, or survey, was used due to the efficient way of gathering data quickly. It yielded responses that usually were easy to tabulate, and it was economical (Patten, 2001). The student survey served to answer this study’s first research question from the perspective of the student: *How does a whole school career academy approach support students academically and developmentally as they enter high school and during their freshman year?* I also needed to know the direction the study would take based on what the students and staff were saying. This helped formulate data content areas, that when aggregated, would help to answer the first research question. The survey instrument (Appendix A) is included.

With high school students as survey responders, broad topical questions of this initial inquiry included the following: *What are the feelings of students attending an arts academy? What are student expectations of the arts academy?* and *What do students need to be successful in an arts academy?* These particular research questions were relevant to the body of literature on career academies due to the lack of studies regarding whole-school career academy implementation (Castellanos et al., 2002b; Hoachlander, 1999; Imel, 2000; Stern, Daytom, & Raby, 2000). Student perceptions and expectations upon entering an arts career academy guide stakeholders in formulating school vision, curricula, programs, and activities that consider student voices as they begin their high school experience. When these students’ perceptions were compared with their teachers’ values, goals, and classroom activities, meaningful data were derived. As an educational leader, how I communicated these findings and information to the staff was attuned to my Relational Leadership Model for change. This model supports healthy, ethical, and effective groups that have a common purpose, are empowered, and work collaboratively

in facilitating positive change. Equally important is the need to bring forth the legitimate concerns of freshman students as they enter an arts academy. “No innovation can succeed unless it attends to the realities of people and place” (Evans, 1996, p. 91).

### **Survey Methodology**

A student research survey was developed using a 14-step approach (T.C. Monahan, personal communication, May 5, 2009). The process began by formulating three broad topical research questions that addressed areas regarding students transitioning into a high school career academy. From these questions, preliminary areas of inquiry for each question were ascertained for step two. These areas of inquiry formed the basis of the survey instrument.

Step three involved developing a sampling plan. It was decided, due to time constraints, to use a non-random sample of convenience derived from the population. The population in this research was defined as accepted students into the new arts academy for the 2009-2010 school year. The sample is non-random because of the exclusion of accepted students from other high schools, incoming eighth- graders, and incoming English language learners. Seniors were also excluded due to their pending graduation.

The sample was reflective of the school population due to specific characteristics of the responders. Present freshmen, sophomores, and juniors at the new arts academy were part of the sample. They were all *first-choice* accepted arts academy students. They included male and female students of varying ethnicities and racial groups. There were groups of student respondents with low grade point average (GPA) range (1.0-1.9), medium GPA range (2.0-2.9), and high GPA range (3.0-4.0). This aspect provided maximum variation to determine if GPA played a role in the responses. The three GPA

ranges were color-coded for the researcher to identify. Students were not aware of which color indicated which GPA range.

Step four provided for a data collection plan. The plan required me to request formal district permission to conduct the research. The district approved the survey research and waived the parental permission forms. They labeled the survey instrument as an action research project and concluded the survey questions did not invade the privacy of student respondents. The district additionally requested that the findings not be published in a format that divulges the identity of the district.

Due to time limitations and with permission of the district, students were asked to report to my office to complete the survey. This gave me easy access to respondents, established rapport, and provided any additional clarification (T.C. Monahan, personal communication, May 15, 2009). Students were all given the same directions as they began to answer the questionnaire. Because of the thoughtful answers to many of the open-ended questions, it was felt that freedom of expression was not thwarted. Data collected included a total of 42 student surveys.

Step five focused on the construction of the data collection instrument. To answer the areas of inquiry, a total of 15 questions were developed for the survey instrument (Appendix A). Many questionnaire items asked students to select *all that applies* to derive a complete picture of student feelings and perceptions. There were no ranked questions, or Likert-type items (Patten, 2001) included in this survey instrument. Several demographic questions were included, such as gender and present school grade. GPA range was determined ahead of time by using the district data collection system. All student surveys were numbered.

In step six, the survey instrument was pretested with six respondents. These students were not used in the final research study. Most surveys were answered in approximately 15 minutes, which allowed me to plan the time needed to administer the surveys. Step seven called for a revision of the instrument. Findings from the pretest included a need to clarify what the term *audition* meant, a need to modify the list of what was meant by the arts on the first page of the instrument, and a changed final direction to return the completed survey to my office, in case the student walked out with the survey. All of these changes were incorporated into the final survey instrument. There was no evidence of bias in the questions in the pretest administration.

Step eight required a letter of transmittal if the survey was to be administered via mail or email. This letter was not part of this methodology. As described in step four, the survey instrument was given in person to the respondents. There were no data collectors in this research study.

In step nine, a preliminary analysis plan clarified how the data would be analyzed. Because of the non-random sample in this study, a descriptive statistical analysis was used. “Descriptive analysis refers to the location of the distribution or measures of central tendency” (T.C. Monahan, personal communication, May 15, 2009). Qualitative data, in the form of open-ended answers in the items, described if findings presented meaningful information. Frequency of responses, or distributions, were presented for items in a narrative form. Some significant data were found with cross-tabulation tables and are provided in the discussion portion of this Cycle I chapter.

Step 10 called for implementation of the data analysis plan, and step 11 advised using follow-up procedures to increase the number of respondents. The analysis plan for

this report was implemented as described in step nine. Follow-up with respondents was not necessary due to a sufficient number of completed surveys.

The specific methods and techniques in compiling the data for step 12 included coding the item variables and tabulating the frequency of responses for each item. Item variables were also cross-tabbed with other variables to derive meaningful information. The final steps in this survey research process included separating usable and non-usable data for this report through the identification of significant findings.

Forty-two surveys were completed by students who applied to this high school arts academy. A total of 23 student respondents (54.8%) were female, and 18 (42.9%) were male. One student did not respond to the gender question. Of the 42 respondents, 14 (33.3%) had a high grade point average (GPA), 15 (35.7%) surveys indicated students of a medium-ranged GPA, and 13 (30.9%) students had a low GPA. The most represented grade in the completed surveys was grade 11 with 16 (38.1%) surveys submitted. Grades 9 and 10 each had 12 (28.6%) respondents. Retained ninth and tenth grade students each had one (2.4%) student respondent. The majority of students (88.1%) reported having less than three classes in their artistic field. About two-thirds of surveyed students (66.7%) reported having no private lessons in their artistic field. Most students (71.4%) auditioned for the arts academy.

### **Students' Feelings Towards the Arts**

When asked what art meant to them, most students (83.3%) felt that art was an expression of who they were. Among females overall, this answer was given 91.3%. Males overall (83.3%), and low GPA students (92.3%) also included that art is a way to relax. Nearly half of the students (45.2%) felt that their friends and parents were their

artistic role models. When this item was cross-tabbed with gender, GPA, and grade, only mid-ranged GPA students (46.7%), and 10<sup>th</sup> graders (69.2%), placed famous celebrities higher as artistic role models.

Over three-quarters of surveyed students (78.6%) believed that people experience art differently. The second most frequent answer for this item was that art changes how people think about their world. Females answered this 78.3%, mid-ranged GPA students placed this answer at 93.3, and 10<sup>th</sup> graders gave this answer 84.6%. Most students (59.5%) felt that art is natural to them. Many students also felt that art is their passion as answered by females (78.3%), low GPA students (69.2%), high GPA students (71.4%), and 9<sup>th</sup> graders (69.2%).

When students were asked to answer what is their artistic ability in an open-ended question, there were 38 responses; or answers from 90.4% of the total sample. Of these, 10 respondents (26.3%) answered that they had multiple (more than two) artistic abilities, and 8 respondents (21.0%) identified two different artistic abilities. Eight other respondents (21.0%) named drawing as their artistic ability. Six students (15.7%) answered music as their ability, whereas one student (2.6%) answered theater for this item. Three respondents (7.8%) identified dance for this answer, and 2 students (5.2%) gave philosophical answers such as “looking past the bad and finding the beauty in small things,” and “to send messages to people in any way I can.”

### **Student Expectations Towards the Arts Academy**

When asked why students chose to attend this arts academy, most respondents (73.8%) said that they wanted to learn from experienced teachers, and many (71.4%) reported wanting to pursue the arts as a future career.

In terms of school and class activities, many students (78.6%) believed that group work was the type of teaching activity most appropriate for an arts academy. Over 60% of students (64.3%) wanted to see more field trips, and more school plays or productions in the next year of the arts academy. Many students (78.6%) also believed that academic grades would improve in the arts academy. When asked what a student needed to be successful in the arts academy, the highest frequency responses were caring teachers at 71.4% and lessons that apply to the arts, also at 71.4%.

## **Discussion**

The following analysis was inferential and descriptive due to the non-random sample of this survey research. The answers to this survey instrument provided some insight for educators and other stakeholders of this arts academy. A high percentage of the students surveyed (71.4%) auditioned to the academy, suggesting an interest in their future school. Many students have multiple (26.3%) or dual artistic interests (21.0%), which may imply that students can thrive in various artistic classes. This can assist the arts academy for future scheduling purposes. Many surveyed students can articulate about the arts, as evidenced in the quality of the open-ended answers. This may also suggest a level of maturity and a sense of purpose for their future. It also pointed to cognitive abstract thinking, which is a strong component of high school curricula. There was also a general feeling that the arts are the most important aspect of the students' lives. Most students discussed this feeling as an expression of who they were, a natural part of their lives, and the arts as their passion.

Additionally, 41 respondents answered all the questions in the survey. One student did not identify his/her gender. This high number of completed surveys showed

students that were serious about the arts academy. Students were advised, in the questionnaire, that the results of this survey would be used to improve the school. Their responses indicated a perception that their answers were relevant and important.

Items that provided the most meaningful data included answers to the broad question of student expectations towards the arts academy. Most surveyed students (73.8%) applied to the arts academy to learn from experienced teachers. This answer is consistent across gender, GPA status, and grade. This was important information, because a large percentage of students (66.7%) did not have formal artistic training in the private sector, or had only one or two classes in high school (61.9%). Students have a great interest in the arts, but expressed a real need for experienced arts teachers to hone their craft.

Surveyed students identified group work (78.6%) and projects (69.0%) as activities that best fit an arts academy. This implied that arts students did not perceive traditional, lecture-type classes for their learning. They preferred hands-on, collaborative work. These were important data to inform teachers and administrators of the academy. More field trips, productions, school plays, and guest speakers were also listed as expectations for the academy by many students.

When students were asked what areas will improve in the arts academy next year, academic grades was shown as the highest percentage (78.6%). There was no difference in this perception for GPA status. Additionally, females placed a high expectation on improved academic grades. This focus on academic grades needed to be clearly articulated to teachers, other administrators, and staff. The expectation of over three quarters of the surveyed students was improvement in their grades next school year, and



the school should meet these expectations with a variety of programs including correlating the arts in all instruction.

Many students (69%) felt that attendance would improve in the arts academy. This answer is consistent to the literature on career academies (Legters, 1999; Maxwell, 2001). Motivation increases and students want to be in school when they see their career unfold in their classes. This fact, when proven accurate in the arts academy, will help to improve school culture and a sense of community in the school.

Low GPA students (green colored survey) did not have high expectations towards graduation and acceptance into college as evidenced in the cross-tabulation of data in Tables 4.1 and 4.2.

Table 4.1

*Perceptions of Graduation Based on GPA Ranges*

| Graduation rates | White Survey | Blue Survey | Green Survey | Total |
|------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------|
| No               | 6            | 6           | 9            | 21    |
| Yes              | 8            | 9           | 4            | 21    |
| Total            | 14           | 15          | 13           | 42    |

Table 4.2

*Perceptions of College Acceptance Based on GPA Ranges*

| Acceptances into college rates | White Survey | Blue Survey | Green Survey | Total |
|--------------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------|
| No                             | 2            | 3           | 5            | 10    |
| Yes                            | 12           | 12          | 8            | 32    |
| Total                          | 14           | 15          | 13           | 42    |

It is not certain if the green survey data in Tables 4.1 and 4.2 are due to low self-esteem and poor academic success for these students, or are based on other reasons. The focus needs to be placed on low GPA students to insure that they plan for graduation and college attendance. This can be done by exposing them to internships, community projects, motivating speakers, college field trips, and career and college training in the arts. Social-emotional on-site training should also be considered for these students to attain coping resources as they move forward in school. If not, “ultimately, concerns about social goals will detract from the academic focus of students” (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006, p .1).

### **Summary of Survey Results**

Surveyed students had high expectations and high hopes for the arts academy. This survey research pointed to motivated students who articulated their artistic ability, and were eager for student-centered classrooms with exciting projects showcasing their talent. They were asking for experienced, caring teachers who would help them grow in their ability. They wanted to see an integrated career curriculum in their subjects. They perceived that their grades and attendance would improve and wanted to experience school-wide artistic activities. The survey had begun to answer what the students felt was needed to be academically successful and to acquire a purpose in their high school education.

In Cycle I, students articulated their needs and expectations to be successful in an arts academy. As the researcher, I then conducted teacher interviews, observed freshman Success Seminar classrooms, and collected freshman achievement data, and other

documents. These multiple data sources were also planned to determine whether or not a disconnection existed between student perceptions of what they should experience in an arts academy, and what teachers say and do in their classrooms.

### **Teacher Interviews**

The overarching goal of this type of data collection was to enable the subjects to articulate clearly and honestly how they felt about teaching the new Success Seminar Curriculum, and their thoughts on how this class contributes to the academic success of freshman students. The purpose of these interviews was to "...gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop deep insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 103). The interviews informed the action research study by asking the teachers what they felt was needed in a successful freshman transitional program and comparing their comments to the students.

### **Interview Protocol**

The following interview protocol was used with the teacher respondents in this qualitative research. Questions were piloted with the other two school administrators at the work site for feedback before the interviews began.

There are kinds of questions that researchers can ask to gain understanding (Patton as cited in Glesne, 2006). The researcher began with experience/behavior questions, then followed with feeling, opinion, sensory, and background/demographic questions. Small talk was initiated in the beginning of each interview to provide trust and rapport with the respondent (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Clarification of research goals and methods were discussed with each respondent. The researcher also asked permission to

transcribe the audio notes at a later date. All respondents agreed on the norms of the interview process. Respondents were relaxed and collegial.

Two interviews occurred on October 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009. The taped interview of each teacher ran approximately 34 minutes, even though the periods were 45 minutes long. It took a few minutes to meet and set up the recorder and procedures in the school library, where both interviews were conducted. Both teachers were sent a card in their mailbox informing them of the interview date, time, and place. Interviews occurred during both teachers' duty periods. Respondent One was interviewed in a vacant office in the school library used to store testing materials. At this time, no secured tests had arrived, and we were able to conduct the interview without any distractions and against any school regulations. Respondent Two was interviewed in a quiet area in the back of the library, due to the storage of the secure HSPA materials in the testing office. Each teacher arrived on time and again expressed no qualms about the use of a recorder.

Each teacher respondent taught one class of the new freshman Success Seminar program and four other classes in their core certification. As the high school schedule was completed over the course of the summer of 2009, school administrators tried to give this new Success Seminar class to caring, competent teachers. For most of the schedule, this worked, and both interview respondents fit this description. There were a few other seminar teachers in 2009-2010 that were teaching this class solely because it was aligned to a free period in their schedule.

Table 4.3 illustrates the interview questions and their classification. The interviews were audio taped with the two consenting Success Seminar teachers. They were conducted separately and with discretion and privacy. The researcher

employed active listening skills and did minimal speaking throughout the interview. Many times the researcher spoke only to clarify statements or to rephrase the question for added information.

Two transcribed interviews were coded using the qualitative codebook previously established. All codes that did not provide significant data were not included in this report. Major themes that emerged involved the teachers, students, and the class environment. In the codebook, when the letter *a* appeared next to the code, it was an indication of an opposite statement to the code directly above. For example, code 1.1 referred to an orderly classroom, whereas code 1.1a signified a disorderly classroom. There were ten questions of these types of codes in the codebook. The exception was a group of codes that described the types of assignments that were part of the Success Seminar curriculum. There were 10 different codes ranging from 2.6 to 2.6i to describe different assignments teachers used in this curriculum. Table 4.4 provides the coding frequencies of both teachers interviewed beginning with code 1.1 and ending with code 3.8a. Table 4.4 illustrates the frequency of answers to the most repeated codes.

Table 4.3

*Teacher Interview Protocol*

| Numbered interview questions |  | Question classification       |
|------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| 1.                           | How many years have you been teaching?                         | Experience                    |
| 2.                           | What are some highlights in your profession?                   | Experience                    |
| 3.                           | What is your experience teaching freshmen?                     | Experience                    |
| 4.                           | How are the freshmen this year in the arts academy?            | Opinion                       |
| 5.                           | What are your feelings about teaching this class?              | Feeling                       |
| 6.                           | What is the best ways students learn?                          | Opinion                       |
| 7.                           | What aspects of the curriculum would you change?               | Opinion                       |
| 8.                           | What type of supports do you need to teach this class?         | Opinion                       |
| 9.                           | What life skills are important for freshman?                   | Opinion                       |
| 10.                          | Do you remember your freshman year in high school?             | Experience                    |
| 11.                          | Did you have a positive experience in high school?             | Experience                    |
| 12.                          | Which high school teachers inspired you?                       | Opinion                       |
| 13.                          | What arts do you enjoy? How were you exposed to the arts?      | Experience                    |
| 14.                          | What do you see in a model classroom if you walked in?         | Probing                       |
| 15.                          | Can you describe a typical day in the seminar class?           | Experience/Probing/<br>Recall |
| 16.                          | What is your vision for this school?                           | Sensory/Vision/<br>Probing    |
| 17.                          | What is your philosophy of education?                          | Sensory/Vision/<br>Probing    |
| 18.                          | Who have been your role models in teaching? Why?               | Experience/Probing            |
| 19.                          | How do you view the students and their future in this academy? | Opinion/Probing               |
| 20.                          | What is your best teaching subject?                            | Demographic                   |
| 21.                          | Age range, gender  | Demographic<br>(observed)     |

Table 4.4

*Interview Frequencies Table*

| Code book     | Interviewee #1 | Interviewee #2 | Total |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|-------|
| See code book |                |                |       |
| 1.1           | 3              | 1              | 4     |
| 1.3           | 3              | 1              | 4     |
| 2.1           | 4              | 2              | 6     |
| 2.2           | 8              | 14             | 22    |
| 2.3           | 6              | 6              | 12    |
| 2.4           | 3              | 5              | 8     |
| 2.4a          | 2              | 0              | 2     |
| 2.5a          | 0              | 1              | 1     |
| 2.6a          | 1              | 3              | 4     |
| 2.6e          | 3              | 2              | 5     |
| 2.8           | 5              | 3              | 8     |
| 3.1           | 1              | 1              | 2     |
| 3.2a          | 0              | 1              | 1     |
| 3.3           | 0              | 3              | 3     |
| 3.4a          | 1              | 0              | 1     |
| 3.6           | 1              | 2              | 3     |
| 3.7           | 1              | 0              | 1     |

The highest frequency score on this table was 2.2, or teacher values. These values were expressed at different times in the interviews and included statements such as: “importance of responsibility,” “going to college,” “work first, have fun later,” “everyone can learn,” “make students comfortable in their own skin,” “parents need to be involved in their students’ lives,” “solve problems together,” “the value of one’s own way of learning,” “listening as an important skill to learn,” “education is important,” “a need to empower kids,” “heritage affecting success,” “parents’ sacrifices,” and, “the importance for teens to find their identity.” Teachers also often expressed good preparation of activities, coded as 2.3. They mentioned Cornell Notes, active discussion and feedback, cognitive thinking, sensory learning, making choices, daily journal writing, multiple

intelligences, drawing out answers, and placing students on a path. All of these activities are thought of before planning a lesson.

Teachers interviewed had high expectations and high goals for their students. They expressed success for their students the same way that they wanted success for their own children. They articulated these high values that they themselves grew up with and believed in deeply. They discussed these often in their interview answers and spoke passionately. They expressed that these beliefs were what drove them to be teachers.

Teachers in this interview were also well versed in what constitutes good teaching skills and activities. They understood how these higher order skills enabled students to be successful in their learning. These findings showed how the expressed answers of teachers should be translated into the actual student tasks evidenced in the classroom.

### **Classroom Observations**

During classroom observations, lack of rigor in the assignments was evidenced more than challenging student work. With 81% of students passing at the end of the first semester of this course, this implied that teachers passed students without rigorous, challenging learning taking place. This was seen in Marilyn's (a fictitious name) classroom observation. The teacher praised the power point efforts of the students, but the assignment was mediocre and comparable to an elementary country-at-a-glance assignment. No connections were made to the city of the school, as stipulated in the curriculum's rubric for this project. Most students read wordy power point bullets that were taken verbatim from the Internet. No evidence of analysis or synthesis was seen in these presentations. The teacher included this presentation as a class work grade. Out of 22 students, two received an F, one a D, and the rest received an A or B.



Another teacher, Randy (fictitious name), expressed the importance of Cornell Note-taking. In discussing the scope and sequence of this curriculum he stated, “the Cornell Notes, actually, should be the first thing you do.” In discussing the entire curriculum, he stated “I think it is a valid tool. There are aspects of it that are excellent, the note-taking for one.” Yet this teacher did not give his students a grade for the note-taking lesson that he described in the interview. Another teacher had a bulletin board display, compiled by the students, of magazine cut-outs reflecting cultures. Little higher order skills are needed for this project.

Teacher values are highly evidenced in the classrooms and in the interviews. One teacher had several pictures of American flags in the classroom in predominant locations. This may have suggested a focus on history (this teacher is a social studies teacher who teaches one class of Success Seminar), or a high value towards patriotism. Much smaller flags of world countries were displayed on top of one large American flag. I mentioned this in my journal reflections. With a majority of diverse ethnic students in the classroom, I felt that not enough cultural flags were displayed. I am aware of my bias towards this inequality in cultural representation as well.

The same teacher was asked *What is the most important life skill freshman students should master?* He replied “responsibility and making own good decisions.” But he could not elaborate how a teacher can *teach responsibility* and not just talk about it. Another interviewee, Sylvia (fictitious name), stated “freedom of choice” as an important life skill to master, due to her experiences in the art world. How this translated to choice and challenging work in all subjects was not discussed by the teacher. Another teacher observed in class had the phrase *Life Rewards Action* on the board. A class

discussion ensued regarding this phrase. The teacher mentioned that a Harvard educated homeless student used this phrase often. This brought about some good remarks by students such as “we should not be afraid to act, because failure is a step to success.” The student remembered this from a speech President Obama made to a high school audience that was discussed in class earlier. In another class, teacher, Sylvia, had an arts college bulletin board display to encourage college applications. This same teacher was comfortable discussing different religions when the students were presenting on cultures. She also created and added a community arts project for the class. She is requiring Success Seminar students to research multicultural and multiethnic World War II heroes to supplement an existing hallway display in the school. She will provide a rubric and resources for students to use. She described that this unit is all about community, and expressed that this is a way to update our heroes reflective of our community today. These last two are more rigorous assignments than the others described. Yet, as of this writing, these activities never materialized.

Even as teachers expressed their high values in the classroom, lesson plans, interviews, and documents, there is somewhat of a disconnect. Most student work lacks rigor and is simplistic and innocuous for high school work. For example, students in this urban city have completed cultural studies since elementary grades in world language and history classes and during the district’s yearly Multicultural Week. Restating the languages spoken, the foods eaten, major cities, religions, and geography does not constitute rigor for the ninth grade. The Success Seminar curriculum (Ali, Freedman, & Webb, 2009, p. 10-11) required this group research and presentation as a way to highlight

the cultures/ethnic groups represented in this city. The curriculum set aside a week to complete this project. Guidelines for this project were not specific or rigorous enough.

Other teachers are not following the timeline set forth in the curriculum (Ali et al., 2009). Most observed teachers had not begun the Cornell Note-taking lesson, which was pivotal for the binder assembly (Ali et al., 2009). Many first marking period assignments had not begun. This was a new curriculum and the pacing guide most likely needed an adjustment. Yet, when teachers modified the pace, but not the actual rigor in the lessons, it was seen as a cause for concern.

### **Summary of Classroom Observations**

What was suggested in the data of the classroom observations is that most teachers are complying in teaching the Success Seminar curriculum, but are watering-down the rigor and challenging aspects of the assignments, or modifying the pace of the lessons. Many grades are not reflective of lasting learning where students have used higher thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, or evaluation. Many teachers have high expectations and values, but these are not readily translated into the classroom for optimum student learning. The question now becomes *How do we, as educational leaders, provide teachers with the tools to identify and require freshmen students to work at challenging, higher-order work?* One answer for me, as an educational leader, is to present the findings of this disconnect to the staff in a manner that will ensure collaborative discussion and thought. A professional learning community of Success Seminar teachers is a recommendation.

## Student Achievement Data

Freshman student grades were gathered for the Success Seminar class at the end of the 2009-2010 school year. Table 4.5 is a summary of the achievement of these students in this class.

Table 4.5

### *Success Seminar Students' Final Grades, 2009-2010*

| Grades | Total Numbers |
|--------|---------------|
| A+     | 11            |
| A      | 16            |
| A-     | 15            |
| B+     | 22            |
| B      | 33            |
| B-     | 32            |
| C+     | 20            |
| C      | 29            |
| C-     | 19            |
| D+     | 12            |
| D      | 17            |
| F      | 74            |

*Note: 300 freshman out of 382 took the Success Seminar Class in 2009-2010*

Based on the final grades on the report cards, out of 300 freshman students enrolled in the Success Seminar class, 25% of freshman failed the class in its first year. Table 4.6 further describes the number of freshman students in 2009-2010 who did not achieve due to grade failures and zero credits for the entire freshman year.

Table 4.6

*Freshman Achievement Data, 2009-2010*

| Description                            | Figures             | Information  |
|--|---------------------|--|
| Total number of freshman               | 382                 | Includes repeaters and home instruction students   |
| Success Seminar (SS) freshman students | 300/382 or 78.5%    | Not all repeaters or home instruction students took this class   |
| SS Students <i>who failed class</i>    | 74/300 or 25%       | Final grade for the year   |
| SS Students <i>who failed grade</i>    | 148/300 or 49.3%    | Acquired less than 40 credits to be a sophomore  |
| Able to take summer school credits     | 45/148 or 30.4%     | Freshman who may add up to 15 credits in the summer of 2010 to go to tenth grade (they acquired between 25-35 credits as freshman) |
| Freshman <i>grade failures</i>         | 148-45=103 or 34.3% | 103 freshman (out of 300) will repeat the ninth grade  |
| Freshman with "0" credits              | 43/300 or 14.3%     | Freshman who received no credits for the entire year including the Success Seminar class   |

*Note.* -The slash / indicates "out of"

-At least forty credits are needed to be a sophomore.

-Some counselors placed ninth grade repeaters, and home instruction students in Success Seminar class; others did not. All students who had the Success Seminar class in their schedule, regardless if they were in a true ninth grade, repeating the grade, or in home instruction, were included in these numbers. They all had ninth grade homerooms.

- Eighty-two freshman are not accounted in these numbers because they did not take the SS class.

It seems that the students are not, as a majority, failing the Success Seminar class. Only

25% of the students failed this class in the 2009-2010 school year. This could be

attributed to the easy way some Success Seminar teachers grade the students. As

previously mentioned, in a classroom observation, a teacher in this program gave most students A's for a simplistic power point presentation. This teacher (as well as others) could have also inflated other grades and pushed up failing students to pass.

Similarly, there is a concern in this district that teachers who fail many students in their classes will be written up and asked to provide student interventions in writing. This process could affect their salary raise or tenure status. In other committee meetings, teachers have informally expressed to me that they cannot fail many students because of this intrusive process. They suggested that they would find a way to pass their students.

Out of the original 42 students who were surveyed in the spring of 2009 at the beginning of this cycle, 12 were freshmen students. Students identified were freshman in the 2008-2009 school year. Many moved on as sophomores in the 2009-2010 school year. Those that continued to pass their grade level are presently juniors in the 2010-2011 school year. One freshman and one sophomore are not accounted for in the achievement data because they are no longer in the school. Table 4.7 indicates the achievement of this group of freshmen in their most recent NJPASS state test scores in tenth grade.

Table 4.7

*Surveyed Freshman (08-09) Achievement Data in 2009-2010*

| Description  | Figures | Information   |
|--|---------|---|
| Total number of freshman   | 12      | 13=freshmen*<br>13=sophomores*<br>16= juniors<br>Total = 42 completed surveys |
| Total number of students in the 2010-2011 SY   | 9       | These 9 students are juniors.on track and on grade level                      |
| Average score of all 12 students on 10 <sup>th</sup> grade NJ PASS Test in Language Arts | 28.3    | Cut-off score = 23  |
| Average score of all 12 students on 10 <sup>th</sup> grade NJ PASS Test in Mathematics   | 18.2    | Cut-off score = 17  |
| Number of surveyed students who passed NJPASS Language Arts, Grade 10                    | 10      | 10 out of 12 = 83.3%  |
| Number of surveyed students who passed NJPASS Mathematics – Grade 10                     | 6       | 6 out of 12 = 50%   |

\* *One student in this grade no longer in the school.*

These data indicate that for approximately 13.3% of the surveyed students, the freshmen transitional program did not work for them. The majority of the students, 86.7%, did do well on their 10<sup>th</sup> grade district test and are on track in language arts, but 50% are not performing well in mathematics. Additionally, this is a small representation of the freshmen to make further conclusions.

## Documents

The Success Seminar curriculum was reviewed for evidence of rigor, teacher supports, and relevancy for students' academic, emotional, and social growth. It begins by providing a rationale for presenting all freshmen with this year-long orientation (class). It explains to teachers the major skills involved in the curriculum's lessons. As described in the curriculum they include:

Increasing levels of character education awareness, learning how to actively and effectively set goals and manage time, development of critical and creative thinking, study and note-taking skills, implementation of research, writing, and test-taking skills, utilization of technological resources, and development of skills to facilitate academic success. (Ali et al., 2009, p. iii).

In the scope and sequence outline, the four major themes that correlate with the four marking periods were academic and social success in high school, critical thinking skills for success, planning for a successful future, and success in action. Each theme was further sub-divided into thematic lessons involving communication skills, organizational skills, critical thinking, social development, study skills, computer and technology skills, and projects. Rubrics, writing prompts, and journal ideas, the counselors' role, and suggestions for community service projects were provided.

At first glance, this curriculum seemed relevant and aligned to best practices reviewed in the literature of transitional ninth grade programs. Specific lessons are evidenced on academic success and social and emotional growth that are consistent with the literature (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Lessons outlined in the curriculum appeared interesting, such as *Culture Groups in Your Community*, *Creating Power Points from Scratch*, *Writing Questions*, *Developing Spreadsheets and M&M Marketing*, *Empathy*, *Peer Pressure and Coping Skills*, *My Future*, *Debates on Scientific Topics*, and so on.



Yet upon further review and based on teachers' informal comments, some of the lessons were simplistic, child-like (the M&M lesson on color graphing) and out of sequence. Holiday food drive, a cultural power point, and not enough opportunities for critical reading and writing were evidence of a watered-down curriculum. High expectations were articulated in the rationale and a note to the teachers, but were not always in the lesson plans. Some early assignments called for cooperative learning and development of writing questions based on Bloom's Taxonomy. Another lesson required students to prepare an EXCEL spreadsheet. If the teacher was not very familiar with these strategies, or was rusty with these educational theories or databases, the lesson failed. The first unit also focused on academic skills instead of social skills. The transitional program literature emphasizes the strong importance students place on socialization as soon as they enter high school. The sequence may not be correctly placed in the curriculum.

From what has been gleaned thus far, students do not become attached to the class. This may be in part because in the 2009-2010 school year freshmen were not offered an arts class, only a Success Seminar class. Students articulated their unhappiness with this scheduling decision. Most students auditioned to the arts academy but were not able to experience the arts of their choice. Instead they were given the elective of this transitional program, which they did not want to take. They later understood that if they failed the seminar class, they did not have to go to summer school, because it is not a district or state graduation requirement. The only penalty for them was a loss of five credits.

In succeeding cycles, questions of the effectiveness of the Success Seminar Curriculum were asked of the teachers, along with suggestions for change. It seems thus

far, that this curriculum had not taken into account the particular needs of students in these classes. No data analysis was provided to teachers about their freshmen students, no on-going professional development was offered, and supportive relationships were not stressed as pivotal between teacher and student. “Transition is not a one-size fit all mentality” (Cohen & Smeardon, 2009, p. 34). Rather seminar teachers need to meet regularly to fine tune the curriculum, discuss problems with each other, counselors, and parents, and offer solutions for students’ success. Just presenting the same lessons to all students does not ensure academic and social-emotional learning.

### **Cycle I Findings Summary**

The findings from all the data collected in Cycle I point to surprising perceptions from students and teachers in the arts academy that do not always correlate with the work that is presented in the curriculum, in the classroom, and evidenced in student achievement documents. There is no doubt that teachers viewed the ninth grade as pivotal to a successful high school experience. They expressed their values, high expectations, and goals clearly and with passion. The Success Seminar curriculum’s rationale also stated clearly “the value of freshman orientation seminars in promoting success of first-year students at the high school level” (Ali et al., 2009, p. ii). Students were excited in attending this high school and a high number of freshmen auditioned to the academy. Students had clear ideas on what they expected of an arts academy in terms of artistic experiences and classroom academic activities. Teachers understood what rigor is, but not what it looked like in the classroom. They seemed to expedite the lessons, and follow the scope and sequence without reflecting on the student task at hand. They may be skittish in failing students to avoid reprimands or other punitive actions against them.

Classrooms are mostly drab with teacher-centered lessons and little evidence of high quality student work. The seminar curriculum and classrooms have few connections to the real concerns of young ninth graders entering high school. The student achievement documents point to an alarming number of freshmen failures documented at the end of the school year at the arts academy. In the 2009-2010 school year, 49.3% of the ninth graders, or almost half the class, were repeating the grade again in the 2010-2011 school year unless they attended summer school. Summer school is comprised of eight weeks of classes that provide success mainly on attendance and not on academic proficiency. Even if more ninth graders did move on to the tenth grade, their learning had suffered and they would most likely lag behind in their classes.

The next cycle of data explored how teachers collaboratively began to change this alarming data concerning the ninth graders in the arts academy. This was accomplished by planning and implementing a blocked transitional program attached to the arts (*Seminarts*), that monitored student success as they began high school. A school-wide vision committee and an arts committee examined who we are, and where we were headed. Teacher surveys and focus groups provided data to inform an effective transitional program. Data from this first cycle were presented to the staff as the arts academy learning community discussed an effective transitional program for the school.

As an educational leader, I facilitated these discussions, had open communication and accepted all comments as valid. I used Kotter's (1996) theory of change and the Relational Model for Change as guiding tools for the continuing data collection and change effort.

## Chapter V

### Cycle II - Success Seminar Teachers

The purpose of this cycle was to foster a positive school culture by including and gathering perceptions of both the freshman teachers in the new Success Seminar transitional program, and the arts teachers of this new themed academy. As the researcher, I needed to examine if this new district-mandated freshman transitional program was effective. The teachers were at a point where they could articulate the successes and problems of the program. They were also skeptical of new top-down initiatives. I needed to give them a voice to help improve school culture and articulate achievement practices for freshman.

As a new vice-principal and leader in the school, I knew that “culture improves collegial and collaborative activities that foster better communication and problem-solving practices” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 7). I wanted to collaborate with teachers to solve potential problems in this new seminar program. The idea of involving teachers is closely attuned to my feminist leadership style by focusing on community-building, interpersonal relationships, collaboration, and an ethic of caring (Glanz, 2002).

An additional purpose of the activities in this cycle was to compare the teachers’ feelings of what constituted student success in an arts academy to the students’ perceptions, feelings, and expectations of the new academy derived in Cycle I. Equally important were teacher suggestions on how to improve the transitional program for the future. Not only were seminar teachers’ opinions important, but so were the arts teachers in this career-themed academy. Meeting with the arts teachers ensured that a strong focus

was placed on the arts programs in this school. I felt that the articulation, open communication, and collaboration of all the artistic opportunities for freshman and other students were meaningful activities. As planning in this new academy began, the goal, as Stowell and Mead (2007) wrote in their approach to teamwork, was to “create an environment where members can resolve problems, manage conflict, and overcome adversity with dignity” (p. 10).

This team effort surfaced in the new arts committee that I established in September of 2009 just as the arts academy opened its doors for the first time. It was followed, in January of 2010, with a school-wide Vision Committee. These committees began the work of organizing important aspects of the arts academy, which allowed shared decision-making of the staff towards their new themed school. Another purpose of the committees was to bring together the school community and plan activities that would assist freshman to feel welcomed in the arts academy. As teachers articulated their ideas in these volunteer committees, I organized two teacher focus groups and a Success Seminar teacher survey to discuss other issues pertaining to freshman. The various data collection pieces allowed the triangulation of data for this cycle. This enabled me as the researcher to “use these multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive perspective” (Calhoun, 1994, p.59) from the teachers’ point of view. The Table 5.1 illustrates the activities of Cycle II.

Table 5.1

*Cycle II Activities – 2009-2010*

| Month     | Activity  |
|-----------|---|
| September | Success Seminar class implemented for ninth graders<br>School-wide Arts Committee organized |
| January   | Success Seminar Teacher Focus Groups 1 and 2<br>School-wide Vision Committee organized      |
| February  | Success Seminar Teacher Survey  |

**Cycle II Activities**

**Success Seminar**

Due to a district mandate, freshman in four district high school academies were placed into the Success Seminar 5-credit transitional class in the 2009-2010 school year. Out of 382 freshman students at the arts academy, 300 had the class in their schedules that year. The 82 freshmen who were not in this class were either repeating the grade or were in home instruction, and therefore not involved in the program.

In this first year of the arts academy, there were 14 sections of the Success Seminar class. The program was taught by eight arts teachers, two history teachers, two English teachers, a world language teacher, and a computer technology teacher. Additionally, five in-class special education teachers worked with various teachers of the Success Seminar program. The only consideration for the selection of teachers to teach this program was if the class was a good fit in their schedule. Because of this random teacher selection in the summer of 2009, the majority of teachers did not learn they were

teaching this class until the beginning of the school year. Others were advised late that summer.

### **Arts Committee**

Because of this major concern of the lack of a structured arts program for freshman, the arts committee was established to allow students to become part of excellent artistic endeavors in the school. The arts committee began on September 30, 2009. As a vice-principal, I wanted to start this committee right away and sent an email to all the teachers on September 15, 2009 to describe to them what we would do in the coming months. In that memo, I stated that the main purpose of this committee was to devise a tentative calendar of events for the year and to start to expose our arts students into the community. We were initially going to meet after school in two shifts, but due to many after-school teacher commitments, we began to meet during the teachers' professional learning community (PLC) periods. Since the staff had different PLC meeting times during the school day, we did not all meet together. Nevertheless, three PLC groups met on September 30, 2009, October 22, 2009, and December 7, 2009.

### **Focus Groups**

Two focus groups of Success Seminar teachers were conducted during the winter of the 2009-2010 school year. Teachers had been working with the new Success Seminar freshman curriculum for more than four months and I needed to derive information about the program from the teachers' perspective. It was necessary to understand if there was a correlation between what the students had articulated before the program began to teachers' perceptions of the program thus far. Also, as an administrator, I needed to have buy-in from the teachers for this new program. In order to do that, and continue to change

the culture of the school, I needed to also give teachers a voice, in a safe environment, regarding their school and its programs.

Of the 14 Success Seminar teachers that school year, five came during their PLC meeting to be part of the first focus group, and three additional teachers participated in a different PLC meeting time. This constitutes a 53.3 percent participation rate of the total number of Success Seminar teachers. This lower participation rate was caused by teachers' scheduling conflicts, extra teacher duty responsibilities, absent teachers, or teachers who did not hear the announcements.

There were 12 questions prepared for the focus groups (Appendix B). Because of the limited school period time, five questions were not addressed in depth. Nonetheless, teachers were able to freely discuss the Success Seminar Program and gave ideas on how to improve the freshman experience in the arts academy.

### **Vision Committee**

In order to continue to collaborate with the teachers, I sent out an email on January 5, 2010 to all the staff at the arts academy. The purpose was to invite participants to be on a steering committee to establish a vision for the school. Initially, this work was not to be part of this action research project. But as the committee unfolded, I saw the value of including these data as evidence of good collaboration. It especially began to fit into this research project because most of the teachers who volunteered and stayed on this committee were arts teachers.

I also saw the need to focus the staff. If any type of change was to occur in the arts academy, including transitional freshman programs, the school needed a clear



roadmap of where we were headed. As Kotter (1996) states in his eight stages of the change process:

Without a vision to guide decision making, each and every choice employees face can dissolve into an interminable debate. The smallest of decisions can generate heated conflict that saps energy and destroys morale. Insignificant tactical choices can dominate discussions and waste precious time. (p. 8)

I knew that I did not want to waste time as an administrator listening to complaints and deciding on issues that did not have clear alignment to what the school stood for. In order to clarify who we were as a school, what was important to attend to, and where we were headed, we needed a strong vision. As a school community we had to decide on these beliefs and values. To affect change and build a positive culture, we needed “to attend not only to rules, roles and relationships – but to systems of beliefs, values and knowledge as well” (Evans, 1996, p. 17). This steering committee would help me clarify directions for change, motivate folks to take action, and help to coordinate the actions of different people (Kotter, 1996).

I quickly received responses from staff who wanted to be part of the steering committee. Teachers’ comments were “Count me in,” “I would like to be involved in this steering committee,” “I am interested in joining this committee,” “I am interested, if it is not too late to join,” “I am more than interested in becoming part of this group. Please let me know what I can do to help,” “Dear Mrs. Sanchez, I’m in!” “Great. I will be there with Juliet in tow!” (the drama teacher bringing the other drama teacher to the meeting), “Please count me in,” “I’ll be there.” Additionally, all four guidance counselors voluntarily became part of this committee as well. The Vision Committee met for a total of five meetings on January 21, 2010, February 2, 2010, February 19, 2010, April 19, 2010, and June 3, 2010.

## **Teacher Surveys**

Even though teachers' opinions of the program were derived from focus groups, I needed to gather data in a different format where teachers could state their answers on specific questions of the Success Seminar program. A month had elapsed from the time data were gathered from focus groups, and I wanted to see if there were any significant changes with the staff towards the program.

Out of 14 teachers who taught this initial freshman transitional class, only eight teacher participants responded and returned the survey (Appendix C). This constituted a little over half of the respondents. Six teachers were non-arts teachers who taught this class. The rest of the seminar teachers this first year were arts teachers. Since the teachers were asked not to write their name on the surveys, it is not known which teachers responded to the survey. Although only approximately half of the teachers participated in this survey, enough survey data were gathered to conduct a check for internal validity. The study and collection of data were done correctly in a non-biased manner (T.C. Monahan, personal communication, June, 2009).

The data analysis corresponded to the teachers' responses on 35 Likert-scaled questions. Questions were categorized in headings pertaining to teachers' opinions pertaining to freshman skills, structure of the Success Seminar class, Success Seminar curriculum, and the capabilities of ninth grade students. Additionally, some survey questions discussed the proposed *Seminarts* blocked class for the following school year.

### **Analysis of Cycle II Data**

As data were collected and analyzed in all Cycle II research activities, major themes emerged. The predominant issues teachers expressed included scheduling

problems, especially a lack of a structured arts program during freshman year in the 2009-2010 school year, curriculum inconsistencies, a need for sustained staff training on the new Success Seminar program, and a disconnect in the school between the arts programs and the core academic subjects. Each of these will be discussed with the data that emerged in Cycle II activities. A final clarifying note pertains to the teachers mentioned in this document. All names are fictitious to preserve the anonymity of the respondents.

### **Theme 1: Scheduling**

Besides instituting a new Success Seminar class requirement for freshman in the arts academy, the school district also implemented a high school initiative of blocked periods in language arts and mathematics. With the two required blocks, the new Success Seminar class and a world language requirement, freshman students no longer had room in their schedules for an arts elective class in the 2009-2010 SY. Additionally, the schedule for all high school students ran from 7:30 a. m. to 4:00 p.m. with no time left to add an extra class. A typical freshman schedule that year is illustrated in the Table 5.2.

Table 5.2

#### *Typical Freshman Schedule in 2009-2010*

| Class Period | Subject                         |
|--------------|---------------------------------|
| 1-2          | Blocked Language Arts Class     |
| 3-4          | Blocked Mathematics Class       |
| 5            | Lunch                           |
| 6            | Physical Education/Health Class |
| 7            | Science                         |
| 8            | Social Studies                  |
| 9            | Success Seminar Class           |
| 10           | World Language Class            |

Reacting to the lack of the freshman arts class, several participants of the teacher focus groups felt that it was sorely needed to help students fit in socially and emotionally in their new school. An administrator who participated in the first focus group mentioned how “we’ve lost the social-emotional component” of the freshman students by not offering them an arts class in their first year and substituting the Success Seminar class instead. This vice-principal had mentioned earlier that many freshman students had come into her office to complain of this scheduling decision. Students did not understand why they auditioned to the academy if they could not experience an arts class as freshman. John, an arts teacher in the second focus group, reiterated the sentiments of the vice-principal and students when he stated “...but I guess that the one we or I guess none of us sort of foresaw [is that] we lose the emotional buy-in from the freshman.” This was reinforced by Julio, a teacher from focus group two, as he was discussing a possible senior-freshman mentor relationship. He said, “Let’s be honest, coming to any school, or any job, or any university, it’s a big transitional time, it’s not just about academics, it’s about socialization, it’s about growing up.” Julio discussed that “the kids felt maybe a little unrepresented; oh you’re going to the arts and you get stuck with what they feel is another academic class.” James, of group two stated, “I think it took a long time for the kids to get over the fact that they weren’t going to have an arts class their freshman year.”

Teachers feel the best way to begin to motivate ninth graders and make them feel they fit into the school is to offer them arts classes of their choosing and interest. This much needed social-emotional component is addressed in the literature as an important piece of a freshman’s transition into high school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

In teacher survey frequency tallies, a large majority of teachers (75%) strongly agreed that freshman need an arts class in grade nine (Q5), and that they are mature enough for this arts class (75%, Q6). Additionally, a large number (62.5%) agreed that students are motivated to excel and achieve in grade nine (Q7). But, 62.5 percent of teachers also stated that *only students who auditioned* should take an arts elective as freshman.

Another identified scheduling problem was an error on the freshman online application that did not clearly stipulate the different performing arts strands. The result was that all dance, music, vocal, and theater students were lumped together. John also mentioned in the focus group discussion, “that to make the groups successful, we need to have the vocal people with the vocal teacher, the guitar people with the guitar teacher, especially if we were trying to get a freshman buy-in into their program.”

An additional concern of participants was the fact that the Success Seminar class was not viewed by students as a requirement to graduate or to go to summer school if they failed the class. A teacher focus group respondent, Jolyn described the program as “a tricky course, it’s a made-up course, there’s no teacher that ever went to school to be a Success Seminar instructor, and you know it’s like a vague and ideal thing.” The vice-principal who participated in the first focus group said that this program is “like a funky, flower-power type of a course.” A different arts teacher, George, stated in the second focus group that the Success Seminar class “is not a real subject, you know.” According to the teachers, students become aware of this, and many did not mind losing the five credits of the seminar class. Teachers mentioned that freshman also knew that this class was not required to move on to tenth grade as a sophomore.

Focus group respondents had a variety of opinions towards incorporating Success Seminar skills in a freshman arts program. Two teachers mentioned the need for exploratory programs where students, either in eighth or ninth grade, could experience all the different arts programs offered with the added seminar components. Teacher respondent, Michael stated “if there were a class that touched upon all of them a little bit, you know, just like a sampling, then they can actually chose and move this way or that way throughout.” To add to this point, Carl said,

So for each marking period they do a different [class], one marking period is dance, another marking period it is theater let’s say, another marking period it’s visual arts, another marking period it is something else, and so on. Like a little bit of everything freshman year, and then sophomore year they’re into the discipline.

Other teachers spoke briefly regarding this idea, but were confused on the logistics, scheduling, grading, and teachers required for students to experience all the arts. They concluded that an exploratory arts program is better managed at the middle school level.

Other scheduling ideas generated from the discussions in the focus groups included an art history class for freshman that focused on seminar skills, and a blocked *Seminarts* class that was taught by arts teachers and meshed both the seminar and arts curricula. George, a teacher in focus group two, questioned why these seminar skills are not taught throughout *all* classes and programs for freshman. The vice-principal in that group answered him with a rationale for the Success Seminar program. In referring to core subjects and curricula, she clarified that other freshman classes have

things that they have to do, so they don’t have a lot of time to spend on things like this. And I think they [district personnel] wanted one communal class that kind of connected all the subjects together so that everyone could be on the same page and build a community.

As teachers continued to discuss their freshman students and their scheduling needs, they understood that not all freshman would benefit from this seminar class. This belief mirrors the literature which says that schools and districts should not make the mistake of placing all students into a *one size fits all program* (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Focus group teachers mentioned a possible need for a freshman default seminar program with a different curriculum for uninterested or unmotivated arts students.

In terms of future scheduling, a majority of teachers in the surveys (62.5%) felt students should not be blocked in an arts class (Q10) and 50 percent of the surveyed teachers felt that freshman cannot *handle* a blocked seminar class (Q35). Additionally, the large majority of teachers (88%) stated that students should not be blocked if they *are not interested* in the arts (Q27).

**Arts committee.** As stated earlier, to fill in the gap of freshman lacking a structured arts class, and to improve school culture and team-building, I organized a school-wide arts committee. Due to time constraints and to focus the teachers during the initial meeting, I decided to prepare an agenda ahead of time for the first gathering. Eight teachers attended during their professional learning committee meetings on September 30, 2009. They included a special education teacher, one French teacher, a science teacher, and five arts staff. In the first meeting, teachers discussed the calendar of events for the year, the budget for the arts, student opportunities, and student arts clubs, such as the Murals Club. The groups also assigned themselves different bulletin boards to announce the arts activities or display student work. We also initially discussed a community artistic outreach program that did not come to fruition.

In our second arts committee meeting on October 22, 2009, 10 teachers participated. The French teacher and special education teacher were still involved as well as eight arts staff. Agenda items included a revision of the school arts calendar, a discussion of the logistics of organizing school trips to the Visual Arts Center in Summit, New Jersey, a recap of the professional development day of October 19, 2009 of the visual arts teachers at this center, plans for the Open House activities on November 18, 2009, and distribution of informational handouts, including a packet regarding the student Arts Academy at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJ PAC) in Newark, New Jersey.

Based on my agendas and field notes retrieved from the Arts Committee binder, the first item discussed in the second meeting was the upcoming Open House for parents, students and the community scheduled for November 18, 2009. Right away, the teachers volunteered that the arts academy students should be involved (freshman as well). This was readily agreed by all committee members, including the idea to grant four hours of community service for their work. The committee members decided that the arts teachers would recruit these students to be ushers and guides. Teachers then considered the schedule for the evening. The guitar teacher volunteered his advanced guitar students for the coffee house activity in the library. The dance teacher would place her dancers in the auditorium, cafeteria, and the library. In my notes, a teacher volunteered a seminar meeting, but it was vetoed as a “sticky idea.” The team decided all guests would follow their student’s school schedule. They also suggested that parents and guests participate in the following activities in between classes: viewing visual arts displays throughout the school, experiencing impromptu presentations in the theater, hearing guitar music and



poetry readings by the students in the library, viewing video productions in the TV studio, attending choir and music performances on the stage and in the band room, witnessing several Michael Jackson lookalikes in the cafeteria demonstrating the moon walk, and talking with traveling “actors” dressed in period costumes proclaiming “all the world is a stage.” One of the visual arts teachers volunteered her students to complete a large paper mural announcing the spring musical, *The Hot Mikado*. She suggested it should be placed at the main entrance to greet guests as they entered. That paper mural stayed up, without any graffiti or damage until the summer of 2010, when it was finally taken down by the same visual arts teacher. The two drama teachers told committee members that head-shots of the main characters of the musical would be placed in front of the auditorium mimicking what is seen in Broadway theaters. Teachers also discussed how to give community service hours to all the student performers. Ideas kept flowing from the committee, responsibilities were set, and refreshments were discussed. I told committee members that the administrators would assist in whatever was needed. When everyone agreed on what to accomplish for the Open House, other agenda items were tackled.

The school arts calendar was revised by committee members (see Table 5.3). All teachers had a copy of the tentative arts calendar in front of them as changes were collaboratively made for the months of December, January, February, April, May, and June of the 2009-2010 school year. Individual teachers had been working to plan for artistic opportunities for their students and needed to let the committee know of these activities.

Table 5.3

*Revisions to the Arts Academy Calendar – 2009-2010*

| Calendar Month/Date Recommendation | Activity   | Teacher                           |
|------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| December 4                         | Addition of Kean University guest speaker and performance for guitar students                | Guitar teacher                    |
| December 8, 10, 15, 17             | Addition of Band rehearsals  | Band Music teacher                |
| December 16                        | Deletion of dance trip to see Broadway Show, <i>Billy Elliot</i>                             | Dance teacher                     |
| December 17, 18                    | Addition of choir rehearsals   | Chorus teacher                    |
| December 18                        | Addition of Choir and Guitar Concert at Newark Liberty Airport from 10:30 am to 2:00 pm      | Chorus teacher                    |
| December 21                        | Addition of Holiday Concert day performance  | Chorus teacher                    |
| January 20                         | Addition of field trip to Martin Guitar Factory in Pennsylvania for guitar students          | Guitar teacher                    |
| January 27                         | Addition of field trip to see Broadway play in NYC, <i>Billy Elliot</i> , for dance students | Dance teacher                     |
| February 2                         | Discussion and addition of Black History Dance Show (day performance)                        | Dance teacher<br>All team members |
| April 29                           | Addition of Guitar Festival with New Jersey City University at the arts academy              | Guitar teacher                    |
| June 3, 2010                       | Addition - <i>Solo Night</i> , music students  | All Music teachers                |

After settling the arts calendar, teachers discussed the dates and logistics of the field trips to the Visual Arts Center. They decided to table the details until all the visual arts teachers could meet later in my office. After all these changes were approved by everyone, it was agreed that the next calendar update would be in December of 2009. In the interim, I would meet with the computer teacher to place the agreed upon calendar events on the school's website for all to see. I found this school arts calendar activity as a meaningful way to coordinate all the school's arts activities and give effective feedback to colleagues.

The final arts committee was on December 7, 2009. It was originally planned for November 24, but had to be cancelled due to other school activities. Only six teachers attended this meeting, which included five arts teachers and the French teacher. Agenda items included more additions to the arts calendar, revision of the eighth grade audition rubrics, thoughts regarding the arts capital budget for 2010-2011, approval of field trips, and professional development. I told the committee members that 11 field trips were approved by the board of education for the arts academy. I was in charge of all the field trips for the school as well, and much of this information also pertained to the arts committee. Teachers gave their ideas on excellent activities for the staff and students. They included the names, possible dates, and contact information opportunities for workshops, guest speakers, community service, and school trips. Teachers had compiled these data earlier, which was typed and distributed at this meeting. One very interesting idea was brought up by the drama teacher. She felt that a Black Box theater was appropriate for the school and should be included in the capital budget. It was her idea that one theater is not enough and that a small production is better suited in this type of

theater. The teacher had even identified a location in the school that was perfect. It was an old large storage area near the TV production studio. I told her to get the specifics and we would see if it could become a reality. Other teachers broached the idea of a permanent art gallery in the school. The location of this gallery was commented on by the teachers. To enhance performances and secure the safety of the students, the dance teacher mentioned that the stage floor in the auditorium was not good, and that she would find information regarding the correct Marley flooring used for stages.

As the meeting unwound, the committee did not set a date for the next meeting due to the holiday music concerts and performances, the various arts field trips, rehearsals for all the performance arts groups, the spring musical's coordination of art, dance, costume, music and drama rehearsals, and the entire committee's preparation for the upcoming eighth grade auditions.

One of the first activities of the arts committee was to bring the plan of the Open House to fruition. Because of the careful planning in the arts committee by the teachers, the event was a resounding success. The Open House set a record in attendance for the school. Other arts teachers mentioned that this was the best Open House they ever attended. It was an exciting evening full of camaraderie, information, and a real exposure to the students' talents. From this Open House, the school was also able to form a good parent-teacher organization (PTO) that furthered the academic and artistic goals of the school.

Part of the planning in the arts committee in this meeting was to involve students in clubs. Due to the newly established academies and the separation of the school budgets, the clubs started late in the school year. Once underway, a Murals Club was

formed. One of the visual arts teachers became the advisor while the other visual arts teacher collaborated in the mural painting. The club had quite a few accomplishments. A 10-foot mural was painted by the students in the music wing, an all-encompassing mural reflecting all the arts in the academy was drawn in the student cafeteria, and a TV production mural also signaled the studio area. These murals helped establish the building as a true arts academy and grounded the students and staff into a positive culture of artistic expression and pride in the school. Figure 3 demonstrates the variety of work the visual arts students and their Mural Club advisors accomplished in such a short time throughout the arts academy building.



Figure 3 Various Arts Academy Murals

In addition to the school murals, the arts committee was instrumental in organizing various music and dance concerts, and coffee houses throughout the school year. Other committee activities included over 50 school trips to various locations such as: Paper Mill Playhouse for drama students' critique of a Peter Pan production, Hamlet at Drew University' Shakespeare Theater, In The Heights and Billy Elliot Broadway plays for dance students, Associated Press in New York City with TV production students, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) museum for visual arts students, Music In The Parks Choir Competition at Great Adventure Theme Park in NJ, Teen Arts Festival, Martin Guitar Factory in Pennsylvania, Kids In Concert, Zimmerle Art Museum, and the Visual Arts Center of NJ in Summit. Apart from coordinating all these field trips, guest speakers also came to the arts academy, such as a New Jersey City University classically trained guitar professor for master classes and performances, and a Shakespeare drama troupe for drama and English students. Although the academy could have had many more speakers, the district's requirement for guests is stringent, time-consuming, and requires board approval.

All of these activities were important for what Bolman and Deal (2003) describe as the symbolic frame that sets the culture of the school for all stakeholders, especially the students. The arts committee was "rebuilding with symbols, myth and magic" (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 15) in all of these rituals, ceremonies, and activities. Right away, students became involved, volunteered for community service in the artistic activities, went to try-out sessions for productions, signed up for field trips, organized bulletin board displays with teachers, and became actively involved in their school.

Despite the changing culture and the hard work by many in the arts committee, there were some arguments between team members, and diva-like attitudes by others. Some teachers were frustrated that there were not enough resources, such as newer musical instruments, choir robes, updated curtains for the stage, enough quality paints, and so on. One of the music teachers actually felt his ideas were not being acknowledged in this committee. I reminded him that he also had to actively listen as well. In this case, the music teacher had a task fixation and power struggle (Stowell & Mead, 2007), because he constantly discussed the same issue of lack of resources. As a team, we tried to be flexible, inclusive, and to reach consensus. We did so many times. But, several staff members, like the music teacher, did not move on the way they should have, and I was not there the following year to push him and a few others in the right direction.

The number of freshman who participated in all of these arts committee activities was not collected due to the nature and variety of the arts programs. As vice-principal, I knew that *all* of the visual arts freshman participated in the Visual Arts Center master classes. Other visual arts teachers recruited their freshman to paint the murals. The choir, dance, drama, and guitar teachers purposely involved their freshman in field trips, master classes, school productions, and other activities. Nevertheless, in future data collection in Cycle III, freshman students would be asked the extent of their participation in the various artistic activities of the school. This type of involvement addresses social-emotional adjustment that all freshmen need. Because freshmen students stress about fitting into a group and making new friends (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Cohen & Smeardon, 2009) being involved in a fun school arts activity can be the springboard for



healthy high school relationships. All of these activities developed by the arts committee additionally served to fill the gap of an arts class for freshman.

In the next cycle of data collection, I would ask arts teachers, in a focus group, to discuss their ideas on how to continue the arts committee work within the school and with the community. I would ask them how these arts academy activities can be better articulated into the middle schools to provide an informed transition into the arts academy. Ironically, the music teacher who was an ineffective team member in the arts committee went to the gifted and talented middle school with his band students to recruit future students and demonstrate the activities of the school band. These types of venues need to continue collaboratively to ensure maximum exposure of the arts program to the transitioning ninth grade student.

**Vision committee.** To continue to facilitate the school into a positive culture and ground all the activities, projects, decisions, actions, and planning of the school, I found it necessary to begin a Vision Steering Committee in January of 2010. I wanted to make sure that all community members, including the freshman and all students, understood what the school stood for and what it valued.

Many of the ideas for this committee came from reading Kotter's (1996) book on change efforts and Linda Nathan's inspiring book on turning around an urban high school (2009). Putting together the ideas of these two authors, I believed that the school's vision should not become a formal statement of where we are going, but rather we should develop a vision as a set of values and beliefs for all to live by.



From the very beginning of this committee work, we set meeting norms and discussed what we felt was student success. I wanted to focus the staff on what made *students successful*, not just what the teachers needed to be successful in the school.

In the first meeting on January 21, 2010, the group collaboratively established meeting norms, which included one person talking at a time, being open-minded about all aspects, allowing “Vegas” like discussions, being on time, taking turns for lunch, and understanding that these meetings were a safe haven for anything. This feeling of engendering trust was important to me to enable honest discussions and to avoid a groupthink (Janis, 1971) mentality. In this manner, we began our discussion on how did we define student success. Table 5.4 illustrates my field notes on what the committee members articulated about student success.

Table 5.4

*Vision Committee: What is Student Success?*

| Respondent | Definition of success             |
|------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1          | Need to be autonomous             |
| 2          | Success in academics and the arts |
| 3          | Maintain a set of standards       |
| 4          | Accountable; learn to balance     |
| 5          | Cope; solve personal problems     |
| 6          | Strive for excellence             |
| 7          | Improvement                       |
| 8          | Setting realistic goals           |
| 9          | Setting career goals              |

The student success statement became the following: students are successful when they are autonomous, succeed in both academics and the arts, meet and maintain high standards, respect themselves as well as others, learn how to balance, cope and solve problems, strive for excellence, show improvement in their learning, set realistic objectives and follow career goals instead of job goals. This statement was incorporated into the school's professional development plan. This question alone could have kept the committee busy for an entire year or more.

With this articulated list, we then decided in our next meeting of February 2, 2010 to answer the question: *Where do we see our school in two, five or ten years from now?* Again, the purpose of these questions was to begin a dialogue of our thoughts on education and our school.

This last discussion began with an idea to work backwards and to look at ourselves 10 years from now. When teachers are given a free reign to construct their wish lists, they really begin to think outside of the box. Teachers articulated on how the arts academy schedule might look like, curriculum areas, collaboration, and school mission. The committee members' comments are described in Table 5.5.

After we discussed at length about the future of the academy, I brought the group back to this next question: *What can we realistically do in the next two years, to begin to move towards these dreams?* The answer that we collaborated on was to simply create the proper environment for academic and artistic success. We would do this with proper materials including textbooks, realistic plans, different levels of artistic programs, consistent discipline policies, more rigorous teaching and learning, and a safe school.

Table 5.5

*Vision Committee's View of the Future*

| Focus Area                    | Teacher Comments   |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Scheduling                    | Our schedule was drastically overhauled.   |
| Collaborative decision-making | We are autonomous and can make our own decisions as a school.  |
| Scheduling                    | In the afternoons, the arts academy has the technical classes (referring to dance, music, etc.) and in the morning all students are in their academic classes. |
| Scheduling                    | There was time in the schedule for upperclassmen to prepare for college acceptances.   |
| Curriculum                    | Dance is now considered a requirement for physical education classes. Studio lessons were provided.  |
| Curriculum                    | Students were in a rigorous program, and if not doing well, they were on probation.  |
| Scheduling                    | Students majored in an arts program and minored in one as well.  |
| School Mission                | In ten years students were doing what they actually came here to do.   |
| School Mission                | There is a higher requirement to be <i>accepted</i> into the academy and to <i>exit</i> the academy.   |

In our next committee meeting on February 19, 2010, I asked the members to read Kotter's (1996) chapter 5 of *Leading Change* that discusses developing a vision and strategy. The guided questions for this meeting included: *What do you think is the most important thought in the chapter? Why is vision essential for this academy? What are*

*elements of an effective vision? What is not vision? Where do we begin?* Both the chapter reading and the guided questions were sent to committee members beforehand. From my field book and notes, the comments made by the teachers in this meeting are shown in the following table.

Table 5.6

*Vision Committee: What is Vision For This Academy?*

| Respondent | Definition of success   |
|------------|---|
| 1          | The vision needs to be articulated easily; it is tangible, dense, brief and doable. |
| 2          | Everyone has a vested interest in the vision.                                       |
| 3          | Goals are feasible and realistic.   |
| 4          | Vision is also challenging.   |
| 5          | We need to take baby steps; meet the students where they are at.                    |
| 6          | We need to provide incentives and positive reinforcement.                           |
| 7          | We need a process first and then a product. We need to crawl first.                 |
| 8          | We need student representation in vision-making.                                    |
| 9          | It should be concrete to save us time and energy.                                   |

These were all profound statements that continued to encapsulate how we saw ourselves. We discussed these at length. At one point, Mary stated that we all needed to find the video segment or book by Daniel Pink entitled *A Whole New Mind*, which discusses the way we will all work in the future. Mary said that the main premise of the book was that it is important to be a *creative thinker* to get ahead. She stated that this is what she thinks we are trying to do at the arts academy. Because of time, we decided to table this discussion for a future meeting to enable us to complete our vision-making work.

Our agenda for the next meeting of April 19, 2010 was the same as the previous meeting agenda. We continued our discussion on where we would be in two, five or 10 years from now. This time I made a chart and directed the committee members to speak concretely on how the organization would look like in the future as well as the students and staff. We were only able to discuss several items in our 45-minute meeting. Under organization, the teachers said, “there is structure visible from the outside,” “hallways are clear,” “there is a dress code,” “there is school spirit – a mascot.” Under the student category, teachers said, “there would be assemblies for each artistic strand separately,” and “there would be uniforms.” Even though the list promised to be interesting, we were not able to complete this chart together because of all the discussions that ensued. At this point, I realized that vision-making would take much longer than I had thought. Even though Kotter (1996) warns against rushing the development of a vision, I wanted to make sure we had something tangible by the end of the year to give to the school community and all our students. It was to be a place-holder, a *work in progress vision*, to guide the incoming ninth graders as they made their decision to come to the arts academy. As I was thinking about this, our superintendent gave the high school administrators a book to read by Linda Nathan. I started to read Nathan’s book and was inspired by her values work with the steering committee in her urban high school. With these ideas, I had my agenda set for our meeting on June 3, 2010.

Our primary task for the June Vision Committee meeting was to identify school values for our arts academy. For this meeting I also invited members of the school’s student council to participate in the values exercise. Our task in this final meeting was to identify five school values from a list (Appendix D). This focus allowed us to decide on

an initial list of values we thought encapsulated us as a school. The committee made sure to turn-key the values survey to all teachers, administrators, students (through the English classes) and other support staff (disciplinarians, security guards, secretaries, custodians, school nurse, social workers, and cafeteria staff). The five values that were selected by the majority of the surveyed participants in the school community were: *achievement, responsibility, creativity, knowledge and self-respect* or ARCKS, which became our acronym for our values. These results were communicated to the entire school on June 22, 2010. Our plan was to disseminate the values survey to parents in subsequent parent-teacher meetings, to build on the vision, and model the values of the arts academy. This plan did not evolve due to the reorganization that took place in the district. All three administrators, including myself, were moved out of the school, and the position of vice-principal was also eliminated throughout the district. The school began to operate with only a principal. There were at this time no vice-principals or disciplinarians in the arts academy, which constituted a reduction of five key staff members in this school.

When I sent the final notice for our last vision meeting, the rumors that all vice-principals were leaving had already become a reality in a May 13, 2010 meeting with the superintendent. Yet in this memo, I wanted to convey a feeling of hope to the staff. I wrote, “Whatever the future brings at [school’s name], we need to continue on this positive path. If we have left capacity in our committee members to continue this good work, then we have reached a noble goal.”

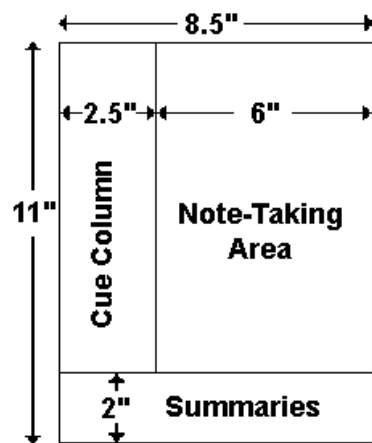
Some of these noble goals became a reality. The vision committee gave its members empowerment, responsibility, and confidence to continue the good work necessary for the school. Values became articulated and distributed to the entire school

community. The majority of the teachers remain in the same school as well as the students. The relationships developed under this change effort have created a core group of teachers who forge on and collaborate, plan, and continue work as usual. Many of these committee members are freshman *Seminarts* teachers who gather daily in the same PLC. In subsequent focus group meetings, I will meet with these teachers and ask them about the values and vision of the school and how these have been communicated for the transition of freshman into the arts academy.

## **Theme 2: Curriculum Issues**

The Success Seminar curriculum was written in the summer of 2009 by a group of district teachers under the direction of a vice-principal from another high school academy. This curriculum was to be used by four of the six district high school academies for their freshman (two gifted and talented academies do not offer this particular seminar class to their freshman). This new curriculum was not modified for the four career academies and their specific themes; technology, vocational education, arts, and leadership. Because of this new generic curriculum, there were no arts activities in the Success Seminar curriculum for the arts academy. As a leader in the arts academy, I remedied this omission with an arts addendum to the curriculum compiled in the few weeks before September of 2009. This addendum was quickly distributed to all the teachers of the Success Seminar program. Training was not offered because of the myriad of activities that all school personnel were involved in with the opening of four new academies. Inevitably, the Success Seminar curriculum proved to be a stumbling block because it was not geared to the students in the arts academy. Freshmen were experiencing a transitional seminar program without exposure to arts experiences.

**Focus groups and curriculum.** Most focus group teachers discussed the success of the Cornell-Note taking system in the curriculum. The Cornell System was designed by Walter Pauk at Cornell University. One of the most important features of the Cornell System is the layout of the page on which notes are taken. (The Cornell System for Note-Taking, n.d., p. 1). An illustration of the main components of the Cornell Note System is seen in Figure 4.



*Figure 4* A Sample Cornell Note System Page

The title is the topic of the lesson and is placed at the top center of the page. The left column, or cue column, holds clarifications, questions, vocabulary, diagrams, pages, and other resources for further study. On the bottom, the student always summarizes their notes of the right column for deep learning. Focus group one teacher Carl mentioned, “Cornell Notes helps them organize, because that’s one of the biggest things here, their organization and it’s a good method and kind of strengthened it.” Jolyn stated, “So I liked the fact that the Cornell Notes have, not just in Success Seminar, but has gone over to the other classes as well. So I would say this is one of the successes.” Her students told her,



We just want to say, we know we give you guys a hard time, but the reality is that we are learning a lot in this class. We use this in other classes, we try to remember, ok, Miss said to do the notes, or this is how we should deal with a peer.

Another Success Seminar curricular requirement is the binder system. This organizational system, as outlined in the curriculum (Ali et al., 2009, p. 12-13), requires freshman students to carry large binders with tabs for all their subjects. Binders are important because “a general lack of organization causes students not to be prepared for class, which in turn causes failing grades” (Gambill, Moss, & Vescogni, 2008, p. 8). Seminar teachers are required to periodically check the binders with all assignments, tests, and Cornell notes organized by subjects. Three teachers in the first focus group articulated on the binder system success for their freshman. Michael discussed that “90% of the kids are participating with that, bringing them in every day.” He later clarified in the focus group that,

well I was going to say ...that the biggest failure, if you asked me a couple of weeks ago was the notebook [binder]. And now, I think, that’s what makes the biggest success, that’s because they bought into it and they’re doing it.

Teacher Jolyn agreed with Michael, yet Juanita, a special education teacher stated “Not my group. I fight with them over their notebooks every week.” No teachers in the second focus group mentioned the binder system as a success. Yet teacher Julio, in group two, felt that students will realize later on “that we did help them with certain life skills.” For students to attain these skills, “teachers’ proactive role in their students’ organization is vital” (Gambill et al., 2008, p. 27).

Other curricular aspects were highlighted as major failures of this program. Several teachers described the Success Seminar activities as non-appropriate for high school students, not rigorous enough to grasp their attention, or not related to the content

subject or domain of the teacher. Carl felt that the organization of the activities in the curriculum, or pacing guide, was not correct. For example, he felt that in the second week of school, students had to develop a power point presentation on the cultures found in their city. Yet in the *second marking period*, a lesson appeared that showed students how to set up power point slides for presentation. Teacher respondent, Michael, also described the incorrect pacing guide when he stated,

We found that there was a lesson in the second week of school where they had to make a power point presentation – the cultural one, and then the second marking period, how to make a power point. It's like – that should have come first, if you put that before the first one, then our kids would say, Ok I see what that is.

This is a curriculum oversight that should have been addressed in its development.

Most focus group teachers are following the curriculum, but were not successful at all times due to poor initial training regarding the new program, innocuous lessons, and misplaced lessons in the pacing guide. John stated,

Some of the stuff that is in this curriculum is garbage. It's just filler, you know I am following the book [curriculum], like a good boy, you know what I mean, and I am doing this thing – time management – and I had to milk it. It's called handout number three – it's a three-day thing, and today was number three, and it was a fifteen minute assignment and they still had 15 minutes left over at the end.

For meaningful lessons that students can relate to, focus group teachers articulated that conflict resolutions skills and technology skills should be embedded in any new seminar curriculum. Other teachers proposed a longer staff training to mesh arts with success seminar skills, and to involve the arts teachers to write the new integrated curriculum.

There may be a disconnect in what teachers perceive are successful learning strategies from the curriculum and what is actually occurring in the classroom. According to the teachers in the focus groups and in the surveys, the main success of the program

was in the domain of organizational skills as described through the Cornell Note-Taking System and the binder system. Based on Cycle I findings of student achievement, 25 percent of the students failed this class in the 2009-2010 school year. A significant percentage of students were not successful with the binder system as seen in the district's data management system, Power School, even though the teachers articulated that this system was successful. For example, in the 2009-2010 school year, one Success Seminar teacher's class of 17 students received seven binder check grades, for a total of 119 possible binder grades. The breakdown in Table 5.7 illustrates these binder grades.

Table 5.7

*Binder Check Grades in One Success Seminar Class, 2009-2010*

| Academic Grade | Number of students who received a binder grade |
|----------------|--|
| 100            | 39   |
| Zero           | 17   |
| Failures       | 22   |
| Passing        | 41   |

Even though the majority of the grades given were passing grades ( $41+39=80$ ), some students in this class did not succeed in organizing their binders well and received low grades for this ( $17+22=39$ ).

In 2009-2010, teachers also widely differed in the amount of times they checked for binders. With approximately 40 weeks in a school year, the range of binder check grades given by teachers were from 0 to 31. There was a teacher that did not give any binder check grades at all (0)! Another teacher only gave two binder checks for the entire

school year. The curriculum calls for weekly binder checks and the teachers interpreted this requirement in different ways. There is a binder check rubric scaled from 1-5 in the curriculum. The use of this rubric was not evidenced in the database of reviewed grades. The curriculum also states that 30 percent of a student's grade in this class is derived through the organization of the binders. Table 5.8 illustrates the total number of binder grades given by 12 Success Seminar teachers with a total of 198 freshman students.

Table 5.8

*Binder Grades and Failures*

|                                       |       |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| Total no. of binder grades            | 2,096 |
| Total no. of students                 | 198   |
| Total number of binder grade failures | 459   |
| Percentage of binder failures         | 21.8% |

If a binder grade was given for each week of the 40 weeks in the school year in every class, there would have been 7,920 binder check grades. There are 5,824 binder checks missing in the database of this group of teachers retrieved by the researcher. It is not clear if these missing grades represent a failing grade for the students or a missed entry of a grade. Nevertheless, the missing number of grades for the binder system indicates that the teachers did not check binders every week, and when they did, they did not input grades for all students. The failure rate is reflected from the grades that *were recorded* for binder check review.

**Curriculum discussion.** There may be a disconnect between what the teachers say is a success of the program with what actually happened in the seminar classroom. What teachers note as a success may be associated with the *implementation* or delivery of several curricular items, but not necessarily student achievement of these items.

Consistency and assessments are areas of concern with the curricular aspect of this program. The lack of administrative accountability of the staff and of sustained professional development may have contributed to student failures.

### **Theme 3: Lack of Professional Development.**

In cycle activities, teachers stated that they were not well trained for teaching the Success Seminar curriculum in 2009-2010. On a volunteer basis in late summer of 2009, four arts academy teachers were trained in a 1-hour workshop with other high school academy teachers by an instructional coach. On November 12, 2009, the remainder of the Success Seminar teachers in the arts academy were trained by the English instructional coach during their duty period of 45 minutes. From this meeting teachers discussed four major areas: general concerns, sequence and content, binders, and projects. On the report sent to me on November 17, 2009 by the English instructional coach, Table 5.9 shows the breakdown of the teachers' concerns.

This workshop seemed to have excellent ideas generated by the seminar teachers. Yet, none of these points were taken any further and opportunities were lost. I was not able to attend this meeting because of other responsibilities. I had planned to facilitate teachers to rewrite the Success Seminar curriculum in the summer of 2010. That did not materialize due to the district reorganization mentioned earlier.

What this table showed was that teachers are genuinely concerned in doing a good job for their students. In the teacher surveys, most teachers agreed that more resources (87.5%, Q16), more professional training (100%, Q18 and 100%, Q33), and added computer lab time for projects (87.5%, Q17) were needed. Half of the teachers agreed that opportunities to share with colleagues (Q19) are important as well as time to collaborate for changes (75%, Q26). In focus group one, Jolyn stated that in the curriculum there “were a few that were literally on the college level and we would meet informally...some of the lessons were a little out there. It needs more of a balance, like not as elementary, like a nice balance for their age.”

In focus group one, Juanita team teaches with Carl, and they stated the following:

Teacher Respondent 5 [Juanita]: I think some of the activities are a little elementary, Mr. \_\_\_\_ [Carl] and I have talked about that. They have an EXCEL activity where you're supposed to hand them a bowl of M & M's and they had to code them by color, type all the colors in, and that's all they're doing with them, and then they ate the M & M's, and that was the whole gist of the project. I think you could have expanded that and what we did was we made them do a shopping list for Christmas and you know, find the best store, do your comparisons, and ...

Teacher Respondent 1 [Carl]: Average out who you're spending more money on, do a pie chart and you can see all the different aspects of EXCEL, even though I am not that familiar with it, at least, I knew a little more things than what they were asking. And the brochure project, brochure of NJ. What we did was took it and made it like one of our main goals to get our kids into college. So, what are the requirements of college, do a college brochure, do some research, get on the internet, make a college brochure, what are the requirements to get in, and showing them a goal to all the hard work that they're doing is to get to college. But, in college it's not just about books, and writing and everything else, there's more to it. You know, we – sports, what are the aspects besides, you know we did some of the curriculum stuff what's required to get in, and what majors they offer, but we also took, what is student life like, why would you want to go to this college besides the good academics and everything else.

Table 5.9

*Workshop teachers' concerns on Success Seminar*

| Category             | Concerns  |
|----------------------|---|
| General Concerns     | <p>Summarizing and paraphrasing skills need to be addressed</p> <p>All teachers need a hard copy of the curriculum</p> <p>Need brain-based research of efficacy of Cornell Notes to distribute to students</p> <p>Is it possible for school to purchase the program materials such as binders, dividers, makers, pens and pencils to sell cheaply to the students?</p>  |
| Sequence and Content | <p>Lesson 10(culture power point) should come after lesson 31 (creating a power point)</p> <p>The EXCEL lesson on M&amp;M's should delve deeper into the uses for EXCEL. Computer teacher offered some of his introductory lessons.</p> <p>Rubric for cultural activity is too vague. Coach and a history teacher will revise. Will be approved by vice-principal (Ms. Sanchez) and the seminar teachers.</p> |
| Binders              | <p>3-hole spiral note pads are acceptable for students and might make it easier for other teachers to check.</p>  |
| Projects             | <p>Holiday cards</p> <p>Band or choir should visit Trinitas (local hospital)</p>  |

Therefore, it seems that teachers understand that there is not enough rigor in some lessons and that in others, they need to collaborate with colleagues. Much of this could have been attended to before the course started in a quality professional development experience, and continued throughout the year in the professional learning communities or scheduled meetings.

An additional problem with training was that no guidance counselors were given an overview of this curriculum, and only one administrator (myself) attended a training session. This lack of professional development is systemic in this district where programs are initiated *before* adequate professional training and resources are provided.

#### **Theme 4: Arts versus Academics.**

Another theme that emerged from the data in this cycle's activities is the separation and distance from the arts programs with the core subjects in the school. This is considered a problem area based on what the literature states about successful high school career academies. Kemple & Snipes (2000) describe the integration of career curricula with high academic standards and professional development as a promising approach. In career academies, the separation of subjects or programs in formulaic departmentalized segments during the school day can no longer exist (Trybus, 1997) because they do not provide meaningful learning for the students and do not raise standardized test scores. There needs to be a connection to high-quality post-secondary learning and artistic career opportunities (Steinberg & Allen, 2002). Purposefully aligning academic standards and career industry standards (integrated curriculum) with the knowledge and skills tested on state assessments, is a step in the right direction.



At this arts academy thus far, these opportunities for integrated curriculum had been lost. As I began the arts committee in September of 2009, I invited anyone in the school community to participate. At first, there were three teachers who joined that were not in the arts department. Yet quickly, this committee was perceived as a group mainly for arts teachers. All the discussions and conversations dealt with the arts program and not with integration of academic subject curricula and the arts. After a while two non-arts teachers discontinued attending. The science teacher told me that she thought it would be a different type of committee. The special education teacher stated that she was too busy involved in the parent-teacher organization, the professional development committee, and the social committee, and dropped out after the second meeting. The French teacher did stay on and was pivotal in many arts activities throughout the year, especially the coffee houses. I did not realize it at the time, but having an arts committee with mostly arts teachers feeds into the academy's systemic problem of a division between the arts component and the academic subjects in this academy.

In the year-long arts calendar, the language arts department trips, featured guests regarding Shakespeare's plays for English students, world language performances and trips, the forensics competitions and trips, and the technology department's trip were all included and subsequently posted on the website. The reason for this is because I made sure they were added; the arts committee members did not discuss these events. There remained a big divide between the activities of the arts committee and the activities within and outside of the school of the academic subjects. The only suggestion of integration was the dance teacher's recital by her students for Black History Month. Yet she did not collaborate with any history teacher to plan this production.

A similar disconnect occurred in the Vision Steering Committee that I began in January of 2010. Initially there were two math teachers, and three language arts teachers that were part of this committee with three guidance counselors and four arts teachers. After this initial meeting, one English teacher dropped the committee because she said she was an AP English teacher and she was too busy preparing her students for this challenging exam. Another math teacher also dropped without a reason, but this teacher was eventually let go as a teacher in the district. The other math teacher did stay on, but I later learned that he might have stayed on for other reasons. In June of 2010, he asked me for notes and agendas of this committee to submit as evidence of a project for his graduate studies in school administration. One of the English teachers that continued on this committee also taught the creative writing elective course, which is one of the arts strands in this academy. None of these academic subject teachers took on an active role in the arts activities of the school.

Additionally, there was quite a bit of excitement after the Open House on November 18, 2009. Yet the role of the academic teachers was minimal. They offered praise to the committee and the administrators on a job well done. But, it needed to be also *their job*; their input was needed to make the arts academy successes, their success as well.

## Cycle II Findings Summary

Cycle II attempted to involve the arts academy teachers in a variety of activities to articulate their perceptions, feelings, concerns, opinions, and suggestions for the Success Seminar freshman transitional program. The teachers expressed their thoughts openly, without reservation and with a sincere belief for changes and modifications of the seminar program. The findings of all the data retrieved from these activities point to interesting information that informed the next cycle of data retrieval in this action research study. Teachers were most concerned about scheduling problems, the Success Seminar curriculum, and the lack of quality, sustained professional development. Through informal actions within these activities, another alarming theme that emerged was the continued disconnect between the arts teachers and the academic subject teachers.

First and foremost, the teachers were concerned that in the 2009-2010 there were no arts classes for freshman. They also stated in focus groups, surveys, and committee meetings that their students were upset about this fact and that the academy missed a chance to anchor the freshman right away in a positive social-emotional experience in high school. Teachers also expressed concern for students who did not want to be in the arts academy, and did not audition to attend the academy. They were placed there due to low enrollment numbers. Teachers felt that an alternate program for these students should be planned and structured.

From the data, teachers felt that there were parts of the Success Seminar curriculum that were not relevant for high school freshman. Some lessons were deemed simplistic or out of sequence in the pacing guide. Teachers were especially concerned

with the lack of professional development or training of this curriculum and of the lack of resources to implement lessons. They would like to regularly meet with their seminar colleagues to exchange ideas on the delivery of lessons.

Teachers also articulated successes of this freshman transitional program. They pointed out that the Cornell Note-Taking System and the curriculum's binder system were a success. The reality is that according to the majority of binder check grades for seminar freshman students, there was a problem with teacher implementation with many missing or failing grades for this component. It is not clear whether teachers understand that this is a necessary organizational tool to be assessed weekly. Teachers may have believed they only had to present the binder system successfully, regardless if the students complied. These ideas could be tied to their perception of success in the program and not if their students actually organized their binders correctly week after week.

The Cornell Note-Taking System was deemed successful as well. This way of taking notes ensures understanding of what was learned and provides an organized retrieval of information for tests and quizzes. Yet the number of students who failed the Success Seminar class in the 2009-2010 was 74 out of 300, or 24%, and the number of freshman failures that year was 103 out of 300, or 34.3%. Again it is not clear why teachers feel the Cornell Notes system was successful in seminar, and this information will also be discussed in focus groups in Cycle III.

Both the Arts Committee and the Vision Steering Committee did have measurable outputs that showed that the teachers worked effectively and collaboratively as teams. Many activities were planned and executed, and a feeling of collegiality and worth was evidenced. Teachers felt empowered that they had a venue where their voices were heard

(Katzenbach & Smith, 2002). Their plans included visiting the eighth grades in the district for dissemination of information regarding the arts academy, and continuing the collaboration of the various arts performances and activities in the academy. In the Vision Committee, a core group of educators emerged as the group that will affect second-order change through a school-wide vision as the academy evolves.

In conclusion, there was a clear articulated voice emanating from the teachers in data retrieved in Cycle II. Most teachers want to continue the seminar experience for freshman if the curriculum changes, students are grouped correctly, an alternate class is provided for unmotivated arts students, training and professional development is provided, and teachers can meet regularly as a group to exchange ideas about the program. In Cycle III, other areas explored became how to structure arts committee meetings and activities, how to provide information to the feeder middle schools in a practical and effective way, how to ensure scheduling of freshman students is accurate based on their artistic interests and motivation in the arts, how to effectively evaluate the different components of the curriculum and rewrite the portions that are not working well, how to begin the process of integration of the arts and academic components, and how to continue to provide the vision of the school in a volatile and changing school and district environment.

## Chapter VI

### Cycle III - Seminarts

The purpose of Cycle III was to examine the effectiveness of the new freshman transitional program called *Seminarts* that began in the fall of 2010. The program came into effect because of the omission of an arts class for freshmen the previous school year with many objections by freshmen and their arts teachers. Students especially voiced their disappointment regarding this oversight. Many of them had auditioned to be accepted into the arts academy and were not offered an arts class as freshmen. The freshmen schedule left no room for an elective the previous year due to two district requirements: a World Language class and a Success Seminar class. Upon discussion by school administrators with district personnel, the new *Seminarts* class for freshmen in the arts academy became a reality. In 2010-2011, the program was scheduled as a daily 90-minute block that offered a Success Seminar ninth grade transitional class with an arts class. The arts teachers taught this program, but a new curriculum was not created due to budget cuts and to the reorganization of the district that left the school without vice-principals and many teachers. Nevertheless, the teachers began the program infusing the seminar skills of the previous Success Seminar class with the arts curricula. In addition, to enable *Seminarts* in the freshmen schedule, the World Language class given to freshman in the past was postponed until the student's sophomore year. A typical freshman schedule for the 2010-2011 school year is illustrated in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1

*Typical Freshman Schedule in 2010-2011*

| Class Period | Subject                              |
|--------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1-2          | Blocked Language Arts Class          |
| 3-4          | Blocked Mathematics Class            |
| 5            | Lunch                                |
| 6            | Physical Education/Health Class      |
| 7            | Science                              |
| 8            | Social Studies                       |
| 9-10         | Blocked Success Seminar & Arts Class |

*Note: classes shown were the required classes for freshman in that school year. The classes were not all in the same periods shown for all freshman.*

This schedule change required me to meet with *Seminarts* teachers and derive how this changed freshman program was progressing. These data were gathered from a teacher focus group meeting that took place in November of 2010. I asked the teachers if there was an improvement between the one period Success Seminar transitional class of the previous year and the new *Seminarts* blocked program. Additionally, to view program implementation and understand the way teachers were approaching this blended curricula, I visited four *Seminarts* classrooms in January of 2011. Finally, a final teacher focus group was implemented in February of 2011 to assist teachers' in the development of an arts transitional action plan for the future.

To derive data of the *Seminarts* program from the student perspective, I also conducted student surveys in December of 2010 and freshmen focus groups in February

of 2011. Students were the main reason we incorporated an arts program with seminar skills in 2010-2011. I wanted to hear from students what they were learning, what they thought about *Seminarts*, and what they needed to be successful. I also compared student academic growth in two different transitional programs. I examined freshman student achievement data from the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years. All of the activities for teachers and for students constituted the extent of triangulated data for each group as illustrated in Table 6.2

Table 6.2

*Teacher and Student Cycle III Activities 2010-2011*

| Month     | Teacher Activity   |
|-----------|--|
| September | <i>Seminarts</i> Implemented   |
| November  | <i>Seminarts</i> Teacher Focus Group   |
| January   | <i>Seminarts</i> Classroom Field Observations  |
| February  | Final <i>Seminarts</i> Teacher Focus Group   |
| Month     | Student Activity   |
| December  | <i>Seminarts</i> Freshman Surveys  |
| February  | <i>Seminarts</i> Freshman Focus Groups   |
| February  | Analysis of <u>Success Seminar</u> Achievement Data 09-10 SY and <u><i>Seminarts</i></u> Achievement Data 10-11 SY |



## Cycle III Teacher Activities

### Seminarts

The new freshman *Seminarts* blocked program was instituted as a direct result of an omission of a structured arts program for freshman in the 2009-2010 school year. Administrators, teachers, and students agreed that arts academy students needed to experience an arts program right away. This would also give validity to the students' auditions to enter the academy and begin to systematically expose students to their artistic interest. Because the Success Seminar program had to remain in the freshman schedule as a district requirement, it was decided by the administrators to offer both programs in a blocked structure with arts teachers.

Our goal was to give *Seminarts* a new code distinct from other academies to help in the recruitment and placement of new ninth graders and allow for blocked program activities. In the schedule for 2010-2011, both the Success Seminar portion of the block and the freshman arts class were listed separately in the master schedule. As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, the district computer technicians did not want to create a new class code for this arts blocked program. The reason for this was the same class code was given to Success Seminar in four of the six high school academies (the exception were the two gifted high school academies with separate freshmen programs). The technology department did not want to assign a different code to a seminar class in the arts academy even if it was becoming a blocked program. This issue was not pressed further due to the reorganization and ensuing chaos in the last months of that school year. As will be seen in Cycle III data, this minor coding issue caused many students to be scheduled incorrectly.

As the new blocked program was being scheduled by the other vice-principal of the arts academy in the spring of 2010, I was trying to come up with a suitable name for this blocked class. My daughter, a doctoral science student in North Carolina who loves to play on words, came up with a solution. She suggested the union of the Success Seminar class with the arts class in the name and coined the term *Seminarts*. As I articulated this new name in meetings during the scheduling process and with teachers in the building, the name persisted and the program now had a unique identity.

On paper, the program was still called Success Seminar followed by the arts class (in most cases). In reality, these two adjoining classes were the *Seminarts* blocked program. As explained earlier, the name change and program code unique to the arts academy never occurred. The schedule did include all the *Seminarts* programs at the same periods in the school day to allow for teacher collaboration of artistic activities and professional learning community (PLC) meetings. This also accommodated for curriculum discussions, audition and rehearsal preparations, student and parent meetings, and interdisciplinary planning of student activities. The schedule also enabled freshmen class projects, field trips, and other activities to be planned. Yet some scheduling errors with *Seminarts* occurred. As seen in Table 6.3, special education students were not blocked into *Seminarts*. They did have the Success Seminar class but no arts class due to their study skills class. When I discussed this with the other vice-principal who developed the schedule, she mentioned the district restructuring did not enable her to finish the schedule on time. She had contacted the head of the child study team who would adjust the schedule as needed in the summer of 2010, but apparently this was not done. Apart from the special education students with no *Seminarts*, one of the chorus teacher's classes

was also *not blocked* with a seminar class. These choir students did not have the *Seminarts* program as well.

Table 6.3

*Seminarts Teachers' Schedule - 2010-2011*

| Period | Class/ Course Code         | Arts Strand of Teacher |
|--------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| 3      | Success Seminar – N007     | T.V. Production        |
| 4      | T.V. Production I – N103   | T.V. Production        |
| 3      | Success Seminar – N007     | Visual Arts            |
| 4      | Drawing/Painting I – N610  | Visual Arts            |
| 3      | Success Seminar – N007     | Band                   |
| 4      | Concert Band I – N682      | Band                   |
| 3      | Success Seminar – N007     | Visual Arts            |
| 4      | Photography I – N615       | Visual Arts            |
| 3      | Success Seminar – N007     | Guitar                 |
| 4      | Guitar I – N660            | Guitar                 |
| 3      | Success Seminar – N007     | Drama                  |
| 4      | Drama I – N636             | Drama                  |
| 3      | Success Seminar – N007     | Dance                  |
| 4      | Dance I – N631             | Dance                  |
| 3      | Success Seminar – N007     | Chorus                 |
| 4      | Chorus I – N662            | Chorus                 |
| 3      | Success Seminar – N007     | Drama                  |
| 4      | Drama I – N636             | Drama                  |
| 3      | Success Seminar – N007     | Creative Writing       |
| 4      | Creative Writing I – N058  | Creative Writing       |
| 3      | Success Seminar – N007     | Chorus                 |
| 4      | Teacher Duty (not blocked) | Chorus                 |
| 3      | Success Seminar – N007     | Special Education      |
| 4      | Teacher Duty (not blocked) | Special Education      |

## Teacher Focus Groups

I met with five *Seminarts* teachers in a two-hour after school focus group on November 23, 2010. All 12 *Seminarts* teachers were invited but due to after school activities and other reasons, only five teachers were able to attend. I scheduled the focus groups purposefully after the school day to accommodate the teachers' new added discipline and attendance responsibilities in the school. I also wanted the respondents to speak freely without time constraints or other interruptions. All focus group respondents were arts teachers and previous members of last year's Vision Committee. The group constituted teachers of drama, dance, TV production, and visual arts. The focus group interview questions can be found in Appendix E.

An important fact to add here is the district's massive restructuring process that eliminated the position of vice-principals and disciplinarians for all schools, several arts academy guidance counselors, and many teachers. There was widespread discontent and I did not want this focus group to become a gripe session regarding these issues. I began our discussion with a statement thanking teachers for their participation and immediately focusing the group on this year's freshman *Seminarts* blocked class with a prepared preamble to the questions (Appendix E). After this introduction, I asked the teachers to peruse two separate documents. They included two separate June, 2010 student achievement tables and student survey comments from the spring of 2009. The purpose of presenting these tables and survey results before the focus group began was to provide the group with a knowledge base on the reality of students' achievement results. The group was then asked to respond to prepared focus questions (Appendix E).

On February 18, 2011, I met with the same five teachers in a final focus group after school. A guidance counselor, instructional coach, and the newly appointed vice-principal of the arts academy were invited, but they were not able to attend. The purpose of this final meeting was to bring a sense of closure to the data on *Seminarts* and to begin to facilitate the group into planning for future transitional programs. I wanted to facilitate the group to develop an action plan that they would be able to use regardless of the changes in the school.

I developed a series of six overarching questions that the staff answered in a written format due to time constraints. Respondents did not have to sign the answer sheets; it was up to them to include their name voluntarily. We then proceeded to discuss their written comments. Their responses were direct, realistic and reflected the best interest of freshman students. Armed with this information, the teachers would create a freshman transitional action plan to present to all stakeholders.

### **Classroom Field Observations**

*Seminarts* classrooms were visited on Friday, January 5, 2011. I observed the dance *Seminarts* teacher's class who collaborated with the TV production *Seminarts* teacher, as well as the two drama *Seminarts* teachers who were also working together that day. Since each of these four teachers had their own blocked program, I was able to observe four *Seminarts* programs in total. The *Seminarts* freshman transitional program was scheduled at the same blocked periods daily. This allowed for teacher collaboration of student activities. This collaboration was clearly evidenced in the observations of these four *Seminarts* programs. In an arts school, this is not unusual. During student productions, students work together in their specific arts strands, and usually rehearse all

together in the auditorium. This collaboration is an opportunity for rich integrated exposure of many aspects in the arts if it is planned and structured correctly. Issues that emerged from this fieldwork included student movement between classes, a lack of structured coordination of activities, and the low level of student engagement in the classes.

### **Analysis of Cycle III Teacher Activities**

Themes that emerged from the data of Cycle III activities were similar to Cycle II areas of concern. They included: scheduling issues and teacher collaboration, curriculum issues, middle school students' recruitment into the arts academy, and bridging the gap between the arts and the academics. An additional theme emerged which involved the lack of accountability, monitoring, or evaluation of the freshman transitional program due to changes in the district and school administrative staff. Each will be described in this chapter.

#### **Theme I: Scheduling.**

The scheduling of freshman in the new *Seminarts* transitional program was seen as a major problem again by the teachers. If the students were placed correctly in their chosen strand and in both parts of the blocked program, the program ran smoothly. In the November teacher focus group, respondent one had the most comments on successes of the *Seminarts* program. This drama teacher stated that there was a big difference between this year and last year because all her *Seminarts* students were drama students. This indicated that the students were scheduled correctly within their chosen strand. She mentioned that her students were thrilled because they auditioned and were picked by the panel to attend the arts academy. Students also saw a friendly face as they entered the

school because this teacher was one of the panel members in the auditions. These freshman drama students felt a connection and pride right away as they began their high school experience.

Another scheduling success discussed by the teachers included a collaborative effort every Friday between the two drama teachers and their *Seminarts* students. Both teachers taught this program at the same time (an intended schedule factor), so they decided to work together on multiple projects on Fridays. Besides collaboration in the classrooms, *Seminarts* teachers had common professional learning community time to plan and discuss activities as well. This was also built into the schedule for the school year.

This intended teacher and lesson collaboration was evidenced in classroom field observations conducted in January of 2011. I first visited the dance teacher in her classroom studio. Sixteen freshman *Seminarts* students were standing around in small groups quietly talking to each other. A group of five female students had their coats on. The *Seminarts* blocked program had just begun, and the teacher was coordinating which students had to go over to the TV production studio to rehearse their commercial. This was the collaborative project between the dance teacher and the TV production teacher– a TV commercial. Apparently, half of the dance *Seminarts* students were already at the TV studio. There was no evidence of objectives in the classroom and the lesson plan was not offered for review.

The dance teacher kept asking students if they had completed their commercial or if they still had to work on it. This teacher asked three students to go to the TV studio to retrieve a camera with footage that she took earlier. She politely told another student

“Ashley, please put your phone away,” and the student complied. Teacher then told two male students to head off to the TV studio to watch footage. Even though the TV studio is on the same floor and around the corner from the dance studio, none of the students were given a corridor pass. There were also two other female students texting on their cell phones that were not told to put them away. The teacher then finished taking attendance on her computer. At this point, there were 11 students in the dance studio. Class started at 9:12 a.m. and at 9:30 a.m. six students were told to stay in the studio and practice. It was not clear why three students were walking in and out at different intervals. The teacher then took the rest of the students and walked over to the TV studio. Students who remained in the dance studio were left unattended. This teacher spoke briefly to a female security guard on hall duty to keep an eye on the dance students from her position.

Upon entering the TV studio, the dance teacher spoke briefly with the TV production teacher, directed some of her students to stay, and returned to the dance studio. I remained at the TV studio at this point. Several students began moving around to different areas of the studio and settling in. Others were constantly moving around. At one point the TV studio teacher said loudly, “How many times do I have to tell you to not sit on my stuff.” The number of students counted as idle and not doing anything were approximately 25. In groups or on their own, these students were either in the camera room area waiting to begin, in the editing room or green screen area waiting for instructions, in the main studio area without direction, or talking about the Giants, a student’s tattoo, and sleeping. Several other small groups of students were constantly walking back and forth. I was following the teacher around to the different studio areas and she kept saying that “this group is good, they’ll get it done.” She then began working



with another group that entered late to this class. She helped them choose a background of a red carpet on a computer program that the students needed to select.

After a time, a student in the green screen area said she was too shy to have the cameramen in there with her, so they moved themselves to the control room and filmed her from in there. I did not see any filming because I went out to the main area to understand the tasks that students had to complete. There was a large amount of student movement in the TV studio.

In terms of supplies, there is state-of-the-art equipment and room distribution in the TV studio. There are nine framed movie posters flanking the corridor to the control room. In the main room there is a newly installed starboard, two regular bulletin boards with news and notes, and a whiteboard with storyboard information. The main room also houses long student tables and chairs, storage cabinets and the teacher's station with her computer. Two separate closets and an office are in the back of the TV studio with an additional exit area. This studio seems well planned with expensive equipment. Because of the expense of this studio the teacher is careful to take care of the area and its equipment. For a second time she affirmed, "How many times do I have to tell you to get off that table?"

The dance teacher appeared and went to the editing room while students sat around. Because of the mix-up of the schedule, several students came in, and other students left during the second part of the *Seminarts* block. The TV studio teacher mentioned that there is a senior scheduled for the second half of this freshman *Seminarts* program. As the first part of the blocked program ended, both teachers were discussing an activity to recruit the eighth graders. The dance teacher left at the beginning of the second

part of the block to rehearse in the auditorium with her dance students for an upcoming dance recital.

The other two classes observed involved the two drama teachers who also collaborated together. During the second half of the *Seminarts*, the dance teacher, as mentioned, came to the theater with her dance students to rehearse. According to one of the drama teachers, 45 students in the audience were writing a critique of the rehearsal as part of their assignment. They were respectful and watching the performances. There were 15 students on stage performing their dance routines with the dance teacher at the right lower part of the stage. The other two drama teachers were circulating in the auditorium. Most students had a notebook and writing utensils; others did not. No lesson plans were offered during this field observation.

During this fieldwork, time and opportunities for students to be actively engaged in their role was not seen during collaboration. Dance students working in the TV studio were many times idle and not actively engaged in the assignment. TV production students were waiting around without enough direction from their teacher. This may have occurred because the structure of the activities was not planned ahead of time by both teachers during their professional learning community time. Structure should have been planned with simple accountability procedures, such as a clipboard for students to sign in with their ID numbers at each station. All dance, TV production, and drama students should have been working on a prepared worksheet given to them by their teacher that indicated their daily work on the project. Dance students also needed to work on their craft while they shot their commercials. At no time should there have been a disconnect with the *Seminarts* class and the arts strand that the students were enrolled in. Without the

lesson plan or evidence of the objectives of the commercial, it is difficult to ascertain if the dance objectives were met. Structure in *Seminarts* needed to be focused on standard-based relevant objectives and activities to engage students in their learning. Structure should have also been seen in effective collaboration between teachers. In the absence of this, many students may find that the program has no meaning for them or is a waste of time.

The two drama teachers had more structure built into their Friday *Seminarts* collaboration, yet from the fieldwork it looked like a day off for students and teachers. No rubric was evidenced for the dance critique assignment. This critique activity was hastily prepared due to the urgency of the dance rehearsal for an upcoming recital. Yet, structure, consistency, and active student engagement are paramount in providing meaningful activities for freshman.

Even with this opportunity for collaboration, a major failure seen by the focus group teachers was the incorrect scheduling of students into *Seminarts* in the 2010-2011 school schedule. Some of the freshman students did not stay for the entire block of this program. They attended the first half and then they left and went to another class. Scheduling mishaps also included older students who were scheduled for half of the *Seminarts* program. They were attending the arts component of the program and not the Success Seminar portion. Teachers noted that it was very difficult to have continuity and to follow the curriculum with all these students changing classes.

This scheduling error was directly connected to what the district computer room personnel told the arts administrators last year. They said we could not create a blocked program with a new code in the district database that supported the schedule. As stated

earlier, the arts academy administrators wanted to create a *Seminarts* block with a *new assigned code* for the course. Since the Success Seminar freshman transitional class with the same class code already existed in three other academies in the district, the district computer programmers recommended that this not be altered. Therefore in the arts freshman schedule, the Success Seminar class, with its own code, was seen followed by an arts class, also with its own code, as back-to-back classes. It was not called *Seminarts* even though the arts teachers taught both sections. What occurred was that the guidance counselors placed other students (not freshman) into the arts component of this block because they needed an arts class or an elective to fill in their schedule. Additionally, some freshman left after the Success Seminar portion of the block because their counselors placed them in a needed math class or some other required class.

These scheduling problems could have been attended to if the vice-principals were still in the arts academy. Vice-principals were the predominate creators of the school schedule in the high school academies in this district. Since all the vice-principals were no longer in the district, the schedule was not able to be adjusted as these glitches occurred. However, there was one minor success. In the arts academy, the vice-principals (including myself) did specify to the computer room that all entering ninth graders be identified by their arts strand, which included: vocal music, guitar, band, piano, drama, dance, visual arts, TV production, and creative writing. In 2010-2011, this enabled most freshmen to be scheduled correctly into their arts strands even if not all were scheduled into the blocked *Seminarts* program.

To add to this “the scheduling nightmare” (a phrase coined by Respondent Five in the November focus group) a state budget problem also affected the 2010-2011 arts

program for freshman. Beginning in early spring of 2010, a dream schedule was developed for 2010-2011 that included all the teachers needed for an effective arts program and for reduction of class size in the classrooms. This tentative dream schedule included more dance and music teachers that were seen as open positions in the schedule. When the budget cuts were announced, the students that were originally scheduled into these open teacher's classrooms were folded into any arts class at that specific time period. Little consideration was placed on the students' arts strand and where they properly belonged. The result was that the dance teacher had no dance students including those that had auditioned in the summer for the dance program. These students were placed with the vocal music teacher instead. Respondent Three discussed this scheduling problem at length in the November focus group. This was unfortunate because these types of issues would have been resolved by the vice-principals in the summer and fall of 2010.

Respondent Five also articulated another scheduling problem. This teacher stated that student choice was ignored by the guidance counselors when they requested specific courses. Advanced arts classes existed, but some counselors placed upperclassman in whatever arts class was available that fit in their schedule. This teacher was particularly concerned because she received a grant for advanced TV production students. Because counselors did not schedule these capable students in levels three and four of this arts strand, she was in danger of forfeiting the grant money. She stated that she had to fight for quite some time before these advanced students' schedules were adjusted properly.

Even with these identified program failures, teacher focus group respondents understood that there were remedies that could have been implemented to improve the

program. Besides fixing the freshman and advanced arts students scheduling errors, respondents discussed implementing a default freshman seminar program that would schedule unmotivated arts students. In this default class, students would get extra attention in social behaviors and skills for academic success. All teachers in the final focus group in February, 2011 recommended this default seminar class. One teacher stated that the “academic teachers should get the group that is unclassified [without a specific arts strand].” “Kids not interested in a strand should be put into a generic seminar class,” mentioned another respondent. A teacher added, “We need a default seminar for those who have not chosen a major.” Respondent Four joined in agreement when she remarked, “Students who are not interested in an art should be placed in a general seminar course that does not focus on an art form.”

In addition to this alternate program for some freshman, teachers in November also discussed an exploratory program where ninth graders could sample all of the arts programs in three semesters and experience the seminar program in one semester. In order to institute this, all freshman arts teachers would have their freshman class at the same time so that students could easily change their class each semester. Respondents felt that, in this way, students would make a better judgment on which arts strands they were most suited for and what they would be responsible for in the next three years. These suggestions supported the literature on transitions into high school. The most effective transitional programs meet the needs of the students and offer a *variety* of programs and activities to anchor freshman in high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Other scheduling issues placed the responsibility on guidance counselors to correctly schedule the auditioned students into their chosen arts strand, even if this meant

moving around the student's schedule. A focus group teacher, Jean, stated, "Auditions and guidance have to be integrated." Additionally Joy recommended guidance counselors ensure that students "pass the level one [class] in the strand to make it to level two." Two focus group teachers felt that a clear scope and sequence progression chart, with pre-requisites, was needed for each arts strand. This course sequence must be communicated clearly to students, parents, and counselors. In the absence of this chart, some counselors placed, for example, students who failed Drama 1 into Drama 2 the following year. Guidance counselors at the arts academy were invited many times to be a part of the focus groups, telephone interviews, or in written email responses. None of the arts academy guidance counselors complied with these requests.

A new twist was added in a final meeting of focus group teachers that occurred in February of 2011. The teachers mentioned there was a possibility of the removal of the blocked *Seminarts* program for the 2011-2012 school year in the arts academy. This change was under discussion due to the problems of not offering a World Language class for freshman. This was all in a planning stage and had not yet been finalized. With the arrival of three new administrators in this school on March 1, 2011, there was a possibility that they might be able to keep the *Seminarts* blocked program alive. Regardless of the outcome, the focus group teachers were not overly concerned. They were confident that they could successfully teach an infused arts and seminar class in 45 minutes, as opposed to 90 minutes, and still call it *Seminarts*.

## **Theme 2: Curriculum Issues.**

The new *Seminarts* curriculum had yet to be revised for the arts academy. The Success Seminar curriculum was written by district personnel in the summer of 2009 as a

generic curriculum for use in four of the six high school academies. From the very beginning of the program and this study, students and staff at the arts academy spoke clearly about various issues in this curriculum. As described earlier, due to district restructuring, changes in personnel, and budget cuts, the *Seminarts* curriculum had not become a reality.

Some teachers did approve of the old curriculum. A focus group teacher highly praised the seminar curriculum and discussed that it integrated well with drama and theater arts. She stated, that “by being able to use dramatic concepts or works to attack the topics, like stereotyping or note-taking, just everything that we touch on, we can use [a] dramatic base.” This respondent also attested to the validity of the *Seminarts* course. She noted,

It’s a really vital course for the kids in our community, and in the time period we’re living, to have some awareness – socially, politically, ethically – just it touches on necessary things that they’re not learning anywhere else.

She reiterated, that “*Seminarts* is a good idea for freshman.” In terms of curriculum changes, another teacher respondent spoke on how she modified a simplistic *Seminarts* lesson with added rigor and challenging activities for her high school students. The drama teacher also said she adjusted seminar lessons for her students as well.

Teachers in the final focus group believed that the freshman *Seminarts* curriculum should be written by the arts teachers. A teacher said, “It is imperative that this curriculum should be designed to incorporate arts with success seminar.” Joy stated that it should be a “broader curriculum with organization, creativity, social interaction, and ethics. These ideas can be interpreted in every strand of the arts.” She agreed, that “we need to write the curriculum so it works with the arts.” Jean had an interesting idea about



the curriculum that she felt could successfully infuse the arts and seminar skills. She said, “I think that using the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCCS) and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Career Skills should be the template to work from.” The following preamble is part of the NJCCCS for Arts Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The New Jersey Department of Education clarifies what the teacher respondent had said in the final focus group.

Creativity is a driving force in the 21st-century global economy, with the fastest growing jobs and emerging industries relying on the ability of workers to think unconventionally and use their imaginations. *The best employers the world over will be looking for the most competent, most creative, and most innovative people on the face of the earth ... This will be true not just for the top professionals and managers, but up and down the length and breadth of the workforce. ... Those countries that produce the most important new products and services can capture a premium in world markets.* (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007, p. 1, NJDOE)

### **Theme 3: Middle School Recruitment**

In the data retrieved in this cycle, teachers spoke of the continued need to effectively recruit students from the middle schools. The communication between the high school and middle schools was lacking. Teachers were aware of this and many times they felt they had good ideas that were not backed up by the new administrators. They spoke of the band teacher who prepared everything for a field trip to several middle schools. He took his advanced band students and went to several schools. The result was that he had a full band program this year in the arts academy. Focus groups teachers agreed with the band teacher but felt they were not fully supported by the school administrators and their new arts supervisor this school year.

Teachers in focus group one also had many recommendations regarding the recruitment of eighth graders into the academy and assisting them in the transition

process. Arts academy teachers would first visit all middle schools in a structured public relations program with a contingency of arts academy students. These students would accomplish this as a community service project which is a district requirement for graduation. An arts video (also developed by the TV production arts students) would be prepared to give to the eighth grade guidance counselors for further dissemination to students and their families. Eighth grade students would be invited to various artistic events in the arts academy throughout the year to experience programs that they would be involved in. Finally, other ideas included eighth graders traveling with high school students to venues such as art museums or arts festivals, middle school students involved in a student-run sidewalk chalk art contest during their Field Day, or a sponsored Arts Day at the arts academy for all district eighth graders.

To motivate eighth grade students in their high school decisions, teachers in focus group two discussed the need for setting guidelines in the different arts strands. Teachers spoke of “providing information regarding expectations” to prospective students so that they were aware of their artistic responsibilities. They also mentioned distributing videos to the guidance counselors in the middle schools. Sonia spoke of an informational video that could be played for parents and eighth grade students, and of “an instructional video [which] could be linked to the application process online.” In the final focus group, teachers mentioned that the TV production teacher and her students had completed an informational DVD to disseminate to the middle schools. They were just waiting for permission to distribute them. Additionally, Nellie spoke of sending DVDs of academy student performances to the middle schools so that prospective students can envision some of the activities they would be involved in.

Focus group one respondents also felt that the lack of student assemblies was a failure for the school, particularly for the incoming freshman. The TV production teacher mentioned that she “had a whole thing prepared and it was never shown.” It was “an elaborate video on how to get through the first week of school,” which seems like a valid transitional activity for incoming ninth grade students in their first year in the academy.

From focus group two, a teacher respondent described an open house that “allows for prospective students to tour the facilities and classes.” Nellie agreed with an “eighth grade orientation with performances and displays.” Nellie also volunteered Arts Days that “introduced the arts classes by bringing in eighth graders to take workshops or go to the eighth grade school and create workshops there.” Jean also mentioned a “hands-on parent night where parents are invited to do artistic activities with their children.”

Staff members gave innovative ideas on how to recruit middle school students into the arts academy. Yet this needed to be planned early. This year’s online application process was from February 9 to the 18<sup>th</sup>. Even though teachers had discussed in November’s focus group what needed to be done for recruitment, they did not follow through with their plans. Much of this inactivity was caused by the changes in administration and the feeling of alienation by the teachers. Teachers felt frustrated and spoke of these barriers. At the time of the final focus group, all applications for high school academies were closed and the time for eighth recruitment had passed.

#### **Theme 4: Arts and Academics.**

In Cycle III, a recurring theme re-emerged between academics and the arts in this career academy. A statement by focus group one respondent was surprising. It seems that there was a shifting student perception in the higher grades regarding a competing focus

of academics and the arts. A focus group respondent had approached a junior who was very active in the school musical and video production department for two years. The student was quoted as saying, “Listen, no offense, but I have classes that actually count, like English and History, and I have to do well in those classes. I can’t make much of an effort in my arts classes.” This student’s honest appraisal points to an alarming division in the arts academy between academics and the arts programs. The literature on career academies states that the most successful career academies successfully integrate core academics with career electives and programs (Kemple, & Snipes 2000; Maxwell, 2001).

There were recommendations from both focus group teacher respondents on how to bridge the gap between the academics and the arts in the academy. Project-based workshops were discussed as an effective method to bring together academic and arts teachers. They could continue as lesson plan “partners” throughout the year for cross-curricular lessons. All teachers in the academy can be surveyed to ascertain special interests or talents. They could share their talents or interests in planned professional development. A student-faculty musical was described that enables teachers to deeply understand the hard work and commitment associated with arts productions. One teacher mentioned that she had structured this in the past in another school and that teachers had very positive insights into this activity. Additionally, students became the experts to their academic teachers and were seen in a different light. Other similar activities were a student-faculty talent night, and field trips for all staff in the arts academy. This all needed to be articulated to ensure that freshman entering the school had future arts portfolios and strong academic transcripts throughout their high school experience for post-secondary goals.

## **Theme 5: Program Accountability.**

Throughout this cycle as evidenced in the data collected, many issues could have been resolved with a consistent administrative team that monitored the freshman transitional program. Major issues described in scheduling and curriculum could have easily been corrected and implemented. The number of retained freshman was a major area that needed to be addressed by the core group of leaders. A default class could have been scheduled with other programs for unmotivated students. In the second year of the academy, auditions for the 2011-2012 school year would have been completed or scheduled for March. Middle school arts articulation teams would have been approved as well as many arts field trips. The discussion of interrelated curriculum and workshops and activities to bridge the divide between arts and academics would have begun. Clubs would have started earlier, and professional learning communities and school committees would have continued. The pending World Language class for freshman for next year would have been collaboratively resolved by the core group of administrators with central office as well. This may sound utopian, yet in this district consistency has resulted in positive school culture with trust and opportunities for all stakeholders to be validated. Yet other forces, such as local political infighting and top-down managerial leadership, have impacted the consistency and structure needed in urban schools.

### **Cycle III Student Activities**

#### **Freshman Surveys**

Freshman students were surveyed in December, 2010 regarding their freshman *Seminarts* class. The purpose of this survey was to provide a student perspective on this new program. Additionally, student comments were valid as possible indicators of areas

that needed to be addressed to optimize student learning. Survey questions (Appendix F) addressed whether students auditioned into the arts academy and if the arts academy was their first choice. Other questions asked students to describe the aspects of the program that were beneficial to their success, their major concerns when they entered the academy, and what were their future goals.

Overall, 43 respondents completed a survey on *Seminarts* in December of 2010. All were ninth graders who had just completed one semester of *Seminarts*. More females than males completed the survey, with 74.4% females and 23.3% males participating. The percentage of responses does not mirror the present population in this grade.

### **Freshman Focus Groups**

I am a proponent of giving students the opportunity to voice their opinions in high school. As an administrator, I understood the need to include students in decision-making opportunities to give students ownership within their school. I had previously involved arts academy students in visionary work in a student council discussion with teachers on the use of I-pods in the arts academy. This last activity resulted in a compromised recommendation that was given to the principal at the time. Due to the district restructuring, these recommendations were not followed through. Yet the students mentioned that no one had ever asked them questions about their school before, and they were happy to be included in these discussions.

I conducted two freshman student focus groups at the arts academy in February of 2011. It was important to discuss with the students what they felt about *Seminarts*, the schedule, the assignments, the teachers, and what they needed to be successful in the arts academy (Appendix G). Nine students were in the first group and four students

participated in the second group. Both sessions were conducted during the arts academy students' lunch period in available rooms in the school. Participants included eight female and five male students. Once we got started, I discussed with them the purpose and ground rules of this activity, and I thanked them for being part of these groups.

Students were respectful and most participated fully in this experience. They volunteered important aspects that will inform the data of this cycle in the research project and in the future of the *Seminarts* transitional program.

### **Student Achievement Data**

In order to continue to ascertain if the *Seminarts* blocked program was more effective than the one period Success Seminar program, I gathered achievement data from two separate years where each program was scheduled. First and second semester report card grades were compared for freshman from the single period Success Seminar class in 2009-2010, and for freshman in *Seminarts*, the blocked seminar and arts class in 2010-2011. The review and analysis of student achievement records impacted how the *Seminarts* program had progressed in the 2010-2011 school year. The Table 6.4 highlights the analysis of freshman achievement in these seminar programs. The table shows that when data were compared, more *Seminarts* freshmen are achieving higher grades (As, Bs, Cs) than the Success Seminar students did the previous year. Failures have also gone down for *Seminarts* students by 3.5%.

The one discrepancy in these data is the total amount of freshman in 2009-2010 as opposed to 2010-2011. The number of freshmen in 2010-2011 was markedly lower. Upon review of students this year at the academy, 117 freshmen were repeaters for the year and therefore were not scheduled into *Seminarts*. The number of students not

accounted for are 39, which include a class of 19 from a teacher who was in the school year for a few weeks and then retired. All the students' grades of this teacher for both marking periods were F. I decided not to include these data because it is an outlier group of data not based on teaching that would skew the results. The remaining 20 students either dropped out or were transferred recently to an alternative setting. Their names still appear on the roster for the school.

Table 6.4

*First and Second Marking Period Grades - Freshman Transitional Program*

|  | 2009-2010 Success Seminar<br>(1 period) freshman grades | 2010-2011 <i>Seminarts</i><br>(blocked) freshman grades |
|--|---|---|
| Total number of grades for MP1,<br>MP2 | 600<br>(300 students X 2 MP's)                          | 312<br>(156 students X 2MP's)                           |
| Failures<br>MP1, MP 2                  | 83/600<br>13.8%   | 32/312<br>10.3%   |
| A's<br>given in both MP's together     | 128/600<br>1.3%   | 90/312<br>29%   |
| D's<br>given in both MP's together     | 71/600<br>12%   | 32/312<br>10.3%   |
| Missing grades                         | 43/600<br>7.2%  | 24/312<br>7.7%  |

*Note:* MP refers to marking period.



### **Analysis of Cycle III Student Activities**

Freshmen students in Cycle III also discussed concerns about their schedules, curriculum activities, and the lack of caring, experienced teachers in ninth grade in focus groups and surveys. Despite these concerns, these students performed better on their report cards than freshmen the previous year. This could have been due to many *Seminarts* teachers' focus on the arts part of *Seminarts* and less on seminar skills.

#### **Student Scheduling Issues**

Freshmen understood scheduling conflicts and discussed them freely in two focus groups in February of 2011. Of the 13 students in the focus groups, seven students were not in a blocked *Seminarts* program, while the remaining six students were. They did not know why some were scheduled in *Seminarts* and others were not. However, out of 13 students, 12 were scheduled correctly into their chosen arts strand due to the revised online application process discussed earlier. Yet the majority of these students did not have both seminar skills with their arts skills in *Seminarts*.

Scheduling issues also surfaced with students in survey data retrieved in December, 2010. When respondents were asked what their concerns were for high school prior to starting ninth grade, the statement selected with the most frequency was "Schedule" (44.2%). This structural component needs to be clearly addressed for any freshman transitional program to be successful.

#### **Students and Curriculum**

When 33 surveyed students were asked about the assignments in *Seminarts* they agreed that it was a good program to begin their high school experience and 70% believed that "it provides good organizational, study and social skills." Yet in student

focus groups, the majority of students did not know what the Cornell Note-System was and were not required to keep binders as described in the original curriculum. Most did say that they liked the assignments in *Seminarts*, but they clarified that these were arts assignments such as “we sing a lot of songs” or “drama and play activities” and “my teacher teaches me how to read the notes.” The same amount of students (70%) believed that “the *Seminarts* teacher becomes a good advisor for students in high school.” This role of the teacher in *Seminarts* was also confirmed in student focus groups. The majority of focus group students feel that teachers did support them in *Seminarts*. Their statements included “she is very encouraging,” “she gives music support and checks grades from other classes before we do music or anything else.” Another freshman mentioned that his band teacher would not allow his students to play in class unless they finished assignments from other classes. When student survey respondents were asked which types of activities were preferred in a *Seminarts* program, the most frequently selected activities were: “Role-playing” (53.5%), “Group work” (46.5%), and “Projects” (46.5%). The most infrequently selected responses were “Independent Study” (7.0%) and “Rubrics” (2.3%). During focus group, a creative writing student mentioned that her favorite assignment was “when we write essays about the topic the teacher gives us.”

Several students in focus groups mentioned that they do not do anything in the seminar portion of the blocked *Seminarts*. One student stated that he did not like the program “because the seminar is supposed to be for the students to ask questions about the school, but no students have questions and the majority of the teachers don’t bother to ask if we have questions.

## **Students and the Lack of Caring, Experienced Teachers**

Students in focus groups also see the need for connections with their teachers in their subjects. Some answered negatively when asked if they like this *Seminarts* program by stating “I don’t learn anything.” Yet students *do want to learn* and speak of liking the assignments “while I had a teacher.” Several *Seminarts* teachers had retired and the substitute teachers apparently did not teach the curriculum. Students spoke eloquently of attributes for their success. They mentioned the need for “having more time,” “more assignments to get kids into the work,” “more education about your subject,” “teachers who pay attention to all students,” and “teachers who motivate you.”

## **Student Achievement Data**

Students in *Seminarts* performed better than their counterparts in the previous year in Success Seminar class. In two marking periods, a substantial amount of students were receiving As (29%) in their report cards in *Seminarts*, as opposed to only 1.3% of As reported for Success Seminar students. The failures had also declined by 3.5 % for *Seminarts* students. These figures could be a result of teacher focus on the arts in *Seminarts* and less on seminar skills.

## **Cycle III Findings Summary**

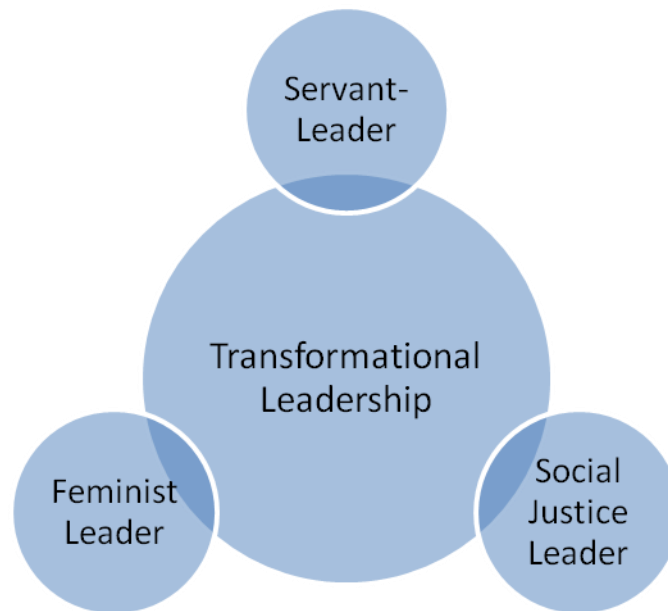
Major concerns in *Seminarts* in this cycle were scheduling and the curriculum. Both teachers and freshmen students discuss an inconsistent scheduling in this program. The question remained how to empower teachers to enable them to progress as an arts academy. As the researcher, I felt that the core group of teachers that were involved in many focus groups, interviews, and surveys should collaboratively plan for the remainder of this school year and for next year. This plan would then be given to the three new administrators of the arts academy. It can also be distributed to central office assistant

superintendents and given to the school community and the feeder middle schools as well. This model to meet and coordinate the future of the arts academy needs to continue with timelines, action plans, and working with key people in the school and district. Already this core group of teachers went beyond their duties and they have collaborated often. The message to them is to continue to work together this way in the arts academy.

## CHAPTER VII

### Cycle IV - Leadership Reflections

The purpose of this cycle was to reflect on my leadership growth throughout this doctoral program, action research project, and dissertation. In the many readings, discussions, postings, and assignments, I have identified my styles of leadership (Figure 5).



*Figure 5 My Styles of Leadership*

The inner circle is what I aspire to be, a transformational leader. The outer circles are leadership styles which I believe describe me as an educational leader. I placed the servant-leader on the top because this is what most defines me. The other two outer circles are important indicators of who I am as a leader. I examined my leadership through a review of the literature on leadership, self-assessments, my leadership journal,

experiences in this program and in my school, and my growth as an educational leader during the action research study of this dissertation.

### **Self-assessments**

As a leader, I saw myself in a very positive light. I scored high on many aspects of the leadership assessments, and justified the results as genuine. I saw myself as a visionary with high moral character. I agreed that I possessed above average intelligence and that I had a healthy sense of humor. I knew that I maintained open, warm relationships and had a genuine respect for others. I also agreed that there were areas that I needed to address and improve.

In Glanz's (2002) book regarding finding your leadership style through assessments, I very clearly scored as a dynamic (primary quality) supportive (secondary quality). The other possible categories included primary qualities of adaptive or creative, with secondary qualities of aggressive or assertive. The leadership virtue which I received a perfect score was *empathy*. Secondary to empathy, I scored high on judgments and enthusiasm. Other virtues included courage, impartiality, humility, and imagination.

At first, I was upset with the label of a dynamic supportive. I perceived this as a weak style. I thought I was more visionary or assertive. Upon further reading, I immediately saw how this style truly described me. Glanz (2002) states that supportives usually exhibit an encouraging and affable nature. He explains that dynamic supportives should reflect empathy at the optimal level, which I did. Glanz (2002) describes other qualities of dynamic supportives as charismatic, warm-hearted, sincere, reliable, humorous, articulate, emotional and spiritual, easygoing, strong-willed, and gentle. Some weaknesses of dynamic supportives are that we tend to neglect our well-being and can be

unassertive. I knew that all of these characteristics truly reflected who I was. Glanz summed me up nicely when he stated:

Dynamic Supportives are the most sensitive to the needs of other people of all quality type. Their gentle charisma is a great asset to themselves and to others. Dynamic Supportives are often great conversationalists, they make people comfortable around them. Without this quality group, schools and classrooms would be places without a dearth of humanity, caring and empathy. (Glanz, 2002, p. 44)

My major value in an assessment I completed in the first leadership class, and most recently in an assignment in the applied ethics course, was knowledge. In my leadership journal I wrote:

I am beginning to think that this knowledge I value is not just of the world and history and politics, or of educational theories and pedagogy, or of philosophical tenets and life in general. It is also knowledge of ourselves, who we are and what we *truly* believe in. Sometimes it takes courage to always be who you really are. I believe armed with this knowledge, not only are we more truthful to all those we encounter, but transparent in our role as educational leaders.

## Leadership Styles

### Servant leader

As I pondered these findings, I was reminded of my affinity with the theories of servant leadership. When I first read about Greenleaf's ideas, I was immediately drawn to his rationale on leaders. His idea that a servant-leader is servant first, not leader (Greenleaf, 1970), suited me perfectly. I did not see myself as a self-serving leader (Blanchard & Miller, 2007), but rather a leader who serves. I never aspired to be in a leadership position. In his famous essay, Greenleaf speaks to this lack of aspiration of future leaders as a primary concern. "In short, the enemy is strong natural servants who have the potential to lead but who do not lead, or who choose to follow a non-servant" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 46). I was gently nudged towards all my leadership positions, never

thinking that it was for me or that I could do well. I was finally convinced when I was told I could help more people by becoming a leader. Then I took the leap. Thus I began my leadership role as a person who wanted to help and to serve.

The enduring qualities of a servant-leader appealed to me. They are active listening (which I am perfecting), empathy, persuasion, awareness, foresight, building community, conceptualization, commitment to the growth of people (an espoused quality to perfect), and healing. When I was young, I originally wanted to be a doctor, but was shunned away from the profession by my mother who felt it was too demanding and difficult for a woman. Yet I knew that I always wanted to help people in some way, that I was caring enough to commit to people and that I wanted to make a difference in the lives of others.

In order to serve, I felt that a caring attitude, forged in positive relationships, must be present. Glanz (2002) quotes Starratt by adding:

An administrator committed to an ethic of caring is grounded in the belief that the integrity of human relationships should be held sacred and that the school as an organization should hold the good of human beings within it as sacred. (p. 108)

Relationships are key to me. Jaworski (1998) adds, “servant leadership sounds like an oxymoron. But in a world of relationships, where relatedness is the organizing principle of the universe, it makes perfect sense” (p. 59). I saw fostering healthy relationships and a sense of community as pivotal in my organization. Gladwell (2008) notes relationships and community ties as one of the pillars of success. Wheatley (2006) states, “the world of relationships is rich and complex, and is the basis of all definitions” (p. 35). Wheatley further explains that to “be savvy in fostering relationships you need to become better listeners, conversationalists and respect others’ uniqueness” (p. 39). I have



not operated in an organization in any other way. I saw my role as guiding, listening, facilitating, probing, and discussing, all with a caring, nurturing attitude. Even when there was a conflict or discord, I never placed the person in a position that demeaned or diminished their character. I just gently stated the facts and appealed to a higher vision. Goleman (2002) refers to this caring attitude as “attunement, or touching people’s hearts” (p. 220). It is “alignment with the kind of resonance that moves people emotionally as well as intellectually. Success depends on what an organization’s people care about, what they do, and how they work together” (Goleman, 2002, p. 208-9). One of Lincoln’s leadership qualities was “showing his compassionate and caring nature in forging successful relationships” (Phillips, 1992, p. 37). This is also discussed by Sergiovanni when he states “the leadership that counts is the kind that touches people differently. It taps their emotions, appeals to their values, and responds to their connections with other people” (as cited in Evans, 1996, p. 170). Blanchard and Miller (2007) write that a good relationship involves listening, investing time, caring deeply, and accentuating the positive.

A perfect example of a present-day, caring, servant leader is Greg Mortenson. This young adventurer built schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan as a way to pay back the inhabitants in the Karakoram Mountains for saving his life after a failed attempt to climb K2. As he decided to serve, he became a leader in forging the construction of a tremendous amount of schools, especially for girls, in that part of the world. “He put his hands on Haji Ali’s shoulders, as the old man had done to him dozens of times since they shared their first cup of tea. Mortenson promised to build the village a school” (Mortenson & Relin, 2006, p. 33). Without empathy and caring, he could have easily

walked away, grateful to be alive. I was so moved by Mortenson's account that I actually went to see him speak on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights at the United Nations on January 30, 2009. I felt a kinship to this kind of leader, and above all, aspired to serve others in my educational role.

I continue to work within an ethic of care as a servant leader. Recently, the principal in the new school that I am now vice-principal mentioned that I needed to confront a specific teacher. I stated that he was becoming the 'good cop' and I was evolving as the 'bad cop'. A facilitator who was in the room at the time said, "Yes, but you are a *gentle* bad cop who is very *kind* to other people." I felt complemented because this is consciously how I try to *assist* people grow and learn in my organization. This feeling of serving others is with me at all times now. In my journal I wrote in December of 2009 the following:

For now I know that I have grown tremendously as a leader. I evidence this every day at my high school. I catch myself asking subordinates in emails how can I *serve them* to help get the job done. I actually use the word *serve*.

I conducted my action research project as a servant leader. In interviews and focus groups with both teachers and students, I actively listened and always focused on building community. I worked on forging positive relationships and growth of the participants in all of our meetings. Recently, a teacher in the arts academy (of which I am no longer the vice-principal) called me to discuss problems in setting up a visual arts activity in the arts academy. This teacher became one of the core participants of my study. I gave her practical advice, and told her to be ethical and to involve as many stakeholders as possible as she forges ahead. I reminded her that she has more power than she thinks she has. This teacher already knows that she can count on me to assist her in all her

educational endeavors. I worked with the teacher through a relational leadership role because I discussed the *courage* she needed to move on her initiative and reminded her of the shared *vision* of the school that we had all worked on (Regan & Brooks, 1995). Of course, because I am no longer at the arts academy, it is a different dynamic that we have. But this core group of teachers in my study have become leaders in their school through my conscious effort to build capacity.

### **Feminist Organizational Leader**

As the tenets of servant leadership are akin to my values and way of being, there are other leadership styles that have aspects of me as a leader. “The feminist organizational theory informs this ethic of caring by avoiding traditional concepts of leadership” (Regan as cited in Glanz, 2002, p. 107). Glanz reiterates that the feminist organizational theory likes community-building, interpersonal relationships, nurturing, and collaboration as primary interests. Feminist theory questions hierarchical, patriarchal, and bureaucratic schools and organizations (Glanz, 2002). Within this feminist theory in organizations, I also quickly identified with Bolman and Deal (2003) in their discussion of Helgensen’s Web of Inclusion female-oriented structural form. They state:

Women build integrated and organic organizations with a focus on nurturing good relationships, hierarchical rank and distinction playing a small part, and lines of communication being multiple, open and diffuse. Women put themselves at the center of the organization rather than at the top, thus emphasizing both accessibility and equality and they labor constantly to include people in their decision-making. (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 81)

On October, 2008, in the margins of these notes, I marked *me!* to identify my strong connection to this statement. Rosener (1990) went further when she described women as transformational leaders who were “interactive, encouraged participation, shared power and information, enhanced others’ self-worth and got others excited” (p.150-151). The

statements aforementioned struck me as describing the way I work and lead in my school. In my reflective journal of April 19, 2010, I stated “trying to collaborate, have a compromise, work things out, even during ethical decision making, is part of my feminist leadership style.”

I have always had a natural tendency to collaborate. I am more *conscious now* on how to work effectively in groups to empower others, allow ownership, and build leadership capacity. In my journal I mention collaboration often. When I began my qualitative research activities, I wrote on October 5, 2009,

I am reminded of the importance of a collaborative approach that makes new programs and initiatives *fit our school*. This is accomplished by democratically meeting and sharing our vision and practice as we begin to ensure second-order change in our high school arts academy.

I also wrote an early journal entry on collaboration as discussed the arts academy:

Our coaches go into the classroom and tell the teachers what to do and administrators just go in periodically to do observations. This is one of my AHA moments. We are going about this business the wrong way. We have to give teachers freedom, flexibility, collaborative time with little strings attached, opportunities for practice talk, and for pinpointing their problem of practice. We have to make them masters of their own classroom.

Another reflective moment on the importance of collaboration occurred to me during our Leadership, Application, Fieldwork Seminar course (LAFS) in March of 2010. We were placed in small groups to discuss our action research. When it was my turn to speak, I realized that my focus was off target and that it did not fit well in my school. The professor and others brainstormed with me and gave me some ideas. I wrote in my journal on March 1, 2010:

The first meeting reminded me of the power of collaborative group work and open communication. I really thought I had a great project, only to realize that an effective action research project needed to have real impact in my school. My research questions were off and I had to limit my study with a problem to be

fixed. I was knocked off my self-proclaimed pedestal for a while – but I realized that this group was giving me valuable advice.

Throughout the action research study in this doctoral program I naturally interacted and became part of the group of participants as if I was one more equal member. If it was my turn to bring in food for the Vision Committee, I did so. If others had better ideas regarding our work, I acknowledged them. If the team requested to meet at another time, I complied. We were a unit with open communication, trust, collegiality, and equality. Group members were very free to express anything, and did so. I have learned to find the strengths inherent in every person and then consciously build up their virtues and worth.

### **Social Justice Leader**

Servant-leader and feminist leadership have been discussed thus far as bearing qualities I possess as a leader. The social-justice leadership style also has aspects that relate to my personality and who I am; to my sense of *being*. Social justice leaders focus on respect, care of others, recognition, and empathy towards those suffering inequalities. These leaders do not tolerate injustices in schools based on racial, economic, gender, sexual, disability, or learning issues. In their eyes – all humans are equal, only their services might differ.

I think because of my heritage and as Gladwell (2008) states, my cultural legacy, I became a history teacher. Politics and history were a staple conversation topic in our kitchen table. As we got older, my brother and I had fierce debates and tried to bring our generational point of view to our parents. Yet the message still remained clear; freedom, individual rights, equality, dignity, even the value of education and knowledge – all were part of our heritage, our culture and our *beings*.

As a history teacher, I also honed these topics into my students. I spent inordinate amounts of time teaching the civil rights movement, the suffrage movement, and the holocaust. I even made my bilingual, non-English students memorize Jefferson's famous words in the Declaration of Independence: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.* I told them over and over again, that this is the basis of our democracy, whether we always get it right in our history or not. I emphasized that we always have the *possibility* to correct injustices in America. The themes of equality, tolerance, freedom, and individual rights were always embedded in our class discussions.

Needless to say, these attributes are with me today as an educational leader. My minority students know this and can feel the equal treatment they receive when they step into my office. I am intolerant of injustices of any kind towards students or staff. I am conscious of this because it is in me. This protection of rights goes beyond race or culture and transcends into the special needs students and their rights, to teachers who are expecting, to the bargaining union and their demands, and to the display of dignity and respect inherent in our treatment of every human being. I do want to say here that I do get angry, frustrated, and upset at folks from time to time. But it never has to do with my sense of superiority or display of inequality towards others. My intolerance stems from others displaying these negative traits. Therefore, I can honestly say that I am a social justice leader.

Social leadership is defined in many ways. Dantley and Tillman (2010) begin by clarifying three components of social justice in schools: leadership for social justice,

moral transformative leadership, and a praxis, or framework, for social justice. They provide then an overview of social justice characterizations, such as: an educated leadership (Foster, as cited in Dantley & Tillman, 2010), ethics of care and critique and the process of student socialization in schools (Starratt as cited in Dantley & Tillman, 2010), a framework for anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro as cited in Dantley & Tillman, 2010), diversity and inclusiveness in social justice (Riehl as cited in Dantley & Tillman, 2010), shifting paradigms and alternative perspectives of social justice in schools (Larson & Murtadha as cited in Dantley & Tillman, 2010), social justice as the *actual* work of school leaders (Bogotch as cited in Dantley & Tillman, 2010), and the importance of discourse and participation (Goldfarb & Grinberg as cited in Dantley & Tillman, 2010). Dantley and Tillman (2010) conclude that social justice links democracy and equity in schools. They provide a conceptual framework for social justice and moral transformational leadership by highlighting research, scholarship and teaching, and continuing education.

I especially connected with Peter McLaren's (2007) call for educators to be social and moral agents for social justice in schools. McLaren discusses the necessity of critical pedagogy in American schools as a way to "empower the powerless and transform the existing social inequalities and injustices" by "challenging the role schools play in our political and cultural life" (2007, p. 186). I felt that this fit in very clearly with my recent role as a history teacher, as an adjunct university professor of Bilingual Education teachers, and as a vice-principal. In whatever educational capacity I am involved in, the focus is on advocating and providing for equitable practices and processes through ongoing critical discussions. Many times this advocacy work brings you face to face with

prejudice and racism from other forces in the public schools. These need to be addressed head on. Similarly, Carolyn Riehl's (2000) focus on fostering new meanings about diversity in schools through inclusive practices, building connections and transformative discourse emerges in literature read. Advocacy leadership that provides an equitable, high quality education for *all students* is the new reform model for Anderson (2010). Through the very tenets of authenticity and advocacy, social justice is derived in schools. This resonates clearly on my role in school. Centering these ethical goals to give voice, power, and position to the disenfranchised in schools today is one of my theories-in-use to be continued to be developed. Early in the doctoral program I wrote in my journal regarding the natural process of reflection in our learning. On March 22, 2010, I stated, "What I am also finding is that most theories and writings on effective leadership have clear components of ethical behaviors and place a value on self-knowledge and reflection."

Today, I am a vice-principal in a gifted and talented urban high school. I am working as a social justice leader in this school the same way I treated my staff and students in the arts academy. Even though I am a disciplinarian and an evaluator, they come for help and assistance because I have told them this is my primary role. I already know that students and faculty of the new school feel comfortable with me. Many times when there is a poor teacher evaluation or a student suspension or detention, students and staff alike thank me as they are leaving my office. They know I do not judge them; I just want to help them. In this work, everyone is treated equally regardless of background, race, sexual orientation, learning disability, gender, or any other category. I believe I was always this way. It is just that I am *more conscious now* because of my recent learning in



my doctoral studies. I find myself at peace almost always now. To me, this is because I truly do accept every other human being as they are.

As a recent teacher, I was a living laboratory of all the knowledge, theories, and practices that I have learned in this doctoral program. My students were experiencing critical pedagogy every day. As a vice-principal again, I understand my strong sense of equity in all my dealings with students and staff. I wrote in my journal on April 19, 2010

I find myself defending the underdog, the person forgotten, and the sole individual whose rights were violated. This speaks to my social justice style of leadership, and it is a part of who I am and how I make decisions. Empathy is never too far in my decision-making.

### **Ethical Leadership**

Being moral, ethical, just, and fair in schools is far more complicated than originally perceived. Many factors need to be considered and much reflection is required. Goleman (2002) speaks of the self-awareness competence and knowing one's values, motives, goals, and dreams. This is done through self-reflection and thoughtfulness.

Branson (2010) states:

Ethical leaders need to become conscious of how their inner dimensions of their self can be controlled and redirected towards achieving better, more transcendental, consequences. Moreover, it is only through a commitment to self-reflection that such conscious awareness can be nurtured and enhanced. (p.7)

Foremost are the values held by those that make decisions. Attuned to my own values and beliefs, I tend to move away from John Stuart Mills' utilitarianism approach due to its expediency and inattention to all those that do not benefit from decisions made for the greater good. This conscious decision is aligned to my fundamental values of social justice, equity, and an ethic of care for *all* students, especially the disenfranchised ones. I certainly understand the link of utilitarianism to democratic values, but I am not satisfied

ignoring justice for all. I prefer Rawls' distributive justice, which merges with Kant's categorical imperative, which is the absolute, unconditional requirement for all circumstances. We can no longer work under a *veil of ignorance* (Ciulla, 2003) for those not benefitting from the greatest good. "A loss of freedom for some is not made right by a greater sum of satisfaction enjoyed by many" (Rawls, 1967, p. 155).

My leadership style of social justice, my experience as a history teacher, and the inequities and lack of freedoms in Cuba, all point to my focus on the least advantaged. The principle of extensive liberty that is compatible with liberty to all, and that inequalities are only tolerated if they work out for everyone (Rawls, 1967) are aligned to what I believe in. In my various roles in education, I am *intolerant* of people who treat others without equity and fairness. To me this is one of the worst qualities of a human being. I strive for equity for all students, without regard to their economic, social, racial or cultural background. As Confucius said, "in education, there should be no class distinction" (Wing-Tsit Chan, 1969, p. 138).

There are several paradigms to assist educational leaders for ethical change. Kidder and Born's Framework states that ethical decision-making should be rooted in core values, provide clear principles, be infused with moral courage, and center on right versus right dilemmas (as cited in Duffy, 2006). In 1996, Messick and Bazerman (as cited in Duffy, 2006) described theories about the world, people, and ourselves to improve the quality of decision-making. This is done by examining the consequences for each stakeholder with honesty. Freeman and Gilbert (as cited in Duffy, 2006) provide a set of questions for the ethical leader to ask, such as; who is affected, what are the costs and benefits, and who has rights. Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2009) paradigm for ethical

behavior examines decision-making through the lenses of an ethic of care, an ethic of justice, an ethic of critique, and professional ethics. My personal and professional code of ethics infused various aspects of these frameworks with my worldview, values, and beliefs. They impacted how I work in schools and how I conducted my action research study.

### **Personal Code of Ethics**

In my position as a vice-principal in an urban high school, I was confronted with ethical dilemmas every day. They were all dealt with using ethical thinking and frameworks, and they were difficult to decide. Because of my learning in applied ethics, I had a method to attend to these ethical issues. I was able to reflect on my own values and the espoused goals of the organization. Table 7.1 describes my code of ethics for decision-making as an educational leader, using Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2009) paradigm for ethical behavior..

Table 7.1

#### *Personal Code of Ethics*

| Personal Value | Ethical Behavior  | Ethical Framework |
|----------------|---|-------------------|
| Knowledge      | Be knowledgeable; gather as much data as possible. Ask experts for opinions | Ethic of Critique |
| Equality       | Listen carefully to all sides; give everyone an equal voice.                | Ethic of Justice  |
| Human Nature   | Treat all workers the same..  | Ethic of Justice  |

As seen, the ethic of justice predominates in my personal code of ethics. This is very important to me. “Sergiovanni (1992) placed the principle of justice at the center of his concept of school” (in Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2009, p. 13). I am always examining fairness, equity, and justice. Once again this is closely tied to my cultural legacy, my study of history, and my experience as a bilingual supervisor in a large urban district. I have evolved this ethic by constantly reading and becoming aware of both sides to any story. For example, I recently was exposed to the notion of “white privilege” (McIntosh, 2008; Wise, 2008) which was an enigma to me. The idea that there is a system of privilege based on the color of your skin was an entirely new idea to focus on. Placing myself in this category was very difficult. I always take pride in understanding others well by filling another person’s shoes with empathy. I now realize that it is not that easy; that it is not enough to be color-blind, fair, or have a liberal disposition. Educational leaders need to remember that much of our nation’s history has given privileges to white Americans. When we have critical conversations or distributive discussions, not just serial testimonies (McIntosh, 2008) with people of color, we begin to understand how others really perceive white folks and how they live. For the educational leader, this new profound understanding serves the purpose of promoting and modeling an ethic of justice in all school endeavors.

An emphasis on the Ethic of Care in Table 7.2 goes to the heart of my leadership style as a dynamic supportive with a predominant virtue of empathy. As I espouse to become an effective transformational leader, I need to treat others well at all times and strive everyday to foster positive relationships by providing trust, equity, and service. The

following table describes my professional code of ethics that is connected to my personal code.

Table 7.2

*Professional Code of Ethics*

- 
1. I will treat all people in my organization with respect, dignity, equity and fairness.
  2. I will listen carefully to all stakeholders (especially students) and their concerns.
  3. I will focus on each student as an individual and what is needed for their success.
  4. I will conduct my duties in a professional manner.
  5. I will be honest in all my professional duties.
  6. I will engender trust by not divulging confidences and by keeping my word.
  7. I will apply and monitor school rules fairly and consistently.
  8. I will not make hasty decisions; rather I will carefully gather all information and sometimes rely on experts for added information.
  9. I will continue to acquire knowledge about education with professional development, training, and readings to enhance my leadership.
  10. I will model the vision of the school and district as an educational leader.
- 

These codes of ethics have enhanced my leadership by forcing me to reflect on who I am, what I value, and how I need to make decisions. My guidelines have been set. These codes must be, as Duffy (2006) states, my constant companions in my school's journey towards higher levels of performance.

## Effective Leadership

The question now arises whether people are born as leaders or if they are developed. From readings and discussions, I think that many aspects of leadership can be taught to motivated leadership students. This has certainly been my experience. Cronin (1987) feels that students can be exposed to leadership skills, styles, strategies, and theories. One can, at the very least, *learn about leadership*. Whether or not one actually becomes an effective leader is another matter. Learning to be an effective leader, I now believe, involves reading, discussion, reflection, identifying values, and practice.

I concur with Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy's (1993) definition of leadership as "a complex phenomenon involving the leader, the followers, and the situation" (p. 41). I had never thought of the idea that you cannot have leadership without followers. It seems obvious of course; it is just that I was always focusing on the leader and no one else. In Kotter's chapter regarding the difference between leadership and management, I wrote the word "great" in my notebook. The distinctions are very clear to me, especially the part on motivating others as opposed to controlling them (Kotter, 1990).

Yet, I also think that opportunities to practice one's craft or profession are pivotal. In *The Outliers*, Gladwell (2008) talks about how 10,000 hours of opportunities are necessary to enable people to succeed. Without these opportunities, Bill Gates or the Beatles and others, most likely would not have been successful. Gladwell's point is that these opportunities are arbitrary and too much emphasis is placed on the individual traits of a person. His egalitarian reasoning is that if we all had these opportunities and some hidden advantages, plus a strong cultural legacy, or at least a replica of these cultural values in schools, many more of us would succeed; the playing field would be open. He

also speaks about community and the importance of relationships and the hidden field that evolves from these interactions. In essence, Gladwell returns the responsibility to society in developing more avenues to succeed and develop leaders with all of the parameters discussed above.

To me, the most appealing leadership phrase is Cronin's (1987) statement that "students of leadership can make an appointment with themselves and begin to appreciate their own strengths and deficiencies" (p. 31). Goleman (2002), in his discussion on self-discoveries, talks about this as well. This is exactly what we did in this doctoral program and research study.

To continue this road of self-discovery, I define effective leadership from what I have learned. Phillips (1992) discussed Lincoln's leadership attributes when he said "If you are a good leader, when your work is done, your aim fulfilled, your people will say they did it themselves" (p. 107). There is a sense of we are all in this together, and we are all worth the same in this attainment of our goals. I remember an English supervisor in my district who had very good success with state scores before he retired. People would always praise him when these results came out. He always said that it was not him, that the success was his teachers and students. He said this over and over again. Basically, it is "we" who make these goals a reality.

As a reminder of a visionary leader, Pellicer (2003) describes effective leaders as "precisely in the middle of beliefs, dreams and values of those whom they lead" (p. 22). Goleman (2002) stresses emotional intelligence and reiterates the five discoveries effective leaders need. These discoveries are reflective; leaders need to ask about their ideal self; who do they want to be. They need to analyze who they are; what are their

strengths and gaps. Then leaders need to make their learning agenda and experiment with and practice new behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. Finally, effective, reflective leaders need to develop supportive and trusting relationships that make change possible.

Goleman (2002) also speaks of the four core domains of emotional intelligence. They are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Each of these has competencies that Goleman believes make effective leaders. The areas I need to work on are organizational awareness within the social awareness domain and developing others and becoming a change catalyst, both part of the relationship management domain. I would not say that I do not do these well, but there is certainly room for improvement. I am just now learning of the science and theories behind being a change agent. I also need to be more conscious when I work to develop others and strive to *sustain* their growth in a supportive manner. My strongest domains are the self-awareness and self-management areas and empathy and service in the social awareness category.

Evans (1996) discusses ethics when he proclaims, “a firm set of personal ethical standards is a hallmark of most successful leaders” (p. 187). Burns (2003) states that transforming leadership “occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (p. 101). This leadership “becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, thus has a transforming effect on both” (Burns, 1995, p. 101).

Blanchard and Miller (2007) talk about transformative leadership simply when they say that effective leaders S.E.R.V.E. by seeing the future, engaging and developing



others, reinventing continuously, valuing results and relationships, and embodying the values of the organization.

Throughout this doctoral program and in conducting my action research project, I have emulated these characteristics in a conscious manner. On March 8, 2010, in my reflective journal I wrote, “it seems to me that the study of ethics is deeply philosophical and soul-searching. It enables the reader or researcher to delve within and examine his or her own values and ethics.” This is what I do as a leader.

### **Leadership Growth**

When I began the 2009-2010 school year as a vice-principal in the new arts academy, my leadership style had evolved. I worked in a high school with two other women school administrators. We complemented each other perfectly. We each had unique strengths and abilities, worked well with each other, and together accomplished many projects. We were a functional team that met daily for working lunches, communicated constantly, laughed often, and respected each other. I saw us as three strong, hard-working *principals* working together.

Beginning with the summer before the school year, I focused on the symbolic culture of a rundown school building. Bolman and Deal’s frames (2003) weighed heavily on my mind. I kept advising my colleagues that we needed to spruce up the building because this would be a powerful unifying factor for the staff. I pushed for the painting of the lockers, for art displays everywhere, clean classrooms, and an ongoing capital budget for the school. We painted the main office with the school colors, spruced up all the bulletin boards, and wrote up at least 50 work orders. The effect was immediate. The staff commented on how great the building looked when they arrived in September. There was

a sense of pride that continued to grow after the first set of school lockers were painted bright blue in early November. The staff was amazed and they told us so.

I have grown as a leader in other ways. During September of that year, I told my administrative colleagues that we needed to have a successful program from the very beginning to boost staff morale. This discussion stemmed from my reading of Rudy Giuliani's book on leadership (2002) and his idea as New York City's mayor for handling the squeegee operators. The proliferation of crime in the city was a major voter concern. Giuliani believed that a successful early campaign would be highly visible (squeegee operators) and rally the voters to begin to engender trust and confidence towards his administration.

I told my colleagues of Giuliani's early success, and we decided to hone in on a major concern of the staff. We thus began our own *squeegee-like* project. Teachers felt that the inappropriate use of electronic devices in the school was undermining learning efforts and causing discipline problems. We listened to the staff and decided to run Project Confiscation. First, we told students in four separate assemblies that I-pods, MPV players, head phones, and other devices were not allowed in the school. We advised them that we would confiscate these and parents would have to come into the school to pick them up. Parents had to sign a contract that if these devices were confiscated again, we would hold them until the end of the school year. Our team (the three administrators) became relentless at the beginning of each school day. We were at the entrances checking book bags every day for about a month and a half. We were assisted by security guards and disciplinarians. Countless parents came in to sign contracts and retrieve these

devices. Teachers and staff marveled at how discipline improved in the classrooms and in the hallways.

Project Confiscation also helped in the culture of change that was needed in the school. There was a sense of urgency (Kotter, 1996) by the staff that needed to be attended to. We worked intensely on this first stage described by Kotter (1996), and we saw immediate positive reaction to the results of this initiative.

As the vice-principal of the arts academy, another area that I was successful with was the development of a vision for the school. I had reiterated the need for this many times to my administrative colleagues. They had agreed, but were too busy to assist in this endeavor. We were accomplishing many wonderful things in the school, but I still felt we were rudderless, and that we needed to be grounded in school goals. As a leader, and using the framework of change by Kotter (1990), I set up a small volunteer committee that began this visionary work. We first had discussions on where we saw ourselves in two, five, or 10 years from now. Then the committee members read sections of Kotter's book (1990), and other readings on vision-making. I also wanted the committee members to focus on good questioning techniques, and not to blame everyone for our failures. "Questions must move from a singular thrust about the way things are to multiple stories about what we could be, from symptoms to causes, from the work of adults to the learning and experiences of students" (Nathan, 2009, p. 7). We invited members of the school's student council to assist meetings and articulate their thoughts. We then agreed to send a values survey to all the students, faculty, and support staff. We needed everyone's input, because "a unifying framework meant that we developed a shared vocabulary for describing learning that all students and teachers (and parents)

used” (Nathan, 2009, p. 6). After almost an entire year in meetings, and after we compiled the data, we agreed on the values that most described the school and where we were headed. The five values and vision that constituted the arts academy then became: respect, achievement, creativity, knowledge, and accountability. This agreed-upon vision and set of values gave meaning to all the activities, decisions, and goals in which the school community was involved. Kotter (1996) further explains that a good vision in the change process clarifies direction for change, motivates folks to take action, and helps coordinate the actions of different people. This was paramount in my mind and all was accomplished with a collaborative team effort. I realized that “it is the combined effort of members that make up a high-performance team” (Stowell & Mead, 2007, p. 27). The team’s fundamental qualities were competence, integrity, and commitment. We were flexible, honest (Vegas rule), and intense in our pursuit of describing what we aspire to be (Stowell & Mead, 2007). What I admired about this team’s members was the level of care and passion they had towards the goal of the committee. They were collegial, friendly, and kind to each other, and followed the pre-arranged rules or norms we set up as a group. Because of the amazing results of this Vision committee, I decided to include this collaborative endeavor in my action research project. I had thus learned how to run an effective team.

#### **Cycle IV- Leadership Reflection Summary**

As I continued in my studies, and implemented the action research study, I reflected on all my leadership learning thus far. I know that I learned to delegate more work to others and build their capacity. I know not be so quick to handle all problems (Ciampa, 2005) and learned all sides of a dilemma. I am transactional at times, but I

never lose my core leadership being which is to assist, serve, be equal, and fair. I make decisions that are driven by my values and the values of the organization to move forward. I continue my relationship building with all stakeholders and not solely rely on personality or a measure of charisma to carry me through (Elliot, 2009). I work collaboratively with staff and never lose the purpose that we all have which is student learning and success. What I wrote in my journal on March 15, 2010 is still how I feel today. I stated:

It has become more and more synergistic and apparent to me on how all the learned theories, postings, readings, projects, and writings are truly connected on asking ourselves who we are as leaders. All of our work in this program forces us to think critically on how we lead, and how we make a difference in our schools and districts.

## Chapter VIII

### Final Summary

The purpose of this study was to analyze and structure an effective transitional program from middle to high school for students of an urban high school academy. This was accomplished by working with teachers collaboratively in committees, reviewing the literature on transitional programs, career academies, and small learning communities, and conducting an action research project of primarily qualitative research techniques with aspects of quantitative data research. Involved also in this important work was my intellectual and practical growth as an educational leader. This was measured by increased learning of leadership issues, and the application of these new leadership skills and knowledge to effect change in my high school.

I conclude the findings of this dissertation and action research study by summarizing the activities and data collection I undertook to first understand and then change how we transition district students into a whole school arts academy. I accomplished this by answering the initial study research questions and briefly encapsulating the cycles and their findings. Provided are recommendations for the continued evolvement of the transitional program in the arts academy with a final conclusion on the impact of this action research study, and implications for stakeholders in high school secondary education.

### Research Questions Answered

*How did a whole school career academy approach support students academically as they transitioned into high school and during their freshman year?* The structure of a whole school arts academy was a brave new world for the district. In this urban city, there had never been an entire high school devoted to careers in the arts while offering students

a college prep education. The preparation for this massive endeavor began with allowing (not requiring) students to audition to a chosen artistic strand and then applying to the academy online. There was a mad rush and confusion to try to place all the students into their preferred academies, because all the present high school students (except seniors) were applying as well as the incoming eighth graders. Little thought was put into structuring a transitional program for the new academy freshmen in collaboration with the feeder middle schools and key stakeholders of both the middle schools and the high school academies. The only aspect of a transitional program was a new district mandated ninth grade class called Success Seminar. A district committee wrote a generic curriculum for four of the high school academies with no deference to the different career themes in the schools. The new seminar curriculum focused on organizational, study, and social skills, and was not geared to the arts programs. To add to the confusion, arts academy freshmen were not offered an arts class in ninth grade. Their elective was the Success Seminar class. There were many objections to this omission from the students and the teachers. But for the first year of the academy, no changes could be made.

In data retrieved in the first cycle of this research study, students clearly articulated what they needed to be successful in the arts academy. They discussed caring, experienced teachers, and increased student-centered artistic activities, such as projects, group work, and field trips and presentations as what they perceived was necessary. Teachers in this first cycle also expressed high values and expectations for their students in academics and artistic endeavors, but the level of rigor and challenging instructional tasks was not evidenced. This may have been due in part to the new curriculum, lack of professional development and resources, and lack of administrative accountability for this

program. When student achievement was reviewed, only one quarter of the freshmen class failed the Success Seminar class. Yet, alarmingly, almost half of this freshmen class, or 49.3%, failed the grade because they did not accumulate the 40 credits to be considered sophomores. A certain number of these repeaters did go to summer school to recoup credits. The result was that 103 freshmen out of 300 in that first year had to repeat the grade. Additionally, freshmen who received *no credits* at all that year totaled 43. In answering this first action research question, it is evidenced that the high school arts academy did not support all of their freshmen *academically* in its first year. The school did not provide enough structures, programs, and resources to ensure success for the freshmen.

In the following school year, freshmen were given an arts class blocked with a seminar skills class called *Seminarts*. Due to district reorganization and the loss of vice-principals (including myself) with many teachers and personnel, a revised seminar curriculum geared to the arts was never written. However, the *Seminarts* teachers did have a common planning time in their schedule and were able to plan activities, meet with students and parents, and prepare interdisciplinary lessons. When achievement data were compared for the transitional program from this second year to the first year, there was a large increase (29.0%) of proficient grades, or As, in *Seminarts* as opposed to the previous year in Success Seminar (1.3 %). In comparing the first two marking period semesters in both years, failures in year two also decreased by 3.5%. It remains to be seen whether this restructured transitional program assists the majority of freshmen to pass to their next grade and improve their academic standing for the year. Thus far, the whole



school arts academy, with a restructured freshmen transitional program, is positively impacting the academic grades of the students.

*How did staff collaboration provide for an effective freshmen arts transitional program?*

As a vice-principal, I saw the need to establish a school-wide arts committee and a volunteer vision steering committee as soon as the arts academy began. I wanted to bring together teachers to make decisions about their new school and to help anchor a positive culture in the academy's first year. I also needed to bring teachers together to solve potential problems in the new Success Seminar class as well as the *Seminarts* transitional program the following year. I additionally conducted focus groups and surveys with the teachers to gather a comprehensive teacher perspective regarding the new arts academy and the transitional programs in place.

The committee work provided effective and collaborative teamwork. Teachers were empowered, felt a level of trust, and gave their opinions and ideas freely without reservations. There was a sense of passion in their work and a willingness to help the students and academy succeed. The arts committee worked very well and coordinated over 50 field trips and many artistic activities in the school year. Monthly calendars and website entries were established and theater and music wing upgrades, an art gallery, and capital budgets for the following year were planned. Student clubs, such as the Murals Club, were well organized and began to beautify the walls of the school. Notwithstanding a run-down older building with a number of disaffected students who did not want to be in the arts academy, the school began to look and feel like a real arts academy alive with

creativity, talent, and excellent artistic experiences. This was accomplished by the coordination of all the programs through the arts committee.

One of the most important aspects discovered in this committee was the view of the arts teachers as effective advisors, or mentors for their students. These teachers basically took their arts students under their wing. They motivated, cajoled, investigated, tutored, and found resources for their struggling students. Their arts students in turn fostered enduring relationships with their teachers and became part of an artistic family, similar to a coach with his team members. This advocacy and relationship building that occurred at the arts school are cornerstones of high school reform models and especially fit into the spirit of this career academy.

The vision committee began the work of planning ahead for the future and identified what is valued right now as a school community. They discussed many aspects of the high school and decided to pick the values that they stood for today. They conducted a school-wide selection survey of the five highest values. The school community included all adults in the building and all the students as well. The majority of the survey participants felt that *accountability, respect, creativity, knowledge, and self-esteem* were what best described the school community's values. The feeling was that with these values (ARCKS) we all could judge our everyday academic, artistic, procedural, or academic actions against these values. This was very important work. The final piece to be totally inclusive was to incorporate the parents the following school year in the values selection survey. This was not accomplished due to the aforementioned district restructuring.

In this cycle, teachers also expressed concerns about the transitional program. They identified scheduling issues, curriculum problems, inadequate resources, and the lack of quality, sustained professional development. A further point made by the teachers was the disconnect of the arts classes and programs with the academic classes within the school. The two groups had not yet found how to mesh their curricula and how to view the other as equally important for the well rounded career and college preparation of their shared students. All of these insights were extremely valid and each of them needed to be examined fully as the work of the arts academy progressed. The collaboration of the teachers and the progress they had made working together in such a short time was inspiring. What was needed was a school leader who consistently facilitated the staff to accomplish the ideas and activities they expressed that were a mirror of what students expected to succeed. An effective school leader was required to continue to anchor the freshmen into their first year and to begin to bridge the gap between the artistic programs and academic classes.

*How did my leadership impact the restructuring of a high school arts academy transitional program?*

I was one of the vice-principals when the high school began as an arts academy. Immediately I saw the problem with not offering freshmen their arts classes. That was one of the reasons I began the arts committee so that freshmen could be involved with the various productions and activities around the school and be part of field trips and other community venues. I also encouraged the other vice-principal, who was in charge of developing the schedule for the following year, to include an arts class with seminar by postponing the world language requirement until the sophomore year. With our

discussions and the principal's blessing, she was even able to incorporate a common preparation period for the *Seminarts* teachers' schedule.

I also began the school vision committee in January without my fellow administrative team. They were both caught up with the many aspects of running a large high school of approximately 1,000 students. I was busy as well, but I knew that we needed to begin to ground the school in a shared vision. This visionary work was inspired as a direct result of reading Kotter's (1990) book on change efforts coupled with Nathan's (2009) ideas on how she transformed an urban high school by collaboratively identifying shared values. I believed that once the values and vision of the school were set, the freshmen would clearly understand the school's expectations of them once they entered the academy.

I believe in relationships as key in my leadership. It has helped me appeal to school staff and students to learn and change for the better. Every opportunity I had to advance people forward, not backwards, I did so. Many times suspended students would leave my office and say "Thank you, Miss" because I had taken the time to "chat" with them about school and life in general. I was always kind, but very tough and consistent. I believe the school community appreciates you more when they know exactly how you lead.

My leadership impacted the collaborative work I was involved in during the action research project. I was mindful of the dynamics of teamwork, groupthink, the ethics of care and justice, and the power of forging positive relationships as we all worked together. I had an open communication and open door policy in my office, and many arts and *Seminarts* teachers and students streamed into the office every day with a

myriad of ideas or dilemmas to solve. Some ideas that began to flow in these discussions in my office involved a clear scope and sequence of all the arts strands, an electronic arts portfolio requirement for seniors, college guests speakers and trips, and more local community artistic activities. I analyzed the culture of the school even before we opened as an arts building by examining the multiple frames identified by Bolman and Deal (2003). I worked hard to bring in district personnel to beautify the school with painted lockers across the building, and sprucing up the main office with our school colors. I wanted to make sure that the freshmen and all arts students took pride in their school as soon as they entered the building. I especially worked on the human resource frame (Bolman & Deal, 2003) as I appealed to the staff's higher visions of the school and of education.

One of the most interesting findings of the action research study was the high expectations that teachers place in student learning evidenced in discussions, interviews, focus groups, committee work, class field observations, and lesson plans. Yet when I visited the classrooms, many times I witnessed watered-down instructional student tasks that were not suitable for a high school. This attention to the instructional task that students are involved in is a direct academic indicator of achievement, and needs extensive professional development for student achievement to improve in all the instructional programs of the school. Further study is needed regarding this aspect, but it can be a year-long goal in *Seminarts* right away.

What I learned as a leader as I was conducting my action research project was the importance of vision, of analyzing systems in the school before embarking on initiatives, on consistent collaboration, and on *looking from the balcony* by gathering as much rich

data as possible to inform what was really going on in the transitional programs of the school.

*How did a restructured transitional program assist freshmen students in the arts academy?*

There is no doubt that the restructured *Seminarts* program was necessary for the freshmen. Students had auditioned and were subsequently disappointed when they did not have their chosen arts class. They wondered what was different from this academy and the other high school academies in the district. We needed to ensure that our freshmen were enrolled in an arts program right away. I felt that the arts teachers were the best staff members to mentor and advise their freshmen through the seminar portion. A blocked restructured transitional program enabled the *Seminarts* staff to nurture their freshmen, conduct a variety of lessons with team members, and include activities usually postponed to after school, such as rehearsals. The *Seminarts* also allowed the arts teachers to assist students in scheduling conflicts, and other student resources such as tutoring, parent conferences, and counseling sessions with school personnel. In their common preparation time, *Seminarts* teachers were able to discuss curriculum issues, attend professional development sessions, conduct their arts committee meetings, and even plan visits to middle schools in shifts while their arts colleagues planned activities for their students.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, thus far the restructured transitional program has enabled improvement of freshmen achievement. It is felt that with the new administrative team on board, including a beloved ex-vice-principal who has returned in her capacity, the *Seminarts* program will flourish and freshmen academic and artistic achievement will continue to grow.

## **Reflections on Change Efforts and Leadership**

Looking back on the initiatives that were put in place to effect change in the arts academy, I have evolved as a leader in several ways. I am deeply conscious now on the role relationships play in any change effort I undertake in schools. I always valued positive relationships, but I now understand that the value I place on relationships is pivotal in a change endeavor. Within any change initiative, I understand the role of effective teams and the importance of vision. I know how to group stakeholders together to develop school vision and undertake other important committee work. I perceived that to institute a second-order change, a process must evolve, step-by-step, and that this process takes time. I am additionally reminded as a leader of the value of collaboration and capacity-building to help build trust, effectiveness and future leaders. Lastly, I now know that any change effort without accountability and evaluation is doomed to failure because without important feedback, information, and restructuring, change efforts may be derailed.

## **Recommendations**

Based on this action research project and the literature reviewed, the following tables illustrate recommendations for future successful transitional programs in the whole school arts academy. The suggestions are placed within a multiple framework of social (Table 8.1), structural (Table 8.2), and academic (Table 8.3) categories to ensure that different aspects needed for a successful transition are met. Freshmen need strong structures and have clear expectations on what they need to do as soon as they enter high school. Table 8.2 describes structural components that are necessary for transition. To round out the necessary procedures for incoming freshmen, academic requirements need

to be clarified with the students as well as the role that organizational and study skills play in academic success. Table 8.3 illustrates the academic procedures for transitioning freshmen to the arts academy.

Table 8.1

*Social Procedures for Arts Academy Freshmen*

| Activity   | Timeline                            |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Open House for interested parents and eighth grade students  | Fall of eighth grade                |
| “On The Road” mini arts student performances & panel discussions   | Fall/Spring of eighth grade         |
| Invitation to arts academy spring musical, arts gallery show, dance or music concerts. Shared field trip or activity of freshmen and their student mentors | Spring, eighth grade                |
| Summer picnic with accepted students and possible arts academy mentors.  | Summer before ninth grade           |
| Accepted students full-day freshmen orientation; big brother/big sister student mentor chosen  | Fall, before first day of school    |
| Shared field trip or activity of freshmen and their student mentors  | Spring, ninth grade                 |
| Post card with school logo, colors and school values sent to welcome accepted freshmen. Cards designed by visual arts students                             | Summer, before entering ninth grade |



Table 8.2

*Structural Procedures for Arts Academy Freshmen*

| Activity  | Timeline                                  |
|---|---|
| Visiting arts teams describe expectations to accepted students; show video on Success in High School! (made by TV production students)                | Spring, eighth grade                      |
| Provide accepted students with their ninth grade schedules and a “run-through” of schedule with their lockers and school maps; student mentors assist | Late summer, before ninth grade           |
| Provide student handbook and resources available  | Spring, eighth grade - through counselors |
| Conduct a team scavenger hunt of key rooms in the new school  | Fall before first day of school           |
| “Meet the academy administrators”, counselors, and <i>Seminarts</i> teachers  | Fall before first day of school           |
| Arrange vendors; buy school supplies at the school  | Fall before first day of school           |
| Student mentors describe discipline code  | Fall before first day of school           |
| Allow freshmen to be late to classes in the first week of school.   | First week of ninth grade.                |

Table 8.3

*Academic Procedures for Arts Academy Freshmen*

| Activity  | Timeline  |
|---|---|
| Prepare Student Academic Handbook (to keep in their binders)  | Summer before eighth grade                              |
| Middle school and high school counselors describe expected grades and credits for successful freshmen year and resources available (tutoring, etc.). Distribute Student Academic Handbook | Spring, eighth grade<br>Fall before first day of school |
| Counselors provide list of arts colleges and universities and general college acceptance requirements. Student mentors assist   | Fall before first day of school                         |
| Panel of academic subject chairpersons describe classes/Q & A session   | Fall before first day of school                         |
| Conduct Cornell Note System Workshop,<br>Donate 1 month of Cornell Note Sheets to all freshmen attendees (PTO fundraiser)   | Fall before first day of school                         |

In addition to these recommendations for a successful freshmen transitional program in the arts academy, a steering committee of arts academy staff with point persons from each of the main feeder middle schools should meet once every two months beginning in

the fall of each year. In these meetings they discuss and coordinate all of the above described plans, give out information packets to distribute at the middle schools, and coordinate activities of accepted freshmen. Student mentors assist with the logistics of these meetings for community service hours. This transitional committee can also discuss information on incoming students who will need additional services and resources. Audition plans are also distributed to middle school personnel in a timely manner (early winter) for the interested student to begin to prepare for their audition in early spring (usually March). The website page is demonstrated to this committee, and each artistic strand would provide a school telephone number if middle school personnel, prospective student, or parent has any questions. High school parent organizational group members may also attend steering committee meetings and an arts academy administrator should facilitate the entire process.

Many of these activities were discussed in the action research study and others were proposed by me, based on what I believe freshmen need to begin their high school experience successfully. However, without guidance, structure, and accountability of an administrator from the arts academy, these recommendations will not come to fruition.

### **Limitations of Study**

This study was conducted in a short period of time (three years) with a limited number of respondents and sample. Other variables, such as district required instructional initiatives, changes of staff in the arts academy, uncertainty of the blocked schedule, new administrators in the arts academy, a renewed focus on staff accountability, and pressure to reach achievement goals, may have influenced or deterred student academic achievement. Additionally, this research did not check for subgroups in the student

cohorts. English language learners and special needs students were not equally represented as other groups.

### **Conclusions**

High schools can “stem the tide of mediocrity” for young urban adolescents by providing effective transitional programs that meet all of the components of a freshmen’s experience in their new school. These components include academic, procedural, and social structures that assist the freshmen to maneuver all the forces that come into play in high school. An effective transitional program is further derived by including parents and stakeholders during the end of middle school and in the first year of high school. Once in high school, freshmen thrive with caring, experienced teachers and mentors, and with activities that are relevant, challenging, and student centered. School resources that assist the students with problems they may experience need to be in place. The advocate or transitional teacher assists the student into these resources and monitors student growth.

Students and teachers in the arts academy articulated very clearly what is needed for student success. Yet disconnects exist with the rigor of classroom lessons, the validity of transitional program curriculum, and the archaic focus on teacher-centered lessons that lack meaning to the real world. For any transitional program to be successful, the expectations of students and teachers need to be evidenced and fulfilled in the ninth grade classroom with administrative assistance and accountability.

Time during the school day for teacher collaboration is required for successful transitional programs. Interdisciplinary lessons, artistic and academic activities, adult professional development, parent and student conferences, and a host of other activities occur during this common preparation time. Staff committees enable teachers from

different segments of the school to coordinate activities and resources and bring teachers together to bridge gaps in their programs. Evaluations of all programs and soliciting student and teacher opinions provide for a positive culture and for collaborative changes to be implemented.

Additionally, teachers and other stakeholders need to be active participants of the development of transitional programs, the scheduling process and the curriculum. Once these parameters are agreed upon, administrators need to hold teachers accountable for accurate curriculum delivery, record-keeping, and program informational sessions to feeder schools, parents and other community members. Major program hurdles can be overcome by careful scheduling that is not one size fits all, and a curriculum that is relevant and meaningful to students with sustained professional development to staff members.

Lastly, transformational leadership is required as the glue that meshes all of these components. Without a visionary leader committed to a renewed focus on the ninth grade, many programs and initiatives do not flourish. School leaders need to institute change efforts that directly impact the ninth grade student. They put systems in place to enable continuous collaboration, evaluation, planning, and communication. Ultimately, with strong leadership, committed teachers and staff, and well-planned, multi-layered transitional programs, freshmen students will experience an excellent high school journey.

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## Appendix A

### Student Perception Survey – Cycle I

Dear Students:

Thank you for taking this short survey. The results will provide next year's Arts Academy with valuable information for improvements based on your attitudes and ideas toward the school. To insure anonymous responses:

**Do not include your name and ID number.**

**In this section, you will answer questions describing your feelings towards the arts. By the arts, we mean, any of the following:**

playing an instrument  
singing, vocal music  
dance  
theater, drama  
creative writing

drawing and painting  
sculpture  
television production  
graphic arts  
photography

-----  
-----

#### 1. What is art to me? (check ALL that describes you)

- An expression of who I am
- A way of making others happy
- A way of making me happy
- A way of sending a message
- A way to relax
- A way to beautify the world
- A way to escape
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

#### 2. How does art affect my life? (check ALL that describes you)

- It is a small part of who I am
- It is natural to me
- It is my passion
- It is something extra that I do
- It is everything to me

\_\_\_ Other (please specify)

---

**3. Who are your artistic role models? (check ALL that applies to you)**

- \_\_\_ Famous celebrities
  - \_\_\_ Friends
  - \_\_\_ Parents
  - \_\_\_ Teachers
  - \_\_\_ Other relatives
  - \_\_\_ People in my religious group
  - \_\_\_ People in my youth group
  - \_\_\_ Other (please specify)
- 

**4. What do you think is the impact of art on the world? (check ALL that applies to you)**

- \_\_\_ People experience art differently
  - \_\_\_ Art changes how people think about their world
  - \_\_\_ Art has little impact on humans
  - \_\_\_ The world can exist without artistic expression
  - \_\_\_ Art can change the course of history
  - \_\_\_ Art mirrors history
  - \_\_\_ Art makes us all better human beings
  - \_\_\_ Other (please specify)
- 

**5. What is your artistic ability?**

---

**In this section, you will answer questions regarding the Arts Academy.**

**6. Why did you choose to attend Arts Academy? (check ALL that applies to you)**

- I want to be in a school with easy classes
- I want to pursue the arts as my future career
- I want to be involved in school productions
- I want to learn from experienced teachers in the arts
- I want to take many classes in my artistic field
- I want a school that is flexible with rehearsals and practice
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**7. How many classes, in your artistic field, have you had in high school? (check ONE only)**

- I have had no classes in my artistic field in high school
- I have had 1 or 2 classes in my artistic field in high school
- I have had 3 or 4 classes in my artistic field in high school
- I have had more than 4 classes in my artistic field in high school

**8. How many years of private lessons have you had in your artistic field (check ONE only)**

- 0
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-9 years
- over 9 years

**9. Did you audition for the arts academy? (check ONE only)**

*Audition means to play an instrument, sing, dance or read a monologue in front of a panel of teachers of the arts.*

*It also means you submitted a creative writing portfolio or an audio-visual media DVD or storyboard.*

Yes

No



**In this section, you will answer questions describing what you would like to see in Arts Academy.**

**10. What type of teaching activities best fit an arts academy? (check ALL that apply)**

- Lectures
  - Group work
  - Role-playing
  - Independent study
  - Portfolios
  - Projects
  - Rubrics
  
  - Other (please specify)
- 

**11. What do you want to see in the arts academy next year? (check ALL that apply)**

- More field trips
  - Visiting artistic guest speakers
  - More assemblies
  - Flexible time for rehearsals and practices
  - More school plays or productions
  - More artistic competitions
  - More visual arts displays
  - Volunteer community service in the arts
  - Work experiences in the arts
  - After school arts clubs
  
  - Other (please specify)
- 

**12. What areas do you think will improve in the arts academy? (check ALL that apply)**

- Attendance
- Academic grades
- Discipline
- Getting to class on time
- Motivation to learn
- Graduation rates
- Acceptances into college

**13. What do you need to be successful in the arts academy? (check ALL that apply)**

- More technology in the classroom
  - Tutoring services
  - Better guidance services
  - Better school communication with parents
  - Caring teachers
  - Block schedule for the arts (double periods)
  - Lessons that apply to the arts
  - Credit recovery programs
  - More hands-on learning
  - Portfolio projects
  - More parent involvement in school
  - Other (please specify)
- 

**14. What grade are you in? (check only ONE)**

- 9
- Retained 9
- 10
- Retained 10
- 11

**15. Check ONE**

- Male                       Female

**Thank you again for your answers to this survey.  
Please return this document to Mrs. Sanchez, Assistant House Director,  
in the main office.**

## **Appendix B**

### **Teacher Focus Group Questions**

#### **Cycle II**

**2009-2010**

1. What is the biggest success of the program thus far?
2. What is the biggest failure of the program thus far?
3. What % of students from this course would you say want to be in an arts academy?
4. What are some ideas to expose freshman students immediately to the arts?
5. How do we insure that the skills presented in the SS curriculum are in a freshman arts program?
6. How will we address preparing a new curriculum that addresses all the arts strands?
7. What type of timeline do you foresee to complete this new program for September?
8. Would you be willing to forego a preference for an early/late schedule to meet the needs of freshman students in this new program that we create?
9. Would you like to call this class something else? What and why?
10. What are your feelings towards portfolio requirements/ with or without a panel?
11. Are you willing to work this summer on a new Success Seminar Curriculum?
12. Any other comments?

## Appendix C

### Teacher Questionnaire – Cycle II

#### Teachers' Perceptions of the Success Seminar Class

Please respond to each item on the survey with respect to the school's existing Success Seminar class and curriculum. Your responses will help to identify specific areas to improve this curriculum and the schedule. You are not being asked to provide your name on the questionnaire; therefore **all responses are anonymous**. This survey will take an estimated 8 to 10 minutes to complete.

Thank you for your participation.

|                   |          |         |       |                |
|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| 1                 | 2        | 3       | 4     | 5              |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |

| Place a check mark (✓) in the column that most closely matches your agreement with each of the following statements: |  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.   | All freshman students need a 9 <sup>th</sup> grade class that has a major focus on organizational skills.                  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 2.   | All freshman students need a 9 <sup>th</sup> grade class that has a major focus on study skills.                           |   |   |   |   |   |
| 3.   | All freshman students need a 9 <sup>th</sup> grade class that has a major focus on skills and resources to solve problems. |   |   |   |   |   |
| 4.   | All freshman students need a 9 <sup>th</sup> grade class that has a major focus on conflict-resolution skills.             |   |   |   |   |   |
| 5.   | All freshman students in the arts academy should be exposed to an arts class in their first year of high school.           |   |   |   |   |   |
| 6.   | Freshman students are too immature to be exposed to the arts in their first year of high school.                           |   |   |   |   |   |

|  |  |         |       |                |   |   |
|--|--|---------|-------|----------------|---|---|
| 7.   | Most students are not motivated to excel and achieve in the 9 <sup>th</sup> grade.                             |         |       |                |   |   |
| 8.   | Only students who applied and auditioned to the arts academy should take an arts class in their freshman year. |         |       |                |   |   |
| 9.   | Students can learn organizational skills in an arts class.   |         |       |                |   |   |
| 10.  | Freshman students should not be blocked in an arts program.  |         |       |                |   |   |
| 1  | 2  | 3       | 4     | 5              |   |   |
| Strongly Disagree  | Disagree   | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |   |   |
| Place a check mark (✓) in the column that most closely matches your agreement with each of the following statements: |  | 1       | 2     | 3              | 4 | 5 |
| 11.  | The most positive part of the Success Seminar curriculum was the Cornell Notes System.                         |         |       |                |   |   |
| 12.  | I do not enjoy teaching the Success Seminar Class.   |         |       |                |   |   |
| 13.  | The most positive part of the Success Seminar curriculum were the student projects.                            |         |       |                |   |   |
| 14.  | The lessons in the Success Seminar curriculum were paced correctly.  |         |       |                |   |   |
| 15.  | Students do not take the Success Seminar class seriously.  |         |       |                |   |   |
| 16.  | More resources are needed for classroom instruction of the Success Seminar curriculum.                         |         |       |                |   |   |
| 17.  | Computer labs were available as needed for this class.   |         |       |                |   |   |
| 18.  | Enough training and professional development was provided before teaching this class.                          |         |       |                |   |   |
| 19.  | Teachers have opportunities to share ideas about this class.   |         |       |                |   |   |
| 20.  | Teachers have little input in the design of this curriculum.   |         |       |                |   |   |

|  |  |         |       |                |   |   |
|--|--|---------|-------|----------------|---|---|
| 21.  | The Success Seminar program should continue for next year.   |         |       |                |   |   |
| 22.  | The binder check requirement is not effective for 9 <sup>th</sup> graders.   |         |       |                |   |   |
| 23.  | Community service should be a strong requirement of this curriculum.   |         |       |                |   |   |
| 24.  | An arts program cannot be correlated with the objectives of the Success Seminar curriculum.                        |         |       |                |   |   |
| 25.  | 9 <sup>th</sup> grade students should have more field trip opportunities.  |         |       |                |   |   |
| 26.  | Teachers need to collaborate to change the Success Seminar curriculum.   |         |       |                |   |   |
| 1  | 2  | 3       | 4     | 5              |   |   |
| Strongly Disagree  | Disagree   | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |   |   |
| Place a check mark (✓) in the column that most closely matches your agreement with each of the following statements: |  | 1       | 2     | 3              | 4 | 5 |
| Note: <i>Seminarts</i> refers to a blocked class of arts with the skills of this year's Success Seminar Curriculum.  |  |         |       |                |   |   |
| 27.  | A block schedule for this curriculum and the arts is important (Seminarts)   |         |       |                |   |   |
| 28.  | An exit panel of teachers that evaluates the learned Success Seminar skills and progress in the arts is important. |         |       |                |   |   |
| 29.  | Students not interested in an arts program should not be in a blocked Seminarts class.                             |         |       |                |   |   |
| 30.  | Study skills can be taught through the arts.   |         |       |                |   |   |
| 31.  | I would like to participate in restructuring the curriculum of the Seminarts class.                                |         |       |                |   |   |
| 32.  | All arts freshman students should be exposed to a challenging and enriched Seminarts class.                        |         |       |                |   |   |
| 33.  | The school needs to provide professional development based on the rationale and teaching of the Seminarts class.   |         |       |                |   |   |

|     |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|-----|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| 34. | Non-motivated students will benefit from a Seminars class.               |  |  |  |  |  |
| 35. | I believe that freshman students cannot handle a blocked Seminars class. |  |  |  |  |  |

Thank you for your cooperation and participation in this survey. It is important for the school to better understand how to revise the Success Seminar Program to increase freshman student achievement in an arts academy.

## Appendix D

### Values Exercise

**What drives you? What do you value the most for this school? Please pick 5 values only.**

Achievement \_\_\_

Helping other people \_\_\_

Adventure \_\_\_

Helping society \_\_\_

Affection \_\_\_

Honesty \_\_\_

Challenging problems \_\_\_

Influencing others \_\_\_

Change & Variety \_\_\_

Integrity \_\_\_

Close Relationships \_\_\_

Intellectual status \_\_\_

Community \_\_\_

Involvement \_\_\_

Competence \_\_\_

Knowledge \_\_\_

Cooperation \_\_\_

Leadership \_\_\_

Creativity \_\_\_

Loyalty \_\_\_

Decisiveness \_\_\_

Meaningful work \_\_\_

Effectiveness \_\_\_

Merit \_\_\_

Efficiency \_\_\_

Order (tranquility, stability, conformity) \_\_\_

Ethical practice \_\_\_

Personal development \_\_\_

Excellence \_\_\_

Public service \_\_\_

Excitement \_\_\_

Responsibility and accountability \_\_\_

Expertise \_\_\_

Security \_\_\_

Freedom \_\_\_

Self-respect \_\_\_

Friendships \_\_\_

Truth \_\_\_

Growth \_\_\_

Wisdom \_\_\_



## Appendix E

### *Seminarts* Teacher Focus Group – Cycle III

Arts Academy

November 22, 2010

**Preamble:** As we begin this discussion, as the researcher, I would like to make a few statements regarding our work today. I am aware of all the changes that have occurred since this study began in the spring of 2009 in this school. Administrators have come and gone, and just as recently as four days ago, another new principal has arrived. Changes have occurred in staffing, enrichment activities, and committee work. There may be students who might not want to be in this academy. **For today, I would like us to comment specifically on the transitional freshmen program called *Seminarts* for this arts academy.** Our task today is to analyze some data and comment on the effectiveness of the Success Seminar class and the freshman arts class and where you think we should be headed. As always, your comments are confidential and will be solely used for the purpose of a research study and hopefully to benefit the school. We will first analyze the data in Table 4.5 and Table 4.6 (see attached).

#### Focus Group Questions

1. What is your reaction to the data in both tables?
2. What do you each teach this year?
3. Have you all taught freshman Success Seminar class?
4. Do you see anything different this year from last year in this class or program?
5. How are freshmen students in your *arts class* this year?
6. Thus far in this study, there seems to be a disconnect with student and teacher goals and expectations and the actual tasks done in the classroom. See student comments (attached).
7. Is the Success Seminar effective, in your opinion?
8. What is your comment on what the students *are actually doing* in *Seminarts*?
9. What would you do, in the reality of this change environment that is occurring in the district, to restructure a successful ninth grade transitional program? (No extra staffing, resources etc.).
10. Any final comments?

**Appendix F**  
**Freshmen Seminarts Survey**  
**Cycle III**  
**December, 2010**

Dear Students:

I am a doctoral candidate at Rowan University. I am doing a study on the freshman *Seminarts* program and I need student input in this short survey.

**SEMINARTS = A SUCCESS SEMINAR CLASS BLOCKED WITH AN ARTS CLASS**

The results will provide the school with valuable information for improvements.

To insure anonymous responses:  
**Do not include your name and ID number.**

**By artistic interest, we mean any of the following:**

playing an instrument  
singing, vocal music  
dance  
theater, drama  
creative writing

drawing and painting  
sculpture  
television production  
graphic arts  
photography

---

1. **What is your artistic interest? (see list above)**

\_\_\_\_\_

2. **Was this arts academy your first choice when you applied?**

YES \_\_\_\_\_

NO \_\_\_\_\_

3. Did you audition (try-out) to attend this arts academy?

YES \_\_\_\_\_

NO \_\_\_\_\_

4. Do you think *Seminarts* ( see definition in the box above) is a good program to have as you begin your high school arts academy experience?

YES \_\_\_\_\_

NO \_\_\_\_\_

5. If you marked YES, why? (mark all answers that apply to you)

- It provides good organizational, study, and social skills
  - The *Seminarts* teacher becomes a good advisor for students in high school
  - It is blocked with the arts class and gives me more time with my arts teacher
  - Other (please specify)
- 

6. If you marked NO, why? (mark all answers that apply to you)

- It is a waste of time
  - The assignments are meaningless to me
  - I do not need this class to graduate
  - Other (please specify)
- 

7. What was your biggest concern as you entered the arts academy as a freshman?  
(mark all answers that apply to you)

- Schedule
- Rules/Regulations
- Making friends
- Challenging academic classes
- Arts classes
- Safety/Bullying

- School atmosphere
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**8. What types of activities do you prefer in a *Seminarts* program?  
(mark all answers that apply to you)**

- Lectures
- Group work
- Role-playing
- Independent study
- Portfolios
- Projects
- Rubrics
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**9. What do you need to be successful in this arts academy?  
(mark all answers that apply to you)**

- Clubs
- More field trips
- More in-school exposure to arts activities (speakers, performances, assemblies)
- A teacher advisor
- More rehearsal time
- More artistic competitions
- More visual arts displays
- Volunteer community service in the arts
- Work experiences in the arts
- A high school big brother or big sister
- More information in grade 8
- More technology in the classroom
- Tutoring services
- Better guidance services
- Better school communication with parents
- Caring teachers
- Credit recovery programs
- More hands-on learning
- Portfolio projects
- More parent involvement in school

\_\_\_ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**10. What is your favorite subject? ( ONE only)**

---

**11. What are your future plans or goals? (mark all that applies to you)**

\_\_\_ College (arts college or any college/university)

\_\_\_ To graduate from this arts academy

\_\_\_ To become a famous artist in my field

\_\_\_ To give back to my community

\_\_\_ To inspire others through my artistic ability

\_\_\_ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**12. What areas of Seminars do you think will help you improve in the arts academy? (check ALL that apply)**

\_\_\_ Attendance

\_\_\_ Academic grades

\_\_\_ Discipline

\_\_\_ Organization

\_\_\_ Getting to class on time

\_\_\_ Motivation to learn

\_\_\_ Graduation

\_\_\_ Acceptance into college

\_\_\_ Artistic ability

\_\_\_ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**13. What grade are you in? (check only ONE)**

\_\_\_ 9

\_\_\_ Retained 9

\_\_\_ 10

\_\_\_ Retained 10

\_\_\_ 11

**14. Check ONE**

\_\_\_ Male

\_\_\_ Female

## Appendix G

### Freshman *Seminarts* Focus Group Questions

#### Cycle III

February, 2011

Students: My name is Mari Celi Sanchez and I am a doctoral student at Rowan University. I am currently studying freshman transition programs. I would like to thank you for being part of this group to discuss the *Seminarts* blocked class. Your comments are important for me to understand student feelings and ideas regarding this class. What you say is confidential and at no time should names be mentioned. I would ask that you please answer one at a time, and allow others to finish before you begin. Here we go.

#### Questions

1. Do you like the *Seminarts* program? Why or why not.
2. Why do you think this program exists?
3. Are you in both parts of the *Seminarts* blocked program?
4. Are you with the correct arts teacher in your strand?
5. Do you like the assignments that you do in this class?
6. Which ones are your favorite?
7. How do you feel about the binder requirement?
8. How about you feel about the Cornell Note System requirement?
9. Do you feel support from your *Seminarts* teachers?
10. Are you in any clubs or school productions?
11. What do you think an arts academy should offer for freshman to succeed?