

“It’s Not Your Everyday Classroom”:  
A Qualitative Analysis of Student Experiences in School-based Enterprise

By

KyMBERly Lynette Byrd

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Approved:

Brian D. Christens, PhD

David Diehl, PhD

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## **Introduction**

A school-based enterprise (SBE) is an entrepreneurial operation managed and operated by students in a school setting (DECA, 2018). These hands-on learning laboratories fuse career preparation and classroom instruction and can produce a myriad of benefits, including higher GPAs, lower suspension rates, higher attendance rates, and improved math and reading scores (Fitzgerald, 1999; Pilot, 2011). Examples of SBEs include raising crops and farm animals, manufacturing household items, operating a radio station, selling beverages and pastries, managing a restaurant, repairing old homes, maintaining local parks, and providing child-care services (Arenas, 2003).

Many SBEs pursue certification through DECA, a nonprofit organization preparing emerging leaders and entrepreneurs in marketing, finance, hospitality and management in high schools and colleges around the globe (DECA, 2018). Chapters receive certification through a written project and individuals receive certification through a comprehensive exam. Participants are required to demonstrate mastery of financial analysis, operations, human resources management, critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, and several other content areas (DECA, 2018). Though few studies have examined the community-level effects of SBE, several communities have integrated these programs into local and state policy agendas to spur economic activity (Fitzgerald, 1999).

While SBE participation is associated with many positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes for students, research has yet to identify the mechanisms that produce these outcomes. This paper utilized the systems view of school climate framework to begin identifying these mechanisms by assessing differences in affective and cognitive perceptions of school

climate between students participating in SBE and students not participating in SBE. Data was analyzed from 5 focus groups conducted among 36 students at a high school in the Mississippi River Delta Region. The qualitative analysis examined differences in relationships, values, and beliefs between the two groups of students.

## **Literature Review**

### **History of School-based Enterprise**

Though SBE is a recent discovery for many educators, this model has existed for decades (Pilot, 2011). In 1990, the United States Congress implemented new laws revising the funding requirements for vocational education. Prior to 1990, many institutions separated vocational education from academic curricula. After the law was implemented, funding was dependent upon integrating both the academic and vocational curricula and this shift resulted in the creation of more SBEs (United States Department of Education, 2004). As early as 2001, the model had been implemented at 53% of U.S. high schools (Ross, 2002). SBE became increasingly popular as schools recognized the importance of fusing career preparation and classroom instruction to prepare students for their post-high school transition (DECA, 2018). In spite of this popularity, SBE has been the focus of few empirical studies. The prevalence of SBE in U.S. high schools presents an abundance of opportunities for research.

### **School-based Enterprise and DECA**

DECA, a nonprofit organization preparing emerging leaders and entrepreneurs in marketing, finance, hospitality and management in high schools and colleges internationally,

certified 428 SBEs in 27 states in 2018 (DECA, 2018). Vo-Tech High School, the site of the study, is certified by DECA and has an active DECA chapter. Certification requires adherence to the National Curriculum Standards developed by DECA, which include financial analysis, operations, marketing-information management, market planning, product/service management, pricing, distribution/channel management, promotion, selling, and human resources management. Chapters must also demonstrate mastery of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills including critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and teamwork, communication, and creativity and innovation. Though certification is not required to operate a SBE, many schools adopt similar standards. Certification also offers opportunities to attend an annual professional development academy and access lesson plans, instructional units, textbooks, e-learning tools, and other resources. In a focus group with Minnesota teachers who oversee DECA chapters at their school, SBE was described as a continuation of the classroom, a cornerstone of the school, and a source of school and community pride (DECA, 2018).

### **School-based Enterprise and Career and Technical Education**

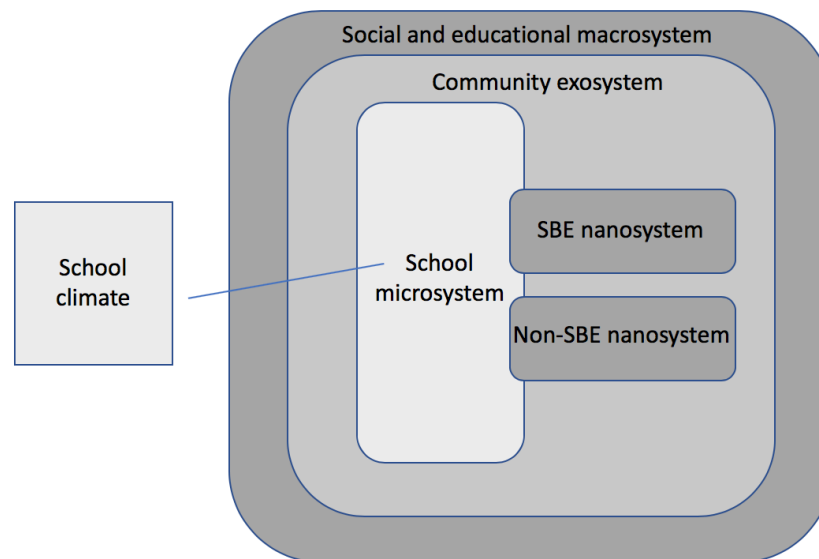
In the United States, 94% of high school students participate in Career and Technical Education (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2018). Career and Technical Education (CTE) “integrates with academics in a rigorous and relevant curriculum, features high school and postsecondary partnerships, enabling clear pathways to certifications and degrees, and prepares students to be college—and career—ready by providing core academic skills, employability skills and technical, job-specific skills” (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2018). CTE is offered in many settings and encompasses several activities, one of which includes SBE. Students who participate in CTE have lower dropout rates and higher

graduation rates than the national average. CTE participants also have higher motivation, engagement, grades, career self-efficacy, college aspirations, and employability skills than students who do not participate in CTE (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2018). Since SBE is one form of CTE, research specific to SBE can determine if participation in SBE produces similar outcomes. The success of CTE demonstrates the potential of SBE.

### **School-based Enterprise and Career Exploration**

Preparation for adulthood and the world of work begins early in life and evolves throughout elementary, middle, and high school (Carter et al., 2010; Kohler & Field, 2003; Weidenthal & Kochhar-Bryant, 2007). Career exploration opportunities are integrated into various aspects of the school curriculum to expose students to the vast array of career possibilities. Students are frequently encouraged to explore their interests, preferences, and strengths (Sitlington & Clark, 2006). Though this exposure begins as early as preschool, the experiences that youth have during high school are especially salient for career exploration and preparation. Adolescence is a critical developmental period during which most youth are exposed to educational, employment, and community service opportunities that shape their future aspirations (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Vondracek & Porfeli, 2006). Since most SBEs operate at high schools, the exposure students gain during these four years can be extremely formative. In addition to students being exposed to diverse career paths, practice-based learning opportunities in SBE allow students to acquire skills that can be utilized in various work settings (Pilot, 2011).

## Theoretical Framework



Adapted from Rudasill, Snyder, Levinson & Adelson (2018)

The theoretical framework for this paper is the systems view of school climate. Rudasill, Snyder, Levinson & Adelson (2018) define school climate as “the affective and cognitive perceptions regarding social interactions, relationships, safety, values, and beliefs held by students, teachers, administrators, and staff within a school” (p. 46). In a positive school climate, social interactions are characterized by trust, cooperation, and openness (Fraser and Walberg, 2005; Haynes et al., 1997; Moos, 1979; Rhodes et al., 2009). Social interactions also focus on the degree to which support and encouragement are offered to students (Bottiani et al., 2014). Relationships are the products of social interactions (Koth et al, 2008). Feelings of attachment, belonging, acceptance, and support are shaped by the strength and quality of relationships (Payne et al., 2003; Rodgers & Rose, 2001). Beliefs focus on the perceptions of experiences, such as the quality of instruction across multiple classrooms (Esposito, 1999; Rhodes et al, 2009). Values, such as expectations for success, are informed by these perceptions and observations.

Classroom nanosystems were the focus of the analysis, which are nested groups within microsystems (e.g. peer groups, sports teams, and academic tracks). Nanosystems help to identify and explain differing experiences of students within a given school. While the remaining sections of the literature review will describe the benefits of SBE, research has yet to identify the mechanisms that produce these benefits. It is possible that the SBE nanosystem creates unique experiences for SBE students in the school microsystem. This paper aims to uncover if the differing experiences of students in SBE and non-SBE nanosystems affect their perceptions of school climate in the school microsystem and how these perceptions might contribute to improved academic, social, and emotional outcomes for SBE students.

### **School-based Enterprise and Student Learning Communities**

The structure of SBE facilitates the creation of student learning communities, which Blessinger (2017) defines as “a curricular-based program and learning-centered social network that moves learning beyond the confines of the classroom” (p.1). Though SBE and SLC are two distinct models, these two nanosystems share many similarities. The content of the courses in student learning communities is integrated, which allows students to make curricular connections across courses. An example of this in SBE would be linking a biology course with an agriculture enterprise and these connections help to boost academic achievement. Student learning communities aim to foster integrative, holistic learning and promote healthy student-student and student-teacher interactions (Blessinger, 2017). Teachers have the opportunity to attend to the whole student and cultivate an environment for optimal academic, social, and emotional wellbeing. The emphasis on integrative, holistic learning that is characteristic of SLC also exists in SBE. This emphasis may produce enriching educational experiences for SBE students.



## **Benefits of School-based Enterprise**

Operating SBEs at high schools can produce a myriad of benefits to students, school administrators, employers, and the local community (Pilot, 2011). SBE fosters positive, productive learning environments by “[providing] relevance, context, and concreteness to abstract material learned in the classroom [and] challenging the individualized nature of modern education by engaging students in a cooperative endeavor” (Arenas, 2003, p.107). SBE also immerses students in environments where they acquire valuable entrepreneurial skills and business savvy (Pilot, 2011). SBE students report gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to run a successful business, such as customer service and communication skills (Haltinner, 2012). Thompson (2016) found that participation in school-based enterprise can generate sustained interest in entrepreneurial activity and influence engagement in entrepreneurial endeavors. Nobre (2002) describes entrepreneurship as a field that embraces innovation and change and forces individuals to challenge inadequate, ineffective responses to social problems.

Involvement in SBE can also improve academic outcomes. Pilot (2011) found that special education high school students who participated in SBE had higher GPAs and fewer out-of-school suspension days than students who did not participate in SBE. He asserts that students perform better in school when they feel their education is relevant and recognize its application to the real world. In three Chicago high schools, students who participated in SBE had higher attendance rates, math scores, reading scores, and GPAs than students who did not participate in SBE (Fitzgerald, 1999). Data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study indicated that students who participated in SBE were less likely to drop out of high school (Kim & Hull, 2011). Schools that operated SBEs also noticed increased parental involvement. Parents were excited about the SBEs and eager to volunteer their time (Fitzgerald, 1999).

While it is clear that SBE participation is associated with many positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes for students, research has yet to identify the mechanisms that produce these outcomes. These outcomes are also associated with a positive school climate, which has been found to improve academic achievement and improve student behavioral and emotional functioning (Kutsyruba, Klinger, & Hussain, 2018; Loukas & Murphy, 2007). The systems view of school climate is one framework that may help to explain these outcomes. By assessing differences in affective and cognitive perceptions of school climate between students in SBE and non-SBE nanosystems, I aim to determine if SBE involvement is associated with an improved perception of school climate in the school microsystem and how this involvement contributes to positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes for students.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

Social Enterprise: Producing School Climate was a 2015 study led by the Center for Safe and Supportive Schools at Vanderbilt University. The study examined social enterprise initiatives as a mechanism for connection and belonging throughout the school and within the community. Researchers were also interested in the relationship between social enterprise involvement and academic, social, and emotional competencies for students. The researchers hypothesized that social enterprise fostered a positive school climate and wanted to determine if student involvement in social enterprise increased student engagement. The study consisted of surveys and focus groups with high school students involved with school-based enterprise and high school students not involved with school-based enterprise.

## **Community Context**

Vo-Tech High School was the site of the study. Vo-Tech is located in a city in the Mississippi River Delta Region with a population of 67,162. The top three industries in the city are healthcare and social services, retail, and manufacturing. Ten-year projections predict growth in the healthcare and social services and retail industries, but not in the manufacturing sector. The median household income in this city is \$39,747, which is almost \$20,000 lower than the United States median income. The poverty rate is 23%, which is nearly twice as high as the national poverty rate. African-Americans and women ages 25-34 in this city experience the highest rates of poverty. Over half (56%) of the city's African-American population and 12% of women ages 25-34 live in poverty. The lack of economic opportunity may help to explain the city's violent crime rate, which is among the highest in the nation for small cities (Data USA, 2018).

Several organizations in the area are responding to this need by promoting economic and community development. One organization in the area operates a Regional Economic Development Initiative, which seeks to impact the region through entrepreneurship, education, workforce development, and technology and capacity building. In 2016, the city's Chamber of Commerce created a new position, Manager of Workforce Development. This individual works in collaboration with the school system to increase workforce development opportunities for students. The Chamber of Commerce also launched a five-year campaign focused on regional and local economic development, tourism, workforce development, and small businesses.

These initiatives mirror the focus of the Career and Technical Education academies at Vo-Tech. The former school superintendent had a background in vocational and technical education and envisioned a state-of-the-art, academically rigorous high school where students

could also acquire advanced technical skills. The facility provides opportunities for practical observation and hands-on application for grades nine through twelve. The school now operates five academies, or school-based enterprises, focused on agriculture, hospitality and tourism, manufacturing, transportation, and information technology. Three-quarters (75%) of the students at Vo-Tech are involved in a school-based enterprise.

### **Sample**

Vo-Tech was chosen as the site of the study because of its existing relationship with the Center for Safe and Supportive Schools. This relationship developed after the center received a grant from the Department of Education to support schools interested in improving school climate. School administrators identified students to participate in the focus groups.

Demographic data was not collected from the focus group participants and focus group data was not linked to survey data. A majority (62.4%) of the students at Vo Tech identified as Black, 34.6% identified as White, 1.9% identified as Hispanic, and the remainder identified as other. Over half (53.7%) of the students were male and 46.1% of the students were female.

At the time of data collection, the school operated school-based enterprises related to culinary arts, manufacturing, automotive repair, agriculture, marketing, information technology, web design, and business. Several of the respondents participated in multiple school-based enterprises. Over half (54.6%) were involved with business, 34.6% were involved with agriculture, 12.1% were involved with web design, 9.6% were involved with culinary arts, 8.9% were involved with marketing, 6.7% were involved with manufacturing, 6.3% were involved with automotive repair, and 4.7% were involved with information technology.

## **Data Collection**

Letters were sent home to obtain parental consent and students were provided assent forms prior to participating in the focus groups. Students provided no identifying information. The survey was distributed on the same day the focus groups were conducted. All 759 students present on the day of data collection completed the 26-item survey. School administrators selected 36 students to participate in the six focus groups. Four focus groups were conducted for students involved in SBE and two focus groups were conducted for students not involved in SBE. Two to four researchers were present at the focus groups. One facilitated the focus group and the other was responsible for note taking. The focus groups lasted an average of 28.2 minutes. One of the focus groups could not be transcribed because of poor audio.

## **Measures**

Vanderbilt University graduate students collaborated with the Center for Safe and Supportive Schools to develop the focus group questions. The questions broadly focused on engagement and environment. Questions on engagement include, “Has the existence of this program impacted your desire to attend school?” and “What impact has social enterprise had on your experience at Vo-Tech?” Questions on environment include, “Have you noticed any differences in your teacher's and/or administrator's attitudes about Vo-Tech as a result of the social enterprises?” The questions were designed to capture the impact of SBE involvement on personal growth, interest in school, career and college aspirations, and relationships with students, teachers, and community members. While these questions did not focus specifically on school climate, they helped to uncover students’ affective and cognitive perceptions of Vo-Tech. Students not involved with SBEs were asked to share their perceptions of the SBEs.

## **Data Analysis**

The systems view of school climate framework informed the qualitative analysis. The analysis examined differences in affective and cognitive perceptions of school climate between students in SBE and non-SBE nanosystems. Specifically, the analysis explored affective and cognitive perceptions of relationships, values, and beliefs.

The focus group recordings were transcribed into Microsoft Word and uploaded to NVivo, where I coded the data for relationships, values, and beliefs. I first examined the focus group transcripts line-by-line and coded any mention of relationships, values, and beliefs. These concepts were broadly defined and any and all data related to the concepts were coded. For example, a student recounting an interaction with a teacher was coded as 'relationships'. A student sharing their opinion on the quality of instruction at the school was coded as 'beliefs'. This is an exploratory study and I was concerned that rigid definitions of the concepts would hinder my ability to identify broad themes and patterns in the data. After reviewing the first focus group transcript, I discovered that relationships were discussed frequently and this code needed to be more specific. I then coded the data for student-teacher relationships, student-student relationships, values, and beliefs. I used these codes as the themes for my analysis.

## **Findings**

The qualitative analysis examined differences in affective and cognitive perceptions of relationships, values, and beliefs between students in SBE and non-SBE nanosystems to determine if SBE involvement is associated with an improved perception of school climate in the

school microsystem and how this involvement contributes to positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes for students. Relationships are the products of social interactions (Koth et al, 2008). Beliefs focus on the perceptions of experiences, such as the quality of instruction across multiple classrooms (Esposito, 1999; Rhodes et al, 2009). Values, such as expectations for success, are informed by these perceptions and observations.

### **Student-Teacher Relationships**

Both SBE and non-SBE students had positive, healthy interactions with teachers. One non-SBE student described her relationship with a caring teacher who altered her life path. She explained,

When my last semester and my freshman year teacher, I really tell him a lot because he leads me in the right direction. If it wasn't for him, then I would probably be in [alternative] school right now. I don't get in trouble anymore, and he has really changed it around.

However, many non-SBE students felt their relationships with teachers were superficial. Their communication was limited to coursework and they had few opportunities to build meaningful connections. One student shared,

I don't have a relationship with the teachers only because I only talk to them when I have a question about the work or something like that. I don't see them after school or anything like that, so no point any further than that.

Non-SBE students explained that their class sizes contributed to this distance. SBE courses were smaller and students received more individualized attention. One student expressed,

If you're not doing well in class or something like that, the teacher may take the time to ask why, but she has so many students that she might just not notice, or it might be multiple students so she had to focus on everybody instead of the individual, so that's why I would say that with this other outside-of-school-related-thing's teacher they have more time and fewer individuals to focus on.

Non-SBE students recognized that their teachers had limited opportunities to connect with students given the demands on their time. In contrast, SBE students established familial bonds with their teachers. One student remarked, “You're all in much deeper connection with them. It's not just, ‘How is your school day going?’ It's like, ‘How is your mother? How is your brother? How is work going?’ They're really like family to you.” SBE students described their teachers as caring, attentive, dedicated, passionate, and inspiring. They also felt that school would be more enjoyable for all students if more teachers focused more on building connections. One student explained,

I think if teachers were more like that, math teachers or English teachers, school would be a much better experience for kids because they actually care about you and they want you to do good. They want to get you far in life, not just you graduate and you're gone now. They're just another face that they see every day. It's not like that in the [SBE] program. They know you, they know your personal life, and they really care about you.

Similarly, SBE students felt more motivated to succeed because of their interactions with their teachers. One student shared,

If your math or your English or your science teachers had that connection with you, you would want to come in and sit down and get straight to work just because you feel like you owe that to your teachers and you want to do good for them. I think the connection that we have with our teachers is the biggest thing in [SBE].

SBE students appeared to form deeper connections with teachers than their non-SBE peers and these relationships fostered an optimal learning environment.

### **Student-Student Relationships**

Both SBE and non-SBE students raved about the welcoming, accepting environment at their high school. One non-SBE student explained, “People here, they seem like family to [me]. That's why I like high school so much. Haven't ever been around a school like this. Like everybody talk to everybody. Like you feel welcome when you come to Vo-Tech.” Students



described their peers as friendly, approachable, and non-judgmental. Their peers felt more like family than friends and they dreaded the separation that will come with graduation. One non-SBE student explained how the positive peer pressure at Vo-Tech has contributed to her growth. She shared,

I'm not the best student. I do a lot of stuff, and since I came to Vo-Tech [...] Like, I kind of started out on the rough side, but then, now, I don't really get in trouble at all. And that's because I have people that motivates me because at my other school, they used to indulge me, like make me do things that get me in trouble, but now it's like, everybody just don't want to be in trouble. Everybody want to do things, stuff like that, and I got a lot of best friends, so [...] I have people that talk to me and guide me through the right path, and they be like, 'You don't need to do this'.

Several non-SBE students expressed appreciation for the supportive, encouraging environment at Vo-Tech.

SBE students interacted with fewer individuals during the school day because of their smaller class sizes. Consequently, many of their closest friends were involved with the same SBE. When discussing her friendships, one student shared, "Most of mine are in my [SBE]. Yeah I do have friends that are here and there, but most of mine [share] common interests with me." SBE students also felt that their participation in SBE afforded them opportunities to build deeper connections with peers. One student described how the large number of students at Vo-Tech made it difficult to get acquainted with his peers. He continued, "[In SBE], especially with our Vo-Tech Acres, all the programs work together. The ag students are working with culinary, and culinary's working with marketing. I think it's helped a lot to get to know [students]". These collaborations were valuable spaces for cross-disciplinary learning and were a medium for students to establish meaningful relationships. Teamwork was essential for student success in SBE and required students to move beyond superficial interactions. One student shared,

I think that's a good thing about the [SBE] here, is everybody work together, and that's the big thing, is communication and being able to get along. You may not like some

students, but once you work with them, you see past the surface level of people and you understand to look at people [deeper].

The cooperative nature of SBE forced students to work across differences. While both SBE and non-SBE students had positive interactions with their peers, SBE involvement presented additional opportunities to foster valuable connections.

## **Values**

Both SBE and non-SBE students valued education. Most students were planning to attend college and intended to pursue careers that would propel them to success. However, some non-SBE students felt their high school education was of little value. They had little motivation to attend school and were more concerned with their post-high school educational pursuits. One student shared her frustration with having no control over her course load and being forced to enroll in courses to earn graduation credits. She explained,

I tried to get it switched and everything they wouldn't let me because they didn't know where else to put me, they said they wanted to put me in a lower class because of my grades, they wanted to put me in a lower class so I just got stuck with that. Which once again which is why I can't wait to go to college where you have choices, you can leave any class you want really.

Several non-SBE students felt that their high school education would be more valuable if a wider array of classes were available. In contrast, many SBE students were more motivated to succeed because of their participation in SBE. They felt that the courses aligned with their personal and professional goals. One student expressed,

It impacted me a lot because usually when I come to school I kind of don't want to come. It's just that thing about waking up so early in the morning but being in a marketing class it makes me want to come to school. It makes me dedicated to being at school, to achieve my goals and going to my career choice. Because of our marketing classes I feel that I will be comfortable in my career choice more than I was in the first place.

Unlike their non-SBE peers, SBE students appeared to be experiencing less post-high school anxiety. SBE students valued the professional exposure they gained from these courses.

## **Beliefs**

Though SBE and non-SBE students both valued education, many non-SBE students wished their courses offered more practical knowledge. One non-SBE student explained,

Sometimes I feel like there's a little bit that they're teaching us that is unnecessary, and that there some things that we need to learn that's not really academic, there's some things we need to learn how to get through in life that we're going to be missing when we get out there because they were so busy cramming some stuff into our brains that we have no use for.

Several non-SBE students complained about being ill prepared for their post-high school transition. Similarly, they felt that too many courses were tailored to students who planned to attend college. One student shared,

I think if high schools, in general, every high school at least that I know of, lack is the life experience, because they say they're getting us ready for college but some people may not be going to college, or some people might be going to military or something like that, so I don't think, well, no, I don't believe that our school at least is getting us ready for life experience, just [college].

These students were concerned that Vo-Tech overlooked students whose post-high school plans did not include college. Many of them attributed their lack of motivation to attend school to their unstimulating courses. One student explained,

I [rarely] come to school only because I feel that coming here is a waste of time sometimes for my first, second, no my first, third and fourth periods are unrequired classes, and most of the times we either have sub or aren't really doing anything. And I'm still passing - that's all my classes, and I rarely come. But it's not like I have the most to do outside of school. It's just that coming here and staying home, I'd do the same thing - just would sit and do nothing when I could just be at home doing that. So I feel it's no reason to come sometimes.

These experiences drastically differed from the SBE students who were eager to attend school each day. Much of this can be attributed to the practical application of their courses. One student shared,

I don't know what schools don't have [SBE], but if you don't have that, you just go to science and leave, but here you go to chemistry and then you go to the green house and you actually use the chemistry. That, I think, has improved all of our grades for sure.

Students linked these applied learning opportunities to improved academic performance. They were excited to learn and eager to disseminate their learning. One student explained,

It helps a lot because students go to class and leave and they never think about school again, but whenever you have a [SBE], you get to go home and be like, 'Mom, I did this today and I did this and I learned this.'

For SBE students, learning was not confined to the classroom. These students also felt better prepared for their post-high school pursuits. Participating in SBE helped many students refine their personal and professional interests. One student shared,

I always wanted to be a vet, and then I worked in a vet's office for a few weeks and I was like, 'No, I can't do this.' Then I was like, 'Oh my gosh, what am I going to do?' As soon as I got in the green house, I was like, 'This is what I'm going to do. I love this.' Without that, I don't know what I would've done in high school.

SBE provided many students with direction by exposing them to a vast array of career possibilities. Students also appreciated the opportunity to interact with the larger community.

One student explained,

With community leaders, when you go out and present, you can meet the mayor, city council members. We've spoken to the deputy under secretary, the USDA. We've been to Boston, North Carolina. It's just a network that you're building up. We know a lot of people.

These students interacted with influential individuals in Jackson and beyond and appeared to have established robust professional networks. While many non-SBE students described their

high school education as inadequate, SBE emphasized college and career readiness to ensure each student's success regardless of their post-high school pursuits.

### **Discussion**

The focus groups revealed that SBE offered meaningful, transformative educational experiences for students. It is important to acknowledge the healthy school climate in the Vo-Tech microsystem. Non-SBE students had positive interactions with their teachers and formed valuable connections with their peers. However, the SBE nanosystem was a distinct environment that offered unique opportunities. Students established familial bonds with their teachers that fueled them to strive for success. The collaborative nature of SBE allowed students to form authentic, genuine relationships with peers. Students were excited to attend school each day and eager to learn. They identified clear connections between course content and their future aspirations. They also had an opportunity to develop a professional identity and refine their career interests.

SBE participation uniquely impacted students while enhancing the school microsystem. The SBE nanosystem facilitated higher quality instruction with its smaller class sizes, abundant opportunities for applied learning, and personalized attention to each student. In these nanosystems, students experienced personal growth and developed valuable interpersonal skills. Students' motivation to succeed and commitment to learning enriched the school microsystem. Their behavior differed from students in the non-SBE nanosystem who had negative perceptions of the school microsystem. These perceptions contributed to poorer academic, social, and

emotional outcomes for non-SBE students. They had little desire to attend school and were less engaged in their coursework.

Collecting demographic data on the focus group participants would have enhanced the findings of the study. It is possible that race, gender, and other identities impacted how students experience SBE and Vo-Tech. Similarly, the homogeneity or heterogeneity of each SBE could affect how students function in these environments. Demographic information would have provided important context for the focus groups and added depth to the findings.

For some students, focus groups may not be the optimal form of data collection. There may have been students in the focus groups who dominated the conversation and caused others to feel apprehensive about sharing conflicting opinions. Interviews eliminate groupthink and create space for open, honest dialogue. Conducting both interviews and focus groups would have expanded the findings by incorporating more perspectives.

### **Future Directions**

As indicated by the literature review, most studies of SBE have focused on the benefits to students and to schools. Several researchers have made claims how SBE impacts employment, entrepreneurship, and economic development (Keel, 1998; Stern, 1994; Stone, 1993), but these assertions lack empirical support. Though these topics are not the focus of the paper, these assertions are frequent in the literature and present opportunities for future research.

## **Employment**

Keel (1998) asserts that SBE participation can combat unemployment for students of color in urban communities. No studies have examined post-high school employment outcomes among students who participated in SBE. Furthermore, for SBE to improve employment outcomes, they must equip students with skills that prepare them for the job market. Many schools may establish SBE in response to student needs instead of market demands. This may create a better educational experience, but students may not graduate equipped with the necessary skills to secure employment. Additionally, it seems unlikely that a school would cease to operate a SBE that students are eager to participate in but is resulting in poor post-high school employment. Schools choose to operate SBE for several reasons and it would be important to explore differences between SBE with distinct aims, such as a SBE focused on improving post-high school employment and a SBE committed to reducing drop-out rates. Research on the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of SBE can begin to answer some of these questions.

The assertion that SBE can combat unemployment also requires information on employment trends in areas where SBE operate. Students in areas with more employment opportunities may have better employment outcomes and this may occur independent of their involvement with SBE. Conversely, SBE may equip students with skills that diversify their employment opportunities. For example, a student in a rural community with no farming experience may have more employment prospects after participating in an agriculture SBE. Examining the community context can begin to illuminate the relationship between SBE and employment outcomes.

## **Entrepreneurship**

Several researchers suggest that SBE participation increases the likelihood that students will pursue entrepreneurship post-high school. Similar to the assertion about employment outcomes, there is little evidence to support this claim. Several studies report that SBE participation results in increased interest in entrepreneurship, but few of these studies track students post-high school (Keel, 1998; Stern, 1994; Stone, 1993). Though students do acquire entrepreneurial skills, establishing a successful business also requires access to capital. There was no mention in the literature of SBE focused on securing resources to support post-high school entrepreneurship.

Guthrie (2013) asserts that entrepreneurs are a valuable resource in economically depressed communities with fluctuating employment opportunities. In these communities, relocation is common among the younger generation and the loss of local talent can be extremely damaging for the economy. These individuals often migrate to locations with better employment prospects. Entrepreneurs can reverse this trend by creating employment opportunities while revitalizing the economy. Baker (1990), who studied SBE in rural communities, asserts that SBE teaches students how create their own jobs so they can remain in their communities after they complete high school. She claims that students involved with SBE develop stronger ties to their community and feel empowered to improve their surroundings. These students are less likely to abandon their community and migrate to larger cities. As mentioned above, no studies have been conducted with SBE students post-high school. First, research must determine if SBE involvement reduces the likelihood of relocation. If relocation rates are lower among SBE students, research can then determine what facilitates this process. Similarly, research can explore whether SBE students are more likely to establish businesses in their home communities



and what contributes to this process. If SBE does reduce the likelihood of relocation and increase entrepreneurship, this model can significantly impact economically depressed communities.

More research is needed to examine the relationship between SBE involvement and entrepreneurship. If more students are deciding to pursue entrepreneurship because of their exposure to SBE, research can determine how to best support this process. Research can also identify predictors of success and failure for SBE students who pursue entrepreneurship.

### **Economic development**

Several researchers have asserted that SBE contributes to economic development (Baker, 1990; Stern, 1984). Baker (1990) describes SBE as a community-focused curriculum integrated into the local economy. She studied several SBEs in the rural Southeast affiliated with Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning (REAL) that consisted of a one-year course in enterprise and a one-year course in small business management. These students conducted community assessments, wrote business plans, operated the business, and strategized on how to expand the business. They were responsible for developing viable, self-sustaining businesses that filled a niche in the local economy.

The rigor of this model demonstrates the potential of SBE. Baker defines success as students acquiring entrepreneurial skills and meaningfully contributing to their communities. However, measures could be developed to quantify the impact of SBE on the local economy, such as revenue generated and number of jobs created.

It is important to note that no universal curriculum exists for SBE. There are many SBEs that include none of components described above and are not viable, self-sustaining businesses. Understanding the relationship between SBE and economic development requires

acknowledgment of the distinct aims of many SBEs. A SBE that increases the number of available jobs and a SBE that reduces the school's dropout rate are both contributing to economic development, but these outcomes must be measured differently. Though SBE can contribute to economic development, research has yet to measure this contribution. Research can also help determine what facilitates this process. Furthermore, economic development may look different in rural, suburban, and urban contexts. Researchers who have suggested a relationship between SBE and economic development can aid with the operationalization of this concept in different settings.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Existing research demonstrates the significant potential of SBE. The findings from this study indicate that SBE produces distinct educational experiences for students. These experiences can be attributed to smaller class sizes, the practical application of course content, and the deep connections established between teachers and students. School administrators that see a need to improve school climate could consider incorporating SBE into their curriculum.

Time might influence the relationship between SBE participation and school climate. The impact on school climate may be determined by how long the SBE has been in operation. Future research could examine the relationship between SBE participation and school climate for SBEs at various stages of operation.

This study could also be expanded to other schools to identify patterns and trends in student experiences in SBE. It is possible that student experiences vary by geographic location,

type of SBE, and other factors. This information could then be utilized to develop best practices for establishing and maintaining successful SBE across different educational contexts.

Future research could examine additional aspects of SBE to add depth to the systems view of school climate framework. An examination of how SBE interacts with the community exosystem can begin to uncover how SBE could be utilized to spur employment, entrepreneurship, and economic development. Analyzing the social and educational macrosystem could help predict the future of SBE. These empirical analyses are essential for ensuring the relevance of SBE in an ever-changing society.

## **Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol**

1. With what social enterprise(s) are you involved at Vo-Tech?
2. What impact has social enterprise had on your experience at Vo-Tech?
3. How has your involvement in social enterprise impacted your relationships with students, teachers, and community members?
4. Has the existence of this program impacted your desire to attend school? If so, how so?
5. For the students who are not involved in any social enterprise, what is their perception of them?
6. In what ways has this project influenced how you view career and college opportunities or interests?
7. Have you noticed any differences in your teacher's and/or administrator's attitudes about Vo-Tech as a result of the social enterprises?
8. Because of the opportunities these social enterprises have provided, how do you think you have grown as a student and teenager?

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