

2019

# The Effects of Small Learning Communities on College and Career Ready Performance Index

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Julie M. Mizell

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2019

Abstract

The Effects of Small Learning Communities on College and Career Ready Performance

Index

by

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EdS, Lincoln Memorial University, 2002

MS, Georgia Southern University, 2000

BS, Georgia Southern University, 1992

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

April 2019

## Abstract

In an attempt to address persistent dropout rates and low-test scores, a high school with nearly 1,700 students in the southeastern region of the United States restructured itself into small learning communities (SLCs) in 2006 resulting in higher student achievement as based on College and Career Ready Performance Index scores. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine the perspectives of teachers as they experienced the SLC transformation. Guided by Piaget and Dewey's theories of constructivism, the perspectives of teachers as they experienced a successful transformation within the context of the school were investigated. The participants' prior knowledge of school reform and accountability created a purpose and meaning to the SLC implementation. The 13 participants in this study taught core academic subjects in this school before, during, and after the inception of SLCs. The collected data were coded to identify patterns and relationships from which four themes emerged: building relationships, rigorous/relevant curriculum, professional learning and interdisciplinary teaming. Findings showed that SLCs both helped improve student outcomes and faculty morale by allowing teachers to have a more active role in decision making in scheduling and deciding professional development opportunities. District or school-level administrators could use this research for positive social change by implementing SLCs to improve high school graduation rates, which could give students more postsecondary and workforce opportunities.

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## Section 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

High school graduation rates in the United States have reached 84% (United States Department of Education, 2017). However, 40% of those students score below the basic range in math and 29% score below the basic range in reading (McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2018). Many schools have kept the same basic organization that has been in place for many years and “most students are expected to learn the material in the same way at the same pace. Public schools have continued to follow their roots and “function as a sorting system” (“The Times Have Changed”, 2019). Based on these statistics, educational leaders continue to create opportunities for innovative school reform which will lead to increased academic performance.

Small Learning Communities (SLCs) is a reform effort that has been evaluated as a way to improve student achievement. Oxley (2007) defined SLCs as “all school design efforts intended to create smaller, more learning-centered units of organization” (p. 61). Researchers (Bryant, Shdaimah, Sander, & Cornelius, 2013; De la Torre, et al., 2013; Felner, Seitsinger, Brand, Burns, & Bolton, 2008; Kilroy, Dezan, Riepe, & Ross, 2007; Schwartz, Stiefel, & Wiswall, 2013) noted that the small school size had a positive effect on the academic gains of students regardless of the class size. Oxley (2008) defined SLCs as “an interdisciplinary team of teachers [who] share a few hundred or fewer student in common for instruction, assumes responsibility for their educational progress across years of school, and exercises maximum flexibility to act on knowledge of students’ needs” (p. 1). For SLCs to be effective, teachers must be willing to change the familiar

departmentally organized structure to a collaborative community where all teachers work together to help students achieve (Kwong, 2010). The combination of the SLC structure and personalized instruction created an environment where students were able to improve student achievement.

### **Problem Statement**

Since the inception of College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), a Georgia high school had been reviewing ways to help students meet the rigorous state requirements and achieve academic success. The problem of students' low academic progress continued to hamper this school. It was the lowest ranked high school in the county according to the CCRPI.

New criteria for meeting state standards have changed for Georgia. The Georgia Department of Education (ED) granted Georgia a waiver for No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (ED, 2010). For the 2012-2013 school year, Georgia schools implemented CCRPI, not Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), as the accountability platform. This index was based on statewide performance targets including content mastery of end-of-course tests, post high school readiness, and graduation rate (Barge, 2012). To meet the current accountability index, this high school's faculty encountered more work to increase the academic performance in mathematics and English for students with disabilities and economically disadvantaged students in the academic year of 2012-2013. This is compounded by the fact the overall graduation rate also fell below the required criteria for both subgroups. The high school's administration and faculty restructured itself into SLCs and has kept this structure for 15 years. I investigated the relationship between

SLCs and student achievement. Specifically, I determined if teacher transition before, during, and after SLC implementation had an impact on student achievement scores.

### **Nature of the Study**

This case study explored effectiveness of SLCs using the perspectives of teachers who have been employed since 2006 when SLCs were implemented. Case study research is used to investigate a phenomenon by collecting data from multiple sources and drawing conclusions around the specific context to explain a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Specifically, instrumental case studies are used to develop theories that facilitate understanding of issues (Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2011; Simons, 2009; Straits & Singleton, 2010; Yin, 2014). The decision to use an instrumental case study for this research was based on my desire to find a relationship in the implementation of SLCs and the increased gains achieved on yearly progress. The objective of this instrumental case study was to determine teachers' challenges and successful experiences during this time of SLC transition to improve CCRPI scores.

The overarching central research question for this study was, "What was the effect of SLCs on CCRPI scores?" Given the educational problem and having little to no empirically-grounded research on the effectiveness of the research site's SLCs and its impact on CCRPI scores, the following sub questions were important in the exploration of SLC strategies for this high school and addressed and answered using qualitative data:

1. What do teachers consider to be indicators of success during the SLC transition while trying to improve CCRPI scores?

2. What was the greatest challenge teachers faced during and after the SLC transition while trying to improve CCRPI scores?

Teachers involved in this study had at least 5 years of teaching experience and up to 32 years of teaching experience, with an average of 21.69 years. Their education levels ranged from bachelor's degree to doctoral degree. Methodology and data analysis will be discussed in depth in Section 3 of this proposal.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Legislative reforms, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), included provisions which required school leaders to create high quality learning environments for all students to prepare them to be successful for college and careers. The concept of SLCs structured as career academies is one example of combining academic and vocational curricula around a career theme to promote long-term employment impacts for students (Stern, Dayton, & Raby, 2010). SLCs are described in the literature as an effective way to structure large high schools into smaller personalized groups that address low student achievement and high dropout rates (Cotton, 2001; Davis, Chang, Andrzejewski, & Poirier, 2014; Fischetti & Smith, 2010; Gewertz, 2011; Oxley & Luers, 2011). Lee, Ready, and Johnson (2001) described SLCs as creating a deeper and more connected environment while reducing the size of the problematic organization. By creating smaller groups of students with similar career aspirations, teachers are able to personalize educational opportunities to keep students engaged in learning and to keep them in school until graduation.

The high school where the research was conducted is the largest school in the county with nearly 1,700 students. Residents have a strong sentimental attachment to the high school because several generations graduated from the same school. The school is over 100 years old. Local industry growth and growth in the local regional university has increased the enrollment at the high school to nearly 1,700 students, which is 500 students beyond its original capacity. School administrators and faculty have encountered equity issues in terms of funding and staffing when compared to other schools in the area.

This school community exhibits low socioeconomic characteristics, including poverty, lack of health insurance, housing insecurity, lack of employment opportunities, and hopelessness (Ferguson, 2007; Tonn, 2007). The racial demographics of the research population are 59% Black and 41% White. The 2010 census data revealed that over 30.5% of the people in this county were deemed at or below the poverty level.

Adding to these data are myriad other challenges. Numerous changes in administration and faculty has resulted in eight different principals in the last 14 years. This has also led to both a lack of curricular direction as well as poor classroom management, weakness in relationships, and poor technology integration. There is an extreme need for improvement among teachers in pedagogical strategies in the teaching of literacy.

In the face of high dropout rates and low-test scores, the high school educational leaders where this study took place, were under pressure to restructure its educational services. The principal, teachers, counselors, media specialists, and staff met to determine the best strategy to help this school improve in the wake of accountability factors

associated with ESSA. After the committee reviewed the data associated with student dropout rate, student attendance, student socioeconomic status, student discipline incidents, student ethnic groups, and student gender ratios, the assistant superintendent of curriculum proposed restructuring the high school with 1,700 students into SLCs. The principal was not convinced that the SLC model was the right one for the school and wanted input from the entire faculty on how to increase school achievement. He divided the faculty into nine committees to examine faculty morale, scheduling, middle school transitions, honors curriculum, homework, a reading initiative, student attendance, faculty attendance, and failure rates. Each committee reviewed data related to their assigned topic, brainstormed ideas that would help to improve the assigned topic in the current setting and reported back to the entire faculty at a scheduled faculty meeting. The faculty embraced the assigned task and discovered that a lot needed to be done at the high school to improve student achievement (Principal, personal communication, September 18, 2010).

Based upon these observations, the principal discussed the option of restructuring the high school into SLCs. He charged the faculty to research different reform options and come to him if they found another flexible model that focused on improving student achievement. With input from all stakeholders at the school, the decision was made to restructure the high school into SLCs.

After meeting with the local State Department of Labor, the stakeholders decided to restructure the school into career academies after learning that 80% of the graduates stayed in the tri-county area after graduation. The need to prepare students for

postsecondary options and the local workforce became a mission for all. In 2003, this urban high school received a competitive United States Department of Education (ED) SLC grant aimed at improving student academic achievement in large public high schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more students. Under my supervision as the grant manager, the school was restructured into SLCs over the next 3 years, which included creating a freshmen academy and three career academies for Grades 10-12. The school also met its College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) goals. In this case study, I explored factors that contributed to this high school's success with implementing effective SLCs as a strategy to achieve CCRPI goals through the perspectives of the teachers involved.

The purpose of this case study was to determine, as viewed by teachers who have been employed since 2003 when SLCs were implemented, the successes and challenges that occurred during this time to improve CCRPI scores.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Constructivism guided this study with the understanding that individual experiences helped teachers make sense of new knowledge during the integration of SLCs. Skaalid (2011) defined *constructivism* as a learning theory that allows learners to construct their own knowledge by actively seeking a connection to reality. Constructivism is an underlying assumption in the development of SLCs. Learning requires students to contribute and solve their immediate problems by using their knowledge to connect to the real world (Beland, 2014; Goodman, 2007; Gordon, 2009).



Applying constructivism in educational reform requires education leaders to bring a unique vision to the workplace and to communicate solutions effectively to all stakeholders that can be implemented to help resolve problems in the school. School improvement must include student achievement and the skills needed to be college and career-ready for postsecondary options (Aud et al., 2013; Barge, 2012; Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014). The reality is “as many as 40 percent of students in urban high schools fail to get promoted from ninth to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade on time, and fewer than 20 percent of those students recover from the failure and go on to graduate” (Connell, Eccles, Kemple, & Legters, 2005, p. 1). Research suggests that changing current school structure by dividing students into smaller groups and incorporating a more personal approach may be the key to increasing success in high school (Dynarski, Gleason, Rangarajan, & Wood, 1998; Gewertz, 2011; McMullan & Wolf, 1991). Oxley (2007) added that successful SLCs also incorporate high academic standards and collaboration with community partners. The constructivist framework allowed me to examine the complexities of organizational change in education manifested by school reform through the perspectives of teachers in the reform process.

### **Operational Definitions**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms were used and defined below:

*4-Year cohort graduation rate calculation for CCRPI:* The number of students who graduate in the standard number of years (4 years and a summer for 9-12 school) from a Georgia public high school with a regular diploma (not including a GED or certificate not fully aligned with the state’s academic standards and not including Special

Education diplomas) divided by the total number of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders, transfers in, transfers out, emigrate or die in the current year and the previous 3 years (ED, 2017, p. 14).

*Achievement:* Achievement was measured using CCRPI (2015). Each school in the district received a score for the 2011-2012 school year.

*Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):* AYP is a means of measuring, through standards and assessments, student achievement under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) goal (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011).

*Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate:* The number of students who graduate in 4 years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class (ED, 2011, p. 1).

*College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI):* The purpose of CCRPI is to provide an objective measure of the extent to which schools, districts, and the state are succeeding in providing high-quality opportunities and outcomes for students that can be used for communication and continuous improvement. (ED, 2018, p. 2).

*Small learning community (SLC):* A subdivision of large school populations into smaller, autonomous groups of students and teachers. Small learning community is a school within a school (Small Learning Community Law & Legal Definition, n.d., para. 1).

## **Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations**

### **Assumptions**

The following assumptions framed this study:

1. Participants involved in this study had no prior experience or exposure to implementing SLCs before working at this high school.
2. Participants had a clear understanding of SLC reform during implementation.
3. Participants honestly communicated their educational and philosophical factors that occurred during the SLCs implementation.

### **Limitations**

The context and setting for this study were highly localized, hence the findings in this study may be generalized only for high schools of similar characteristics. I was a former administrator at the high school that is the site of the research study; therefore, the setting is one of convenience. The teachers invited to participate in the study were only the ones who have taught at the school and have been employed since 2006 when SLCs were implemented. I have also worked with all the teachers involved in the study in some capacity (as a teacher, media specialist, or administrator). I was honest with participants and shared my role as the researcher of this study to mitigate potential anxiety.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study was delimited to teachers who have taught at this high school in Georgia before, during, and after SLC implementation. Although bounded in this local setting with teachers who experienced the change resulting from implementing SLCs in

this school, the results of the study may be generalizable to high school settings in other regions of the country interested in implementing SLCs.

### **Significance of the Study**

Under CCRPI accountability indicators, Georgia measures how well schools are doing to prepare students for the next educational level. High school students are still expected to score at a *meets* or *exceeds* level of performance on the end-of-course tests for the designated subjects. However, students do not have to pass the end-of-course test in order to receive a high school diploma. By providing SLCs and building student/teacher relationships within the school community, teachers and administrators at this Georgia high school worked to ultimately achieve an increase in CCRPI scores.

The high school in this study has the largest enrollment in its county of 1,700 students. Because of its size, many challenges exist including high teacher turnover, complacency among staff, overcrowded classes, and a multitude of changes in leadership as compared to the other high schools in this county with stable leadership. It was anticipated that this case study contributed an insider's view as to the success of a school with multiple challenges engaging in transformative processes through SLCs generating success in meeting the academic needs of children. Other potential contributions of the study include educational leaders (a) considering changing the physical structure when building new high schools with over 1,000 students to accommodate SLCs, (b) hiring more teachers who are familiar with the SLC structure, and (c) considering the SLC structure when making a school improvement change.

## Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case research study was to explore perceived factors that contributed to this high school's success when implementing SLCs as a strategy to increase CCRPI scores through the perspectives of the teachers involved in this process. Accountability under ESSA also required this high school to improve student academic achievement in order to achieve the state's goals and identified measured criteria. Section 1 addressed the foundation and significance of this qualitative case study.

Section 2 will reinforce the qualitative case study through a review of literature of accountability factors, such as the history of NCLB, AYP, Common Core Standards, CCRPI, and ESSA. Research investigating efforts to personalize the school environment will be reviewed with regards to maintaining high levels of student performance. Research of SLCs will also be included in this section beginning with the history, government and private financial support efforts, and implementation strategies. I will also include a review of differing research methodologies considered for this study.

Section 3 will describe and justify the qualitative methodology for this study. It will include an explanation of the selection of participants, research setting, researcher's role, and data collection methods and procedures. Data analysis procedures and strategies will also be included to ensure research accuracy.

## Section 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The first chapter of this study provided an overview of the problem, the purpose of the research, the theoretical framework of the study, and the significance of this reform. In an attempt to address persistent dropout rates and low-test scores, a high school with nearly 1,700 students in Georgia restructured itself into SLCs. The intent of the reform was to divide students into smaller groups and incorporate a more personal approach to increase student academic achievement. While experiencing this reform, the faculty also faced changing federal and state educational guidelines to ensure a quality education and equity for all students.

Using current and relevant literature, Section 2 outlines the history and effectiveness of SLCs, the educator's role in SLCs, and federal and state education standards and accountability. I weaved these three topics together to present data on an effective learning environment.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The information presented in this chapter came from peer-reviewed journal articles, case studies, electronic sources, literature reviews, books, and government documents. To ensure saturation, much of the literature was written within the past 7 years and is peer reviewed. I used ProQuest, SAGE, Academic Search Complete, ERIC, and dissertations. The key search terms used were *small learning communities*, *adequate yearly progress*, *College and Career Ready Performance Index*, *Every Student Succeeds Act*, *graduation rate*, *No Child Left Behind*, *high school reform*, *closing the achievement*

*gap, career academies, and high school redesign.* Internal school documents and data were also collected. School test scores were accessed through the CCRPI portal, which can be accessed online, and through archived data on the Georgia Department of Education website.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Prior school reform efforts on the national and state levels have influenced decisions made at this high school. The participants' prior knowledge of school reform and accountability created a purpose and meaning to the SLC implementation. The design of SLCs within this high school of nearly 1,700 students created personalization and a sense of belonging to improve student achievement. When teachers can focus on the needs of smaller groups of students, they are creating a constructive classroom climate where student personalization is a priority for education success (Abbot & Fisher, 2012; Sammon, 2008). SLCs are used to reform the way a high school is structured (Fleischman & Heppen, 2009; Oxley & Luers, 2011). Felner et al. (2008) discovered that the small school size had a positive effect on the academic gains of students regardless of the class size. Additional findings also revealed that poor, minority students have a higher academic achievement level when attending a high school which incorporates SLCs, instead of attending a traditional high school (Benson & Borman, 2010; Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008; De la Torre, et al., 2013; Ravitz, 2010). This information has encouraged educational leaders who were looking for a way to close the achievement gap between minority students and other students.

## **National School Reform Efforts**

Federal intervention has become a reoccurring theme in many reform efforts. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* outlawed racial segregation in public schools (Brown v. Board of Educ., 1954). That Supreme Court ruling also “found no constitutional mandates for federal control of education; therefore, education is a responsibility of the individual states” (Rhoads, Sieber, & Slayton, 1999). However, the federal government contributed to the reform movement by establishing national goals and providing financial support to the establishment of national standards (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008). Federal directives also mandated achievement testing and standards-based education reform (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003). *Improving America’s School’s Act* ( IASA) reauthorized the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1965 (ESEA), which was first enacted by President Johnson and designed to spend federal funding on poor schools with low achieving students (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003). IASA amendments required all states to have “content and performance standards; assessments aligned with those standards in one grade of each of three spans: 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12; and an accountability system to identify schools that were not helping all students perform as expected on those assessments” (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003, p. 4). Those same principles of equality education were embedded in NCLB. NCLB comprised more than 4 decades of federal government involvement in public education, beginning with the ESEA of 1965 (Robelen, 2005).

At the end of January 1992, the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST) issued its report. This report focused on the need for the establishment



of a national system of educational standards and assessments as a basis for comprehensive reform of U.S. education. (NCEST, 1992). The report noted that the United States had settled with minimum education expectations due to the lack of demanding standards compared to other developed countries.

For the standards-based reform movement to be successful, educators must agree on what content students should master and at what level is mastery achieved compared to the current mastery level (Habeeb, 2013; Pattison & Berkas, 2000). In the summary to its report, NCEST reported that assessments could be designed and used to qualify students for high school graduation, college admission, continuing education, and certification for employment, as well as system accountability (NCEST, 1992).

*Goals 2000: Educate America Act* in 1994 was written to highlight national educational standards “which supported state and local efforts to set challenging content and performance standards and to carry out school reforms that will raise the achievement levels of all students” (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003, p. 4). Once again, the federal government saw the importance of creating performance standards that were based on educational equality for all students, including students that received special education services. States were challenged to create standards-based curriculum and assessments that would increase the achievement levels of all students (Scherer, 2001). School administrators figured out that they would have to use performance standards to benchmark improvement which became known as AYP (Dee & Jacob, 2010).

On January 8, 2002, President Bush signed NCLB into law (Klein, 2015). NCLB was written to improve the quality of education for all students and to close the

achievement gap between high and low achieving students (Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011). Former U.S. Secretary of Education Paige stated the focus of NCLB is for every child in America to achieve high standards (ED, 2003). As described by ED (2004), NCLB required states to 1) set standards for grade-level achievement and 2) develop a system to measure the progress of all students and subgroups of students in meeting those state-determined grade-level standards” (p. 18). Higher standards and accountability from NCLB (2001) have helped American high schools become more focused academically. “Twenty-two states now require students to pass exit exams (or in some cases to demonstrate comparable proficiencies) to receive a diploma” (Balfanz, 2009, p. 28). In 2005-2006, students from low-income families were 4.5 times more likely to drop out of high school than students from high-income families (Nelson Laird, Shoup, Kuh, & Schwarz, 2008). “Even those who do graduate often leave high school without the necessary skills and work habits needed to make a successful transition to postsecondary education and the job force” (Herlihy & Quint, 2006, p. 2). High schools, including the one in this study, are continuing to work toward preparing all students for postsecondary schooling or training in order to help them become productive citizens in society.

### **Georgia School Reform Efforts**

In 2009, ESEA was 2 years past due for reauthorization (Wardlow, 2016). NCLB was still in place until Congress reached a bipartisan agreement (Douglas-Gabriel, 2018). Waivers were put into place for states who adopted college and career standards and connected them to their state assessments (Strauss, 2014). Through the ESEA waivers, Georgia implemented CCRPI in 2012 as an alternative to AYP (ED, 2018). CCRPI

annual reports provide stakeholders with accountability information for Georgia schools, districts, and state on the progress of preparing students for the next steps of college and career readiness for all students (ED, 2019). In December 2015, President Obama signed ESSA (Davis, 2015). The main difference in NCLB and ESSA was the educational decision-making power given to the states and local school districts, such as standards, assessments, teacher evaluation systems, and equity in education for all students. With ESSA, Georgia reflected on several years of CCRPI implementation and revised CCRPI (ED, 2018).

The redesigned CCRPI was implemented in 2017-2018 (ED, 2018). It includes five main components each scored on a scale from 0 to 100: content mastery (30% of total CCRPI score for all school levels), progress (35% of total CCRPI score for elementary and middle schools, 30% for high schools), closing gaps (15% of total CCRPI score for elementary and middle schools, 10% for high schools), readiness (20% of CCRPI score for elementary and middle schools, 15% for high schools), and graduation rate (15% of total CCRPI score for high school only). The CCRPI also reports the performance of student subgroups, school climate, and financial efficiency status.

Georgia has also created criteria to identify schools who need additional support. Table 1 provides the specific criteria used to determine if a school is identified as a Comprehensive Support and Improvement school (CSI). Table 2 provides the specific criteria used to determine if a school is identified as a Targeted Support and Improvement school (TSI). Schools were first identified in the fall of 2018. CCRPI scores will be released in the fall of each school year.

Table 1

*Comprehensive Support Schools Designation Criteria (CSI)*

| Criteria # | Criteria Category               | Entrance Criteria  | Exit Criteria   |
|------------|---------------------------------|--|---|
| 1          | Lowest 5%                       | Title I Schools Only:<br>When ranked according to their three-year CCRPI average, are among the lowest performing schools that represent 5% of all schools eligible for identification.  | A school may exit if the school no longer meets the lowest 5% entrance criteria AND demonstrates an improvement in the overall CCRPI score greater than or equal to 3% of the gap between the baseline CCRPI score (the three-year average that led to the school's identification) and 100. This 3% improvement must be demonstrated from the highest of the three CCRPI scores used in the three-year average to the current CCRPI score. |
| 2          | Low Graduation Rate             | All High Schools:<br>Have a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate less than or equal to 67%.   | Attain a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate greater than 67%.  |
| 3          | TSI Additional Targeted Support | Title I Schools Only:<br>Have been identified as a targeted support and improvement (TSI) school for additional targeted support for three consecutive years without exiting TSI status. | Meet the TSI exit criteria.   |

(ED, 2018)

Table 2

*Targeted Schools Designation Criteria (TSI)*

| Criteria # | Criteria Category                     | Entrance Criteria   | Exit Criteria  |
|------------|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| 1          | Consistently Underperforming Subgroup | All Schools:<br>Have at least one subgroup that is performing in the lowest 5% of all schools in at least 50% of CCRPI components.  | A school may exit if no subgroup is performing in the lowest 5% of all schools in at least 50% of CCRPI components.  |
| 2          | Additional Targeted Support           | All Schools:<br>Among all schools identified for consistently underperforming subgroup, have at least one subgroup that is performing in the lowest 5% of all schools in all CCRPI components.<br><br>Note: Title I schools identified for additional targeted support will move to the CSI list if they do not meet the TSI exit criteria after three consecutive years. | A school may exit if no subgroup is performing in the lowest 5% of all schools in all CCRPI components AND the subgroup's current score is greater than the previous score for all components in which the subgroup is no longer in the lowest 5%. |

(ED, 2018)

### **Small Learning Communities (SLCs)**

Most of the literature presented in this section describes how SLCs can have a positive effect on improving student academic achievement in large high schools. Oxley (2005) defined SLCs as a “small school where students are more likely to form relationships that bind them to school, and teachers are better able to identify and respond to students’ needs” (p. 3). Oxley (2005) also pointed out that successful SLCs utilize student involvement as a measure of school improvement.

Cotton (2001) suggested that classroom teachers can have a significant impact on student learning through SLCs and that SLCs provide an opportunity for teachers to adapt instruction to students’ individual needs. When teachers are able to focus on the needs of smaller groups of students, they are creating a constructive classroom climate where student personalization is a priority for education success (Quint, 2006; Abt Associates, 2002).

Fleischman and Heppen (2009) also make the case that schools must meet the instructional needs, as well as the social and emotional needs of students. An aspect of academic achievement that is just as important as a caring school climate is personalized learning for students (Froiland, Oros, Smith, & Hirschert, 2012). Armstead et al. (2010) found that converting to SLCs will enable teachers to meet individual students’ academic needs by being able to personalize instruction. These students should also be better prepared for college and career readiness.

There are several different designs of SLCs. Sammon (2008) states, “their variety is as individual as the schools and school systems in which they are housed” (p. 16).

Thomas Levine (2010) defined SLCs as “existing comprehensive high schools deciding to break themselves into either autonomous smaller high schools or other kinds of less autonomous units, such as houses or academies” (p. 276). All SLC structures have the same overall goals of increasing personalization and improving overall student academic achievement (AVID, 2010).

SLCs are used to reform the way a high school is structured (Fleischman & Heppen, 2009). Oxley (2007) described five essential components of successful SLCs: (1) inclusive programming, (2) continuous program improvement, (3) rigorous and relevant curriculum and instruction, (4) interdisciplinary teaching and learning teams, and (5) building-level and district-level support. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of SLCs using the perspectives of teachers who were employed by the school before, during, and after the transition to SLCs.

SLCs structured to bridge the gap between schools and work support academic learning while incorporating vocation learning. SLC career academy structures brought together two groups that existed separately in the high school. By allowing students to participate in career academies, the valuable experience of vocational education becomes more relevant to the academic teachers in the high school (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Haick, 2010; Spurlock, 2010).

Researchers and educators with small school experience reveal that “smallness” is not a quick fix that can solve all of the high school dilemmas (Bronson, 2013). However, they point out that it can help the situation. Also, billions of dollars have been dedicated

through Department of Education grants and concerned citizens to redesign low-performing high schools into SLCs (Princeton-Brookings, 2009).

### **Preparation for Postsecondary Work**

Scholarship and research play an important role in cultivating and maintaining a culture of learning, especially in the development of the leadership necessary for promoting and sustaining a learning environment. Teachers are challenged with making sure that their students have the necessary preparation for achieving their next step after graduation, whether it is a postsecondary option or a career (Hazel, Pfadd, Albanes, & Gallagher, 2014). Students are enticed with the opportunity of having a high-paying job. However, they must first be grounded and prepared with the skills needed to get and keep those jobs. The authors of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) argued that American schools were not meeting desired outcomes in terms of student achievement. In a second report, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986), teachers as leaders were cited as the key to school reform. Curtis (2013) offers an expanded definition of teacher leadership, noting that teacher leadership involves, “specific roles and responsibilities that recognize the talents of the most effective teachers and deploy them in service of student learning, adult learning and collaboration, and school and system improvement” (p. iii).

Educators are using their expertise to maintain high levels of student performance (Kelly, 2010). No longer can teachers just close their door and teach what is important to them. Accountability has required administrators and teachers to find ways to engage all



students (Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, & Wang, 2013; Tucker, 2014). Susan Sclafani, former Assistant Secretary for Vocational and Adult Education, pointed out that the remedy may lie in the three R's, "rigor, relevance, and relationships". Sclafani concluded that educational reform in schools should focus on figuring out what students need and help them get it. (Barton, 2004; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013)

For SLCs to be effective, teachers must be willing to change the familiar departmentally organized structure to a collaborative community where all teachers work together to help students achieve (Bulach et al., 2008; Kwong, 2010). To improve academic achievement, school administrators need to include SLCs that help students discover their individual talents and encourage them to use their talents to maximize learning (Van Bockern, 2014). Jones (2004) argues for a caring environment in the school, one that has positive relationships between teachers and students and one where teachers are able to take care of a child's affective and cognitive needs (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Richards, Aguilera, Murakami, & Weiland, 2014). De la Torre et al. (2013) concluded that academic improvements happen when principals and teachers work together to determine the best learning strategies to implement in the school.

Fleischman and Heppen (2009) make the case that schools must meet the instructional needs, as well as the social and emotional needs of students. An aspect of academic achievement that is just as important as a caring school climate is personalized learning for students. Armstead et al. (2010) found that converting to SLCs will enable teachers to meet individual students' academic needs by being able to personalize

instruction. Armstead et al. (2010) also concluded that these students should also be better prepared for college and career readiness.

Personalized learning includes providing differentiated instruction for all students (Emmett & McGee, 2012). Differentiated instruction dictates that teachers vary and adapt their teaching strategies to fit the varied learning experiences, cultures, and personal interests of students in the classroom (Donegan, 2008; Gosine & Islam, 2014; Oxley, 2008; Roberson, 2014). Teachers must differentiate instruction in order to reach all students. According to NASSP's *Breaking Ranks* (1996), teachers who practice personalized learning in their classroom convey to students that they care about their learning.

Marzano (2003) conducted a mega-study of research over several years of high achieving support structures within schools. He listed 11 factors that significantly impact academic achievement correlated by percentages of students passing state tests. These factors ranged from challenging goals and effective feedback to classroom management and motivation. The ED's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2007) states that even though well-paying, high-skilled jobs are available, students must acquire the education and skills necessary to get and keep those jobs.

### **Summary**

Section 2 outlined national and state school reform efforts of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, AYP, ESEA, ESSA, and CCRPI. Efforts to personalize the school environment through SLCS and preparation for postsecondary work were discussed as ways to maintain high levels of student performance.

Section 3 will describe and justify the qualitative methodology for this study. It will include an explanation of the selection of participants, research setting, researcher's role, and data collection methods and procedures. Data analysis procedures and strategies will also be included to ensure research accuracy.

### Section 3: Research Method

#### **Introduction**

This instrumental case study provided an understanding of the factors that teachers encountered while implementing SLCs in a high school setting in Georgia to achieve higher CCRPI scores. When schools create SLCs, it is an endeavor for the entire faculty. However, little to no empirically-based evidence exists on the effectiveness of this school's SLCs, hence the focus of this research study (Abt Associates, 2002; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009; Newman et al., 2006). The purpose of the instrumental case study was to capture teachers' experiences during this time of transition, focusing on the teachers who are directly related to preparing students for the graduation test. The intent was to understand how dividing students into smaller groups and incorporating a more personal approach may be the key to increasing success in high school.

#### **Design**

Merriam and Associates (2002) described qualitative research as an approach that individuals use to create meaning through worldly interaction. Qualitative research reveals the "*why*" through the analysis of gathered information (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Qualitative researchers must relate to their participants "through culturally understood roles in which obligations and responsibilities are known to both parties" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 84). This approach provided me with a perspective of the teachers involved in the study as it depicted them as equal having participated in the SLC reform with a focus on their point of view from within the classroom during this time. I

investigated any findings resulting in organizational changes through the analysis of interviews.

Constructivism provided the theoretical framework for analysis and interpretation. This theory “takes into account the way knowledge is constructed...to create meaning from what they know, value, and believe” (Lambert et al., 2002, p. 28). The participants used their prior knowledge of school reform and accountability and created a purpose and meaning to the SLC implementation.

While preparing for this investigation, I considered several research methodologies. Those investigated were phenomenology, ethnography, and case study. Although these research methods have similar qualitative approaches, each research method depends on the context and the research objectives of the study.

A phenomenological study “describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2014, p. 51). Pure phenomenological research describes rather than explains and begins with a perspective free from hypotheses (Vagle, 2016). Creswell (2014) proposed a process when using phenomenology. He suggested the researcher begin with an understanding of a phenomenon experience and create interview questions for individuals related to their everyday life. The researcher then conducts interviews, collects data, and analyzes the interview responses to create a written report which will help the reader understand the experience (p. 54).

Ethnography is “description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system. The researcher examines the group’s observable and learned patterns of behavior,

customs, and ways of life” (Creswell, 2008, p. 58). Wilson and Chaddha (2009) described the ethnographic method as “examining behavior that takes place within specific social situations, including behavior that is shaped and constrained by these situations, and people’s understanding and interpretation of their experiences” (p. 1). Challenges to using this research method included extensive time to collect data and being able to critically describe every aspect of the culture to give meaning to actions and behaviors of the group (Creswell, 2008).

Case study research is used to investigate a phenomenon by collecting data from multiple sources and drawing conclusions around the specific context to explain a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Case studies can add strength to research that has already been conducted. Yin (2014) describes the case study method to uncover contextual conditions that would help explain the phenomenon of study. The decision to use an instrumental case study for this research was based on the desire to explore effective factors that contributed to this high school’s transition with implementing SLCs as a strategy to achieve AYP.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching central research question for this study was, “What was the effect of SLCs on CCRPI scores?” Given the educational problem and having little to no empirically-grounded research on the effectiveness of the research site’s SLCs and its impact on CCRPI scores, the following sub questions were important in the exploration of SLC strategies for this high school and addressed and answered using qualitative data:

1. What do teachers consider to be indicators of success during the SLC transition while trying to improve CCRPI scores?
2. What was the greatest challenge teachers faced during and after the SLC transition while trying to improve CCRPI scores?

### **Context**

Creswell (2014) recognized the importance of purposeful selection of participants for a study because they “can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). The participants in this study taught in the school setting before, during, and after the inception of SLCs and are still currently employed in the school system. All participants were core academic teachers (English, math, science, social studies) because the state assessments are focused on academics solely. Their perspectives provided knowledge and insight on their experiences of implementing SLCs. Table 3 provided potential participant characteristics. The average years of teaching experience among the potential participants was 23 years.

Teachers received an invitation to participate in the study via email. The teachers were asked to reply to the email invitation indicating their desire to participate in the interview. Once teachers indicated they wanted to volunteer to participate in the study, I met with them individually to go over specific procedures and to provide them with consent forms. I personally explained the consent forms with each possible participant and asked them to return them to me within 7 days. I also encouraged them to ask questions, if they had any, about the procedures and their involvement in the study. Interviews were also scheduled at this time.

Table 3

*Potential Participant Characteristics*

| Teacher's Name | Race/Ethnicity   | Highest Degree Earned | Area Taught    | Years of Teaching Experience |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------|------------------------------|
| Teacher 1      | African American | Specialist            | Social Studies | 28                           |
| Teacher 2      | African American | Doctorate             | English        | 31                           |
| Teacher 3      | Caucasian        | Masters               | Math           | 16                           |
| Teacher 4      | Caucasian        | Masters               | Math           | 13                           |
| Teacher 5      | Caucasian        | Masters               | English/Drama  | 12                           |
| Teacher 6      | Caucasian        | Bachelor              | Social Studies | 25                           |
| Teacher 7      | Caucasian        | Specialist            | English        | 33                           |
| Teacher 8      | Caucasian        | Specialist            | English        | 30                           |
| Teacher 9      | African American | Specialist            | Math           | 32                           |
| Teacher 10     | Caucasian        | Specialist            | Science        | 15                           |
| Teacher 11     | Caucasian        | Masters               | Math           | 28                           |
| Teacher 12     | Caucasian        | Masters               | Science        | 23                           |
| Teacher 13     | Caucasian        | Specialist            | English        | 13                           |



### **Role of the Researcher**

I am currently a middle school principal in the same school system in which the study was conducted. I had been employed at the high school for 15 years. While there, I served in the roles of business teacher and media specialist, as well as an assistant principal. During this time, the principal also appointed me to be the SLC grant manager to oversee the implementation of the grant goals and the spending of the grant funds, as well as fulfill the duties as the school's media specialist. My professional relationships with this faculty included being a peer as a fellow teacher, a resource helper as a media specialist, and an observer and supporter as an administrator. In my role as the researcher, I designed the research questions, interviewed participants, and analyzed the data.

### **Data Collection**

I developed the interview protocol used in data collection (see Appendix). Open-ended questions were used to allow the participants an opportunity to share their own experiences (see Hatch, 2002) before, during, and after the SLC reform in this high school. The intent of each question was to obtain a vivid understanding of teachers' experiences with the transition to SLCs and the collaboration with other SLC team members. Individual interviews were part of the data collection process which was used to "gather more in-depth insights on participant attitudes, thoughts, and actions" (Kendall, 2008, p. 18) among the interviewed teachers. This data was used to support the identified themes. I met with the participants to address confidentiality and request their consent. After receiving the consent letters, the participants were contacted via e-mail to

schedule the interview. Dissemination of study's results to participants were sent through e-mail.

Brief field notes were taken during the review of public records and during interviews and examined for patterns and ideas. According to Phillippi & Lauderdale (2018), the functions of the field notes in qualitative studies include researcher reflection, coding, and data analysis. (p. 382). The field notes were part of the data used to base conclusions for the study.

Data were collected through state CCRPI annual reports, local system data, interviews, and field notes. I accessed school report cards through the Georgia Department of Education website and collected multiple years of data from this source that correspond with the high school's SLC implementation. Collected school report card information will include school size, school demographics, CCRPI scores, attendance rates, and graduation rates. All of the data were used together to provide a rich data source that I used to triangulate confirmation of emerging themes.

Interview Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 14 helped me collect some background information from the teachers.

Interview Questions 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13 answered Research Questions 1 and 2.

Interview Question 6 answered Research Question 1.

Interview Question 7 answered Research Question 2.

The interviews occurred after the school day over a 2-week period at a time and location agreed upon by me and participant. Each interview was recorded for accuracy

and lasted approximately an hour. I transcribed the interviews and labeled each one for identification purposes. All audio files were burned to a CD-ROM and kept at my home in a locked file cabinet accessible only to me. I was the only person aware of the participants in this study. Data collection procedures are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

*Data Collection Procedures*

| Month | Week | Participants                        | Materials   | Activities  |
|-------|------|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| 1     | 1    | 13 Potential Participants (Table 1) | Consent Form for Interview  | Meet with participants to address confidentiality and request their consent; document public records data; code |
| 1     | 2    | 13 Potential Participants (Table 1) | Calendar  | Schedule interviews; document public records data; code   |
| 1     | 3    | 13 Potential Participants (Table 1) | Interview Questions for SLC Teachers (Appendix)                             | Conduct interviews; take field notes  |
| 1     | 4    | 13 Potential Participants (Table 1) | Interview Questions for SLC Teachers (Appendix)                             | Conduct interviews; take field notes  |
| 2     | 1    | Researcher                          | Recorded Interviews   | Transcribe each interview; code   |
| 2     | 2    | Researcher                          | Recorded Interviews   | Transcribe each interview; code   |
| 2     | 3    | 13 Potential Participants (Table 1) | Transcribed Interviews  | Review interview transcription and confirm data accuracy  |
| 2     | 4    | Researcher                          | All data (transcribed interviews, field notes, public records data, coding) | Data Analysis   |

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data was coded to identify emerging themes. Coding involves “systematically labeling concepts, themes, events and topical markers so that you can readily retrieve and examine all of the data units that refer to the same subject across your interviews” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 207). The multiple data sources listed in the previous sections provided a rich data source that I used to triangulate confirmation of emerging themes. Five themes emerged from the data: Building Relationships, Rigorous/Relevant Curriculum, Professional Learning, and Interdisciplinary Teaming.

Triangulation is a research method used to establish validity by analyzing the evidence from multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hatch, 2002). Triangulation occurred by checking the data from the interviews for consistencies in the teacher-to-teacher verbatim transcripts relative to field notes and State CCRPI annual reports and local system data. These combined data sources served to establish validity for emerging themes in the data. Merriam and Associates (2002) defined reliability as being able to duplicate the data if the study were done again. They further suggest that participants in a study read and validate the data to ensure authenticity and to enhance internal validity. Consistency and accuracy when collecting data will demonstrate a high level of reliability (Shank, 2006). I used the following strategies to validate the research: triangulation with face-to-face interviews and data collection and personal engagement by being involved in this research process to gain a clearer understanding of the teachers’ perceptions about SLCs.

### **Summary**

Section 3 described the qualitative methodology for use to conduct the research. This qualitative case study used interviews of teachers that are currently working at the high school portrayed in this study. The purpose of the descriptive case study was to evaluate teachers' experiences during this time of transition, focusing on the teachers who are directly related to preparing students for the state graduation test. Constructivist theory was used in this study as they relate to the implementation of SLCs in this high school. Data analysis procedures and strategies were included to ensure research accuracy.

## Section 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this case study was to determine, as viewed by teachers who have been employed since 2003 when SLCs were implemented, the successes and challenges that occurred during this time to improve CCRPI scores. The data were used to answer the overarching central research question for this study regarding the effect of SLCs on this high school increasing CCRPI scores. Approval was granted through the Walden University Institutional Review Board (core IRB) process, and the IRB application was approved and assigned #11-20-15-0046605. The data collected were from the experiences of 13 teachers who provided background information on their beliefs, knowledge, and practices during this implementation.

### **Findings**

The overarching central research question for this study was, “What was the effect of SLCs on the CCRPI score?” Given the educational problem and having little to no empirically-grounded research on the effectiveness of the research site’s SLCs and its impact on CCRPI scores, the following sub questions were important in the exploration of SLC strategies for this high school and addressed and answered using qualitative data:

1. What do teachers consider to be indicators of success during the SLC transition while trying to improve CCRPI scores?
2. What was the greatest challenge teachers faced during and after the SLC transition while trying to improve CCRPI scores?

Using Oxley's (2007) conceptual framework for SLC practice, I analyzed the data to determine the extent to which the transformation from a traditional high school to SLCs had taken place at this Georgia high school. This analysis helped to put into context the experiences of the teachers and their roles in transforming this school from a traditional high school into SLCs. The following themes emerged from the research: building relationships, rigorous/relevant curriculum, professional learning, and interdisciplinary teaming.

The following section presents the results of the study separated by research questions and delineated by the above research questions.

### **Results for Research Question 1**

**Building relationships.** A common characteristic of SLCs is the opportunity to create a community with smaller groups of students. Teachers can personalize the high school through SLCs by getting to know their students' strengths and weaknesses which help them better support their students. Marzano (2011) noted, "Positive relationships between teachers and students are among the most commonly cited variables associated with effective instruction. If the relationship is strong, instructional strategies seem to be more effective" (p. 82). Participant Alison described this student/teacher relationship as,

"Mutual respect which supported the core work of teaching and learning. I enjoyed getting to know my students and finding that we have similar interests. Even showing up to a football or baseball game to support my students showed them that I really care about their interests."

Participant Melissa said,



“Having a smaller community of students in the ninth grade helped them transition to high school due to the individual support we were able to give them each day. The ninth grade students had so many other things to worry about—getting to class on time, managing a two-story high school, having friends to sit with at lunch, having friends in their classes. I was able to create that relationship with my students so that they asked me for help and trusted me to have their best interest in mind.”

Participant Marianne was excited to discuss her experiences with SLCs. She said,

“For the first time, in a long time, I was able to actually learn about my students, their interests, ambitions, and their life outside of school. Students appreciated having most of their classes on the same hallway each year. Also having the same administrator and counselor for four years helped create that family atmosphere because we were so familiar with one another by the senior year.”

By attending extra-curricular events, giving additional support, building trust, and creating a family atmosphere during the school year, the teachers were able to build relationships with their students which resulted in improved academic achievement.

**Rigorous/Relevant curriculum.** A common attribute of successful SLCs is a curriculum that has rigor and relevance with personal meaning for students. Blackburn (2018) defined rigor through her research as “creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning at high levels” (p. 13). Daggett (2005) defended that “studies have shown that students understand and retain knowledge

best when they have applied it in a practical, relevant setting” (p. 2). The teachers felt that having a rigorous and relevant curriculum was an important SLC trait that had been successfully integrated into the curriculum by most teachers. Participant Mike spoke about the “collaborative relationships with community partners” that had been created during the SLC process. He said,

“This opportunity to work with community partners helped the teachers to reflect on their own work and to find ways to continue to improve to make the curriculum they taught relevant to our students. Teachers saw the importance of increasing the rigor and relevance in their teaching so that students would be able to work for these community partners one day. We all have a part in preparing the future workforce.”

By creating a rigorous and relevant curriculum, the teachers were able to answer the “*why*” specific standards were being taught and connect it to future college and career opportunities.

**Professional learning.** Integral to SLC teaching and learning is the teacher’s reflection on the effectiveness of his/her instructional practices to ensure that all students are learning. The purpose of professional learning is to “build school and district capacity, motivation, and accountability” (Smylie, 2014, p. 20). The consensus of the interviewed teachers in this study was that professional learning opportunities are available, including literacy strategies, learning styles, and differentiated instruction, which are all important ideas when supporting the diverse learners in your SLC.

**Interdisciplinary teaming.** Another common characteristic of SLCs is the

interdisciplinary teaming of teachers working closely together with a group of students they share for instruction. The interviewed teachers spoke of teaming and they all described the frustrating part of losing students after one year due to the grade-level SLC structure. SLCs that have attained prominence on the bases of their students' success encompass the entire four years of high school study (Cook, 2000; Meier, 1995).

Participant Susan spoke highly of the transition opportunity in ninth grade from middle school to high school with grade-level SLCs. Participant Angie liked "collaborating with other teachers and working together to monitor students' progress and find solutions for struggling students." Participant Josh described his experience of getting to know his students in his SLC as an "experience he will never forget as he watched students from all races working together and ignoring the worldly differences that surround them daily" and watching "the connection of students getting to know each other to build that sense of community."

By creating interdisciplinary teams of students, teachers were able to work closely with teachers on the same team to effectively support their students during their high school years. Students also had the opportunity to get to know their peers on their team to create that family environment.

## **Results for Research Question 2**

**Building relationships.** Not every teacher in the school believed in building student/teacher relationships. Participant Angie described this as,

"Some teachers do not see the benefit in building relationships with the students.

They don't understand that you have to have a relationship to get what you need

from them. Those teachers were not even willing to work with other teachers to help students succeed. You knew who they were because the students shared openly and honestly with us. They students knew who cared about them.”

Participant James shared,

“Students will be respectful when we show respect to them. They are more willing to accept consequences for infractions if you have built that relationship and trust with them. Building that family atmosphere through small learning communities created a learning environment where we could share our students to help them succeed.”

Not every teacher believed in building relationships to ultimately increase academic achievement. It appeared that being compliant was more important to teachers than building the sense of community on the student teams.

**Rigorous/Relevant curriculum.** Participant Brian shared his challenge with preparing students for postsecondary opportunities,

“The rigorous curriculum is supposed to prepare students to be successful in that first year of college. However, I find myself having to remediate before I can reach the rigorous level of instruction. Our communities allow us to share kids with like challenges so that we can close those gaps quicker. Students will rise to our expectations if they have the skills to perform.”

Participant Josh pointed out,

“We are preparing our kids for jobs that don’t yet exist. So, to make instruction relevant is hard sometimes. As technology keeps changing, our students are

changing with it, as most of the teachers have a hard time of keeping up. Teachers have to embrace this challenge and try to prepare our students for world problems that don't even exist yet, as well as teaching responsibility, honesty, and having integrity. This is a hard job, but I love it!"

A challenge that Participant Melanie encountered when trying to make her curriculum rigorous and relevant was, "relating to the diverse student population that we have". Participant Melanie continued,

"It is hard for me to make classroom activities relevant when I have not experienced some of the tragedies and hardships that some our children have experienced. Some of them are just trying to survive each day and coming to school is their safe haven. Those are the students who I think have benefited more from the SLC concept. We have been able to build that relationship and find a way to teach them math."

Participant Amy added, "having our small communities gives us an opportunity to make sure our students with similar interests can be grouped together, especially during elective classes for vocational training that will be needed to achieve their job goal."

Teachers encountered challenges when making curriculum rigorous and relevant. Dealing with remediating students, preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, and understanding their experiences, teachers were able to use these challenges to create a personalized learning environment for students to feel confident and continue to excel each day.

**Professional learning.** There was a concern regarding common professional learning for all teachers. Participant Alison shared that “professional learning opportunities are now open to everyone, not personalized. It seems to be a one size fits all mentality.” Participant Eddie expressed the same concern, “We know that we should learn new instructional strategies to support student learning for all students, especially since we are structured into small learning communities. However, my principal chooses the professional learning workshops that he wants us to attend.” Participant Amy was not sure how principals decide which professional learning opportunities teachers attend during the school year or during the summer. Participant Amy added, “Shouldn’t data be used to determine professional learning needs?” Marianne voiced, “I want professional learning opportunities to be structured into small communities like the ones students are a part of.”

Some teachers thought that their main purpose at school was to prepare the students for a state test and not for real-world application of learning; therefore, they viewed professional learning opportunities as optional. According to Chomsky & Robichaud (2014), standardized testing has decreased the “development of freedom and creativity in education” (p. 3). Participant Penny shared,

“We are supposed to be continuous learners in our professional, but that has not been the goal of our administration, in my opinion. If my students are getting the results that the administration wants, I am left alone and not required to attend professional learning.”

Differentiated professional learning opportunities was wanted by many teachers.

However, the principal chose the professional learning opportunities for all teachers. Teachers saw the benefit of creating SLCs with their students and requested this same model be used for their professional learning.

**Interdisciplinary teaming.** Participant Susan's frustration was evident when she spoke of teachers,

“Having to teach outside of their SLC, which makes it difficult to schedule common planning time for the SLC team. Since I must teach a ninth grade and a 10<sup>th</sup> grade class, I am not able to plan with either team. We must be creative and meet after school or before school or on the telephone. Schools implementing SLCs should be required to be grade specific for kids to get the most out of this structure each day.”

Even though the school was restructured into SLCs, some teachers had to teach classes outside of their SLC due to staffing restraints. Teachers agreed that grade-specific SLCs worked best for interdisciplinary teaming.

The data demonstrated that the faculty can sustain SLCs. However, the data did not determine if the faculty and students have a role in the decision-making if it is decided that SLCs are not the best solution for this school.

The district has supported the principal's and faculty's decision to incorporate SLCs. However, the demand for improved student performance on state assessments has played a part in the decisions that are made at the school level regarding curriculum and professional learning opportunities. The current administration has kept in place teaming

of teachers and encourages building positive relationships with students to improve academic achievement.

### **Evidence of Quality**

All participant identities were held confidential and not revealed at any time during or beyond this research. The school name and location were not identified in any part of the study. My role was to get approval from the local Board of Education to conduct the study, design the research questions, schedule times and dates to interview participants, collect all manner of data pertinent to this study, and perform an analysis of the data. Because I have not worked at this high school for 6 years, the professional relationships with this faculty included a former peer as a fellow teacher, a former resource helper as a media specialist, and a former administrator. The interviews revealed data about changes teachers endured before, during, and after the transition to SLCs and the outcomes that evolved during and after the change.

I used the following strategies to validate the research: triangulation of the face-to-face interviews, data collection, and personal engagement by being involved in this research process to gain a clearer understanding of the teachers' perceptions about SLCs.

I have taught and worked as a supportive role at this high school. I have gained the trust and respect from my former colleagues, supervisors, and the school district which makes me capable of completing this research study.

### **Summary**

In Section 4 I reviewed the data collection, data analysis, and results of the research for this study. According to my research, teachers considered the integration of a



rigorous and relevant curriculum by all teachers as an indicator of success during the SLC transition while trying to increase CCRPI scores. The greatest challenges which teachers faced during and after the SLC transition while trying to increase CCRPI scores included convincing all teachers that building relationships with smaller groups of students was important, requiring all teachers to attend common professional development instead of personalized opportunities, and losing students after one year due to grade-level SLCS. The faculty can sustain SLCs by involving them in a more active role in decision-making in scheduling and deciding professional development opportunities.

Section 5 will include the interpretation of the findings, along with the limitations and recommendations for further research for this study. Also, the key essence of the study will be shared in the conclusion of this chapter.

## Section 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to capture the experience of teachers during this time of transition by focusing on the teachers who were directly related to preparing students for the graduation test. The intent was to understand how dividing students into smaller groups and incorporating a more personal approach may be the key to increasing success in this high school.

The specific research sub questions for this study were as follows:

1. What do teachers consider to be indicators of success during the SLC transition while trying to improve CCRPI scores?
2. What was the greatest challenge teachers faced during and after the SLC transition while trying to improve CCRPI scores?

I focused on archived CCRPI annual reports, local system data, and interviews. Collected school report card information included school size, school demographics, CCRPI scores, attendance rates, and graduation rates. Open-ended interview questions were used to obtain a vivid understanding of teachers' experience, challenges experienced with the transition to SLCs, and the collaboration with other SLC team members. As discussed in Section 4, these combined data sources served to establish validity of five emerging themes in the data: building relationships, rigorous/relevant curriculum, professional learning, and interdisciplinary teaming.

### **Interpretations of Findings**

The size of a school can potentially impact the learning environment (Humann, Palaich, Fermanich, & Griffin, 2015; Kaplan, 2014; Tausan, 2015). Luyten, Hendriks, and Scheerens (2014), in a review of the literature concluded that students in larger schools have lower performance than small schools. In FY2001, as part of reauthorization of ESEA of 1965, Congress reserved \$45 million for the SLC program in the form of a competitive federal grant program (ED, 2001). The goal of the grant was to help high schools plan and implement SLCs to create a more personalized high school experience for students and to improve student achievement (Abt Associates, 2002). Another significant financial supporter was the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Schneider, 2016). Their work focused on creating college or career preparation programs which give students greater opportunities throughout their lives. (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2017; Fouts, Baker, Brown, & Riley, 2006). Teachers in my study considered SLCs to be an approach to building closer relationships with their students. They were able to personalize their students' learning because of the smaller communities which were established during SLC integration. The teachers were also able to build trust with their students and create individualized learning plans for each student.

The Gates Foundation commissioned a national study (Achieve, Inc., 2005; Stiefel, Schwartz, Iatarola, & Chellman, 2009) to review data at 50 high schools focusing on the implications of SLCs and high expectations, such as increases in attendance, test scores and teacher collaboration. Researchers found that teachers at smaller schools had more personalized relationships with the students and among their peers, but their

workloads were increased (ED, 2001). Fleischman and Heppen (2009) suggested that schools must meet the instructional needs, as well as the social and emotional needs of students. An aspect of academic achievement that is just as important as a caring school climate is personalized learning for students. Armstead et al. (2010) found that converting to SLCs will enable teachers to meet individual students' academic needs by being able to personalize instruction. Armstead et al. also concluded that these students should also be better prepared for college and career readiness.

Guided by Piaget and Dewey's theories of constructivism, I investigated the perspectives of teachers as they experienced change in a successful transformation within the context of this high school. Even though the structure moved from career academies to grade-level teams over time, teachers were still able to motivate students because of the relationships which were built during this time. Teachers could work together to provide additional class time for tutoring to help students with the challenging curriculum. No longer could teachers just close their door and teach what was important to them. Accountability required administrators and teachers to find ways to engage all students (Tucker, 2014). However, teachers discussed a lack of effort on the part of the school to reach out to parents and the community to help support the students.

Although gains have been made since the inception of the SLC model at this high school, the data showed that these gains are not necessarily related to creating SLCs. I observed that the SLC achievement data could also be an indirect result of other SLC characteristics, such as personalization and a sense of belonging. The individualized learning plans and relationships built during this time required the commitment of the

teachers to understand a student's learning needs. However, the change in standardized curriculum to Common Core and the change in state accountability indicators from AYP to CCRPI created a sense of frustration for the teachers (see Pattison, 2011). If academic expectations kept changing on the state and local levels, teachers felt that they were not able to make the gains that were expected with the SLC model.

Teachers considered the greatest challenges they faced during the SLC transition to be distracting from the academic work needed to be done to help students increase their academic achievement. For SLCs to be effective, teachers must be willing to change the familiar departmentally organized structure to a collaborative community where all teachers work together to help students achieve (Bulach, et al., 2008; Kwong, 2010). To improve academic achievement, school administrators need to include SLCs that help students discover their individual talents and encourage them to use their talents to maximize learning (Van Bockern, 2014). However, numerous changes in school-level administration leading up to the SLC transition caused some teachers to hesitate to embrace this transition. Also, the State of Georgia changed from AYP to CCRPI as their accountability model during the SLC implementation (ED, 2018). Teachers were involved in curriculum conversations needed to prepare the students for the accountability changes which diverted attention from the SLC implementation of relating curriculum to students' lives, cultural backgrounds, and personal interests to increase motivation and engagement. Additional findings also revealed that poor and minority students have a higher academic achievement level when attending a high school which incorporates SLCs, instead of attending a traditional high school (Benson & Borman,

2010; Bulach, et al., 2008; De la Torre, et al., 2013; Ravitz, 2010). This information has encouraged educational leaders who were looking for a way to close the achievement gap between minority students and other students. The teachers believed that the lack of these authentic learning experiences had an impact on the economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities subgroups continuing to struggle. Teachers also felt that curriculum changes during this transition cornered the teachers into teaching the surface of content and not the depth of content.

Teachers also realized that the SLC career academy model did not support our students who were joint-enrolled in college classes at the local university. These students struggled to fit into a career academy because their current focus was performing academically on the collegiate level. Therefore, it was hard to place them in an SLC due to their non-traditional schedule and providing them with authentic learning experiences which were happening on the college campus, not at the high school. These students helped improve test scores in the school; however, did not have a place in the SLC career academy model. Researchers and educators with small school experience reveal that “smallness” is not a quick fix that can solve all of the high school dilemmas (Bronson, 2013).

### **Implications for Social Change**

SLCs are a reform effort that has been evaluated to improve student achievement. Researchers discovered that the small school size had a positive effect on the academic gains of students regardless of the class size (Felner et al., 2008; Kilroy et al., 2007). The

combination of the SLC structure and the personalization strategies create an environment where students are able to improve academic achievement.

The implications for positive social change from this research might include knowledge useful for educators, administrators, and superintendents who are interested in understanding an insider's perspective as to the effects of restructuring high schools (1,000 students or more) into SLCs. Long term results of this study might include (1) a change in the physical structure when building new high schools to accommodate SLCs, (2) hiring more teachers who are familiar with the SLC structure, and (3) considering the SLC structure when making a change.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The following recommendations are based on possible local action opportunities related to the findings of this study:

1. Teachers work together to integrate a cooperative learning focus for students into each established SLC at the high school.
2. Teachers serve as advisors to students in each SLC to continue building relationships and to become advocates for the students in academic planning and career development.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The following recommendations are based on possible research opportunities to further this study based on the findings of this study:

1. A study focused on the postsecondary success of students who graduated in 2006 or later to determine the effectiveness of SLCs in this high school.

2. A study focused on students' perceptions before, during, and after the SLC implementation to determine if the same themes emerge which are like the emerged themes from this research.
3. A study focused on the district-leaders during the SLC implementation of this high school and if their support was a part of the success of this initiative.

### **Summary**

Achievement gaps still exist at this high school. Although gains have been made since the inception of the SLC model at this high school, there is still much work to do if students are to be adequately prepared for college and the workforce.

I believe that SLCs helped improve student outcomes by involving the teachers in the process of the transitions to SLCs at this high school. The benefits of building student relationships, incorporating a rigorous and relevant curriculum, professional learning opportunities, and interdisciplinary teaming provided a platform for the teachers to desire SLCs as the new normal as student outcomes increased during this time. However, the changes in state curriculum and accountability during this transition created a feeling of frustration for the teachers knowing that gains and growth in student achievement were possible according to the literature, but the work for these SLC initiatives had to move to the background of implementation during this process.

As long as the state board of education keep changing the indicators used to achieve the current accountability model of CCRPI, the teachers at this high school will continue to teach to a moving target. Trends in achievement will be hard to decipher and teachers could eventually leave the profession due to the frustration.



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## Appendix : Interview Questions for SLC Teachers

1. What is your educational background and highest degree earned?
2. What subject(s) do you teach?
3. How many years have you been teaching at this school?
4. How many years have you been teaching in the SLC reform model?
5. Please describe your experience(s) regarding your change from a traditional classroom to an SLC environment.
6. What things helped you during this transition?
7. Did you experience any challenges with the transition process? If so, what are they?
8. Did you receive any professional development to prepare for the transition to SLCs?
9. What methods were used to collaborate among the SLCs?
10. Is dialogue encouraged regarding student scheduling, lesson planning, and sharing best practices among your SLC team? How?
11. How often do you meet with your SLC team?
12. How has your perception of the school administrative role changed since SLC implementation?
13. Do you have any recommendations for new teachers coming to this school regarding the SLC model?
14. Do you have anything else to add?