

COMMUNITY AND THE CONNECTION TO PERFORMANCE
IN HIGH SCHOOL: SUGGESTIONS FOR THE
TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL
FOR URBAN DISTRICTS

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

by
Rebecca A. Kellich
December 2017

Examining Committee Members:

Dr. Maia Cucchiara, Advisory Chair, Policy, Organizational & Leadership
Studies

Dr. Steven Gross, Policy, Organizational & Leadership Studies

Dr. Christopher McGinley, Policy, Organizational & Leadership Studies

Dr. John Hall, Policy, Organizational & Leadership Studies

ABSTRACT

The high school drop-out rate has become a critical issue nationwide. Research points to the high school transition as a stressful experience for students and identifies it as a potential contributor to the elevated drop-out rate.

Using the stage-environment fit theory as a framework (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993), this research examines the high school transition for a group of students in an urban school district. Four different school structures were used in this research. The sending schools included an elementary school (K-8) and a middle school (6-8). The receiving schools included a special admission high school and a comprehensive high school. The students were recruited from one of the two sending schools and interviewed in both eighth grade and ninth grade. Academic, behavioral and attendance records were also collected in both eighth and ninth grade.

One major finding of this research was that eighth grade students enrolled at the elementary school were part of a more united community than those enrolled in the middle school. The elementary school was better able to meet student needs in interpersonal, instructional and organizational ways. These students experienced a more supportive and successful high school application process. A second major finding of this research was that when the students got to ninth grade, almost all of them reported a positive social transition yet almost all of them experienced an academic decline. Students' interpersonal needs were a priority to them, above their organizational and instructional needs. Additionally, the schools were unable to meet students' instructional needs and thus were unable to provide a developmentally responsive environment to foster their academic success.

This work is dedicated to my children, Austin and Grace, who are my inspiration and motivation - my reasons for everything.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mom and Dad, you have assisted me in immeasurable ways for years. Even before this project, you contributed every ounce of yourselves towards my success. Between the childcare and the coffee, I simply could not have done this without you. Thank you!

Eric, our conversations inspired my research topic. Thank you for your support over the last seven years and for consistently adding levity when the work became challenging.

Dr. Cucchiara, I am grateful for your patience and understanding. Thank you for participating in this journey with me.

To everyone else who has helped make this endeavor possible, who has believed in me and guided me along the way - thank you!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	xii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	8
The Effect of Transition.....	8
Ninth Grade: A Pivotal Year.....	10
Academic Decline.....	11
Behavior.....	13
Attendance	14
Stress Levels	14
Variables Affecting the Transition Process	15
Adolescence	16
Structure of Sending School	17
Size of School	19
Eighth Grade Predictions	20
Early Warning Indicators.....	21
Increased Risk Factors for Students in Poor Urban Areas.....	23

Failure Rates	23
School Structural Issues.....	25
Parent/Teacher Communication.....	26
Lower Trust Levels.....	27
Support for High Performing Students in Urban Schools	28
Support for the Transition Process.....	29
The Role of the Parent	29
The Role of the Teacher.....	31
The Triangle of Support.....	32
The Role of Peers.....	34
Successful Transition Programs.....	34
Potential Interventions	38
Transition Teams	39
Freshman Academies	40
Team Teaching.....	42
Advisory.....	42
School Engagement	43
A Focus on Eighth Grade.....	44
Early Warning Indicator Students.....	46
Theoretical Background: Stage-Environment Fit	46
Reasons Behind Selecting Theory	48
Stage-Environment Fit theory in Current Research.....	48
My Stage-Environment Fit Theory Research Contributions	51

Stage-Environment Fit Theory & the Organism Metaphor	51
Conclusion	52
3. METHODS	54
Research Questions	54
Rationale.....	56
Data Collection	57
The Schools Involved.....	57
Sending Schools – Eighth Grade	58
Receiving Schools – Ninth Grade.....	59
The High School Application Process in Sommerville	61
Student Recruitment – Spring 2015.....	62
McHeartly Student Recruitment – Spring 2015.....	63
Leemer Student Recruitment – Spring 2015	63
Spring Interviews	65
Student Follow Up – Fall 2015.....	65
McHeartly Student Follow Up – Fall 2015.....	65
Leemer Student Follow Up – Fall 2015.....	66
Fall Interviews	67
Teacher Recruitment.....	67
Eighth Grade Teacher Recruitment – Spring 2015.....	68
High School Teacher Recruitment – Spring 2015	68
Proposal versus Outcome	69
Data Analysis	69

Positionality	70
Conclusion	71
4. EIGHTH GRADE.....	72
The Two Schools: McHeartly versus Leemer	72
The McHeartly Experience	73
School Culture	74
Student Perception of Teacher-Student Relationships.....	77
Eighth-Grade Experience	82
Parent-Teacher Relationship	84
The Leemer Experience	85
School Culture	85
Student Perception of Teacher-Student Relationships.....	87
Parent-Teacher Relationship	88
High School Preparation	90
McHeartly	90
Transition Programming at McHeartly	91
Teacher Role in Transition Planning.....	92
Leemer.....	98
Transition Programming at Leemer	98
Teacher Role in Transition Planning.....	100
Stage-Environment Fit Theory in Sending Schools.....	103
Stage-Environment Fit at McHeartly	104
Stage-Environment Fit at Leemer	105

Overall Application Results	105
Analysis.....	107
5. NINTH GRADE.....	110
The Two Schools: Parkesburg and Monroe High School.....	110
Overview of Parkesburg High School	111
Student Perspectives on Transition Programming at Parkesburg	112
Teacher Role in the Transition Process	115
Parkesburg Teacher/Student Relationships	115
Overview of Monroe High School.....	118
Student Perspectives on Transition Programming at Monroe.....	119
Teacher Role in the Transition Process	120
Monroe Teacher/Student Relationships	121
The Transition Experience	122
Student Reported Social Success at Both High Schools	123
Academic Decline Across the Board.....	127
Eighth Grade Predictions	132
Steven	132
Mason	133
Stage-Environment Fit Theory: Understanding Ninth Grade Struggles.....	135
Theory	136
Interpersonal Needs	137
Organizational Needs	137
Instructional Needs.....	138

Magnitude of the Decline	139
Analysis	140
Conclusion	141
6. CONCLUSION.....	143
Summary of Findings.....	143
Implications for Policy and Practice	149
Bridge Program	150
Advisory or Academy	151
Adult Mentor	151
Instructional Support	152
Student Feedback	152
Reflection on Stage Environment Fit Theory.....	153
Opportunity	153
Strengths and Weakness of Study.....	155
Suggestions for Future Research	156
 BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	 158
 APPENDICES	
A. ES/MS STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	165
B. ES/MS TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	166
C. HS STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	167

D. HS TEACHER INTERVIEW	
QUESTIONS.....	168
E. EIGHTH GRADE STUDENT	
CODES.....	169
F. NINTH GRADE STUDENT	
CODES.....	170
G. EIGHTH GRADE TEACHER	
CODES.....	171
H. NINTH GRADE TEACHER	
CODES.....	172

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. McHeartly Students - Receiving High School.....	64
2. Leemer Students - Receiving High Schools.....	64
3. McHeartly Students – Fall 2015.....	66
4. Leemer Students – Fall 2015.....	67
5. McHeartly versus Leemer – Acceptance into Special Admission Schools.....	106
6. Parkesburg Student Performance.....	128
7. Monroe Student Performance.....	1

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The elevated drop-out rate among high school students is one of the most pressing issues facing the U.S. education system. A report from the Alliance for Excellent Education states across our nation, approximately 7,000 students drop-out of school on any given school day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). This number contributes to a growing number of social and economic problems with lasting consequences.

The consequences of dropping out of school are severe, and can be seen both on an individual level and national level. According to the Alliance report, the average income for a high school drop-out is almost \$8,000 less than those incomes of students who have obtained their high school degree (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Since our state and national revenue is affected by the income of our citizens, the drop-out rate is part of a larger, national concern. Further, the Alliance report also outlines the data that states those students who do not graduate high school are more likely to commit crimes and use public services like food stamps, WIC and housing assistance. Without a high school diploma, citizens are unable to participate fully in society, increasing the economic burden for the country (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011).

Graduation rates vary by gender, race and income. According to a report issued by the U.S. Department of Education, across Pennsylvania, the state where my research was completed, the graduation rate is 84%. The report also outlines graduation rates by race. Hispanic, African American, and American Indian students are significantly less likely to graduate on time than Asian and White students. White and Asian/Pacific Islander students both boast an 89% graduation rate while the graduation rates of

Hispanic and Black students is 68%, a percentage well below the state average. In addition, students from low-income families are six times more likely to drop-out of high school when compared to peers from high-income families. Males are at increased risk with only 68% graduating from high school as compared to 75 percent of females, across all races and ethnicities (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014).

The first step in addressing our national student drop-out rate is to consider the reasons why such high numbers of students are leaving school before they graduate. In our educational system, students begin school at the age of five and are expected to continue their education until they graduate high school. Students who successfully meet the requirements of one grade level will move on to the next one. Despite this structured educational system, many students are struggling with making these school level transitions successfully. Specifically, research shows that educational transition has the potential to negatively affect students' academic, social and emotional functioning (Isakson, K & Jarvis, P., 1999; Barone, C., Aguirre-Deandreis, A.I., & Trickett, E.J., 1991; McIntosh et al, 2008). While transition research suggests that a variety of school level transitions may have an adverse impact on students, some researchers point to the transition from eighth to ninth grade as the most challenging (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

The transition to high school has been suggested as the most disruptive for many reasons, including the intersection of adolescent developmental changes, different environments with higher expectations, new teachers and peer groups, and the greater sense of autonomy that students will face (McIntosh et al, 2008). This combination of factors is difficult to manage for many young students. Through this difficult but important year, ninth grade students accumulate the highest rates of truancy, discipline

referrals, academic failure and academic retentions (Habeeb, 2013). A student's ninth grade experience has shown to be significantly influential in their decision to leave school (Newman, B. et al, 2000).

While transition research shows that outcomes for students across race and gender are inconsistent, it is evident that students in areas of high poverty show the most regression (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Balfanz & Letgers, 2004; Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Seidman, 2004). Students in poverty are more likely to attend challenged high schools with more grade level retentions (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004, Neild & Balfanz, 2006). During their transition to high school, these students face additional barriers that are not within their control, including elevated rates of teacher turnover and lack of family and school resources. These extra obstacles contribute to an already challenging transition process, which amplifies their risk of dropping out of high school (Neild & Weiss, 1999).

In the public schools in Sommerville (pseudonym), a city in Pennsylvania where my research was completed, the challenges students face in making the transition from eighth to ninth grade are evident in their report cards. Using data from the Sommerville Education Longitudinal Study, Neild and Weiss (1999) studied the high school transition including ninth grade failure rates. Researchers followed a random sample of public school students beginning in the summer after their eighth grade year through their senior year in high school. As outlined in this report, the average grade for a freshman student during the time frame of this study was a 71, which equates to a low C. One-third of freshmen students had an average below an F (65). Further, 58% of students failed at least one course during their ninth grade year. One-third of these students failed three or more classes (Neild & Weiss, 1999). Specifically, during the 1999-2000 school year,

many first time freshmen failed to accumulate enough credits for promotion (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). These students are then considered repeat ninth graders until they have accumulated enough credits. This means, they may have to repeat any failed ninth grade classes (i.e.: English 1, Algebra 1) while at the same time taking new tenth grade classes (i.e.: English 2, Algebra 2). These repeat ninth graders are typically assigned to one homeroom class and kept separate from the incoming ninth grade students. While logistically it is possible for these students to get back to their correct grade level, research shows that not meeting the credit requirements for advancement, even if it was only by one half credit, decreases the chances that these students will graduate high school with the classmates they entered high school with (Herlihy, C. & Quint, J., 2006). Specifically, these students were at least six times more likely to not graduate in four years as compared to those who accumulated the 5.5 academic credits necessary to be promoted to tenth grade (Bornsheuer et al., 2011). The number of students dropping out of high school before they complete their degree is a considerable issue in Pennsylvania. More than half of the African-American students in Pennsylvania attend high schools in which the majority of students do not graduate on time, if at all (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004; Bornsheuer et al., 2011).

Despite the importance of the high school transition, there is currently limited research on the topic (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Schiller, 1999). This study contributes to existing transition research by examining the eighth to ninth grade transition in an urban school district, focusing on a majority minority population in schools where most students are economically disadvantaged and according to existing research, at-risk for dropping out of school. The data from this

study can be used to help design transition interventions for exiting eighth grade students and incoming ninth grade students to help shape a better high school experience.

To guide my research, I used Stage-Environment Fit theory. Stage-environment fit (SEF) theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993) is an adaptation of Person-Environment Fit Theory (Edwards, J. R., Caplan, R. D., & Harrison, R. V., 1998). In its most general form, stage-environment fit theory predicts that students will experience declines in motivation and performance if the resources provided to them by their school environment do not align with their developmental needs. In regards to the high school transition, this theory emphasizes that to be most responsive to entering ninth grade students, we must understand the facets of adolescent development and generally, the needs of adolescent learners as a whole. As a group, adolescent students wish for independence, interpersonal opportunities, peer acceptance, and connection with their teachers. Stage-environment fit theory states that a developmentally responsive educational environment would consider these needs in designing school structure, curriculum and programming (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993).

To better understand how students in an urban school district experience the transition from eighth to ninth grade and how their environment meets their adolescent needs, I examined the process for a group of 20 students. This qualitative study involved fieldwork at four different sites, including student and teacher interviews and the collection of related documents. Data collection began in the spring of participants' eighth-grade year and continued as the students entered high school. I recruited students from two different eighth grade classes: one within an elementary school (K-8) and one within a pure middle school (6-8). An elementary school is defined as a school that

enrolls students for the first four to six grades, usually including Kindergarten. A pure middle school is defined as a school that enrolls sixth through eighth grade students. Existing transition research helped guide the selection of my school sites. Research has suggested that elementary schools meet student needs differently than do pure middle schools (Weiss & Baker-Smith, 2010). I chose to complete eighth grade fieldwork within these two different settings to better understand this difference.

The high school application process for students in large urban areas often involves students completing one application for a certain number of high schools, with acceptance primarily being based on their grades and test scores from seventh grade. If they are unable to gain acceptance into a special admission school, they are able to enroll in their local comprehensive high school. Research suggests that students in poverty are more likely to attend comprehensive high schools. Further, research also shows that these students have a different transition experience than those who enroll in special admission or other types of high schools (Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Balfanz & Letgers, 2004). In this study, I included one comprehensive high school and one special admission high school to gain a better understanding of the variability of students' experiences between settings.

It is important to note that during this research, I worked as the school counselor for both the middle and elementary school involved, Leemer and McHeartly. This role is significant as I had connections with many of the students and staff, as well as access to student data. In my role as counselor, I helped the students and their parents with the initial stages of the high school admissions process including researching the high school options, selecting which schools to apply to, and completing and submitting the

supplemental documents. I was not the counselor for either high school involved in this study.

Individual interviews were completed with participating students and teachers. I conducted these interviews during the last semester of their eighth grade year and the first semester of ninth grade. Guided by stage-environment fit theory, my student interviews were designed to better understand student perspective and to obtain students' perceived needs for resources and support. In addition, I interviewed their eighth grade teachers in the spring and some of their new ninth grade teachers in fall. Research has shown that teachers are extremely influential in the transition experience of adolescent students (Eccles & Midgely, 1993; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Gutman & Midgely, 2000). The teacher interviews were designed to obtain teacher perspective on their role in meeting student needs in the transition process as well as to help us better understand how their school can be most responsive to exiting eighth grade and incoming ninth grade students.

This research examined the early stages of the high school transition in answering my primary research question, 'How do students in an urban school district experience the initial transition from eighth to ninth grade and what are the factors that support and/or impede their success?' This transition period is critical - far too many students experience declines in academic, social and emotional functioning when their needs are not met and the resulting transition is not a successful one. Additionally, students in poor areas are at greater risk due to lack of funding and resources. This study will help to inform transition practices at both the elementary/middle and high school levels in our city schools.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I will review the research on school level transition, specifically the transition to high school. Next, I will summarize the academic, social and emotional declines that ninth grade students experience during this transition. Then, I will outline the variables that affect this transition including a discussion on the differences in structure between middle schools (6-8) and elementary schools (K-8). This will be followed by a discussion of ways to predict how a student will experience ninth grade using data from eighth grade. I will then review the research that argues why students in urban settings experience transition differently. Then, I will discuss potential interventions for incoming ninth grade students, supporting resources for students, and existing successful transition programs. Finally, I will conclude this review with a discussion on stage-environment fit theory which guided the design of my study, the construction of my interview questions and the analysis of my data.

The Effect of Transition

Many researchers have examined the relationship between elevated high school drop-out rates and students' high school transition experience (Alspaugh, 1998a; Alspaugh, 1998b; Benner & Wang, 2013; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Eccles & Midgely, 1993). It is important to note that while this topic has been gaining traction over the past few decades, it is clear that not all students are impacted by transition in the same way. In this section, I will explain why school level transition seems to be problematic for students. I will also review some cases where transition did not have a negative effect on students.

Schiller (1999) explains transition as “a process during which institutional and social factors influence which students’ educational careers are positively or negatively affected by this movement between organizations (Pg. 216-217).” These positive transition experiences occur when the environment meets the students’ developmental needs. In a longitudinal study examining student grade level transition, researchers found that students transitioning from fifth to sixth grade reported positive changes as they entered a new school. This finding was associated with the move to small learning communities, where the students experienced a better fit with the structure of their new environment (Barber & Olsen, 2004).

Students can anticipate these grade level transitions yet they still have potential to cause disruption. Akos & Galassi (2004a) explain that school level transition is so difficult because most of them require students to adjust to three components simultaneously: academic, procedural and social aspects of the new school. While there are cases where grade level transition does not have a negative effect on students, and sometimes even facilitates positive life changes, much transition research suggests that it is common for students who transition to the next grade level to demonstrate some academic, personal and/or interpersonal loss (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Benner & Graham, 1997; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Seidman, 1994; Suldo, S. M., & Shaunessy-Dedrick, E., 2013).

Barber and Olsen (2004) examined patterns of change in perceived school and youth functioning across four grade transitions of fifth through tenth grade students. Specifically, they examined the degree to which students experienced connection, respect for psychological autonomy and regulation, and also measured the degree to which

students liked school. At every grade transition, there were students who reported negative changes. Specifically, these students reported a decreased quality of their school environment and decreased academic, personal and interpersonal functioning. More negative changes, however, were reported from students in ninth grade, which researchers attributed to the stress from a combination of grade level transition and environment transition. Through this study, Barber & Olsen identified various risk factors for students struggling with the transition including new and challenging peer relationships, increasing difficulty of school assignments and greater numbers of students enrolled. Specifically, ninth graders reported less liking of school, higher perceived need for school organization, lower support from teachers and administrators, less monitoring from teachers, lower classroom autonomy, less involvement in school activities, lower self-esteem and higher depression (Barber & Olsen, 2004). At this time, students leave a small, familiar elementary or middle school with very few teachers. They enroll in a new high school environment that is often much larger, with many more teachers but fewer teacher-student relationships (Gullotta, 1983). While the transition from middle to high school seems most significant, it is least researched (Rice, 2006).

Ninth Grade: A Pivotal Year

Research has pointed to ninth grade being a critical year for students in their high school experience (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Bornsheuer et al, 2011; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Habeeb, 2013; Heppen & Therriault, 2008). In this section, I will outline the importance of this transition year and review the negative effect it has been shown to have on some students' academics, behavior and attendance. I will also review research on student perception of the transition experience. Researchers believe the ninth grade

year of school to be so critical because of the combination of adolescent development and the normative transition to high school. These changes throw students off track academically and socially, and it is difficult for them to regain stability (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Eccles & Midgely, 1993; Gullotta, 1983).

In one study, students who transitioned from eighth to ninth grade reported increased negative changes in both their personal and school lives. Out of a list of 24 variables, students who had transitioned to high school reported negative changes including: enjoying school less, lower support from teachers, less involvement with school activities, lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression (Barber & Olsen, 2004). In the following sections, I will go into more detail on the various ways in which students negatively experience this transition.

Academic Decline

It is common for ninth grade students, coming from a variety of educational settings, to experience a decline in academic performance (Alspaugh, 1998a; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, A. & Trickett, E., 1991; Habeeb, 2013; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; McIntosh et al 2008). While not all students are affected equally by this transition, research has shown that many students experience some amount of academic decline (Barone, C., Aguirre-Deandreis, A. I., & Trickett, E. J., 1991; Benner & Wang, 2013; Eccles & Midgley, 1993; Vasquez-Salgado & Chavira, 2014). In a study designed to assess student perceived social support, school support and attitudes towards school, researchers found that over seventy percent of students demonstrated a decline in academic performance from eighth to ninth grade. Over twenty percent of these students showed a drop of a full letter grade. These negative changes were shown to begin at the

start of the high school transition and continue through the year (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, A. & Trickett, E., 1991). For some students, this academic decline continued into tenth grade. Student identification with academics in ninth grade was a strong predictor of tenth grade classroom engagement (Thompson, A. & Gregory, A., 2011). If students are not engaged in ninth grade classes, it is likely they will not be engaged in tenth grade either.

To provide a specific example, Rice (2006) examined the math and science trajectories of three different groups of students and found that students who make the high school transition between ninth and tenth grade show the greatest gains in mathematics while students who make the high school transition between eighth and ninth grade show the lowest overall mean gain. Students who did not change schools during their transition showed no change in their mathematical trajectories. Rice (2006) found the same thing was true for students in the area of science.

Related to the increased failure rate, extant transition research shows that more students fail courses in ninth grade than any other year of high school. Heppen & Therriault (2008) identify ninth grade as an important year because research suggests that the achievement loss associated with ninth grade is difficult to reverse. In urban areas like Chicago, over 40% of ninth graders fail one or more of their major subjects during their first semester of ninth grade. Failure in ninth grade tends to lead to continued failure, especially as the student becomes significantly older than his/her first time ninth grade peers; few students can recover the credits they have lost (Roderick and Camburn, 1999). With this continued failure, it follows that ninth graders also have the highest rates of academic retentions (Habeeb, 2013). Approximately one-third of first time

freshman in Somerville public schools fail to accumulate enough credits for promotion (Neild & Balfanz, 2006a). This is problematic since research suggests that students who are retained in ninth grade are much less likely to graduate on time, if at all, compared to those who advanced to tenth grade (Bornsheuer et al, 2001; Herlihy, 2007; Neild, R., Stoner-Eby, S., & Furstenberg, F., 2008).

Additionally, in their examination of the relationship between ninth grade retention and “on-time” graduation of students in Texas, researchers found that 85.8% of students who were retained in ninth grade did not graduate on time. In this study, “on-time” was defined as four years after their entrance into high school as freshmen. Students were not able to accumulate the 5.5 credits required for promotion to tenth grade (Bornsheuer et al, 2001). One argument made for the elevated freshman failure and retention rates is that students are not developmentally prepared to handle the challenges of the new high school environment.

Behavior

In addition to a decline in academic performance and a strong possibility of academic retention, ninth grade students also have the highest rates of discipline referrals (Habeeb, 2013; Rice, 2006). In fact, researchers have found a significant interaction between academic decline and problem behavior (McIntosh et al., 2008). McIntosh et al. (2008) measured problem behavior by collecting student grades and office discipline referrals. Results of this study suggest that discipline referrals predicted ninth grade GPA; students with more referrals often earned lower GPAs. Specifically, students who received more than two referrals experienced a drop in their grade point averages. This study establishes the relationship between academic decline and behavioral problems,

suggesting that a problem in one area will affect the other (McIntosh et al., 2008). Booth & Gerard (2014) found that when students experienced a “lack of fit” with their school surroundings, they reported a decreased connection to the school and an increase in problem behavior.

Attendance

Ninth grade students often experience a decrease in attendance rates as they make the transition into high school (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, A. & Trickett, E., 1991; Benner & Wang, 2013). When students enrolled in schools where they reported feeling supported, their attendance remained stable and sometimes improved (Benner & Wang, 2013). Benner and Wang (2013) investigated attendance patterns of students from middle school into high school and had several important findings related to stage-environment fit theory. They found that when students moved into a school that they reported was developmentally responsive to their needs, their attendance trajectories were maintained or improved. One specific finding that speaks to this link is that students who entered high schools that were more ethnically diverse than the middle school they attended were more likely to exhibit decreasing attendance patterns (Benner & Wang, 2013). The findings of this study suggest that the transition from middle to high school can negatively affect students’ attendance patterns, and that often, the difference in school structure is to blame. The quality of the match of the school environment and the developmental needs of students has an influence on their attendance trajectories.

Stress Levels

Students who reported having higher stress levels during the transition into high school reported less satisfaction with school and lower school membership (Barone,

Aguirre-Deandreis, A. & Trickett, E., 1991; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Higher reported stress levels also predicted lower grade point averages (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Students reported increased stressors during the transition to high school; these stressors decreased over the course of ninth grade (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999).

Research shows that even ninth grade students enrolled in an accelerated curriculum report increased stress, in both magnet and public high schools (Suldo & Shaunessey-Dobrick, 2013). Similar to their General Education peers, students who transitioned to high school while being enrolled in Advanced Placement courses faced greater academic difficulty. The students enrolled in these classes reported greater stress levels than students on a General Education track. Although these students expressed greater stress levels, their self-report of life satisfaction and mental health was not significantly different from students enrolled in the General Education track. Both groups reported decreases in these areas. The significance of this is that students enrolled in accelerated classes might have special resources, such as small, cohort-like class sizes to help counter the effect of the transition (Suldo & Shaunessey, 2013).

Variables Affecting the Transition Process

There are many variables affecting the transition experience of ninth grade students. In this section, I will outline these variables including adolescence, a developmental process that affects eighth and ninth grade students. Other variables discussed will be the characteristics of students' sending and receiving schools, including school structure and size.

Adolescence

Many researchers believe the transition to high school is problematic because of the coinciding nature of puberty. These researchers state that students undergo many physical and emotional changes during the transition to high school and that these changes are the reason for the academic, social and emotional decline (Calabrese, 1987; Eccles & Midgley, 1993; Gullotta, 1983).

Early adolescence is defined as the period between ten and fifteen years of age. Students begin this developmental period in their middle school years and continue through ninth and tenth grade. At this time, adolescents are experiencing an increase in hormones, resulting in body shape changes. It is also typical of early adolescents to be completely absorbed with themselves yet struggle with feelings of low self-worth and self-esteem (Gullotta, 1983). This time period is considered one of increased risk; students are more likely to succumb to peer pressure and engage in consuming alcohol, drugs. They are also at greater risk for being arrested (Eccles & Midgley, 1993).

Since adolescence is a time period that produces many feelings of alienation, students' relationships with other people often go through flux and change (Calabrese, 1987). Primarily, their relationship with their parents suffers. Students feel misunderstood by both their families and society. Adolescents are often more interested in and influenced by the opinions of their peers. Their desire to impress and be accepted by other students is mixed with their feelings of estrangement and seclusion from them (Calabrese, 1987). Calabrese (1987) states the reason for this confusion is that these students have yet to develop many social skills to help them deal with the pressures of becoming a young adult and making important life decisions. With all of these emotional

forces at play, it is not difficult to see how a transition to a large, unfamiliar place would make performing their job as a student difficult.

Structure of Sending School

Structurally, middle schools and elementary schools are very different. Elementary schools generally educate Kindergarten through eighth grade students while middle schools educate young adolescent students, usually sixth through eighth grade or seventh through ninth grade. The creation of middle schools was purposefully designed around the unique developmental level of adolescent students. In their review of the middle school movement, Schaefer, M., Malu, K. & Yoon, B. (2016), examined the existing middle school research from 1963-2015. They identified the important components of the middle school concept as: interdisciplinary learning, block scheduling, advisory and exploratory courses to help students with college and career readiness. In their review of the literature, these researchers found that the critical components in the middle school mission could not be pieced apart (Schaefer M, Malu K & Yoon B., 2016).

Some researchers believe that students experience declines in their academic, social and emotional lives based on the type/structure of their sending school experience (a K-8 system versus 6th-8th). These researchers argue that the structure of their sending school has an effect on a student's high school transition experience. Through work in this area, researchers have found that a relationship exists between the magnitude of a student's academic decline and the structure of their Kindergarten through eighth grade education (Alspaugh, 1998; Smith, J., 1997; Weiss, & Baker-Smith, 2010).

Alspaugh (1998) examined three types of school districts: one with a linear transition arrangement, one with a pyramid transition arrangement where many

elementary schools filtered into one middle school, and one with a K-8 and 9-12 organization. Using the Missouri Mastery and Achievement Tests (MMAT), Alspaugh studied whether or not the students experienced an achievement loss as they advanced in their education. He found a significant achievement loss for those students who transitioned from elementary school to middle school, as opposed to those students who attended a K-8 school. Further, Alspaugh noted that those districts with the pyramid structure school had greater academic losses than those districts where students made a linear transition from one elementary school to one middle school (1998).

Weiss and Baker-Smith (2010) had similar findings in their study of eighth grade form and resilience. Using data from the Sommerville Education Longitudinal Study, they examined academic and social outcomes in ninth grade, comparing middle school attendees with K-8 attendees. These students were examined right before they entered high school and immediately after they started high school. They found that students attending middle schools had more difficult high school transitions than those who attended K-8 schools. This could be due to the type of school granting the K-8 students admission as compared to the ones enrolling the middle school students. It was found that middle school students were more likely to come from families where no parent has more than a high school degree and where the family has received welfare payments in the last year. They also found that students who attended middle schools were more likely to have been retained in a grade at least once. These middle school students had ninth grade averages that were at least two points lower than those students who graduated from K-8 schools. K-8 students were more likely to attend magnet schools than middle school students.

This research suggests that students in pure middle schools have a different experience than those who attend K-8 schools (Weiss & Baker-Smith, 2010). While middle schools have claimed to make a stronger commitment to helping students transition to high school, students from these schools also have lower retention rates and decreased academic performance when compared to students who transitioned to high school from an elementary school (Smith, 1997; Alspaugh, 1998a; Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, A. & Trickett, E., 1991; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Middle schools have been found to inadequately prepare students for their high school careers (Eccles, Lord and Midgely, 1991).

Those districts with a K-6 and 7-12 configuration, and only one school level transition, had the lowest amount of students who dropped out (Alspaugh, 1998b). This finding supports the conclusion that prior school transition has a cumulative effect, and that the extra stress from the transition to high school produces additional negative academic results. This research also highlights the importance of intervening in students' educational experience much earlier than high school to ensure a smooth high school transition and increased likelihood of high school completion.

Size of School

Researchers have examined the overall size of a given school and determined it to be important when considering the effects of the high school transition process. Alspaugh (1998a) found that as the number of students in each grade increased, the achievement loss associated with that high school increased. The size of a school was shown to be a significant factor in a student's high school experience and thus, high school drop-out rates (Alspaugh, 1998b). Some of the general research on school size is flawed due to its

design. However, it is important to review the findings to provide for a comprehensive literature review.

Researchers have found a negative correlation between students in poverty and educational outcomes (Seidman, 1994). Important to note, however, is that school size magnified the negative correlation between these two variables (Alspaugh, 1998b). Limited research shows that an increase in school size promoted attendance to school (Benner & Wang, 2013).

In larger schools, researchers have also found that students feel teachers have increased control, but teachers report feeling a decrease in efficacy, and both report a decrease in relationships between teachers and students. In these environments, teachers are unable to pay individual attention to the students and as a result, many feel isolated. A larger school size also increased feelings of teacher efficacy, which then increased student absenteeism, violence and substance abuse. Eccles, Lord & Midgely (1991) argue that we must consider the environmental characteristics of the classroom before and after the transition if we want to discover the root of the transition problem (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991).

Eighth Grade Predictions

It is possible to estimate how successful a student will be in high school by looking at their eighth grade experience. Research has found a significant relationship between academic and discipline referrals during the time between eighth and ninth grade. Students' discipline referrals in eighth grade predicted their ninth grade discipline patterns and academics. Students with more discipline referrals had lower grade point averages. Also, the academic scores of students with two or more referrals dropped from

fall to spring of their ninth grade year. The high school transition has a snowball effect, and often times, problem behaviors in one area of the transition may impact other areas, making it difficult to narrow down where the problem started (McIntosh et al, 2008).

McIntosh et al (2008) also found a significant relationship between students' academic scores and their discipline referrals. In this study, researchers examined students in eighth grade and ninth grade and found that students' eighth grade behavior predicted their academic experience in ninth grade. Specifically, students with greater disciplinary action taken against them in eighth grade had lower academic averages in ninth grade. In ninth grade, students who had received two or more disciplinary referrals experienced academic decline between their fall and spring semester (McIntosh, 2008). Students who experienced declines in middle school attendance were also more likely to experience low attendance in high school (Benner & Wang, 2013). High school turned out to be one more stressor for these students who were already exhibiting stress in middle school (McIntosh et al, 2008).

It is important to note that students who did not perform well in middle school have been shown to benefit by not attending the same high school as their peers. Conversely, those who did perform well in middle school benefitted most from attending the same school as most of their peers. Much of a student's middle school reputation follows them to their next educational environment (Schiller, 1999).

Early Warning Indicators

Researchers have established Early Warning Indicators of dropping out of high school. These indicators are as follows: the student has missed more than 10% of instructional time during the first year, student failed one course, student has a grade

point average under 2.0, student received two or more F's in core academic courses and/or received fewer than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the credits required to graduate (Heppen & Therriault, 2008). These indicators can be used with student data prior to ninth grade as well.

Recognizing the low graduation rates among low income and minority students, Neild, Balfanz & Herzog (2007) examined at-risk students in a large urban school district and found that they could predict non-promotion to tenth grade based on various risk factors. They tracked students for six years and compared data on those who dropped out of high school. In their results, they found that students who dropped out of school displayed warning signals years in advance of their departure. The early warning indicators included: a final grade of an 'F' in reading or mathematics, attendance below 80%, and a final unsatisfactory behavior mark in at least one class. Sixth grade students who displayed one or more of these indicators had a 75% chance of dropping out. The more signals a student displayed, the greater their chances of dropping out. More than half of students who dropped out of high school displayed one or more of these indicators in eighth grade. This means that more than half of the drop-outs could have been identified before they entered high school. Students in ninth grade who obtained fewer than two credits or attended school less than 70% of the time had a 75% chance of dropping out of school. Many of these students who experience course failure stay in school for one or two more years. This means that we as educators have a small amount of time to catch them and intervene further. We need to improve our efforts at engaging students in short-term success, especially those who demonstrate these warning signs in eighth grade or early ninth grade (Neild, Balfanz & Herzog, 2007).

Increased Risk Factors for Students in Poor Urban Areas

Extant research suggests that ninth grade transition can be challenging for many students if the school environment is not responsive enough to their developmental needs. While transition research on students in poverty can be more difficult to find, we do know that students in poverty often attend schools that are often underfunded and overlooked (Seidman, 1996). In areas with high concentrations of poor urban students, schools face increased academic challenges, decreased feelings of school connectedness and engagement plus a plethora of additional stressors including teacher turnover and a shortage of helpful resources (Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Reyes et al., 1994; Seidman, 1994; Catterall, 1998). In these schools, there is a greater chance of a mismatch occurring between the school environment and student developmental needs (Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Seidman, 1996).

Failure Rates

Students enrolled in poor city schools fail classes at a much higher rate than students in suburban districts. In large city school districts such as Chicago, over 40% of students fail at least one class in ninth grade. Some researchers suggest that urban students are not being prepared for the changes in school structure or curriculum because they enter high school with extremely low skills for their grade level. In their longitudinal study, Neild & Balfanz (2006) found that by the time they reach ninth grade, many students are already more than two years below their grade level in reading and mathematics performance.

As with the transition research mentioned previously, student failure rates vary based on gender, race and ethnicity. Males and African American and Hispanic students

are at the highest risk for failure (Roderick & Camburn, 1999). Roderick & Camburn (1999) examined patterns of failure rates of students in an urban school district in Chicago. In their results, they found that students reported failing classes for three reasons: because they did not attend classes, they did not complete their work, or they did not pass their exams. Researchers surmised that this class failure could have been a result of various risk factors such as the student entering high school at an older age than his/her peers, whether they had moved around a lot before the high school transition, and if they entered high school with lower math and reading achievement. Roderick & Camburn (1999) also found that urban student failure is reported as “expected” by many teachers who assume students to have an academic deficit. As a result, the problem isn’t always addressed with the urgency it requires.

Fine (1991) argues that when drop-out rates are extremely high as they are in these poor, urban school districts, a strong argument can be made that the issue is a structural one, and not necessarily the result of student deficit. Although students in urban districts are technically being offered equity in educational access, they are not receiving equity in educational outcomes. In her research, Fine documents significant underfunding of schools. She agrees that urban schools are generally not well resourced, and points out that most of the city’s lowest performing students are sent to large comprehensive high schools with a plethora of structural issues. To improve the drop-out crisis and help improve outcomes for urban students, Fine argues that we need to look beyond individual student characteristics and focus more narrowly on the school structures that these students are a part of (Fine, 1991).

School Structural Issues

The institutional structure of urban schools can sometimes feel disorganized and anonymous, contributing to student failure rates. The lack of funding plaguing these schools affects students in a variety of ways. For example, the shortage of staff means that school processes are not always as well planned out as they should be. For example, Riehl, Pallas, & Natriello (1999) examined the course scheduling procedures in urban high schools and found that the schedules are often created last minute in the beginning of the school year with many mistakes on them. The schedules needed to be adjusted for almost all of the students and these changes were not complete until the fourteenth week of the school year. Students were in the wrong class for almost one semester (Riehl, Pallas, & Natriello, 1999). This is only one example of a systemic flaw that increases the chances of failure for poor urban students.

Another related concern is that students in urban schools are not able to build many relationships with staff members in high school. Previous transition research has established how critical it is for students to feel supported by their teachers (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Booth & Gerard, 2014; Eccles & Midgley, 1993; Wallace et al, 2012). It is not common, however, for urban students to feel this support. In a study examining the factors contributing to successful transition of an African-American population, Newman et al. (2000a) found only one-third of students in city schools felt supported by their teachers in high school. Other students reported that the teachers were unapproachable and standoffish. Even the high-performing students in this study reported feeling negatively about the student-teacher relationship. Many students reported missing their teachers from middle school (Newman et al, 2000a; Newman et al, 2000b). Structurally

and institutionally, poor urban schools have high rates of teacher turnover, preventing students from forming supportive relationships with them.

Parent/Teacher Communication

While research shows that urban students often report lack of teacher support, their teachers report lack of parental support (Stone, 2003). Though there is limited research on the effect that families of students who are “at risk” play in their students’ performance during the transition to high school, it is clear that in urban environments, difficulties between school and family communication do exist and that these difficulties affect a students’ transition to high school (Stone, 2003).

In Stone’s (2003) research examining elementary and middle school teacher communication with parents over their students’ transition to a large, urban high school, results showed that not all teachers engaged with parents similarly. In fact, there were significant differences between eighth grade teacher perceptions of parent communication and ninth grade teacher perceptions. Eighth grade teachers on the whole were generally more positive about relationships with their students’ parents. They were more likely to report that their schools encouraged reaching out and including parents in the day-to-day school process. Eighth grade teachers also reported that parents were invited to the classroom with the idea of providing feedback. Generally, these teachers reported that parents were supportive of their teaching efforts (Stone, 2003).

Ninth grade teachers were not as positive in comparison. They reported feeling less trusting, and were less likely to report working closely with parents to support student needs. While these teachers reported feeling less supported by their students’ parents, they also had varying levels of outreach. Teachers with more experience, who

taught students with higher achievement levels tended to reach out to parents more often. Teachers with negative attitudes about student learning capacity, teachers of White and “Other” racial backgrounds, and male teachers reported lower levels of outreach to parents. Additionally, teachers in schools with higher levels of Latino student body reported lower levels of outreach. The results of this study are significant as they show that communication between parents and teachers changes over the course of a few months, between eighth grade and ninth grade, affecting student achievement and trust levels between all participants (Stone, 2003).

Lower Trust Levels

Developing trust between members and stakeholders of a school community is important. As urban minority students advance to high school, they are entering their new environment and are asked to build new relationships with strangers. In a study examining the social and academic adjustment of inner city Hispanic students, Reyes, Gillock & Kobus (1994) facilitated a one-day workshop designed to help improve grade point averages across the ninth grade transition. Even after this transition workshop, students reported feeling less support from friends and teachers. In fact, students had very negative things to say about their teachers and did not feel that their instructional practices matched up with their instructional needs at the time. As perceptions of school support decreased, students’ feelings of peer support decreased as well. Students from more poor environments have a harder time trusting others, making the high school transition process even more difficult. Lower trust levels have also been shown to correspond with lower school-wide academic achievement (Stone, 2003).

This elevated chance for failure due to lack of resources and support does not

mean that students cannot escape the path of failure. Catterall's (1998) research examined the resilience of minority students from lower SES households and found that supportive family behaviors, student engagement and staff responsiveness are significant factors that contribute to student success and that work to reconcile the effects of developmentally inappropriate school environments (Catterall,1998).

Support for High Performing Students in Urban Schools

Researchers have examined the difference between high performing students and low performing students in urban schools. Both groups had negative feelings on teachers as they made the transition from eighth to ninth grade. However, low performers were more likely to speak positively about teachers. Also, only 55% of students reported that ninth grade was more challenging. Low performers actually suggested that ninth grade was easier than eighth grade (Newman et al, 2000).

When asked why students failed or did not do well, high performing students reported problems such as needing to study more, having problems with teachers, were bored, and had trouble staying awake. Low performing students reported that they did not do well when they did not understand the work, did not go to class, or acted up in class. Overall, more than half of these urban students reported that their mothers were most supportive of their academics. These urban students also reported challenges of the transition as the size of the schools, organization of classes, the length of the class periods and having to interact with new people. When asked about the factors that contributed to their success, high performing urban students reported that they had good study habits, they sought help from teachers and they were determined to do well. Low performing students reported that the work was easier (Newman et al, 2000).

When examining the coping strategies of those students who are successful in high school compared to those who are not, researchers found that those students who performed well in high school reported more support from their family, especially their mothers (Newman et al, 2000b). They further reported three categories of coping skills: individual dedication to goals, academic hard work, and socially spending time with people who supported their academic goals. While both high-performing students and low-performing urban students experienced challenges in the areas of school, friends and family, it was the high performing urban students who were better able to identify and utilize their support networks. This research reinforces the idea that educators play an important and influential role in the lives of students. Additionally, while students may not verbalize it, their families are considered to be part of their support system (Newman et al, 2000a; Newman et al, 2000b).

Support for the Transition Process

While transition to high school has potential to cause a disturbance in the academic, social and emotional trajectories of students, research has established that there are ways to mitigate the damage. Parents, teachers and peers can act as a support system for students undergoing transition (Catterall, 1998; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). In this section, I will discuss the important roles of the parent, teacher and the positive effects of a partnership between the two. I will also review the benefit of peer support.

The Role of the Parent

When assessing student relationships, it is important to differentiate between parents, peers and teachers. Despite the emotional distance that some adolescents create between themselves and their parents, parental support has been shown to decrease the

amount of academic and social difficulties adolescents have during the transition to high school (Falbo et al, 2001; Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis & Trickett, 1991; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Smith, J., 2008). Students who rated higher levels of family support also reported higher levels of school satisfaction, less anxiety and experienced easier adjustment to high school (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis & Trickett, 1991; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Higher levels of parental involvement in tandem with increased feelings of school belonging have also been associated with an elevated grade point average (Gutman & Midgley, 2000). Parental involvement has also been shown to have an impact on the social engagement of these students. Parents are considered a huge influence in the selection of activities for their children, which determines their social network (Falbo et al., 2001).

Akos and Galassi (2004a) compared student, parent and teacher perspectives on student transition and found many similarities. Students and parents were found to rate similar items as student concerns as they enter high school. Surprisingly, when asked how long it took their student to successfully make the transition to high school, over half of the parents reported that it took less than two weeks. Other studies have found that parents and students differed on perceptions of transition concerns, and that parents were more concerned about their child's safety and whether or not they would fit in (Smith, J, 2008).

To ease their children's transition process, parents reported that they focused their conversations on the rigor of the upcoming academic work, they discussed potential social issues, they offered more encouragement and accompanied their student on a visit to their new school. Parental involvement is paramount when considering a smooth

transition to high school (Baker & Stevenson, 1986).

Parental strategies for helping their students with the transition have been found to vary due to the socio-economic status of the family. Mothers with a college degree are more likely to be involved with their children's schooling in knowing their teachers, being aware of their performance, and managing their class schedules. College educated mothers are more likely to choose Advanced Placement courses for their students, regardless of the student's academic performance. As a whole, mothers who were better educated better prepared their children for the high school transition (Baker & Stevenson, 1986). This is important as it relates to this study because many parents of poor, urban students are not college educated. Thus, there may need to be more effort on the part of the school when it comes to assisting students with the transition. In addition, school personnel should be purposeful in helping urban parents be as involved in their children's schoolwork as possible (Gutman & Midgley, 2000).

The Role of the Teacher

In addition to parental support, ninth grade students find meaning in the relationships they develop with teachers as well. The transition research that examines the role of the student-teacher relationship consistently finds it to be significant, and a primary factor influencing student success (Barber & Olsen, 2004). In fact, this relationship has been categorized as one of the strongest mediators of the damaging effects of the high school transition. The effect of this relationship was most noticeable during times of student transition (Barber & Olsen, 2004).

Teacher support is a strong predictor of perceived changes in student school experience. Those students who reported a positive connection with their teachers or

school personnel during times of transition also reported positive student functioning. This student-teacher relationship was predictive of students reported functioning both inside and outside of school (Barber & Olsen, 2004).

The level of teacher support explains the patterns in student academic, personal and interpersonal functioning. The higher levels of teacher support and school belonging that students reported, the more likely they were to also report a higher quality of life, finding success both in and out of school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Barone, Aguirre-Deadreis, & Trickett, 1991; Gutman & Midgley, 2000).

The reason for this could be that students have a desire to be acknowledged. Wallace et al. (2012) examined students' relationships with their teachers using the 'Being Known' measure. They found that youth are more connected to their environment when they perceive that others accept and acknowledge them. Student-teacher relationships affect school connectedness, which then affects student experience. When teachers consider a student's developmental stage and identity, and they work with them in a way that meets these unique needs, students perceive a positive relationship with that teacher, and have a feeling of "being known." This feeling of being known can be utilized for intervention, as it encourages student engagement across several areas (Wallace et al., 2012).

The Triangle of Support

Those students who had parents, middle school teachers, and high school teachers collaborating over their transition found the most academic success in ninth grade. Students were most successful when a triangle of communication occurred so that parents were learning more about high school from the high school teachers, high school teachers

were learning about the students entering their school, and the middle school teachers knowing both groups could speak for high schools but could also advocate for families. When middle school teachers created this bridge for students and parents, students reaped academic benefits at the beginning of high school (Crosnoe, 2009). Researchers stress that in order to help students make a successful transition, the voices of those closest to the transition, students, parents, teachers and administration, must be heard (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013).

This research outlines the necessary connection and continuity between middle and high school, and the responsibility of both schools to ensure the student makes a successful transition (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Rice, 2006). Unfortunately, this connection is rare. Many times, a tension exists between middle and high school teachers. Often times, high school teachers have many complaints about middle school teachers not doing a good job with educating their students. They claim the students are failing because they are not academically prepared to do high school level work (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998).

What is sometimes a tense connection between middle and high schools in suburban school districts is even more stressful for urban school districts. Not only are elementary and middle school teachers targeted for blame, it is rare for urban middle schools and high schools to talk at all, putting these students at a further disadvantage. It is unlikely that these students have access to a triangle of support such as the one mentioned above (Crosnoe, 2009).

The Role of Peers

Students' relationships with their peers over the course of the high school transition are important (Rice, 2006). During this transition, students are often introduced to new peers and a new social structure. Most of the time, students lose the level of social power they had in middle school, particularly if they enroll in a high school with few of their peers from middle school. Sometimes, students are able to reinvent themselves in a more positive or popular light for high school. Either way, the social structure that they had been used to shifts.

Some students reported increased support from their friends over the course of the freshman transition. This reported support from friends was found to be associated with decreased grade point average at the end of eighth grade, the beginning of ninth, and the end of ninth grade. There's a relationship between a feeling of school membership and perceived support from friends. This feeling of school belonging increased when students reported low levels of autonomy. School membership also increased as perceived parental support increased (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999).

Successful Transition Programs

Parent, teacher and peer support have been identified as helpful resources for students making the tumultuous transition to high school. In this section, I will continue my discussion on resources to help students experience a successful transition to high school by outlining the importance of transition planning. I will review the significance of transition planning for both exiting eighth graders and incoming ninth graders. It is important to note that the transition programs outlined below are not all equally effective at meeting students' needs as they make the transition to high school. These variants will

be explained below.

Since we are viewing the transition to high school as a process rather than a singular event (Schiller, 1999), if we are to address this transition properly, efforts towards transition planning should begin in the middle school setting (Falbo et al., 2001). These programs should address both the risks of adolescence as well as any mismatch of students' educational needs versus educational resources they are offered. Unfortunately, high-quality programs to help students successfully move from middle to high school are rare (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998).

Calabrese suggests that we can combat the alienation and negative feelings of adolescents by integrating them into the high school and giving their experience meaning. It is possible, he suggests, for all students (regardless of age) to learn together and act as role models for each other. Students then need to be made a contributing voice to their school and community by encouraging them to participate in activities, offering them opportunities to share their talents with society and allowing them to help make school and community decisions (Calabrese, 1987). This will increase students' feelings of acceptance and fulfillment.

These points above can be incorporated into transition programming. The most effective transition program will address the three populations of people who are affected by the process: students, elementary/middle and high school teachers and parents (Smith, 1997). Both the sending schools and receiving schools have a part to play in assisting students with becoming more comfortable in their high school environment (Rice, 2006). Additionally, successful programs address the information gap between middle and high school, helping middle school students understand more fully what their high school

experience will be like. Feeder schools and high schools must work in tandem with each other (Smith, J. 2008).

Research has shown that students who participated in full time transition programs were less likely to drop-out and even performed better in school. In order for them to be effective, however, the transition programs must address all three groups of participants: students, staff and parents (Smith, J., 1997). Unfortunately, programs are often designed with little or no input from students. Researchers have found that to be successful, the transition program must be tailored to students' developmental needs (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).

In existing transition research, students were asked what could be done in eighth grade before the transition to ensure that it goes smoothly. They responded that the schools could provide insight and more information on the transition to reduce any potential for anxiety (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001). They also reported that it would be helpful for high school students to meet with the middle school students. In fact, Smith (1997) found that having the high school counselor speak with the eighth graders was the most prevalent practice in transition programming. Similarly, parents reported that more interaction between the middle and high school levels would be beneficial. On a related note, teachers reported that the students entering high school needed a more rigorous academic program during middle school with the addition of more purposeful study skills development to prepare them for high school academics (Akos & Galassi, 2004). There is much value in pre-transition planning (Falbo et al., 2001).

Once students have made the transition, students, parents and teachers reported that an additional set of interventions to assist them in their new endeavor would be

helpful. High school students who had already been through the transition, reported that a better Orientation would have helped them to be more successful. Parents hoped for continued communication between middle and high school. Teachers suggested that the school open itself for tours and host a summer remediation program (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

As Akos and Galassi mention in their work (2004), interventions should be put into place to help students adjust to the academic, procedural and social changes in their high school. Since the interventions consist of varied amounts of support, the order and the amount of effort put into each area would depend on strengths already present in the school system. Procedural concerns, however, will be most likely to be addressed first as all students are going to experience change in this area. Depending on the nature of the particular school system, the social and academic dynamics might be related (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Letgers and Kerr (2001) examined the high school transition interventions throughout public schools in Baltimore, Maryland. They found that 25% of schools used Small Learning Communities while over 25% used team teaching. Half of the public schools integrated a ninth grade academy model into their school structure. Twenty-five percent of the programs utilized a summer enrichment program for incoming ninth grade students. Half of the schools rostered ninth grade students to their own special class designed to help them integrate into high school. Out of all of these interventions, the Small Learning Community had the most effect on student performance.

Since transition is seen as a series of events rather than a singular one, some researchers would argue that programming would need to begin in the fall of eighth grade

and continue for at least two years in order to be effective (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Bry & George, 1980). In an examination of students enrolled in a transition program compared to those who were not, no significant changes were found in tardiness, absences or disciplinary outcomes during their ninth grade year. At the end of the first year, both the program group and non-program group were experiencing increased academic failure. It was by the end of tenth grade, the second year of the program that significant differences were observed between the two groups. Those who were enrolled in the program experienced a reversal of academic decline while those who were not enrolled in the program continued to decline (Bry & George, 1980).

While implementing a transition program is a challenging thing to do, once it is established and has been effective for several years, the entire school culture could change for the better (Habeeb, 2013). It is important though, to reevaluate the effectiveness of the programming each year to determine if students are actually benefitting from it.

Potential Interventions

Transition programming can be broken down into much smaller pieces. In this section, I will outline the success of various interventions utilized in current transition programming. These transition interventions include school-wide programs, as well as programming exclusive to ninth grade students. To design transition programming, it is important to recognize that the high school transition experience differs between schools. Depending on the type of school district organization, students may experience things such as new peer groups, new buildings and teachers, a different class schedule, new rules and higher expectations. In addition, the physical changes occurring at this time

including the onset of adolescence, and the individuality of each student makes the transition to high school a unique experience. I have included a variety of transition program options that can be used in combination with each other. Again, these transition programs are similar in their aim to support adolescent students in education but differ in their outcome. Overall, it may require a combination of interventions to ensure we are meeting the needs of students during the transition to high school.

Transition Teams

Since the academic and behavioral factors between eighth and ninth grade seem to influence each other, easing students into the high school transition by addressing their concerns before they get to high school would be most beneficial. If we can address the tensions that school transition evokes at an earlier point in a student's educational career, there may be a better chance for them to experience academic and social success, and boost their emotional confidence.

One way to do this is the creation of transition teams, including eighth to ninth grade students. While suggestions of middle school teachers connecting with high school teachers sounds easy, in reality, tension exists between the two. Since ninth grade students enter high school and typically experience an academic decline, it is common for ninth grade teachers to cast blame on the middle school teachers. Common criticisms from the high school teachers are that the students are unprepared for the work, they have no motivation to complete homework assignments, the students are unsure of how to study, and their parents are not involved (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998).

To address this tension and to better prepare students for a high school curriculum, transition teams comprised of eighth and ninth grade students, their parents,

and eighth and ninth grade teacher volunteers, could be created. The most important piece of transition teaming is parent involvement. Important activities for the transition teams would be team building, retreats, parent nights, pen pals and peer mentoring and a shadowing day or field trip to the high school. Towards the end of ninth grade year, transition teams should help students create a transition plan for the rest of their high school years, including any post-secondary options. The teams should address all concerns regarding moving from eighth grade into ninth, including both academic and social aspects, to lower student stress regarding their big transition (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).

At its core, the transition team intervention includes significant community building between the students eighth and ninth grade settings and would meet the interpersonal needs of adolescent students. Additionally, transition teams include teachers, parents and students, which researchers emphasize is critical. This intervention would need to begin before high school but would also help students plan for life after high school graduation. This intervention would be difficult to organize in a large district. Further, in districts with high rates of teacher turnover, efforts towards development of this program could easily get disrupted. If organized efficiently, it could have a significant impact on easing the anxieties of the students as they make this huge transition.

Freshman Academies

The one positive transition reported in Barber & Olsen's (2004) research was the transition between fifth and sixth grades. Here, the students reported higher levels of student functioning. Researchers speculate that the reason for this could be the

organization of the class into small learning pods where they were offered opportunities for community building and greater levels of teacher support. Similar to these small learning pods, many high schools are creating Freshman Academies based on the same principles.

The Freshman Academy Model is popular in many large, comprehensive high schools. The ninth grade students are housed in a separate location from all the other students under the thought that these students will have a negative influence. Critics say this model is ineffective as it secludes the new students and drains resources (Habeeb, 2013). These researchers question whether being around older students would negatively influence the behaviors of new students. Some suggest it does not matter if the ninth graders intermix with the older students and that the students experience behavioral problems because they are being asked to make important decisions without the maturity or social skills to help guide them. In the transition to high school, some students leave a small environment where they feel supported as an individual and enter a large high school where they can be considered just a number (Habeeb, 2013).

Freshman Academies can be seen as effective in helping the students make the transition to high school in large urban districts. In these academies, freshman students have their own set of teachers who communicate regularly about their progress. Additionally, the structure of freshman academies allows for increased interpersonal opportunities between new ninth grade students. This intervention could help ninth grade students meet their needs in instructional, organizational and interpersonal ways, but the benefits of this might only last the year. Eventually, students will be asked to integrate into the larger school setting without the comforts of a familiar academy. The Ninth

Grade Academy structure could be delaying the inevitable and transition to tenth grade could become the new problem.

Team Teaching

Similar to Freshman Academies, team teaching has been successful in many schools. In this model, a group of teachers shares the same ninth grade students. To discuss student progress, they meet regularly. Critics say this model is more effective than just isolating the freshman class and that if they can be used together, it would be most effective. It is thought that this way of educating students extends the cohort nature of middle school (Habeb, 2013). This transition intervention is easier to organize than transition teams, and requires less structural change than the creation of Freshman Academies.

Advisory

As outlined above, adolescents have a need to build healthy relationships, particularly with adults who are not their parents. One intervention that is difficult to organize but that researchers claim has positive outcomes if run successfully is advisory programming. According to the Association for Middle Level Education (Pearsall, 2017), when schools meet the affective needs of adolescent students, they experience both academic and personal gains. Students reap a variety of benefits from advisory, including the chance to build healthy relationships with staff and increased opportunities for interpersonal connection with peers (Pearsall, 2017). The need for advisory to be organized and facilitated well cannot be overemphasized. Poorly planned or delivered advisory could result in students not taking the work seriously, which could be a waste of time and money.

School Engagement

In examining the relationship between students' participation in organized activities and their transition experience (Bohnert et al., 2013; Falbo et al, 2001), researchers found that extracurricular activities have shown to offer social and emotional benefits to students if they continue to stay involved in them (Bohnert et al, 2013). There are many reasons for this. Primarily, engagement in activities allows one to be noticed and recognized, battling the isolation that most ninth graders struggle with. Secondly, these extra-curricular settings provide a safe space to interact with peers. Finally, high schools tend to offer a wide array of activities, with a diverse group of peers as members. This increases the chances that a student will find a place where they feel they belong (Bohnert et al, 2013). Conversely, students who were not involved in school or their community are more at risk for increased feelings of alienation (Calabrese, 1987).

In addition to a social benefit of engagement in school activities, there is also an emotional one. Ninth grade students who participate and remain involved in organized activities demonstrate fewer depressive symptoms later in the year. Also, students who initiate and remain involved in these activities experienced further social and emotional benefits evidenced in the spring of their ninth grade year (Bohnert et al, 2013). It has also been discovered that participation in organized activities is infectious; students who initiate and continue participation in one group tend to join others (Falbo et al, 2001). Participation in these organized activities might help students stress levels and adjustment as they transition from middle school to high school and therefore, school personnel should be focused on helping students plan which activities to participate in during high school (Bohnert et al., 2013).

There are some challenges that come with helping all students to become engaged. First, the school would need to have enough offerings to meet all students' needs. Second, many ninth grade students are often so overwhelmed with the transition that they are not focused on the club opportunities that they can choose from. Often they miss the deadline for fall sports. One way to shape this engagement data into an effective intervention would be to mandate that all students are required to participate in one club or sport. To make it easier to participate, the club period could be a class held once or twice a week during the school day. Ideally, ninth grade students would be given an overview of their options at Orientation and could select the activity they connect with the most. This intervention would meet the interpersonal needs of ninth grade students, which would positively impact their transition. It may not, however, address their instructional or organizational needs.

A Focus on Eighth Grade

Although the focus on high school transition programming lies primarily within ninth grade, prior research points to the importance of this transition programming starting in eighth grade. Smith (1997) outlines the effects of various eighth grade transition programs on their high school retention, studying programs that were student focused, parent focused and staff focused. Smith defined the student programs as: eighth graders attending classes, high schools presenting the information, Big Brother/Big Sister programs, and the high school counselor meeting the eighth graders. Parent programs consisted of visits to the high school and a parent orientation in the fall. Staff members were targeted in programs where the middle and high school teachers, administrator and counselors meet separately. This of course, is only possible when there is a strong

connection between middle and high school, something not typical of large, urban districts such as Sommerville. Smith's study also determined that the most prevalent practice for full and part time transition programs was the high school counselor meeting with the eighth graders. The least prevalent practice was a Big Brother/Big Sister program (Smith, 1997).

What Smith found was that full transition programs, ones which addressed all three students, parents and staff, were most successful in successful transition and contributed to lower drop-out rates. The level of adult support was the key factor and the major difference between part (two audiences) and full (all audiences) transition programs. The programs that addressed only one audience were ineffective. Students attending school with full programs performed better in school as measured by their grades. It was found, however, that students who attended schools with full programs had parents with greater income, higher education levels and occupational status. These schools with full programs reported more resources from parents. Students had a more positive learning experience and better quality relationships with teachers in these schools. These results suggest that the most successful program would be one targeting students, parents and teachers and that this impact would be significant regardless of student demographics, family characteristics and student behavior (Smith, 1997).

This research outlines a full transition program as one that addresses parents, students and teachers. It demonstrates that the level of adult support was the key factor and the major difference between part and full transition programs. To be most beneficial to students, transition programs should address all three parties involved in the process. This support for students requires parent and teacher buy-in, which does not

always exist in large district, particularly urban districts. It is still important however, to note the critical role of a supportive adult in the educational trajectory of students.

Early Warning Indicator Students

With the Early Warning Indicator list mentioned previously, we are easily able to identify which students are in danger of dropping out of high school. Through identifying Early Warning Indicators for dropping out of high school, educators can target high-risk students and provide them with extra support (Heppen & Therriault, 2008). Since these indicators are applicable to middle school students as well, high schools can identify the incoming at-risk ninth grade students using eighth grade data.

One transition program that would address this research is a summer bridge program. Neild, Balfanz & Herzog (2007) argue that students who exhibit early warning signs should be enrolled in a summer program. According to these researchers, an ideal program would be focused on maintaining student academics during the summer months and building community among their new peers and teachers.

Theoretical Background: Stage-Environment Fit

To guide my research, I'll be using the stage-environment fit (SEF) theory. In its most general form, stage-environment fit theory predicts that students will experience declines in motivation and performance if the resources provided to them by their school environment do not align with their developmental needs. Researchers hypothesize that the negative psychological changes that occur during high school are a result of the mismatch between the developmental needs of the adolescents and the resources provided to them by their school environments. This theory emphasizes that to be most

responsive to entering ninth grade students, we must understand the facets of adolescent development and generally, the needs of adolescent learners as a whole.

Adolescent students wish for independence, interpersonal opportunities, peer acceptance, and connection with their teachers. Stage-environment fit theory states that a developmentally responsive educational environment would consider these needs. It is important to note that this is a theory about responding to the needs of adolescents as a group; it is not a theory about meeting the needs of individual students (Ullman, 2014).

Recent stage-environment fit theory research has outlined three major components where schools should ensure they are meeting students' needs, within the interpersonal, instructional and organizational components of education (Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 2009; Ullman, 2013). Researchers claim these ensuring student needs are met within these elements is important to the "quality and character of their education and non-education related development during adolescence (Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 2009, p. 443)."

Since adolescence is a time period of rapid emotional, physical and mental development, this theory emphasizes that to serve this population, an organization must remain fluid and open to change. For example, in the beginning of the ninth grade school year, adolescent students might find that tools such as lockers fit their organizational needs. However, as time goes on, the students might report that the lockers are no longer enough to be helpful. Students might also feel that a social skills class offered to them in the beginning of ninth grade meets their interpersonal needs. As the school year goes on and students mature and develop, they may report needing a different form of

interpersonal or instructional opportunity such as the authority over their own class schedule or less structured or formal interpersonal opportunities.

If the changes in the environment align with a student's changing developmental needs, the outcomes are predicted to be positive. Any misalignment between the two is theorized to cause a decline in motivation and performance. Though there are many structural differences among high schools, Eccles and Midgely assert that a transition to any "developmentally appropriate" high school environment, one which focuses on meeting student needs in interpersonal, instructional and organizational ways, will affect youth, their self-perceptions and their view of their environment in a positive way.

Reasons Behind Selecting Theory:

I chose to apply the stage-environment fit theory to this research because of my experience as a School Counselor in a variety of educational settings (K-8, 6-8 and comprehensive and special admission high schools) and my natural focus on the developmental needs of my students. Prior research demonstrates that the transition to high school can cause stress for students. Additionally, adolescence is a developmental stage of great flux. As a guidance counselor, I believe that the changing developmental level of the student is an important component to consider when assessing the impact of an educational environment. I selected stage-environment fit theory because it mirrored these beliefs.

Stage-Environment Fit theory in Current Research

Stage-environment fit theory has been used in a variety of educational research. Booth & Gerard examined the relationship between school climate and "goodness of fit." Researchers interviewed and surveyed seventh through tenth grade students to better

understand their behaviors, self-reflections and reports of self-efficacy (2014). One important finding in this research was the existence of a “honeymoon” period in the evaluation of stage-environment fit. Researchers found that seventh grade students entered school with a very positive attitude about the new responsibility they had been given including having their own lockers, meeting new peers and being able to walk to their classes without teacher assistance. Student reports reflected a positive fit with their physical environment early in the year. As the year progressed however, students found themselves struggling with teacher and peer relationships and reported a “lack of fit” between the physical and social aspects of their environment and their own needs. As mentioned previously, students’ development during this time period fluctuates, which might be why this study found that students were initially satisfied but later had negative reports (Booth & Gerard, 2004).

In this same study, Booth & Gerard also examined age and gender and determined them to be important variables in the discussion of stage-environment fit. Tenth grade girls reported an increase in self-efficacy, scored higher on school attitude measures, and when compared to boys, had fewer adjustment issues. Boys, however, experienced initial excitement and then frustration. After the seventh grade “honeymoon” period and throughout high school, boys reported increased frustration in their relationships with peers and teachers and a decrease in their attitudes towards school. They struggled with an increase in problematic behavior (Booth & Gerard, 2004). These results confirmed Eccles’ (1991) findings that a “lack of fit” contributes to an increase in behavior problems.

Stage-environment fit theory has also been used to understand more about how

secondary school structures meet students' basic and developmental needs, and help promote developmentally responsive school environments. Ellerbrock & Kiefer examined the transition from middle school to high school (2013) and studied the structured and unstructured portions of students' days. Researchers completed individual interviews with students and shadowed them, collecting observations of class time, lunch and existing transition programming. Middle and High school teachers and principals were interviewed also. They found that for eighth graders, the structured portions of their day promoted a developmentally responsive environment for the students. The structure of their classes included team teaching, block scheduling, homeroom and teacher preparation periods. The unstructured portions of their day, lunch and recess, did not foster a developmentally responsive environment for students. Many students reported being bullied or engaged in negative peer interactions during this free time (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013).

For ninth graders however, the new structured time periods provided to be a mismatch with their needs. These structures included the earlier school start time, the number of varied classes and the increased academic rigor of these classes. Additionally, students reported feeling confused about these changes and longed for the team-teaching exposed to them in middle school. The unstructured periods of their day, lunch, clubs, after-school activities and in-between class times showed to both promote and hinder student transition. Many students reported missing the close nature of their middle school community. Others leaned on the friendships from eighth grade during these unstructured times and used them to help get them through the transition.

These findings stress the importance of examining the school environment when

studying the high school transition and are consistent with Stage-Environment Fit theory; in order for students to experience positive gains, they need to “fit” with their environment. If the environment is not responsive to their developmental needs, they will experience stress and motivational decline (Eccles & Midgely, 1993; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013).

My Stage-Environment Fit Theory Research Contributions

Similar to Ellerbrock & Kiefer, I examined differences in stage-environment fit theory between eighth grade and ninth grade. My approach however, adds to the current research on transition because I included four different school settings. I also analyzed the examination of the interpersonal, instructional and organizational components of the school environment. My study will also add to the existing research by providing more clarity on the difference between the transition experience when a student attends an elementary school eighth grade as compared to a middle school eighth grade. Additionally, the population with which I am working consists of a higher percentage of students in poverty than in earlier stage-environment fit research.

Stage-Environment Fit Theory as it Relates to the Organism Metaphor

Stage-environment fit theory fits into a bigger discussion on organizations as it is similar to Gareth Morgan’s metaphor of organizations as organisms (2006). In Morgan’s description, organisms are living systems that depend on their wider environment to meet their needs. Additionally, these organizations must adapt to grow and survive. Finally, Morgan suggests that organizations operate most efficiently when the needs of their members, which can often be complex, are met.

In this metaphor, organizations go through a continuous cycle of input, internal transformation, output and feedback. Like stage-environment fit theory, Morgan's metaphor of organizations as organisms emphasizes the importance of relationships between the environment and the internal functioning of the system (Morgan, 2006). As emphasized by stage-environment fit theory and Morgan, one thing that is missing from high school policy and programming is the feedback component of assessment, particularly from students.

Conclusion

Extant research on transition shows us that the transition process has negative academic and social/emotional outcomes for many students. It further shows that this process seems to be most challenging between eighth and ninth grade. Stage-environment fit theory research has demonstrated that a student's new environment needs to fit their changing developmental needs in interpersonal, instructional and organizational ways in order for them to be most successful. Developmentally responsive schools will focus on the needs of adolescents as a group, including a desire for independence and autonomy, a need to be accepted by peers, and a need to build relationships with adults who are not their parents.

Current research predicts that students in poor urban school districts have a greater chance of experiencing a mismatch between their developmental needs and the resources provided them by the school environment. Using stage-environment fit theory as a guide, this study was designed to better understand specifically how these students experience the high school transition, to learn more about their interpersonal, instructional and organizational needs as they make this transition and to discover ways

that educational leaders can implement positive changes in programming to increase their success.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

In order to contribute to the scholarly and practical knowledge about the high school transition process for students in an urban school district, I conducted a qualitative study of students' experiences as they make the move from elementary (K-8) and middle school (6-8) programming to a high school setting. This study involved interviewing students in their sending school environment and following them to their receiving school, which was either a comprehensive neighborhood school or a special admission school, using stage-environment fit theory as a framework. In addition to student perspective, this study also incorporates the voices of their teachers from eighth and ninth grade levels.

In this chapter, I will review the research questions that guided my work. Next, I will discuss the recruitment process of students and teachers, outlining which participants completed interviews. I will then discuss the differences between my proposal and my outcome, exploring aspects of the study that did not go as planned. Finally, I will describe how I analyzed this data.

Research Questions

My primary research question is: 'How do students in an urban school district experience the initial transition from eighth to ninth grade and what are the factors that support and/or impede their success?' Research has shown that school transition causes academic, behavioral and motivational decline. Further, students in urban districts are more at risk for failure in transition due to lack of resources. Within this question, I examined the various ways the students' unique experiences within their sending and

receiving schools affected their transition process.

My first two sub-questions are “How do students’ experiences in eighth grade shape their ninth grade year?”, and “In what ways does the sending school attempt to help students prepare for the transition to high school?” Research explains that most students struggle with the eighth to ninth grade transition because there is a mismatch between their developmental needs and the resources provided by the new school environment. They experience a “lack of fit” with their new high school as they adapt to many new faces and structures (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Eccles & Midgely, 1993). Transition research also suggests, however, that a student’s ninth grade experience and their fit with their new environment might be influenced by whether they graduated from a K-8 elementary school or a middle school (Alspaugh, 1998a; Weiss & Baker-Smith, 2010). Since participants were recruited from two different eighth grades in the same district: one in a K-8 and one 6-8, I was able to examine differences between these distinct eighth grade experiences.

My third sub-question is “What are students’ perceptions of their needs as they make the transition to high school and from their perspective, how they are addressed by existing transition programs?” To answer this question, I asked students about their perceived needs before and after their transition. The reason for this follow up design is to determine if their perceived needs changed, or if their perceived needs were met. This offered a very important student viewpoint in analyzing which school services are successful and which ones need to be adjusted, with the goal of providing the most developmentally appropriate high school experience possible. I also reviewed research on adolescent needs and used these as my guide when analyzing the ways in which

schools were able to meet these needs.

Generally, when students arrive in high school, the more easily they assimilate to their environment, the less emotional stress and frustration they will experience. My fourth sub-question is “Which factors promote the establishment of a connection to school? Which factors hinder this connection? Which factors mitigate the stress a student might feel in their new environment?” These questions helped us understand more specifically which areas ninth grade students found themselves struggling to fit in, and where school leaders can intervene.

Teacher support has been shown to be influential in a student’s transition experience. My fifth sub-question is “How do eighth grade teachers and school staff report involvement in preparing students for ninth grade? How do ninth grade teachers and school staff report support of students during their ninth grade year? How do these relationships differ across the four different types of schools?” Within this question, I examined how teachers understand their roles in supporting their students during the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade, and specifically identify if and how this involvement helps to meet the developmental needs of students. I also inquired about student perception of teacher support during both eighth and ninth grade and whether or not students believe this impacts their experience. Teachers have insight on school climate and programming that might not be visible to an outsider. Teacher interviews were designed to obtain answers to all of these questions.

Rationale

This research was designed to better understand how students experience the transition process, with the over-arching goal of improving transition programming and

decreasing the high school drop-out rate. I have chosen a qualitative design to help better understand the feelings and values that might influence the behavior of the students as they advance to this critical grade level. The qualitative design will allow us to get a good sense of each student's individual transition experience. In addition, the qualitative nature of the study will be helpful as we generate ideas to assist in the creation and improvement of transition programming in elementary and middle years and beyond.

Data Collection

Examining my primary and sub-research questions involved collecting data at four schools in the same urban school district: a K-8 elementary school, 6-8 middle school, a special admission high school and a comprehensive high school. In this section, I will give an overview of the four schools including their general school structure and enrollment. This will also include an introduction to the Sommerville High School acceptance process. I will explain how I recruited students and teachers for this research and clearly detail their sending and receiving schools. Finally, I will briefly discuss the pieces of the original design that in actual study execution, did not go as planned.

The Schools Involved

My preliminary discussion on the schools involved in this research is based both on my experience as a school counselor in Sommerville and my research on the schools. The qualitative information in the brief description of the schools, including knowledge of the structural changes, comes from my own experience as a counselor in the district. While in this role, I had become familiar with many schools. Specifically, I was the school counselor for both sending schools so some of my background knowledge of the schools comes from my own experience there. While I had no connection to the

receiving schools, I was familiar with them and their reputation in the community. Once I selected my schools, I needed to eliminate any judgement associated with prior experience or knowledge and focus on what the students and staff were saying about their experience.

Sending Schools – Eighth Grade

In the Spring of 2015, I collected data at Leemer Middle School* and McHeartly Elementary School*. Both schools enroll a majority of economically disadvantaged students (83.7% and 83.6% respectively) and a majority of African American students (96% and 93.9% respectively). I chose these schools for several reasons. As seen in the statistics above, the schools are comparable in regards to student and family demographics. However, there are some differences in the middle school experience of the two sets of students. The schools are two miles away from each other yet do not mirror each other in the areas of school climate or culture. This contrast will be explained in detail below. In addition, one school exists as an elementary school and one as a pure middle school. Some transition research has suggested that students in K-8 have an easier time adjusting to high school compared to students who attend a 6-8 school setting. The comparison of these two schools assisted us in examining if students do indeed have a different eighth grade experience. Other important differences between the two schools are outlined below.

Leemer is a neighborhood middle school whose enrollment has increased over the past years due to budget cuts within the school district. In the last two years, the Sommerville School District has altered the school structure for Leemer. For example, the year of this research was the first year that Leemer enrolled a sixth grade class. The

school experiences high teacher turnover each year and does not show evidence of strong parent-teacher collaboration. Many students do not perform well academically as evidenced by their report cards and their well-below-average scoring on state testing, the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA).

McHeartly is a neighborhood school whose enrollment has increased due to budget cuts occurring within the school district. In the past two years, the Sommerville School District has altered the school structure of McHeartly. This is the first school year that McHeartly has an eighth grade class applying to high schools. McHeartly has a strong teaching staff with many teachers who have been working there for years. While the poverty rates for both Leemer and McHeartly are similar (83.7% and 83.6% respectively), McHeartly's parent population has been described as a "working population" by some of the teachers. The school also boasts an extremely strong Home and School Association, which provides an outlet for parents to verbalize any education related concerns. Parents and teachers often work closely together.

Receiving Schools – Ninth Grade

In the Fall of 2015, I followed the students that I previously interviewed from eighth grade to one of two schools: *Parkesburg or *Monroe High School. I selected these two high schools for my research because of their presence in the same school district, their proximity to each other, and the fact that generally, large groups of students from Leemer and McHeartly end up at one of these two schools. I also chose these two sites because one is a comprehensive high school and the other is a special admission school with certain academic and behavioral requirements to be admitted.

Parkesburg is a citywide admission high school located in the same building as

Leemer Middle School. The two schools share an entry way and a cafeteria, which has increased the connection between them. While Parkesburg receives many applications from Leemer students, the school retains their special requirements for admission including all A's and B's on middle school report cards, exemplary attendance and behavior, and Advanced or Proficient scores on the PSSA; requirements which many Leemer students do not meet. During the 2013-2014 school year, Parkesburg students were mostly African-American students (95.4%), with representation from White (.4%), Asian (.7%), Latino 2.5% and Other (.4%) populations as well. These are similar demographics to the neighborhood high school, Monroe. The percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged (83.5%), however, is lower than at other schools. In addition, only 8.4% of Parkesburg students are categorized as students with disabilities, a lower statistic than is seen at most schools, neighborhood high schools especially. Almost 5% of students are categorized as 'Mentally Gifted' students. On average, Parkesburg rosters approximately 285 students per year.

Monroe is a comprehensive high school and the neighborhood school into which Leemer and McHeartly students filter into if they are unable to find placement in special admission or citywide schools. During the 2013-2014 school year, Monroe enrolled a majority of African-American students (97.1%). Most of these students qualify as being economically disadvantaged (90.2%), which is much higher than the number for Parkesburg. More than one-fourth of Monroe students are categorized as students with disabilities (32%), also much higher than Parkesburg. On average, Monroe rosters 1109 students per year, four times the number of students as enrolled at Parkesburg.

The High School Application Process in Somerville

In order to fully understand this research, it is important to have a clear picture of the high school application process. In the city where this research was completed, as with other large urban districts, there is a school choice process. There are eighteen special admission high schools and eight citywide admission high schools to which all eighth grade students across the district are invited to apply. These schools often have rigorous acceptance requirements in the areas of academics, state testing scores, attendance and discipline records.

The application process begins in September of their eighth grade year when students and their parents are invited to complete an online application for high school. The application invites students to pick the five schools they wish to apply to from a drop down menu. This application can be accessed by the student, his or her parent, and the school counselor. The application process is open for about seven weeks. When it closes, the high schools are sent the seventh grade profiles for all of their applicants. Most special admission schools require supplemental materials such as essays and interviews. These supplemental materials are due a few weeks later, and are delivered to the school district building by the counselor.

The students are notified of their acceptances online, several months later. If they were accepted into more than one school, they are then given two weeks to decide which one they wish to enroll in for the fall. Students who were not accepted into any schools are automatically enrolled in their neighborhood school for the fall. Sometimes, students are put onto a waiting list for a certain school and then offered acceptance after the first round of student enrollment.

Most times, the counselor is the point person for these applications and works with the students and their parents to decide which high school would be a good fit. While teachers do not have access to the online system, many help by ensuring that students are aware of their high school options by promoting the high school fairs and open houses. I have worked on both the eighth grade end as well as the high school end, so I have experience in both sending and receiving the applications.

Student Recruitment - Spring 2015

In this section, I will discuss my student recruitment during the Spring of 2015. At this time, I recruited eighth grade students who had decided to attend Monroe or Parkesburg high schools. Since I was the school counselor for both sending schools, it was important to help students and parents understand that this research was being completed outside of my official school district role. In my recruitment process, I clearly explained that all participation was voluntary and would have no effect on my relationship with either the student or parent. This critical information was included in an introductory letter to be sent home with the Parental Permission form, which parents were required to sign before their student was able to participate. The students too, were asked to confirm their willingness to be part of the research.

In recruiting participants, my goal was to recruit 10 students from both McHeartly Elementary School and Leemer Middle School who were enrolling in Parkesburg or Monroe High School the following year, for a total of 20 participants. As the counselor at both schools, I had developed a relationship with many parents, which helped my recruitment process at the eighth grade level. It was difficult however, to recruit ten students who were certain about their high school selection. When I recruited the

students in the spring, I had access to their high school selection data. I was aware of which students had the option and made the choice of the special admission school, Parkesburg. I was also aware of which students were denied admission to all of their choices, and their only public school choice was to attend the neighborhood school, Monroe. Overall, I recruited 14 students across the two sending schools.

McHeartly Student Recruitment – Spring 2015

At McHeartly, the K-8 school, I was able to recruit six students total (See Table 1). Four of these students had chosen Parkesburg as their high school. Two of these students were not accepted into any of the schools they applied to and at the time, their only public school choice was the neighborhood school, Monroe High School. There were many other students who did not get into the schools they selected, but their parents were clear that they did not want their child to attend the neighborhood school so they did not appear to be a candidate for this research. Besides the two students that I recruited, there were no other students who were scheduled to attend Monroe. Most of the other eighth graders from McHeartly were accepted into other special admission schools, but not Parkesburg, so they were not candidates either.

Leemer Student Recruitment – Spring 2015

At Leemer Middle School, a sixth through eighth grade setting, I had access to the same information from my students' high school applications, acceptances and rejections. I was able to recruit eight students total (See Table 2). Six of these students were accepted to Parkesburg and five decided to attend there. Two of the students were not accepted into any of the schools they applied to and their only public school choice at the time was the comprehensive high school, Monroe. There were many other students

who had not been accepted into a special admission school, but whose parents shared that they were not going to attend Monroe either. I was unable to recruit these students because of the uncertainty of where they would be enrolled in the fall.

Table 1. McHeartly Students- Receiving High Schools	
Student Name	Receiving High School
Steven	Parkesburg
Mason	Parkesburg
China	Parkesburg
Thomas	Parkesburg
E.J.	Monroe
Jane	Monroe

Table 2. Leemer Students - Receiving High Schools	
Student Name	Receiving High School
David	Parkesburg
Carmen	Parkesburg
Samir	Parkesburg
Tymir	Monroe
Chante	Parkesburg
Daquan	Parkesburg
Abdullah	Parkesburg
Sam	Monroe

Spring Interviews

The eighth grade participants were interviewed in early May to capture their immediate feelings on the transition to high school (See E.S./M.S. Interview Questions, Appendix A). All interviews were semi-structured to allow room for individual students to explore related topics that feel important to them. To ensure that students did not feel pressure to answer my questions in a certain way, I let them know up front that there were no right or wrong answers. I also encouraged them to call me “Rebecca.” Each interview was conducted in-person with each individual student, and with permission of both parent and student, was recorded for transcription. Once participating students completed their interviews, they received a gift card for their time. I also collected data on their attendance, academics and behavior.

Student Follow Up - Fall 2015

In the Fall of 2015, I followed all of the eighth graders to either Parkesburg or Monroe High School. In the beginning of the school year, I contacted the school counselor at both schools to determine whether the students ended up at the school that they were initially scheduled to. The counselors let me know which students were enrolled in their schools and helped me facilitate the fall interviews. In the Fall of 2015, nine students across the two high schools completed follow up interviews.

McHeartly Student Follow Up – Fall 2015

The four McHeartly students who were enrolled in Parkesburg in the spring ended up attending there in the fall. The two McHeartly students who had been enrolled in Monroe High School in the spring did not attend there in the fall. One of these students enrolled in a local charter school and the other student was able to gain admission to

another special admission high school in August 2015, right before school started (See Table 3).

Leemer Student Follow Up – Fall 2015

Similarly, there were several Leemer students who did not end up attending the school they were enrolled in during the spring (See Table 4). One of the students who was scheduled to attend Parkesburg chose to attend a local charter school. One of the students who was scheduled to attend Monroe moved to a different state. Four of the Leemer students attended Parkesburg and one of the students attended Monroe. Finally, one of the students who attended Parkesburg decided not to complete a fall interview with me.

Table 3. McHeartly Students - Fall 2015		
Student Name	Receiving High School	Actual Outcome
Steven	Parkesburg	Attended
Mason	Parkesburg	Attended
China	Parkesburg	Attended
Thomas	Parkesburg	Attended
E.J.	Monroe	Did Not Attend – Charter
Jane	Monroe	Did Not Attend – Other S.A.

Table 4. Leemer Students - Fall 2015		
Student Name	Receiving High School	Actual Outcome
Carter	Parkesburg	Attended
Sandy	Parkesburg	Attended
Jaxon	Parkesburg	Did Not Attend – Charter
Elijah	Monroe	Did Not Attend – Moved
Lisa	Parkesburg	Attended
John	Parkesburg	Attended but refused participation – Fall 2015
David	Parkesburg	Attended
Joseph	Monroe	Attended

Fall Interviews

The ninth grade participants were interviewed in November to capture their immediate feelings on the transition to high school (See H.S. Interview Questions, Appendix B). All interviews were semi-structured to allow room for individual students to explore related topics that feel important to them. Similar to the first round of interviews, each interview was conducted in-person with each individual student, and with permission of both parent and student, was recorded for transcription. Once participating students completed their interviews, they received a gift card for their time. I also collected data on their attendance, academics and behavior.

Teacher Recruitment

Since student-teacher relationships have proven to be so influential in how connected a student feels to their school, and to a student's sense of self-efficacy, I

individually interviewed members of the school staff at all four schools. The purpose of these interviews was to collect data on teacher's perceptions of school climate and community, as well as to elaborate on what role, if any, they played in the high school transition process. These interviews were approximately an hour long, in-depth and semi-structured. Through these interviews (See E.S./M.S. Interview Questions, Appendix C and H.S. Interview Questions, Appendix D), teachers were able to offer information about the educational environment that are not easily observed. I asked teachers to report on their relationships with the students, which of their students' needs felt pressing, and how they attempted to meet these adolescent needs. With their permission, I recorded and transcribed the interviews.

Eighth Grade Teacher Recruitment – Spring 2015

My initial goal was to recruit ten eighth grade teacher participants for this research: five from the elementary school and five from the middle school. The teachers from McHeartly were willing to participate in this research and I was successful in recruiting five of them. At Leemer, however, recruiting teachers was more of a struggle. I reached out to five teachers and was able to recruit two of them to participate. At McHeartly, I recruited the Special Education Liaison, the Dean of Students, two 8th grade teachers and the substitute school counselor. At Leemer, I recruited the Special Education Liason and the computer teacher who was very engaged in the high school application process.

High School Teacher Recruitment - Fall 2015

I aimed to recruit ten high school teacher participants for this research: five from the special admission high school and five from the neighborhood school. However, at

the high school level, the teachers were very difficult to recruit. I reached out to five teachers at both sites but was only able to recruit one from each school. A few teachers agreed to participate, but when it came time to schedule an interview, they were not available. More than one teacher told me that they did not have the time to participate. It is possible that many of them did not agree to participate because unlike the eighth grade teachers, they did not have a relationship with me.

Proposal versus Outcome

Not everything in my proposal went as planned. Initially, I had proposed to recruit 20 students for this research. I aimed for a higher number of recruited students to account for attrition. I was able to initially recruit 14 students but for a variety of reasons, only nine of them enrolled for the fall interviews. Additionally, I thought it would be much easier to recruit teachers from the schools. At the high school level, I had a surprisingly difficult time recruiting teachers. Many of them reported that they were too busy. My initial proposal also included observations and following one student in each of the schools. Due to time constraints, however, I was unable to complete the observations and decided to focus solely on student and teacher interviews. Despite these outcomes, I was able to collect a significant amount of data. I will describe the data analysis process below.

Data Analysis

In this section, I will discuss my data analysis process. As Hesse-Biber points out in her discussion of qualitative data analysis, it is “an iterative process of data collection along with data analysis (2011, pp. 123).” Using Grounded Theory analysis, my data collection was a fluid process with constant evaluation of what is happening at my sites.

The student and teacher interviews were used to further my understanding of the problem of high school transition, and how stage-environment fit theory affects a student's transition experience. After completing the student and teacher interviews in the spring, I transcribed all of the recorded interviews and then used the Dedoose coding system. The coding software helped me identify categories of emerging data based on themes of student needs during the transition, types of supports, the physical, social, academic and emotional fit they perceive with their current environment, and teacher perceptions of student support at the current academic level. Data from the second round of interviews was analyzed similarly and underwent axial coding (See Student Codes and Teacher Codes, Appendix E-H). As substantial categories were expanded and insignificant categories were collapsed, I completed memos to document my observations and thoughts, and to help build theory. As the study progressed, through the constant comparative method, I linked the coding categories together and tested the theories I built in my memos.

Positionality

Throughout this research, it was important to exercise reflexivity and reflect on my own positionality as the students' school counselor and as a school district staff member. As mentioned above, I had worked at both McHeartly and Leemer for half of a school year before I began my research. For most of the school year, I assisted eighth grade students in the high school application process. In some cases, I had experience teaching these students counseling lessons. I acted as colleagues with teachers in both McHeartly and Leemer for the school year. Having a familiarity with the students and teachers was helpful since I used semi-structured, in-depth interviewing. In the

interviews, I was keenly aware of my role as school counselor and how this affected my questioning and observations, what data I considered to be important and what I did not notice right away.

Conclusion

My final data for this research comes from fourteen eighth grade student interviews and nine follow up interviews with these same students after they advanced to ninth grade. My data also includes a total of nine teacher interviews, five from the K-8 and two from 6-8 as well as one from each of the high schools. Finally, I collected academic, behavioral and attendance records for all of the students involved in this research. Using this data, I was able to answer my primary research question of, 'How do students in an urban school district experience the initial transition from eighth to ninth grade and what are the factors that support and/or impede their success?'. In the chapters that follow, I will discuss the the findings that emerged as a result of this data collection and analysis.

CHAPTER 4

EIGHTH GRADE

In this qualitative study, I examined the high school transition process for a number of students in a large, urban school district. My data collection began when the students were in eighth grade. Interviewing students and teachers from McHeartly, a K-8 setting, and Leemer, a 6-8 grade setting, allowed for comparison of the student experience between the two schools. In this chapter, I will explain the experiences of the students in eighth grade, as they prepared to move to high school. This explanation will include a description of the culture of both sending schools and the different ways that these schools managed the high school transition. I will then analyze both settings using the three concepts of stage-environment fit theory. It will be clear from my data that the McHeartly community was more unified. This unification met the students' interpersonal, organizational and instructional needs, which led to a more supportive and successful high school transition process. In contrast, the Leemer school climate was much more challenging and the students were not able to be supported in the same way. Leemer did not meet the interpersonal, organizational or instructional needs of their students, which negatively impacted their high school admissions process and outcome.

The Two Schools: McHeartly versus Leemer

To answer my primary research question of "How do students in an urban school district experience the transition from eighth to ninth grade and what are the factors that support and/or impede their success?" I begin by examining the culture of each of the sending schools, McHeartly and Leemer. Both schools are considered neighborhood schools, which means they serve a specific population based on locale. These schools

serve students in neighboring communities, yet the high school acceptance outcomes for students who graduate from the two programs significantly differ because of the different ways the schools met or did not meet student needs. My data shows that a higher percentage of McHeartly students were accepted into special admission schools. These outcomes will be discussed throughout this chapter.

From my experience as a counselor in the district, I know that both sending schools experienced some changes in the years before this research was completed. During that time, McHeartly, which was a K-5 school at the time, was in danger of closing. The district wanted McHeartly to merge with Leemer, which at the time only enrolled seventh and eighth grade. The neighborhood families fought back against the district and after much disagreement, the district agreed to keep McHeartly open with the understanding that it would grow into a K-8 school. The year this research was collected was the first year that McHeartly enrolled an eighth grade class. Leemer, too, experienced significant changes when it was decided that McHeartly would remain open. It was determined that Leemer would evolve into a true middle school, including sixth grade. The year that this research was collected was the first year for Leemer to enroll sixth graders in their school. Despite serving a similar population, McHeartly and Leemer are very different communities.

The McHeartly Experience

My data on McHeartly is based on six student interviews and five teacher interviews. In the sections that follow, I will give an overview of McHeartly's school culture and the types of relationships that exist in their building. Later in the chapter, I will describe the transition programming offered at McHeartly and the ways in which the

school prepared their students for high school. I will conclude with an analysis on how McHeartly met the needs of their adolescent students.

School Culture

The culture at McHeartly is a safe and respectful one. Most of the students are enrolled in the school from Kindergarten through eighth grade, and they develop close relationships with those around them. The teaching staff too, has longevity and those who do leave the school often only do so for retirement purposes. When asked about the environment, one of the long-time staff members, Ms. Moore, proudly remarked:

“Well, like a family, eat lunch with students. We-, we let them know, we-, we reveal ourselves to them, not just as teachers, but as human beings. Uh, I think that we have tried to foster a caring among the students as well (Ms. Moore, personal interview, April 2015).”

Both the teachers and students in my research report that the culture is one of respect empathy, even student-to-student. Ms. Smith, the Dean of Students shared her feelings on the caring school environment and expressed that she hopes students take these important personality characteristics with them to their new school environment.

“Well, we’re a small school so I think that we’re more like a family. I think that they will take some of those caring personal traits with them. They’ve been with these kids for so long and where kids in other schools may tease a student for being different, I’ve seen our students actually stand up for one another in our school. So I think that the fact that we’re such a small community here, I think that the kids will be able to take that with them when they go to high school; they’ll have empathy and sympathy about other people and the things they’re going through. I notice that our kids are very sympathetic to each other even when they’re having difficulties or when there’s a conflict; there are many students that will come over and help when a student is down, as opposed to trying to kick them when they’re down. They really tend to help each other and I think that’s based off our small community. So I think that’s something they can take with them that’s a plus (Ms. Smith, personal interview, April 2015).”

Ms. Smith mentions the word “family.” This theme of family was common in most of my interviews. She also emphasizes the small size of the school and the fact that generally, the students have been enrolled together for many years. Ms. Smith suggests that this small school size and the K-8 structure positively influenced the relationships within the community.

The students also report feeling comfortable in their educational environment. When I interviewed them about the culture of their school, it was clear this was a safe space for them. Generally, the students in this research did not report experiencing social conflict, but student unity. Steven, one of the students, described the school culture:

“Everyone here is like, you know, the kids are friendly, we’re not really, like, we have some behavioral problems, but we know we know how to, like, sort that out. Um, and everyone here is, they’ve been here for a while. They, most kids, well most of the kids here, you know, they’ve been here for numerous amounts of years. Some of the same kids have actually come back every year. And each year like they’re all, they’ve all become friends. You know, relationships, good relationships, have been built here (Steven, personal interview, April 2015).”

Steven reiterates Ms. Smith’s observation that the students have been in school together for many years. He notes that while strong relationships have been built between the McHeartly students, they are not perfect. He admits to the students having some “behavioral problems” but an important part of his statement is that the students are given the tools from the adults in their lives to sort these issues out on their own.

The family feeling of McHeartly, while comforting as an enrolled student, can be intimidating to leave. The community is so intimate that when I asked one of the students what she will miss when she leaves, she began to cry.

- Interviewer: What do you think you're going to miss most about this school?
 Participant: My friends, because I've known some of them since the 2nd grade. Sorry (begins to cry).
 Interviewer: It's okay. It's pretty emotional
 Participant: I didn't think I was 'gonna cry
 Interviewer: It's a really, it's a really emotional time. But you're handling it well. Do you think you'll keep in touch with a lot of your friends?
 Participant: Yes, because they live close to me, so that'll be okay
 Interviewer: Yeah, if they're close to you that sounds like it might be um a good way to keep in touch. That's the beauty of the neighborhood school. You go to school with the kids in the neighborhood. Were you crying just there because of leaving your friends? Or was it a different reason?
 Participant: Yeah, I think it might have been that. I don't even know (Jane, personal interview, April 2015).

While she could not identify the exact reason for her tears, Jane knew that she did not want to leave this experience, this safe space, where she has spent the last nine years of her life. Jane also reported being worried about her friends since the graduation to high school meant she would not see them every day. The community feeling inside of McHeartly was another theme consistent in all of my interviews.

While teachers and students on the inside of McHeartly spoke about the community feel of the building, they also reported that some of the surrounding community does not feel the same way. Steven spoke of this disconnect between the outside community's perception of the school and his own experience as a McHeartly student: "People say like, people don't, some people in the neighborhood don't really like McHeartly that much. They say it's a bad school. They don't really know what goes on inside of the school. They don't know us. They don't really know McHeartly. McHeartly is a very good school. It's taught me, it's done me wonders (Steven, personal interview, April 2015)." Steven emphasized the positive effect the school had on him

and suggested that it is impossible for outsiders to understand the strength of this community.

Several years prior to this research, the district wanted to close the building and merge the current students with Leemer. The students and teachers had to fight hard to keep this school open. This involved multiple meetings to prove why it was important to the community members and the district to keep this school open. Steven reflected on the process:

Participant: Well, basically it was when we were in sixth grade. Basically, they tried to close us down. They were closing down schools in Sommerville. Ours was on the list. But they, but people, at first we were like, we were devastated, like we didn't know how to react to it. Cause we'd been here so long, we didn't know. But lots of people, we thought, we actually thought the school was going, they were going to close down the school. But lots of people, you know, they came out, they supported McHeartly. They came to meetings, and there were even students from the school that wrote speeches to the superintendent, to present to the superintendent. And you know they're fighting and fighting. Not only do we, are we still open, but we go to K-8 now (Steven, personal interview, April 2015).

When the district threatened to close the school, the McHeartly community members united to keep their school open. Steven utilizes the word “devastated” to explain how the school community felt about the potential of McHeartly closing and he emphasizes the work that went into proving that the school deserved to stay open. From his report, students, teachers and parents united together in this effort.

Student Perception of Teacher-Student Relationships

Overall, the students at McHeartly expressed truly positive relationships with their teachers. When I asked what the students would miss most about the school, E.J.

replied, “I’m ‘gonna miss ... like how much teachers like, like um, never gave up on me ‘cause I know in high school, if you don’t do the work they just not ‘gonna care. They just ‘gonna, like fail you. So I have to like, stay on myself (E.J., personal interview, April 2015).” Generally, the McHeartly students reported feeling that the teachers were helping them and guiding them. One of their big concerns is not having this same guidance in high school.

It is important to the students that the teachers care for them as family would. In E.J.’s interview, I asked him what the McHeartly teachers do to ensure the students have a good relationship with them, and he replied, “Um ... Like treat me like I was family. Like treat me like I was them and I would treat them like they was my family (E.J., personal interview, April 2015).” The students are citing a tight and personal connection with their teachers, and are hoping to develop these types of relationships with teachers in high school. It is clear from the data that the students respect their teachers and perceive them as strong mentors.

While students had positive things to say about many of the teachers, there were two teachers that stood out during the student interviews: Mr. Johns and Ms. Smith. Mr. Johns and Ms. Smith are both teachers who had worked at the school for at least five years. Mr. Johns was the eighth grade homeroom teacher and English teacher and Ms. Smith was the Dean of Students. Both worked closely with the eighth grade students.

Many students reported that Mr. Johns was their favorite teacher. Their connection with Mr. Johns was genuine, and involved him sharing joyful moments in their education, but also him challenging them. There was a mutual respect between the

two and the students knew that he cared about them and their success. When asked about their relationship with Mr. Johns, the students replied:

“Mr. Johns has prepared us for high school, and during the high school application process he’s actually there for us. He helped us get our recommendation letters and stuff like that, and he has helped us, for some of us that were like, that didn’t understand the high school process, he explained it to us and he helped us like pick high schools. You know for some of us that didn’t know what high school they wanted to go to, he gave suggestions, you know, he gave us newspapers, he gave us booklets about the top high schools. Stuff like that has just helped us so much (Thomas, personal interview, April 2015).”

While it was not his responsibility, Mr. Johns took on a critical role with helping the students prepare for the high school application process. The fact that he was putting a significant amount of extra work in made students feel that he cared for them. He was also available for students if they just needed someone to listen to. Thomas, echoed these thoughts:

- Interviewer: What does Mr. Johns do that makes it easy for you to have a relationship with him?
- Participant: Um, well, he’s funny, he like jokes and stuff. And then him, he’s a friendly person and he’s somebody that I can talk to. He’s kinda like the father figure in my life and we associate really good, like if I come in and I might be mad or sad about something, he’ll talk to me and ask what’s wrong and he’s somebody that I can talk to so I’ll tell him what’s wrong (Thomas, personal interview, April 2015).

Here, we see the theme of family emerging again in the interviews. Thomas compared Mr. Johns to family, calling him a “father figure,” and attributed this connection to Mr. Johns’ awareness and concern for Thomas’ feelings. The students feel comfortable talking to Mr. Johns, about topics outside of school work and report feeling connected with him because he listens to them.

The closeness and the respect that that students felt for Mr. Johns was mutual. Mr. Johns reported he was very close to this eighth grade class since he worked with them for a few years. He explained how they celebrated his birthday that year. Mr. Johns recalled:

“I can actually send you the card they made me for my birthday, it was really beautiful. Just a lot of “I love you Mr. Johns, you’ve been a wonderful role model” I don’t know about that sometimes, but I know they know that I’ve worked my a** of for them. Um, and I know they appreciate that, most of them. Yes, it is a family atmosphere. Smith with his little jock self, uh, gave me this card with snoopy and Woodstock. Look (shows picture of card). I mean, and just writes #father, so yes they look at me like a father figure (Mr. Johns, interview, April 2015).”

Mr. Johns recognizes that his students see him as a father figure, which is a big role to play. He discusses the card that students gave to him on his birthday, and emphasizes that the students do see him as a role model. This same teacher warned that there are boundaries that he needs to be aware of, and that while some students see him as a father figure, at the end of the day, he is only their teacher. When discussing how involved he was in sharing the results of the high school application process, he remembered worrying:

“I was calling kids and I found myself almost feeling like boundaries had been crossed, like I went too far, like too much. I ain’t their daddy, I have to remember at times. But I feel, I love them (Mr. Johns, interview, April 2015).”

Mr. Johns had no direct responsibility to the students in regards to their acceptance into high school, but he took on this role because he cared about them. He did admit to feeling like boundaries had been crossed when he was calling homes to share the news of

which schools the students were accepted to. While teacher and parent are two different roles, from Mr. Johns' report, it seemed that those roles had meshed together.

In addition to reporting a strong relationship with Mr. Johns, the students were also close with the Dean of Students, Ms. Smith. They reported feeling that she would steer them in the right direction, and if they happened to be going down the wrong path, she would be understanding, but also firm. When asked about how they were able to have a strong relationship with these teachers, one of the students stated: "Um, Ms. Smith, she like tells me that, if I'm about to get in trouble, she'll tell me that I need to stop or something. And, if I need anything, if I have a problem, I can go to Ms. Smith (Thomas, personal interview, April 2015)." The teachers who worked hardest for the students were the same teachers that students felt an important connection to. The students were aware and appreciative of the work that these teachers put into helping them succeed, and they reported working harder for them in class.

There were a few teachers that students did not get along with as well and in each of these examples, the reason that students felt a negative relationship with these teachers was directly related to a lack of respect and fairness in the classroom. E.J. commented, "But if I come to a school and a teacher is like, disrespecting me, I'm not going to be disrespectful to them but if they like push me, I'm probably going to snap or do or say something I'm going to regret or something like that (E.J., interview, April 2015)." Another student commented on one of his core teachers, explaining his feeling that she does not really teach them:

Participant: Ms. James, I don't know, we don't do work in her class. She's just like I don't know. She just puts work down and then we do it. She doesn't teach us anything.

- Interviewer: So it's kind of like, hands off?
Participant: Yes.
Interviewer: And how does that make you feel about her?
Participant: I feel like she's just getting over (Mason, personal interview, April 2015)

Mason talks about his teacher “just getting over” when she does not teach them. This suggests that he is looking for teachers to have a more active approach in the classroom.

I describe both the positive and negative reports of student-teacher relationship to illustrate that the students have interpersonal needs to feel cared for and respected, and that this display of care and respect are the foundation of the student-teacher relationship. Students also have instructional needs that include wanting teachers to help them understand the material, and pushing them to engage when they are feeling unmotivated. It is clear that the relationship between the student and teacher is important in terms of student outcome. The students feel that they are aware of a teacher's motivations and efforts and they argue that the work a teacher puts out in the classroom is related to the work a student puts into the classroom. With mostly positive relationships reported with their teachers, it was probable that McHeartly students would experience a more positive transition outcome.

Eighth Grade Experience

McHeartly students generally had positive things to say about their eighth grade experience. They enjoyed the time they spent with friends and were challenged by the work they were assigned in class. Two eighth grade students reported on their year below:

“Honestly, this year has been pretty good. It's been amazing. Um, you know I got a chance to hang, to see all my old friends. I still kept all my old teachers, which was actually a plus because you know, I've been with

them for a while, like they're really good teachers. So being with them again, again they know me so... You know, being with them is kind of, made it a little smoother and easier (Steven, personal interview, April 2015)."

"Well, it's been fun! and I have learned a lot too, um, I like 8th grade. I'm gonna miss the people when I leave, and um it's just been like a kinda great time. It's better than 7th grade because in 8th grade you kinda feel like you know what you're doing. Like in 7th grade it was kinda like stressful because the work that we do now, Mr. Johns says is on a 10th and 11th grade level and sometimes 9th. And in 7th grade it's on 9th and 10th grade level so it's kinda harder to do. But in 8th grade you know you really understand what you're doing (Thomas, personal interview, April 2015)."

Steven and Thomas reported that while eighth grade was enjoyable, it was also academically challenging. Their teachers attempted to deliver a rigorous curriculum because they were aware of the academic differences that high school would bring. Students also reported feeling more mature, and understanding more clearly the importance of their academic performance.

Participant: Well like you said, we're adolescents, so we're more, way more mature than we were before. We understand, we know how to have fun times, we know how to get serious at time. And we don't really, this year we understand, like high school, graduation; we don't really play around with it. We knew that this was, in regards to high school applications, we know this was our shot to try to get into a good school. So, you know, many of us try to get good grades, the best we could this year.

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm.

Participant: And like I said, we are more mature now. So we don't really play around with things like this. So going into high school, we understand the seriousness of things and we understand how we will have to work harder going through the years (Thomas, personal interview, April 2015).

Due to their increased focus on their future, one of the greatest challenges reported in eighth grade was not the advanced curriculum but the high school application

process. Part of this was due to the fact that the process is laborious, if done correctly. The other reason this felt difficult was likely because the students knew they were leaving McHeartly.

Parent-Teacher Relationship

Many of the McHeartly teachers in my research reported an active parent population at their school. Overall, the teachers reported that they felt the parents regarded education and the high school application process seriously. When asked what role the parents play in the transition process, Ms. Smith, the Dean of Students replied:

“They were huge. I think parents in general play a role and they decide on how the role is played. Parents decide. If you’re an active parent, you’re going to be in there and it will show that you are an active participant in those kids lives because of the way the kids behave and the way their report cards look, their homework, etc. Part of this high school transition those parents were very vital because I think that they were necessary to help the kids pick out what high schools were appropriate. We had a few that were not as active as we would like them to be and that’s when our counselor stepped up and was calling homes and trying to talk to parents to get some finalized details on the high school transition. Our students for the most part think our parents were very helpful and it is necessary to have that partnership with school (Ms. Smith, personal interview, April 2015).”

Teachers reported that they communicated consistently with parents to ensure the students were meeting deadlines, being given the most opportunities, and making the best decision on where to enroll for high school. Above all, they recognized that parent input was crucial during the high school application process.

The students in my research also felt that their parents were supportive of them and they agreed that this support had been a huge motivator through their schooling. When asked what role his parents played in the high school application process, one of the students remarked:

“And now I understand that I really need to buckle down, work hard, and my parents have actually helped me with that. They talked to me about high schools I want to go to, they give me little pep talks. They have, they’ve really helped me through high school process. Everything in my head, when I have a decision that I want to make that I’m not sure about, I talk to them about it and they have helped me, they help me sort it out (Steven, personal interview, April 2015).”

Other students reported that they felt supported by their parents, and that their parents were highly involved in their high school decision making, even if they were ultimately letting the students decide where they would enroll.

The Leemer Experience

My data on Leemer Middle School is based on eight student interviews and two teacher interviews. In the sections that follow, I will give an overview of Leemer’s school culture and the types of relationships that exist in their building. Later in the chapter, I will also describe the transition programming offered at Leemer and the ways in which the school prepared their students for high school.

School Culture

In this section, I will describe the school culture of Leemer, which was impacted by many factors. With a larger student body, the culture of Leemer was different than that of McHeartly. There were more students per grade, but also per class, making it more difficult to create a sense of community. Additionally, since the school enrolls sixth through eighth graders, this means that students had just recently experienced a transition from another school, again affecting community development and student performance.

The teachers in my research reported that their students were not taking their academic work seriously. In my interview with Ms. Sanders, the computer teacher who assisted with the high school application process, we discussed the student mindset:

Interviewer: Have the students talked about what they're worried about or excited about for high school?

Participant: No, only a few. Some of them have actually gone and toured the school or did the shadow day and some just don't care. They aren't caring what's going to happen in high school. They don't care what's going on now to make sure they make it to high school, and I think some of them won't get it until they step foot in high school (Ms. Sanders, interview, April 2015)."

In our interview, Ms. Sanders reported going to great lengths to help students prepare for their future, but receiving little validation from them. She makes it clear that not all students are acting this way, that some are completing shadow days. For the most part, however, Ms. Sanders gives the impression that the students are not focused on school work.

It is possible that part of the reason for this was the high rates of staff absenteeism. For example, the children were without a certified math teacher for three months. Because of her scheduling flexibility, the Special Education Liason (SEL) was asked to cover the class for the month. Ms. Ryan reported that she does not have the background to be teaching math and since the students believed their work would not be graded, they did not pay attention as much as they would in another class (Ms. Ryan, personal interview, April 2015). In my interview with Ms. Ryan, she reported:

"I want to say come let's go do math. They don't want. They just disappear. Why would you take my class to do math when everyone else is playing? (Ms. Ryan, personal interview, April 2015)."

Ms. Ryan mentioned that the number of staff absences enabled students to play in the hallway rather than attend classes taught by a substitute. In her quote, Ms. Ryan explains that the students are socializing in the hallways rather than learning in the classrooms.

With over 100 students per grade level, Leemer is a bigger school than McHeartly. This could be the reason that Leemer students more often reported classroom behavior issues, bullying and fights, all of which impact school culture. Students reported that it felt difficult to find a connection with friends they truly fit in with. They reported being less able to focus on their academics in this type of environment.

Student Perception of Teacher-Student Relationships

Overall, students reported having a strong relationship with a few of their teachers. Ms. Wright was commonly mentioned as a favorite teacher. When asked why, one of the students explained that this is because “she teaches the material first, and then lets you try it and if a student still doesn’t understand, she breaks it down even further (Joseph, personal interview, April 2015).” He reported that she makes learning fun.

Students reported enjoyed spending time with teachers who took the time to help them and who were open to hearing what they had to say. When asked what qualities of a teacher allow the students to develop a foundation for a positive relationship with them, one of the students, Lisa, reported: “If you don’t understand something, they’ll give you a chance to understand it, which is good. They’ll go over it with you and they offer extra credit for those who are missing points off their grade, which is good (Lisa, interview, April 2015).” Sandy, one of the top-performing students described her relationship with her teachers: “It’s good, I respect them as they respect me. I do what they tell me to do.

Sometimes when I feel like exhausted, I still do it but then I take my time, then I be like I'm just 'gonna rest for a little while but first get my work done because my grades come before me so I can move up and not stay back because I haven't failed a class, I've never failed a grade before (Sandy, personal interview, April 2015).” The students in my research reported some positive student-teacher relationships when they felt respected by their teachers.

Similar to the McHeartly students, the Leemer students were able to differentiate between a positive student-teacher relationship and a negative one. The Leemer students also cited disrespect and unfairness in the classroom as reasons that they had a negative relationship with their teachers. Lisa outlined characteristics of a negative relationship with one of her teachers: “It's not the teaching style; it's how she doesn't listen to what we have to say. It's like she just goes about what she wants (Lisa, personal interview, April 2015).” Consistently, the students stated that they wanted to feel listened to, and if they felt heard and respected, they would work harder for that teacher. Another student, Elijah confirmed: “And it's like when I'm trying to say something she'll tell me to raise my hand. And when I raise my hand, she act like she don't see my hand (Elijah, personal interview, April 2015).” The students reported feeling frustrated with teachers who they felt did not acknowledge them.

Parent-Teacher Relationship

The Leemer teachers in my research reported feeling discouraged about the level of parental involvement. The teachers did not feel that they had a collaborative relationship with parents and did not feel supported by them. When asked about this dynamic, Ms. Ryan remarked:

“Parents unfortunately here are not very supportive. They're so busy. They have like two or three jobs. Getting them to be involved is very very challenging. But um, there's one thing I encourage parents to do. You know that my son plays basketball, he plays for the schools, is for them to be a little more involved and get their children to create realistic goals and offer support, not just only when the kids get in trouble they show up which happens a lot. Some parents you don't see them only when they come to reinstate their children. That's when you see them in school. You don't see them again (Ms. Ryan, personal interview, April 2015).”

Interestingly, Ms. Ryan mentions that parents are not supportive or involved, but then suggests a potential reason for their inability to participate - they might be working several jobs. It can be difficult for parents to be at school during the day if they are scheduled for work. While teachers like Ms. Ryan report this as the reason for their absence, they still become frustrated by it. Both Leemer teachers reported:

“But that is still a work in progress and we cannot, I wish we would be able to collaborate more and plan adequately for students, but it's not working the way I would expect it. We don't have that here. Other schools have it but we don't really have that parental support that we always need (Ms. Ryan, personal interview, April 2015).”

“And the thing is that they have strong 8th grade teachers that are telling them the same things. It's not like we're not telling them. It's not like we're not phoning the parents to tell them what their kids are doing. I just think there's a disconnect. A lot of the parents say they're working and can't do this, or they're working and can't do that. I think that the parents have to take the time. We're putting out the time; the kids have to put out the time. It has to be all the way around, with support in all places in order for it to succeed (Ms. Sanders, personal interview, April 2015).”

The teachers reported that the parent-teacher relationship is a “work in progress” and emphasized that they will continue to try to partner with parents, as they felt it was critical in the students' educational experience. Ms. Sanders makes a good point about the high school application efforts needing to be made all around, involving students, parents and teachers.

Despite their similarities in location and school status as a neighborhood school, McHeartly and Leemer had little else in common. The size, school culture and relationships among those in the community were vastly different. McHeartly is a small school with a tight-knit, family-like environment. Leemer is a large middle school that was unable to effectively form a community around teachers, parents and students. Now that these differences between the two schools have been outlined, I will discuss the important added effect of transition planning on eighth grade students. Once again, the programming offered between the schools differed, and affected the outcome of the graduating eighth grade class.

High School Preparation

Since transition programming begins with the high school application process, then preparing students for the high school transition begins with preparing them for that process. McHeartly and Leemer are both part of the same district and used the same counselor, so many of the same services and resources were offered to their students. However, utilization of those resources differed between the two schools, which will be outlined below.

McHeartly

In this section, I will discuss the transition programming offered at McHeartly, including their focus on ensuring their students had access to as many transition planning resources as possible. I will also review the role that the McHeartly teachers in my research played in the transition process, discussing their focus on academic rigor and their high levels of involvement in the process. Finally, I will review how the school's

transition planning and teacher involvement led to greater numbers of students feeling they were prepared for high school.

Transition Programming at McHeartly

The transition programming at McHeartly began with an emphasis on learning about the high school options in the district. The counselor invited all of the special admission high schools to come speak with the seventh and eighth grade classes. Since the resources in the district had decreased, many of the high schools that were invited declined the opportunity. Some did take the opportunity to present to the classes, and the students left feeling more informed. They reported feeling that this type of programming was perfect for what they needed. In addition, the counselor also met with each student one-on-one to review their high school options. The homeroom teachers talked about high schools often, even asking students to complete research on schools they were looking to apply to.

Outside of the counselors' work with the eighth grade classes, the school had existing measures put into place to ensure a smooth high school start for their students. The school was originally a K-5, and as they added grades to their programming, they also created a "Middle Years Academy," that separated the K-6 from the seventh and eighth grades. The principal made this separation distinct and purposeful. The students wore separate uniforms, including blazers for formal occasions. The students agreed that the Middle Years Academy uniform helped them stand apart from the rest of the school and gave them the feeling of professionalism. Since the school was growing a grade each year, it had the opportunity to be purposeful in this growth.

In addition to their own uniform, the older students had most of their classes on the third floor, away from the younger students. Since their classes were all on the same floor, the students were given the freedom to walk independently from one class to the next. The students were also given lockers to store materials that they were not using. These operational pieces were helpful to the students as they prepared for high school. When reflecting on their preparation, students elaborated on these measures:

- Interviewer: So how has this school prepared you to go to high school? Have they done anything to help you think forward about what next year might be like?
- Participant: Yeah. In middle years, they started making us transition class different, like, walking to class instead of getting led by teachers. Um, they gave us lockers and they gave us certain times we had to be in class without being late.
- Interviewer: And so you're free to walk within that time frame, and do you, how are you with time management? Do you feel like you get there on time?
- Participant: Yes.
- Interviewer: What happens if you guys don't get to class on time?
- Participant: Demerits.
- Interviewer: You get demerits, okay. And what does a demerit equal? Or what does it add up to?
- Participant: If you get a certain amount of demerits, you can't go places or do stuff, or activities when they have it at school (Mason, personal interview, April 2015).

The students were expected to get to their classes within the three-minute time frame, without being walked by a teacher. They were being trained to manage their own behavior so that in high school, this time-management requirement would not be a surprise to them. They were given rules and regulations to follow, with consequences.

Teacher Role in Transition Planning

Most of the McHeartly teachers that I interviewed reported that they have a role to play in ensuring the students are prepared for high school. They reported seeing

themselves as a guide for their students. The staff boasts of an all hands on deck mentality when it comes to the high school application process. For example, while the Dean of Students is typically tasked with ensuring the rules of the school are being followed, she also invested her time in the high school application process. During her interview, she outlined this role more specifically:

“My experience with the high school transition process was I assisted in helping the counselor bring students down, look at and choose what high schools they wanted to attend. I also talked with the students, tried to help them make permanent decisions on what high schools they wanted to go to. I also assisted a few parents who called and tried to get in touch with the counselor but for some reason because of the counselor’s schedule, she was not being available. So I assisted on those days when she was not available to help them. I tried to find locations that were closer to their homes and find high schools that were the best fit for their child. That was my experience as far as for helping our kids with the high school process (Ms. Smith, personal interview, April 2015).”

Ms. Smith wanted to continue participating in the high school application process in future years. When speaking about ways the school helps to prepare students for the high school transition, and changes she wants to make to the existing transition programming,

Ms. Smith replied:

Participant: I want to start them a little bit younger. I didn’t realize until this year that 7th grade is really the focus year. I always thought it was 8th grade.

Interviewer: Right, for high school applications.

Participant: Anything for high school. I thought it was 8th grade that they were going to look at and not even realizing that the process starts so early in their 8th grade year and they don’t even have anything to show for their 8th grade year before they’re already choosing and selecting; so going forward I want to definitely focus on my 7th graders and I’ve been saying that to them this year now that I know. Next year’s 6th graders coming up I’m driving it home (Ms. Smith, personal interview, April 2015).

Ms. Smith was prepared to teach the sixth graders about the high school admissions process so they would be ready when it was their time to apply. The teachers at McHeartly are invested in their students and wish for them to succeed.

Mr. Johns, the English teacher at McHeartly played a huge role in helping the students during the high school application and transition process. Mr. Johns recognized that the work students would receive in high school would be much more difficult for the students to adjust to if he did not challenge them in eighth grade. The students in my data consistently reported that the work they were assigned English class was advanced, and they were aware of Mr. Johns' strategy. When I asked one of the students about this class, he said:

“Mr. Johns, you know, the work he's given us, most of it has been above the 8th grade level. Some of it is like, some of the work he's given us is like 10th grade level. For example, in the beginning of the year we read a speech by Frederick Douglass, and we also read Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Those two texts, well the Frederick Douglass speech we read was *What Does the 4th of July Mean to a Slave?* Both of those speeches were hard. They were tough to comprehend. You know some of the language we didn't really get, but Mr. Johns was there with us, took us step by step. He made it easier for us. He explained to us things we didn't understand, I mean if we didn't understand anything, he would explain it to us, he would help us and as we progressed we got better at it and learned more, we learned more from these speeches. So we actually understood them better, we so can actually, front to cover, we can understand it better (Steven, personal interview, April 2015).”

Mr. Johns ensured that the students would be familiar with the high school texts once they arrived there. The students felt confident in their transition knowing that they were completing upper level work. Many of the students in my data reported feeling supported by Mr. Johns as he guided them throughout the entire assignment.

In addition to ensuring his classwork was rigorous, Mr. Johns reported keeping the students informed by sending information on school fairs, certain PSSA required percentiles and other application requirements. Additionally, recognizing that there might be other challenges to completing the high school admissions process than just the application, the same English teacher volunteered more than just his teaching experience; he volunteered to help transport the students to the high school fair and open houses:

“So I have, so many times I would send them, and you did this as well, so many times we double teamed them, you know you’ve done this before but you would say things like, here’s the high school fair out at Drexel. I would follow up, you know I have a g-mail account, emailteacher2@gmail.com. I would just type in the word 19 and it goes out to my kids. I would say, here’s the high school fair, go to this. Kids who couldn’t go, I would say, I will drive you. Let me know if you need me to drive you. I send them things from the notebook.org. Find out the information, where you want to go (Mr. Johns, personal interview, April 2015).”

The teachers were the main source of information for their students. Many of the them required the students to complete research around special admission schools so that they were well-informed. Generally, the McHeartly teachers that I interviewed were open to helping students access important resources in any way that they could.

Since students were only allowed to apply to five schools, it was important that a student met the criteria for those five schools. The high schools receive many applications so their initial weeding out process involves strictly numbers. For example, if the school requires that a student scores in the 88th percentile on the PSSAs, they might remove all of the applicants who scored below that percentile to save time, without looking at other aspects of their seventh grade portfolio. The English teacher commented on the importance of taking these application requirements seriously.

“And then also, as you and I talked about being realistic with kids, like, you’re not getting into Cooper*, like Thomas comes to mind. You got a basic in the PSSA, stop saying you’re going to Cooper, you’re wasting a slot, you’re wasting it (Mr. Johns, personal interview, April 2015).”

It is possible that because these students grew up in such a small school, that they were deluded about the number of other successful eighth grade students applying to high schools as well. As Mr. Johns outlines above, many of these students needed to hear about the importance of being realistic with their application portfolio multiple times.

Knowing more about what is required of students to be admitted into good schools, the English teacher commented that he would have been easier on the students in seventh grade so their grades would have been better.

“You know I happen to be super close to these kids in a way that I’ve never been close to any kids, or class. They’re my favorite homeroom ever. I can say that I know first report period, I gave them more room as far as their English grades because I was concerned about them getting into high school, good high schools. Part of me, I wish I had known more ‘cause I might’ve been more lenient with their last report card grades in 7th grade. As bad as that sounds, it’s the truth (Mr. Johns, personal interview, April 2015).”

Mr. Johns is suggesting that if he was more lenient with student grades, then they would have gotten into better schools. As evidenced by the quote above, the teachers at McHeartly are concerned enough about the welfare of their students that they would go as far as adjusting a year’s worth of curriculum if it meant their students would have a better chance at getting accepted into special admission schools.

According to the students, besides helping them understand the high school admission process, their teachers were truly preparing them for high school, and “real life.” When asked to elaborate on this idea, one student explained:

“They know, like, you know obviously they've experienced the same thing. They have been through high school too. They know what it's like. They know it's not all fun and games. So that's what they have mainly been trying to teach us this year with the work they have been giving us. Miss Kramer has been giving us the projects to work with real life, real life situations, so we're actually in the middle of one of the projects right now (Steven, personal interview, April 2015).

Steven reports that the McHeartly teachers challenged him and he recognized that while the work is hard, it is necessary to prepare him for what is to come. Generally, most students reported that the teachers pushed them to continue to do more and do better, and they were grateful for this. They reported trusting their teachers, knowing that what they were being asked to do was going to prepare them for the academic shift in ninth grade.

Most teachers that I interviewed felt that the McHeartly students were ready for the high school transition. When asked to elaborate on this, teachers primarily cited the rigorous curriculum as the reason for this. In my interview with two main teachers, they noted:

“You know, we know that they are ‘gonna experience a jump in difficulty, so I think challenging them, rigor in the curriculum, I do think is one way we prepare them (Ms. Moore, personal interview, April 2015).”

“I, well as far as pedagogy and education goes, particularly with my homeroom, I feel like they're very, very well prepared for high school, good high schools (Mr. Johns, personal interview, April 2015).”

Students reported Mr. Johns as one of the most challenging teachers, and he reported believing his students were ready for the high school curriculum.

While the students and teachers generally agreed that they were ready for high school academics, many of them also spoke about the anxiety that moving from a small K-8 school to a large high school produces in a student. As one of the teachers recognized in our interview, it is exciting and worrisome at the same time.

“It's funny. I have asked some of the kids and it, it does vary. Some of them are very excited and happy, and some of them will tell you they're very nervous. And I think that's especially true and I'd be curious from your findings, I think if, from a K to 8 school where they've been sheltered and many of them have been here literally 9 years. It's all they've known. Of course you have some kids who have been in a lot of schools, but I think it does intimidate them to go to a large school, physically the largeness of it. I don't know if it hits them because I think they feel like the big fish here ... I don't know if it really hits them that they're going to be the, the freshmen, the bottom, you know? I don't know if that hits them (Ms. Moore, personal interview, April 2015).”

For a student in a school this size, and a community this strong, the emotional aspect of the high school transition may not hit them until their first day of high school when they are the “little fish in the big sea,” as Ms. Moore describes. Additionally, most of the students have spent many years here, and potentially have been “sheltered.” For those students who have only attended McHeartly, there may be a disconnect between perceived preparation and actual preparation.

Leemer

In this section, I will discuss the transition programming offered at Leemer. I will also review the role that the Leemer teachers played in the transition process, focusing on their work in helping students complete the high school applications. Finally, I will discuss the levels of student preparation, demonstrating that neither the Leemer students or teachers in my research felt that they were prepared for high school.

Transition Programming

The transition programming at Leemer was not as robust as the programming at McHeartly. Since the same counselor served both Leemer and McHeartly, some of the basic services were the same, such as inviting high schools to speak with the students. However, these high school visits did not have the same outcome at Leemer as they did at

McHeartly. The Leemer teachers reported that their students talked throughout the presentations. Ms. Sanders, one of the teachers reported:

“There were a few high schools that did come and the kids weren’t even respectable. That was upstairs I believe. Monroe High School came over too. It was funny because when Monroe came over, there was a student who had graduated last year, and he was talking about how he gave us problems and everything, and sees the change now that he’s in the ROTC. So they have a student who actually went through this process, from here, and said how behavior was and actually told them. They had a few schools come over and have us telling them. For this 8th grade here that we have, I think this is the most that we’ve had where they’re not really getting it (Ms. Sanders, personal interview, April 2015).”

Ms. Sanders discussed a presentation given to the Leemer eighth grade students by Monroe High School, which is the local, low-performing comprehensive school. One of the Monroe students who gave the presentation was a Leemer alumnus who spoke about his poor behavior in eighth grade and the changes he made when he advanced to high school. Ms. Sanders was disappointed that her Leemer students did not listen to this advice from a speaker who once was their peer.

The only other resource that the teachers utilized was the high school fair hosted by the school district. Ms. Sanders, one of the main teachers working with the students in their application process stated: “The only thing they had was the high school fair, which was a little bit earlier to give them a chance to go out and visit some of the schools, but not too many of the kids did that. So I think that they need more than just the high school fair (Ms. Sanders, personal interview, April 2015).” Outside of these high school presentations and the optional choice to attend the off-site high school fair, the teachers and students in my research reported that there was no purposeful planning around high

school transition. Teachers who are familiar with the high school transition process know that students need to do more than attend this event to be prepared for high school.

Teacher Role in the Transition Process

Only two teachers from Leemer agreed to participate in the research. These teachers are active participants in their students' educational experience. Their perception of their role in the transition process is not reflected throughout the school. They took responsibility for the students completing the high school applications because they felt this was the only way to ensure every student would get a chance. Taking responsibility for the process meant that they helped the counselor meet with each student to determine which high schools might be a good fit for them. Since the application process moved to an online format, the teachers completed the form with the student in school. Ms. Ryan, the SEL, reflects on that process:

“Some of them, when we were approaching the last days, I had to physically bring the students here to come and apply on my computers in this room. No parent called to question me why I called which schools. Initially I was like afraid that oh why did you choose this school for my son? I didn't ask you to do it. Well they did not do what they were supposed to do so when they came in and said Ms. Ryan, I have five schools I want to apply to, I said, okay let's do it. That's how I did a lot of them. The only child who I did not do was absent and she did not get into any of those schools because the application didn't come back. And her mom called and said I did not get it back. I said check your house. She checked the house. It was right there. She didn't even open it. (Ms. Ryan, personal interview, April 2015)”

Many of the students developed the list of schools they were applying to with these teachers, who then reached out to the parents to obtain their approval. Ms. Ryan was worried the parents would be upset about not playing a main role in the process. From her experience, however, the parents did not get upset about the teachers making

educational choices for their children. It is possible they see the teachers as the experts in the education field, and trust that they will make good choices for their children.

The teachers in my research reported that they focused on consistency and promoting the high school application information each day. Their goal was to inform as many students as possible so they could take this information home.

“My goal is to try and relay everything to the students, and hopefully they’ll take it home. I say it over and over again so that eventually it will get to the home. So I do a lot, because when my daughter was going through the process, I didn’t know all of this. So I try to make sure that the things I didn’t know, I try to make sure they do get the opportunity to do all the stuff, so they can go through the process and be successful in what they want to do (Ms. Sanders, personal interview, April 2015).”

Ms. Sanders emphasizes that she wants to help students and parents understand the complexities of the high school application process since she has recent experience with it. The timeline for the high school application is short, as it opens at the end of September and closes in November. Ms. Sanders aims to help parents and students understand the process as early as possible.

While many Leemer students were not accepted into a special admission school, Ms. Ryan and Ms. Sanders credit themselves for those students who did. Ms. Sanders recalled:

“And I think that a lot of kids would not have gotten into the schools that they got into and there would be more kids going to Monroe if we weren’t calling home. If I didn’t have the kids in here and we weren’t doing what we were doing, taking them to the high school fair, I think a lot of them would not have applied to different schools (Ms. Sanders, personal interview, April 2015).”

The teachers in my research believed their efforts, including the many phone calls made to parents, increased awareness among the Leemer eighth grade students and ultimately, helped these students get into good high schools.

Ms. Ryan and Ms. Sanders did not feel that the Leemer students were ready for high school. The teachers did not feel that the students were taking their academics seriously. Ms. Ryan surmised that the students are so focused on socializing now and might not understand the complexities of high school until their first day on campus.

“They will have to improve their study skills. Like, for the most part my students don't have good study skills. And, and I always tell them, "In order for you to be successful in high school and be able to stay there, not drop-out, you would have to change your whole attitude about schooling, and your readiness," which for the most part, they aren't. And I try to prepare them for that. And some get it and some don't. So it's still like work in progress for that (Ms. Ryan, personal interview, April 2015).”

Ms. Ryan attributed part of this problem to the students' maturity levels, and explained that many of them are not mature enough to see the bigger picture. Ms. Ryan does call it “a work in progress,” indicating that this maturity may develop with time and teacher preparation. Ms. Ryan does mention that the students need to change their attitude about schooling. Ms. Sanders agrees but considers the teacher's role in this culture:

“We're allowing them to turn in late work. When they move onto high school, you don't have to take late work, and that's what I'm trying to get them to realize now. I think some of the things that we do now is a disservice to them going into high school by accepting all this late work, because when they move on to high school, they're going to think “This teacher is going to accept my late work and I'm going to pass”, and that's not going to be the case for every single teacher (Ms. Sanders, personal interview, April 2015).”

Ms. Sanders commented that some teachers at Leemer were not encouraging the students to think differently about school. She explained that teachers are flexible with

assignment deadlines, and warns that since this will not continue in high school, the school is enabling the students to procrastinate and focus on things other than their academics.

In addition to the teachers worries that the students are not ready, the Leemer students in my research agreed that they were underprepared for the high school transition. Most of them reported feeling less prepared for the social aspect of high school.

- Interviewer: Mm-hmm. (Affirmative) Okay. What do you not feel prepared for?
 Participant: I think I don't feel prepared for the students.
 Interviewer: The students, say more about that. What do you mean?
 Participant: Like I'm moving to a different place so I have to make a lot of new friends.
 Interviewer: Mm-hmm. (Affirmative) That's true.
 Participant: And I'm not really that outgoing.
 Interviewer: Mm-hmm. (Affirmative)
 Participant: Like I wouldn't get myself out there (Elijah, personal interview, April 2015).

The Leemer students transitioned to middle school two years before this research and it is likely that many of them used the first year to adjust to their new school and peers. Now, they are being asked to transition again and while they were looking forward to more independence, the students also reported not being ready, academically or socially for another transition.

Stage-Environment Fit Theory in the Sending Schools

In this section, I will review the important elements of both adolescent development and stage-environment fit theory. I will review the three components of stage-environment fit theory: interpersonal, instructional and organizational, and discuss

the ways in which McHeartly worked to meet student needs in these areas. I will then review the same three components in my analysis on the Leemer experience.

Research argues that adolescence is a time period of increased stress and development for students. Naturally, these changes affect their needs in school. It is a critical component when reflecting on the developmental responsiveness of an educational environment. Research tells us that adolescents have needs in interpersonal, instructional and organizational areas. Specifically, they long for independence and increased interpersonal opportunities with peers. They look to build healthy relationships with adults who are not their parents. Most times, these adults are their teachers. They require acceptance and a feeling of belonging. They also need opportunities to engage in meaningful work (Pearsall, 2017).

Stage-Environment Fit at McHeartly

The McHeartly community met the interpersonal, instructional and organizational needs of their adolescent eighth grade students. Interpersonally, the students were well connected with teachers and peers. Some of this had to do with the length of time they were enrolled in the school. Much of it, however, had to do with the intentional focus on community building. Instructionally, these positive relationships with teachers helped the students in the classroom. Since they respected most of their teachers, they reported being willing to work harder for them. Additionally, the teachers provided the students with challenging work, and connected it to their future, which made it feel more meaningful to the students. Organizationally, McHeartly structured their K-8 school so that the seventh and eighth graders rotated between teachers and were given the freedom to walk from class to class without a teacher. They wore their own uniform and had their

own label of Middle Years Academy. All of these organizational strategies helped to meet the needs of adolescent learners and prepared them for high school.

Stage-Environment Fit Theory at Leemer

Interpersonally, Leemer students did not report positive relationships with students to the same degree that the McHeartly students did. There were some teachers that students reported connecting with, but they did not report considering them “mentors.” Additionally, the theme of community did not come up in student or teacher interviews. The teachers that I interviewed did not feel that students respected them. These relationships in this environment did not lead to an increase in interpersonal opportunities for students. Instructionally, these challenges were reflected in the classroom. The teachers in my research reported that students were not taking their school work seriously. Students reported that teachers were often absent. Organizationally, the students were given lockers and the freedom to walk from class to class without an adult. One teacher reported that the students did not use these freedoms wisely and often played in the hallway. At Leemer, they were given too much freedom without meeting their other needs, which resulted in a challenging environment for both students and teachers.

Overall Application Results

As mentioned, many eighth graders from both McHeartly and Leemer reported that the most challenging part of eighth grade was the high school application process. The process involves an online high school application allowing student to apply to five schools. These five schools then are given access to the student’s seventh grade profile: grades, attendance and behavior. Special admission and city-wide schools

have a list of minimum expectations in academic, attendance and behavioral areas. These special admission schools also require supplemental materials such as essays, letters of recommendation, and potentially interviews or auditions. High school acceptances were based both on this seventh grade profile as well as the quality of any supplemental materials.

At the end of the 2015 school year, the McHeartly students were accepted into more special admission schools than the Leemer students (See Table 5). Since I only recruited students who were scheduled to enroll in Parkesburg or Monroe High School for this research, this outcome is not immediately clear when isolating the participants in my research. Table 5 outlines the total amount of students in the McHeartly eighth grade class and the Leemer eighth grade class. It further illustrates the amount of students who were accepted into a special admission high school and the amount of students who were not. It is evident from this table that a greater percentage of the students who graduated from McHeartly were accepted into special admission high schools.

Table 5. McHeartly versus Leemer – Acceptance to Special Admission School			
School	# Students in 8th Grade Class	Accepted into Special Admission School	Not Accepted into Special Admission School
McHeartly	40	25 (62.5%)	15 (37.5%)
Leemer	105	27 (25.7%)	78 (74.2%)

Politics and social capital played an important part in the application process for the McHeartly students. Many of the teachers had connections with other important staff members across the district, which was a benefit to the students. When some of the

McHeartly students were not accepted into any special admission or city wide high schools during the first round of admissions, these adults in the school stepped in and used their connections to help them. One of the teachers described how he reached out to people that he knew had connections and power in the school district.

Mr. Johns: Ah, Vanessa Highly, the old principal here who had 20 some years in the district, she ended up getting those kids who had no placements into John Adams High School. Yes, I did all of the work, but at the end of the day, I don't know the principal there. She's the one who made the call. She got Murray, Isabelle, Harry and Andrew and someone else, Christopher, in there.

Interviewer: But you had reached out to her.

Mr. Johns: Many times, and not just her, but the nurse whose husband, do you know what role her husband plays? Right, the Director of Athletics. So, 'cause at one point, Murray noted, "that's funny Mr. Johns, you've never ever had a relationship with the nurse and all of the sudden this year, that's different." You know how politics works, you know how it works (Mr. Johns, personal interview, April 2015).

The McHeartly teachers made phone calls and requests that then enabled their students to enroll in good high schools that were originally not options for them. The teachers were aware of the importance of these connections, and used them when needed.

Analysis

The data shows that students at McHeartly experienced a different high school application and transition process than those students at Leemer because of the increased focus on meeting the needs of adolescent students in interpersonal, instructional and organizational areas. There was a strong sense of community, which fit the students'

need for belonging. The students and teachers bragged about the the strong relationships that were built there, which met students' need for increased interpersonal opportunities. The school organized purposeful programming around the high school transition facilitated by the teachers, which met the students' needs for an adult mentor and meaningful activity. Instructionally, the teachers engaged the students in rigorous and relevant work. Organizationally, the students were considered their own academy with rules designed in accordance with adolescent development.

Like the McHeartly students, the Leemer students needed guidance and support through their eighth grade year, including in the high school application process. However, they did not have the opportunity to have adult mentors like the McHeartly students did. In fact, neither teachers nor students at Leemer reported on the existence of community within their school. The teachers reported that the students did not take work seriously. The students reported that the teachers were often absent. Instructionally, the students rarely reported on the curriculum and there was very little purposeful transition planning. Organizationally, Leemer did offer students lockers and the freedom to walk from class to class without a teacher. Without guidance on the importance of these freedoms however, they were not taken seriously.

The reports of the Leemer students were surprising given the fact that Leemer is a middle school and middle schools were designed specifically to address student needs. This school does not espouse the middle school vision as promoted by the Association for Middle Level Education (Pearsall, 2017). Outside of a few organizational tools, there was little reported focus on developmental responsiveness in the building.

The data aligns nicely with the stage-environment fit framework. Since the McHeartly students were working in a space that considered their developmental needs, they experienced a more successful application process. Leemer did not work purposefully to meet the varied needs of adolescent students so their students were not as successful in the high school application process. While located only a mile away from each other, within the same district, they produced different outcomes in terms of high school acceptances and level of student preparedness.

Though different in structure, both environments aim to educate young adolescent students and should be responsive to their unique needs in a variety of areas. For the educational environment to be successful, the components cannot be piecemeal. The most successful and developmentally responsive environment will meet adolescent student needs in all areas. This will also be true as we examine the actual transition to high school in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

NINTH GRADE

To answer my research question of how students in an urban educational environment experienced the transition process, I re-interviewed my participants during the first semester of their high school experience. Most of my participants attended Parkesburg High School, a special admission school. There was one student who attended Monroe, the low-performing, comprehensive high school. To gain additional insight, I recruited teachers from both educational environments to interview. In this chapter, I will give an overview of both high schools and the students' transition experiences. My data will show that even though the students from McHeartly experienced a more developmentally responsive environment in eighth grade, once they got to high school, this experience did not protect them from the well-documented challenges of starting ninth grade. Consistent with extant research, all students except for one experienced academic decline when they transitioned to high school. I will then discuss how accurately the eighth grade predictions played out in high school, describing the trajectory of two students. I will highlight Mason's story, one student who experienced the most decline. Finally, I will show how stage-environment fit theory helps illuminate the challenges of the transition to ninth grade.

The Two Schools: Parkesburg and Monroe High School

The students that I followed to high school attended one of two schools: Monroe High School or Parkesburg High School. Both schools were close in proximity to each other and enrolled ninth through twelfth grade students, but they differed significantly in size and type of school programming. Monroe, a neighborhood school, enrolled 810

students in their high school the year that this research was completed. Parkesburg, a special admission school, enrolled only 250. In this section, I will give an overview of both high schools, including a discussion on their school culture, levels of parental involvement and the quality of teacher-student relationships that exist in the building.

Overview of Parkesburg High School

Parkesburg is a special admission high school in the district of Sommerville which means that any student in the district is eligible to apply for admission but they must be accepted by the school before they are able to enroll. The admissions process for Parkesburg includes an evaluation of student grades, attendance, test scores and behavior. Additionally, the students are asked to interview with a committee of teachers from the school. Parkesburg is smaller than most schools in the district. It is important to note that 9 out of 10 of the students that I followed to high school attended Parkesburg, so much of my data comes from this setting.

The teachers and students in my research generally describe Parkesburg as a school where students are united in community. Ms. Zane, the school counselor emphasized that the community building among students across all grades was purposeful. The parents were involved in the community building, too. In our interview, Ms. Zane stated that the parent support at the special admission school is strong, and that teachers connect with parents often:

“Teachers communicate with parents. Some teachers communicate with parents a lot, and so that happens by phone call and by email. Sometimes I get looped in when it's an email situation and that's when I can really see it, but I know they're communicating. The other one was ... Oh, the parent teacher nights are pretty well attended here. I don't know what the percentage is, but somebody probably does know that. I don't, but there's a nice little buzz in this school on parent teacher nights, or report card

conferences (Ms. Zane, interview, November 2015).”

Ms. Zane felt that generally, most parents at the school were responsive to school staff and that this was a big factor contributing to the community feel of the school.

While Parkesburg is considered a successful special admission school, Ms. Zane did admit that when new students transition to ninth grade, things do not always go smoothly:

“That's not to say there haven't been occasionally some sense on the part of freshman that some upper class-men are giving them a hard time. That has happened and we've dealt with it on a case by case basis. It's usually ... I can think of two instances this year. One was a small group of eleventh grade boys who were not happy with ... You know what happens is, some kids come in ... This is classic bullying stuff. Some kids come in and think that they need to put on an extremely tough, aggressive mask to defend against someone who might take advantage of them. If they do that with an upper class-men, the upper class-men will put them in their place. We had a couple situations with a small group of freshman and eleventh grade boys in the fall, and then again with some tenth grade ... I guess they weren't freshman. They were tenth grade and senior girls that had to be dealt with. Those were dealt with on an individual basis (interview, November 2015).”

As Ms. Zane reported, it may take time for the freshman students who were once the oldest in a building to become used to being the youngest. This adjustment may cause some social discomfort between all grade levels, and ultimately conflict in a typically peaceful environment.

Student Perspectives on Transition Programming at Parkesburg

The culture of the student's receiving school is important to consider when thinking about how they experience transition. Equally important is the transition programming offered to the new students to help them adjust. In this section, I will describe students' perspectives on transition programming at Parkesburg. Overall, the

students echoed their counselor in emphasizing the community building happening at the school and stated that getting to know the whole community was a helpful piece of the transition process.

When I asked what types of community building activities the school did to help the students adjust to their new setting, the students mentioned the Orientation that Parkesburg held for students before school started. Additionally, during the first week of classes, all four grades of students were brought together for field day activities. Students cited these “icebreakers” as important in their transition.

Steven: Well, I appreciate, um, like the activities we do, like the first or second week on a Friday we went out onto the field and we did, um, activities like in certain groups. It was the third week we went out and did the activities. The first two weeks we started doing these small groups. There was like a few Freshmen, a few Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors. That was to help us all get to know each other, so, um, new kids wouldn't be worried about the older kids.

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm. Was that a worry of yours?

Steven: Yes, because I almost know none of the students. Well at least I thought I didn't. Many I don't know, but I know, when I got here I saw two students I do know, so that was a relief to me. So I wasn't really like alone, on my own (Steven, interview, April 2015).

In addition to the focus on community and student-relationship building, ninth grade students were required to take a course on Social Development and Leadership. The class was divided so that girls were separate from boys. The class content included helping students to discuss the transition to high school and what the new environment felt like for them. The conversation also included being purposeful when building relationships with other students, and ensuring that people are treating you well. One of the students, Steven, commented on the program:

Steven: We do activities, like to express ourselves, which I believe really helps me, because it helps me communicate better, considering I'm in this, well high school is more foreign to me. I feel like an alien in here. So it's great to be able to express myself, so people continue to know me and I get to know them (personal interview, November 2015).

Students like Steven reported that the course taught them coping skills and strategies to deal with the inevitable social issues that emerge in high school.

Additionally, while the whole school is engaged in community building activities, the students felt that this class was important as it helped them to build trust within their ninth grade class. All of the students praised the program and felt the conversations that emerged from the lessons helped them to understand and trust their new peers.

The counselor's report of the existing transition programming was similar to those of the students. Ms. Zane also cited the freshman course:

"All our ninth graders have a course that's unique to us. It's called social development and leadership, and that's a course that has them look at themselves, what their values are, how those values stack up with the mission of the school, meaning peace and social justice, and with leaders in the world. There's a peer mediation and conflict resolution piece to that course that's taught by physicians for social responsibility. That is the unique thing about coming here is there's this freshman course that's three days a week all year called social development and leadership (Ms. Zane, personal interview, November 2015)."

Ms. Zane highlighted one interesting component of this programming, that an outside organization comes in to teach the conflict resolution piece of the programming. This is appealing because students are now hearing the importance of community and peaceful conflict resolution from more than just their teachers. Additionally, the course is three days a week, which is a significant amount of time for a student. The dedication of this large amount of time to the program demonstrates how important the school feels

building trust and community is in the high school transition process. It also emphasizes the value of conflict resolution between peers.

Teacher Role in the Transition Process

Since Ms. Zane was the only Parkesburg staff member that I was able to recruit in this research, this section will include information on her specific counseling role in the transition process. When asked about this role, Ms. Zane admitted that she does not interact with the new ninth graders as much as she would like since she is the only counselor for a school with ninth through twelfth grades.

“I'm the only counselor here, and that's for all four grades, and this is my second year. What I've been eyeing for the future, is developing a more integral or systematic way of meeting the freshman. Now the way I meet them is through a new parent/student night in the spring, which we started for the first time last spring. Then again in the fall at orientation. Then again we had a ninth grade class meeting. Beyond that, it's very catch if catch can, if there's an issue, if there's a concern. What we're working on, and you might know this because of the district's Naviance protocols, is a way of interacting with the freshman on a much more systematic basis, and it's a work in progress. It's developing as I learn the school, the needs, high school in Sommerville. All that stuff. I'm hoping next year we'll have something that happens on a more regular basis with me and the freshman (Ms. Zane, interview, November 2015).”

It is clear from Ms. Zane's interview that she does not interact with new ninth graders on an individual basis throughout the year. This could mean that the new students are not getting the time and attention they need from their counselor to make a successful transition.

Parkesburg Teacher/Student Relationships

Many of the Parkesburg students had positive things to say about their teachers. They reported that teachers were involved in helping them navigate the transition. While the students did not feel as close to the Parkesburg teachers as they did to the teachers at

their elementary school, they did see them as caring and supportive. Steven reported:

“The teachers here, they’re, well it’s not exactly what I expected, but some teachers are warm, some teachers are nice. I thought in high school teachers would like, they would just keep going, just teach and wouldn’t be able to help you the way my teachers did, and make connections with you, but I was wrong. Some of the teachers here are really nice and open. They’re willing to help us even when we’re struggling, so that’s a big benefit (Steven, personal interview, November 2015).

The students reported feeling connected to these teachers who they felt were invested in them, and who made learning fun. Certain teachers even opened their classrooms during lunch times for the students to informally socialize. I asked Carter what he does during his free period lunch:

- Participant: I go to my history teacher’s class, because I don’t like eating the school lunch.
- Interviewer: You don’t like eating the school lunch. Do you bring a lunch?
- Participant: (shakes head no)
- Interviewer: Who else goes to that teacher’s class?
- Participant: All of my friends.
- Interviewer: All your friends? What do you guys do?
- Participant: Play music, dance (Carter, personal interview, November 2015).

These teachers gave students another social setting option besides the lunchroom, a space that could be overwhelming for new students, especially when they do not have set friendships yet.

The students reported that they most valued a teacher’s positive energy and sense of humor. Thomas reported, “um, mostly I’m excited about is seeing people ‘cause I don’t want to stay in the house cause it’s boring. So, not only is it mandatory to come to school, but I want to come. I mean, learning is fun here (Thomas, interview, November

2015).” Building these positive relationships with teachers helped to make the students feel connected to their new school, which helped them want to be there every day.

Certainly, not all of the teachers in the school were able to form good relationships with students. For example, the Spanish teacher came up repeatedly in conversation with the students. The students did not feel respected by or cared for by her, and many of them did not perform well in her class. When describing all of his teachers, one of the students reported: “Then, um, I have Ms. Stuart, um, she’s the Spanish teacher. I don’t really like her too much but I have, I’m ‘kinda struggling in her class a little bit cause like, she makes teaching hard for the kids in a way. Like, if you can’t, if you cannot have like mutual respect back and forth, that makes it hard to learn and understand (Thomas, interview, November 2015).” Here, Thomas makes a link between relationships and learning.

Since I interviewed the students only three months into their high school experience, it is not surprising that their relationships with their new teachers were not as close as those with their elementary and middle school teachers. From student reports, it seemed that the teacher-student relationship building was off to a good start. Only one student reported that he did not have a good beginning relationship with his teachers.

Mason reported:

Interviewer: Why do you think that is that you don't have a good relationship with them yet?

Participant: I really don't know. I don't know.

Interviewer: Do you want to have a good relationship with them?

Participant: Sure. (Mason, personal interview, November 2015).

Most students were able to identify what a good student-teacher relationship feels and looks like. It might be a struggle, however, for students to understand how to begin to

develop these relationships if they fail to happen naturally. As stated above, Mason cannot determine why he does not have a good relationship with his teachers, but he knows that he would like to build one. The lack of connection with his teachers affected Mason deeply, which will be explained in detail later in the chapter.

Overview of Monroe High School

Monroe is the neighborhood high school, which means it enrolls all students who live within certain geographic boundaries. This school serves families who live in the same geographical locations as McHeartly and Leemer students. Monroe is a larger school, with 810 students from ninth through twelfth grade. As with most comprehensive high schools, Monroe has a negative reputation. From my experience in the district, I know the school is infamous for the challenging behavior of its students.

Mr. Cooper, the one Monroe teacher who agreed to participate in my research, offered a positive view of the school. He had only been teaching at Monroe for one and a half years, but explained that both years have been different and that the culture of the school really depends on the students enrolled. He compared his current ninth grade class to his class the year before:

“The two years that I've been at Monroe have been extremely different, because last year's class was legendary for their immature, inappropriate behavior. It was just absolutely worse than anything I've ever seen in terms of profound immaturity, inability to sit still, inability to focus, inappropriate behavior. This year, it's a thousand times better. You have eighty percent of the kids who really want to learn and act reasonably appropriate in class. I would say that the classes vary, but I can only go by what I've seen. The best way to sum it up is just to say most of these kids are good kids who are open to learning. The other thing I'll say is look, obviously you have the kids who are really disciplined and just want to learn and don't want any of the other ... Don't want to get distracted. Most kids are kind of in between. Even the good kids can be distracted. Then you have the kids who just are the distractions (phone communication,

November 2015).”

Mr. Cooper presents the spectrum of student types and explains that most kids are somewhere in between being completely focused and being a distraction. Overall though, he felt that this year’s ninth grade students were open to a positive learning experience.

Despite his feeling that the school program was improving, it is important to note that Mr. Cooper did miss his initial interview with me because of school violence. When explaining this, he recalled:

“What happened was ... We were just talking about it during our CPT. I'm just a person ... I'm not going to let kids beat the crap out of each other and not get in there. I understand teachers, especially women, don't want to get involved. I totally get it. That's just not me. These girls were just going at it, and I got in there. Except this was the most intense fight I've seen, and I had to really get the girl and actually get on top of her. I knew her, and I was like, "Calm down." She was like, "Let me up. I'll kill her. I'll kill her. I'll kill her." I'm like, "Sorry. I can't let you up. I'm sorry." Eventually security came, but it was just absolute ... it was insanity (phone communication, November 2015).”

These student fights are part of the reason that the school has such a negative reputation.

These fights also contribute to the destruction of any community or safe educational space that the school tries to build.

Student Perspectives of Transition Programming at Monroe

My data on the student experience of transition comes from the perspective of one student. Joseph was the only student who graduated from eighth grade and attended Monroe. Joseph reported that the school utilized a Ninth Grade Academy Structure where the ninth graders are grouped for their studies and isolated from the upper classmen. When asked about the efficacy of this transition tool, Joseph reported feeling

safe in the Ninth Grade Academy, away from the older students. In fact, he felt worried about moving to tenth grade. He said, “I don't know if I go in 10th grade, and I'm here, and there be more fights than I thought it was, 'cause people keep saying like upstairs be fighting, but down here, it's just pure safety (Joseph, interview, November 2015).” This transition tool helped Joseph feel comfortable while adjusting to his new environment and academic expectations.

Outside of the Ninth Grade Academy structure, the school also held an orientation for ninth grade students. Unlike the Parkesburg orientation however, it was not focused on community building or trust. Instead, Joseph reported that it was a time for students to pick up their school ID cards and see the building (interview, November 2105). Joseph admitted that he did not attend. Outside of the Ninth Grade Academy, the school does lack transition programming.

Teacher Role in the Transition Process

While the school as a whole does not place emphasis building community through transition programming, when asked about his specific role in the transition process, Mr. Cooper emphasized the importance of building relationships with the students:

“I don't do anything specific, Rebecca. I think that what I do differently is I keep my approach super simple. To me, everything is wrapped around relationships, positive working relationships, making learning fun, and then fundamentals too. The first two things are so crucial. The point is, I'm always all about relationships. I'm one of those teachers who, as soon as every kid walks in, I'll say, "Hi, John. Hi, Joseph." I think that's the most important thing that any teacher can do is just to really cherish each professional relationship with each kid ... That's the biggest thing that you can do to make them feel comfortable (Mr. Cooper, interview, November 2015).”

Mr. Cooper was specific about the need for teachers to build trust and develop mutual respect with the students in order to help them the most during this stressful transition.

While he did not do much supplemental work around student academic or social enrichment, Mr. Cooper saw it as his mission to build relationships with students because he believed that this would lead them to experience positive academic outcomes.

Monroe Teacher/Student Relationships

When assessing the teacher/student relationships at Monroe, I utilized information from both Mr. Cooper's and Joseph's interviews. Mr. Cooper suggested that if a student feels a teacher is genuinely trying to develop a relationship with them, and demonstrates concern for that student's well-being, they are more likely to develop a trust of that person and have a positive school experience.

But as far as what I do, I just try to be really sensitive to what 9th graders are going through. I never ... When I was at UC, I never wanted to teach 9th graders. I was like, "Oh my God. I never want to teach 9th graders." I had enough problems with 10th graders, as opposed to the more mature 11th and 12th graders. But now that I have them, now that I understand them, I see that they really are sweet. You are kind of getting them just before they really start to go through the massive changes. There's a real sweetness to a lot of 9th graders that when you see them every day, they're really open to those relationships with you, because they're still at the very end of that chapter in their life. What I'm saying is that if you're a teacher and you go out of your way to show 9th graders that you're there for them and you care about them, it'll be very easy to have wonderful relationships with them. That's the best way that I find to make kids feel comfortable (Mr. Cooper, phone communication, November 2015)."

Part of the reason that Mr. Cooper feels he has good relationships with students is that he is empathetic to the transition that they are going through. Mr. Cooper's hope was that this relationship building would isolate the students from the effect of the high

school transition.

When asked about the relationship he had with his teachers, Joseph reported that they were not bad, but they were not better than the ones he had in middle school. He did not reference Mr. Cooper, or any teachers specifically. Further, when asked about his relationship with the counselor, Joseph reported that he “didn’t talk to her like that (interview, November 2015),” demonstrating a lack of trust or relationship between the two.

The Transition Experience

The transition process does not have a set time frame and is likely not the same experience for every student, which makes it difficult to analyze. Ms. Zane, the counselor from Parkesburg, felt that it could take students a long time to get used to their new environment.

“The level of work is more intense, they have to be more responsible for their work themselves, and the social aspect is pretty intense, you know? Interacting with kids who they haven’t met, finding their place in the class, in the school socially. I think that’s a big, big factor that takes them ninth grade to sort out (Ms. Zane, interview, November 2015).”

Ms. Zane confirmed the increasingly difficult academic expectations and the social issues that arise during the high school transition, and remarked that these changes, both social and academic, may take students all of ninth grade to figure out. In this section, I will discuss the transition experience of all students, without regard to school. I will describe the social success that all students reported when they made the transition to high school. I will also illustrate the academic decline that occurred during the transition to high school. Consistent with extant research, my data will show that all but one student who transitioned to high school experienced an academic decline.

Student Reported Social Success at Both High Schools

Students across both schools had similar experiences in the social aspect of their transition. In this section, I will discuss the social worries that students from both schools reported when they were in eighth grade, and how they were alleviated by November of their ninth grade year. I will also discuss the social success that many of the students experienced as they began to feel connected to their environment, regardless of which high school they attended.

The majority of the students I interviewed as eighth graders expressed concern about social situations that might arise in their new school. At the time, the thought of being the new student in a different school, and having to meet new people was uncomfortable for them. Some of the students were coming from spending eight to ten years in one building. Additionally, students heard rumors about fights in high school and even good students worried about getting into a physical altercation. When asked what he was worried about when coming to school each day, Steven, a generally quiet and focused student replied:

“Well I’m more worried about getting into a fight. That’s the main thing. It comes off easily, especially in high school. Like fights start easily out of the blue, almost any day. So getting caught up in that and getting into a fight myself. I would say that’s one of my biggest fears because I worry that I can’t really protect myself and if you get into a fight and you lose that automatically destroys your reputation. And as a Freshman you’re already reset to the bottom of the bar and have to scratch and claw your way back up. So getting into a fight and losing a fight and it destroying your whole reputation. Sometimes there’s no, like, starting over. That’s one of my biggest fears (Steven, interview, November 2015).

Steven knew he was not capable of defending himself, but the main reason for his worry about getting into a fight was not because he would get hurt or into trouble. Steven

believed that if he lost the fight, that it would destroy his reputation among his new peers, meaning he would be both less popular in his new school and vulnerable to more fighting. He knew that the work he had put into making his reputation a good one in elementary school meant very little as he made the transition to high school. He would need to start from the beginning, and form new relationships with other students and teachers.

Another student, China, replied that one of her worries was rumors of Freshman Friday, a day where all of the freshman students were targeted by the older students. China described the day as “it's like new students, older students gang up on each other like pranks (personal interview, November 2015).” Other students had worried about bullying and targeting of ninth grade students.

Despite these worries, most students reported feeling good about the social aspect of the high school transition. Most of the students reported making new friends and feeling like they fit in with the school. When asked if he felt that he had made friends at Parkesburg in November of his ninth grade year, Steven responded:

- Participant: Yes, I have. I feel like I've made quite a few friends here. Um, some I can trust. I can honestly say I think some people in here I can call my new school family.
- Interviewer: That's really nice.
- Participant: Though my old family, my old school will still stay in my heart always, I'm glad to start in this new school and make new friends so quickly (Steven, interview, November 2015).

When asked about the reasons behind this social success, the students confirmed that their new peers were more mature than the students in middle school. David reported, “The students are more mature and not like goofing around all over the place

here (David, interview, November 2015).” Several students across both schools recognized that in high school, the kids care less about material things. Because of this, there was less bullying and less negative peer-to-peer interactions (Sandy, personal interview, November 2015). China, who had reported experiencing significant bullying in middle school, reported:

- China: Everyone fits pretty much fits in here.
 Interviewer: That's really good. How's that, how's that so? How's that possible?
 China: Even though everyone's kind of unique they all fit in cause like no one really cares.
 Interviewer: No one cares about what?
 China: Like how unique you are (China, interview, November 2015).

When asked how this was different than middle school, China reported: “Middle school they care more about like the way you looked, the way you dress (China, interview, November 2015).” China remarked that the kids in high school were in school to learn, and worried less about appearance and popularity. She reported feeling more accepted in her school environment.

It is possible that students like China enter high school and are able to reinvent themselves, or simply be themselves. In my interview with Thomas, he exclaimed: “even China has friends here (Thomas, interview, November 2015)”, emphasizing that even someone who reported not being accepted in middle school had the chance to start fresh and experience social success in high school. Additionally, with the decrease of materialism and bullying, students reported a decrease in student fighting.

In addition to the shift in student priorities and maturity, it is possible that students had an easier time adjusting socially because they moved to high school with a

few students from their previous school. The students confirmed that the transition was easier because of these familiar faces. While they initially clung to those students that they knew, they also admitted that by November, these old ties began to break apart as they connected with new people.

Interviewer: Did traveling with a few of your peers from 8th grade to this school, did coming here with them help your transition?

Participant: A little bit, I mean one of my friends, well I was stuck with one of my friends from my old school, so that helped me. He was cool. We've been friends since fourth grade when we were at our old school. Um, I would say like we all came to the same school but I wouldn't say all of us are still together, because like in high school I've seen friendships disband, bonds break. I've seen that with my other old classmates. I keep in touch with them. It kind of saddens me because we've been friends this long and now it just breaks apart. I think that's the thing in high school. It pressures you, peer pressure and everything, like it changes you (Steven, personal interview, November 2015).

Steven's comment that "it changes you" reinforces that the transition to high school is more than just a one or two-month probationary period, it is really a period of adolescent development. The students recognized that it was going to be an ever changing process and while most were pleased with the social progress they had made at the time of the interviews, they acknowledged that it was going to take more time for them to feel the way they did in eighth grade. Steven confirmed: "But here I'm just scratching the surface, well almost scratching the surface. I don't think I'm even close to the position I was at in my old school. Like I have a good relationship with some of the teachers, um, maybe like one or two. But at the same time I don't think I'm in the same position that I was in my old school (Steven, interview, November 2015)."

Overall, students across both schools reported experiencing social success. There are many possible reasons for this. First, they reported that students in high school had different priorities than middle school and developmentally, were more mature. This allowed students to be themselves and feel accepted. Second, students moved up to high school with friends from their eighth grade class. While they stayed close with those friends during the transition, they were able to find new friends to connect with. Additionally, a majority of these students attended Parkesburg school, a school that prioritized community building and that provided extensive programming for students to meet other students early in the year. It is possible that this contributed to the students' comfort level with new peers.

Academic Decline Across the Board

When I interviewed the students in eighth grade, they reported being worried about the extra work that high school teachers will inevitably require, however the majority of them reported feeling prepared at the time. In contrast to their generally positive social experience however, many students reported a challenging academic transition. In this section, I will outline the academic decline that all but one student experienced during the transition to high school. The academic decline includes a decline in student grades and/or an increase in absences or lateness.

The collected report card data shows that all students except for one experienced an academic decline at the end of the first marking period (See Tables 6 and 7). Some students earned multiple failing grades, with one student failing four classes. The student attendance records also changed dramatically between eighth and ninth grade. Most students experienced an increase in both absences and lateness.

Student	# of Failing Grades, MP4 8th grade	# of Failing Grades, MP1 9th grade	Days Absent 8th grade	Days Absent 9th grade	Days Late 8th grade	Days Late 9th grade
Steven	0	2	5	8	4	4
Mason	0	4	14	65	11	103
China	0	1	5	0	9	4
Thomas	0	1	3	3.5	33	24
Carter	0	1	2	2	0	10
Sandy	0	0	7	8	2	5
Lisa	0	0	6	10.5	8	31
David	0	2	11	9	41	65

Student	# of Failing Grades, MP4 8th grade	# of Failing Grades, MP1 9th grade	Days Absent 8th grade	Days Absent 9th grade	Days Late 8th grade	Days Late 9th grade
Joseph	1	3	29	43	42	30

All students were asked about their high school grades during the ninth grade interviews. Many of them reported feeling embarrassed by their performance and admitted not performing to their potential. Steven, who is typically an A/B student reported: “Well my grades this year, I didn’t, um, it’s not really what I would, it’s not

what I would usually get. At my old school I would get A's and B's, maybe one or two C's here and there. My report card now, I just got my report card the other day. Though it is only my first report card, compared to where I've come from at my last school I would say it's really weak, abysmal. I think if my old teachers saw they wouldn't be proud of me (interview, November 2015)." Another student, Thomas, confirmed that he "slacked this first quarter (Thomas, interview, November 2015)."

When asked why this happened, many students agreed that the work was more difficult. Many of them also made a direct connection to the social pressures of the high school transition, and stated that the social transition took precedence over their grades. Steven reported: "I think sometimes the transition got to my head a little bit and sometimes peer pressure. I'm more, to be honest, I'm more of a procrastinator. At my old school, I'm surprised how I ever did homework at that time. I think it's because the homework now is getting so hard, and so complicated, it's like I can't do this, so I just push it to the side. But um, and peer pressure sometimes too because when I first came here I just wanted to make friends, I wanted to fit in and I think I got caught up more into that than my school work so that was another downside (Steven, personal interview, November 2015)." Steven admits that the interpersonal aspect of this transition was more important than the instructional aspect. Many students echoed the same priorities.

While some students were aware of how bad their grades were, many other students were purposefully less informed. They confirmed that they were performing poorly in school but had very few other details and did not seem interested in looking at their grades. A few students did not even pick up their report cards.

- Interviewer: That's good to know. How are your grades?
 Joseph: Uh, I don't know...I know I do my work though, but I know that I never seen them.
 Interviewer: Okay. You haven't seen your grades yet. Did you come to report card conferences?
 Joseph: No (Joseph, interview, November 2015).

Another student, Carter, guessed as to what his grades might be. He knew he was not doing well academically and admitted that he was not sure what his report card looked like, but said he was working on it.

- Interviewer: How are your grades compared to last year?
 Carter: Uh, well I got I, I have to be better than I did like in the other years.
 Interviewer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Are you doing better than last year?
 Carter: Not currently, but I'm working on it.
 Interviewer: Okay. What would you say your grades are like?
 Carter: Uh, like, probably like Cs and Ds.
 Interviewer: Okay. What did you have in middle school?
 Carter: Uh. I had like As, Bs, and a couple Cs. (Carter, interview, November 2015).

Sometimes I found a discrepancy between a student's academic performance and what they were reporting. For example, Joseph reported that math was his favorite class. This was the class that he was taking when I arrived for my interview. When I went to meet with him, he was asleep in class. Further, even though Joseph's grades were low, he underrepresented his poor performance. When asked about his academic transition and preparedness, Joseph reported:

- Participant: Okay, I don't know what to say, like, all right, I'm being honest though. When I came to high school, I thought it was 'gonna be bad, but it actually turned out good.
 Interviewer: That's good. Tell me more about that. What do you mean?
 Participant: Like, like, when I came here, I thought that it was 'gonna be like people like more on me that should be and like, when I started, like, I thought it was 'gonna be like way harder work, but like Miss Smith* I mean, Miss Smith, she

taught me way more than I think I should have learned in 8th grade.

Interviewer: That's good, so you feel prepared?

Participant: Yeah (Joseph, interview, November 2015).

The amount of academic decline differed for all students, but the overall trend of decline and disconnection was clear.

Despite the decline, the students reported that they were invested in their academic work. They wanted to understand the material they were being taught. When asked about their best days in high school, the students recalled days where they were celebrated for academic reasons. They reported wanting to make their teachers and parents proud. My interview with Steven is a good example of this:

Interviewer: I was going to ask you if you are involved in any activities here.

Steven: I'd like to play for the baseball team here at this school but this school partners with Monroe High School for a lot of sports.

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm.

Steven: But I'd love to do that. Make one of the best players I can be and still get good grades so I can be recruited by a good college. Maybe a coach can see me and recruit me to come play for college.

Interviewer: That would be nice.

Steven: That would be my dream for that to happen. I would feel like I fulfilled everything that my parents have wanted of me since I was born. To make them proud of me would be the best feeling in the world (Steven, interview, November 2015).

Steven's vision of his future suggests he cares about traditional markers of achievement and hopes to succeed in high school.

Overall, students from both schools reported a positive social transition but experienced academic decline in their move to high school. Some students reported that the work was indeed more difficult. Others admitted that making new friends and

beginning to establish a reputation took precedence over their academics. Some students were aware of the specific grades involved in their academic decline while others reported not even collecting their report card at conferences. In the discussion of their academic decline, students mentioned the predicted disappointment of their eighth grade teachers, showing that the respect from those teachers was important to them. These students also discussed life goals including attending college and getting a good job to make their parents happy. The students reported knowing what they needed to do to be successful, but had a difficult time balancing this with the other transitions they were making during the first semester of high school.

Eighth Grade Predictions

Existing transition research argues that we can determine the success of a student's transition by looking at their performance in eighth grade. In this section, I will outline two different student trajectories. The first one is of Steven, who was predicted to perform well academically in high school based on his strong eighth grade profile. The second trajectory is that of Mason, someone who was not predicted to perform well based on his high numbers of discipline referrals and below average academic scores.

Steven

Steven was a graduate of McHeartly. In eighth grade, he performed well academically. He received A's and B's, and was rarely absent or late. In our eighth grade interview, he spoke about maturity and taking his school work seriously. When I interviewed him in high school however, he let me know that his grades were "abysmal" and that his old teachers would be disappointed by his performance. When I asked him

why this might have happened, he told me that the peer pressure was too much for him.

He admitted that his interest in socializing took precedence over his academics.

Interestingly, Steven reported a successful transition to Parkesburg despite his academic decline. He was motivated by meeting new peers, demonstrating the importance of interpersonal needs for adolescents. Additionally, he remarked often about his new teachers in his interviews. Steven reported being pleasantly surprised by the relationships he was able to build with them in just three months.

Overall, Steven reported being happy and feeling positive about his ninth grade experience. The significance of Steven's story is that even with a strong academic profile in eighth grade, students still struggle during the transition to high school. Even the most focused eighth graders in this research prioritized their interpersonal needs over their instructional and organizational needs at the beginning of ninth grade. All students, including academically strong students, need more adult support and guidance during this time.

Mason

Mason was also a graduate of McHeartly. Mason earned C's and D's, and had poor behavior marks. As outlined by extant research, discipline referrals and poor behavior marks in eighth grade predict poor academic performance in ninth grade. These predictions turned out to be accurate.

During his eighth grade interview, Mason talked about how he had many friends who were in high school and reported that he felt confident about the transition. Mason's ninth grade story, however, depicts a student whose high school transition experience began with a very quick decline in performance, both in academics and attendance. This

decline continued throughout the year. Out of all of the students in this research, he is the only one who failed all of his classes, which impacted the rest of his high school experience.

In our interview, Mason did not give the impression that he was feeling well-connected in his new school. When asked about his relationships with his new teachers, Mason replied “relationships ... I don't really got a good relationship with my teachers (personal interview, November 2015).” He also reported missing his McHeartly friends and teachers.

When I interviewed Mason in the fall of ninth grade, he was failing all of his classes. In our interview, he reported that he regretted slacking off in the first semester. Mason and I discussed the qualities of successful students in high school.

- Interviewer: And what do you think are some characteristics of students who are successful in high school?
- Participant: Successful ... Um, a lot of kids, there's a lot of smart kids here, like, I could do the work, I just choose not to.
- Interviewer: What kinds of things do you need to be successful in this high school? Whether it's from others or yourself?
- Participant: I would be good if I had motivation, I know that (Mason, personal interview, November 2015).

He indicated several times that he did not have the motivation to complete the work. He also admitted that he did not check his grades. He knew that they were bad but did not want to face the reality of checking them. When discussing two particularly tough classes, Mason mentioned that his strategy in dealing with it was to get to school and just get them over with, since they were the first two classes of the day. While he was able to verbalize the strategy, he was not able to implement it. He missed 65 of 180 days of school in ninth grade and was late 103 times.

In talking about adult support at home, Mason's counselor reported: "I feel for him. I mean, I met with his ... Not met, because she doesn't show up but ...I called his mother on the phone and it seems to me like there is nobody really keeping track of him (Ms. Zane, interview, November 2015)." Ms. Zane reported being concerned about Mason because she did not feel as if anyone at home was guiding him. It did not seem that anyone at school was either.

Mason ended up failing every subject for the year and being asked to leave Parkesburg to repeat ninth grade somewhere else. He reached out to me in the fall of the following year to help him re-apply to another special admission high school. At that time, he was attending an online charter school. Since the application process involves checking the academic and behavioral records of your last full year of school, I suggested to Mason that he consider another route since it was unlikely that a special admission school was going to consider his application with his attendance and academic record. Without more personal guidance, Mason was unable to get into any Sommerville public schools and continued his enrollment at the online charter school.

Stage-Environment Fit Theory: Understanding Ninth Grade Struggles

In this section, I will reiterate the main points of the stage-environment fit theory. Then, I will review the three components of stage-environment fit in a discussion on adolescent needs and how/if the high schools worked to meet these needs. Finally, I will review the trajectories of both Steven and Mason to emphasize that it is important to consider the needs of students who are coming to high school with strong academic profiles, as well as those students who are not.

Theory

Stage-environment fit theory suggests that only when environmental and developmental trajectories align do students have a positive transition experience. When these variables are not aligned, students will experience motivational decline (Eccles & Midgley, 1993). As we know from extant research, adolescents have unique needs to be met in a variety of areas.

Similar to our eighth grade population discussed in Chapter 4, the ninth graders in this research are also considered adolescents and have the same needs. They yearn for independence and freedom. They look for opportunities to express their individuality and the ability to find meaning or relevance in their school work. Opportunities for increased interpersonal interactions are important to them. Building healthy relationships with their teachers is critical. Instructionally, while they long for independence, they still need adult support. Organizationally, they need a system of decreased adult guidance as they move towards independence with the curriculum.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the most successful and developmentally responsive programs will meet student needs in interpersonal, instructional and organizational ways. Meeting one but not all does not result in the most positive student outcomes. Since almost all of the students experienced a decline in academics, behavior or attendance, stage-environment fit theory would predict that not all of their needs were being met.

Below I will outline specific examples of how Parkesburg worked to meet student needs in interpersonal and organizational ways. I will also outline how Monroe's Ninth Grade Academy structure helped to meet one student's organizational needs, but not his

interpersonal needs. Finally, I will discuss the area that neither school met: student instructional needs.

Interpersonal Needs

Interpersonal needs were the most important to the students in this research. Ninth grade students prioritized building their new community over their academics in the first couple months of high school. Parkesburg supported these interpersonal aims by rostering ninth grade students to a social development class, strictly for freshmen, which the students reported helped meet their needs to adjust to their new setting. They also held various school-wide ice breakers for ninth to twelfth grade students in the beginning of the school year. Parkesburg worked to ensure that the entire school community was familiar with each other. Many teachers provided a safe space for the students to gather and socialize during unstructured times.

Outside of the purposeful relationship development facilitated by Mr. Cooper, Monroe did not intentionally work to meet students' interpersonal needs. In this controlled structure, there were very few opportunities for students to engage with other students. Additionally, besides ROTC, they did not have clubs or any real transition programming to help students feel comfortable in their new space.

Organizational Needs

Organizationally, Parkesburg designed various school systems to help meet ninth grade needs. For example, in the beginning of the school year, they held a Ninth Grade Orientation to help new students understand the new school processes. Parkesburg also utilized an advisory system with their students, which was a place for students to meet in the morning and prepare for the day.

Monroe utilized a Freshman Academy system, which helped ninth graders adjust to the school without added distractions. Joseph also reported feeling safe in this space. The academy structure was the only work Monroe put towards meeting students' organizational needs. They did not offer a true Orientation for students to become used to the new school process. Students were left to meet their organizational needs on their own.

Instructional Needs

Since students experienced an academic decline, it is possible that their unmet needs were in the area of instruction. In their ninth grade interviews, students reported that the work was much harder and that some of their teachers were not responsive to their need to make the academic transition slowly. Additionally, students were not asked for their input regarding curriculum and much of their performance was based on rote memorization. The students reported recognizing some of the lessons in ninth grade but generally, they were overwhelmed with the amount of work assigned to them. Instead of having their work broken down by nightly assignments, students were given a mix of week-long projects and daily homework, which they reported felt challenging for them to manage while managing other aspects of the transition.

Students were given a lot of freedom in high school, freedom that my research indicates they might not have been ready for. They were not given enough academic support from teachers. In fact, many of the students at Parkesburg had not even met their counselor by the time I interviewed them in November. Those who were struggling academically knew their grades were low, but did not know what to do about it. Many of

the students placed the blame on themselves. Overall though, students needed more structure and support around classwork and homework.

The McHeartly students left a tight-knit community and had to start over again, socially and academically. The Leemer students had just experienced the recent transition to middle school and now were faced with another one. In both situations, the students had to start from the bottom and experienced the same academic and motivational decline that the research suggests.

Magnitude of Decline

The magnitude of the academic decline differed between students. Steven, a student who was predicted to do well in high school, did not display strong academic performance during the first three months of high school. After the first quarter, Steven had failed one course. He did not have attendance issues, however. Despite his “abysmal” grades, Steven reported a positive transition experience.

Mason, the student who experienced the greatest decline, performed at a slightly below average level in eighth grade, but also had significant behavior problems. Academically, he floundered at the high school level. Since Mason was a student who reported not trusting people quickly, and having few friends for this reason, developing relationships with his new peers and teachers was difficult. When he did not attempt to form these relationships in the beginning of the school year, he watched the other students form community and felt left behind, which possibly was the reason for his significant academic and motivational decline.

While the magnitude of their decline differed, both students had developmental needs that were not being met. Extant research points to meeting interpersonal needs

being critical for ninth grade students. My data supports this research. Steven was able to engage with his new peers and teachers easily. In fact, this consumed much of his time. For a student like Mason, however, who reported that he has a difficult time engaging interpersonally, meeting this need is more of a challenge. Schools that are seeking to be most developmentally responsive should consider more support for students who come to high school from a variety of backgrounds and academic levels.

Analysis

Stage-environment fit theory predicts that students who are enrolled in environments that meet their developmental needs at the time are more likely to experience positive academic outcomes. These needs must be met in interpersonal, instructional and organizational areas. All three of these components should be addressed in a school program that is designed to be developmentally responsive to adolescents.

Interpersonal needs were students' greatest focus when they made the transition to high school. Students from both Parkesburg and Monroe spent the first three months trying to make connections with new peers and teachers. Parkesburg was able to meet students' interpersonal needs while Monroe was not. Organizationally, Parkesburg offered students resources such as an in-depth Orientation, while Monroe offered a Freshman Academy structure. Finally, both schools struggled meeting students' instructional needs. The freedoms that students were given with their coursework were too intense for students to handle well. Even top performing students like Steven experienced an academic decline, demonstrating that all students need additional support and guidance as they make this transition. Extant research indicates that this support is

best received by an adult mentor at the school. My research confirms the importance of students to build healthy relationships.

Conclusion

To answer my research question of how students in an urban educational environment experienced the transition process, I re-interviewed my participants once they advanced to high school. My data showed that students who attended both the neighborhood and special admission high schools experienced social success. All students were pleased with the increased focus on academics in high school, with a decrease in materialism and bullying. Their interpersonal needs were the focus of their transition, and for most of the students, these needs were met. Organizationally, both high school structures offered at least one resource to help students with the transition. Instructionally, however, student needs were not met. All students but one experienced academic decline when they transitioned to high school, demonstrating that they needed more teacher guidance and instructional support those first few months of high school to help them adjust. The data shows the importance of schools working to meet student needs in interpersonal, organizational and instructional ways when they are making the transition to high school. Using Steven as an example, meeting needs in one or two areas, but not all three, does not result in the most positive outcomes.

Additionally, while stage-environment fit theory is based on meeting the needs of groups of adolescent students, the eighth grade prediction research helps us understand that students are coming to high school with a variety of earlier school experiences. In thinking about the similarities and differences between Steven and Mason, it would be helpful for schools to consider various student types. For example, while interpersonal

development seems to be critical to a successful transition, not all students are able to form those relationships at the same pace. Schools should design programming that would meet these varied student needs. In the final chapter, I will discuss potential interventions to assist the students' transition based on the findings of this research.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

My primary research question was *“How do students in an urban school district experience the initial transition from eighth to ninth grade and what are the factors that support and/or impede their success?”* Ultimately, a culmination of experience shapes a student’s eighth to ninth grade transition process. In this chapter, I will outline the two major findings of this research. I will briefly review other findings as they relate to the research sub-questions. Next, I will discuss implications for policy and practice. Finally, I will discuss the strengths and weakness of this project, and will make suggestions for the future direction of high school transition research.

Summary of Findings

One major finding in this research is that the students who graduated from the smaller neighborhood elementary school, McHeartly, experienced a greater social capacity within their community than did the students from the middle school, Leemer. Their community was more unified, which made for stronger teacher-student relationships, and a more supportive high school transition process. In contrast, the Leemer school climate was much more challenging and the students were not able to be supported in the same way, which impacted their high school admissions process and outcome. A higher percentage of the McHeartly students were accepted into one of the special admission high schools than the Leemer students.

The second major finding in this research is that when both groups of students arrived in high school, regardless of the sending or receiving school, all but one of the students experienced varying degrees of academic decline, and an increase in absences

and lateness. The McHeartly community was able to help their students get into better high schools, but once the students made the transition, these efforts did not protect them from the well-documented challenges of starting ninth grade.

To answer the first two sub-questions, *'How do students' experiences in eighth grade shape their ninth grade year?'* and *'In what ways does the sending school attempt to help students prepare for the transition to high school?'* I compared student interviews from both eighth and ninth grade as well as eighth grade teacher interviews. Since the follow-up interviews occurred in November of ninth grade, it is only possible to discuss how the students' eighth grade experience shaped the initial part of their ninth grade year.

The high school application process is difficult to navigate. Both McHeartly and Leemer had teachers who worked with students on this process. Through these initial interviews, it was clear that the students were not being prepared in the same way at both schools. Academically, the McHeartly teachers supplemented the eighth grade curriculum with more rigorous work so that the students were confident and prepared for the ninth grade curriculum. Since many of the students had been enrolled there since Kindergarten, the teachers were familiar with their strengths and areas needing improvement. They reported seeing it as their job to ensure the students had already experienced the academic material they would see in high school.

The students at McHeartly reported taking the high school application process seriously. When high schools came to present to the students, they were fully engaged. The teachers were a hands-on part of the high school application process, encouraging students to do their research. The McHeartly students reported feeling that the application process was a group effort.

This same preparation was not done at Leemer, even with the two or three teachers who did put the extra time in with students. The school struggled with student and staff morale, and student and teacher attendance, which led to students missing weeks of important math and literacy curriculum, putting them very behind their peers. There were some teachers at Leemer who were invested in the application and transition process, but the school was much larger than McHeartly, with 150 eighth grade students to prepare. Neither the students nor teachers reported any additional transition planning for the students.

Since McHeartly was a stronger school community, many of their students experienced a more supportive high school application process in eighth grade. This enabled more of them to get into special admission schools, with some of the students needing to utilize the school's social capital. The Leemer community was not as unified, which made for a less supportive high school application process in eighth grade.

When the students made the transition to high school, many of them reported social success with their peers. Generally, they reported positive feelings about their new school. However, most of them, regardless of receiving high school, experienced an academic decline, or trouble with attendance and lateness. The support did not isolate them from the initial academic decline that extant research shows is typical of ninth grade. We can conclude that community support in eighth grade can help students advance to a special admission school but that this eighth grade experience does not necessarily shape the initial ninth grade transition experience.

Addressing the question, *“What are students’ perceptions of their needs as they make the transition to high school and how are they addressed by existing transition*

programming?” involved analyzing student interviews. Socially, students knew that they were headed for a big social change. They reported being worried about bullying and fights and needing to feel connected to teachers and students in high school. Many students reported being less concerned when they had peers who they knew were going to high school with them, even if they were not close friends. These students were a familiar face to get them through the first few weeks where everything is new.

Some of the Leemer students were less concerned about developing relationships and more focused on being in a school where they would focus on their school work. The Leemer students were coming from an environment that could be chaotic at times. Having had this experience, many of these students reported that they were looking for a calmer environment to get a better education.

This need for connection and a calmer educational environment was addressed by the programming offered at both high schools. Parkesburg emphasized community building throughout the school, encouraging ninth grade students to become familiar with older students. Monroe’s school organization included a Ninth Grade Academy structure, and one student reported it was “pure safety (Joseph, November 2015).” Despite these resources in place, students still suffered academic declines at both high schools, and regardless of sending school.

To answer the questions: “*Which factors promote the establishment of a connection to school? Which factors hinder this connection? Which factors mitigate the stress a student might feel in their new environment?*” I again utilized high school interview data. Initially, transitioning to high school with friends or acquaintances from the eighth grade class did mitigate stress for students. Within a month of the transition,

these old groups dissipated and new social circles began to form. The students at Parkesburg spent a lot of their free time in their teacher's classrooms with other students. Developing a group to identify with, whether it is club membership or the unofficial group of students who have lunch in the teacher's classroom, is important in helping a student feel connected to their school. Students are still likely to feel the stress of the transition weighing them down, but if they have a social circle to share this stress with, it is mitigated.

Students experience social interactions every day that further their relationships in school. Students who do not attend school regularly, begin to feel left out and disconnected. Mason, the student who was asked to leave Parkesburg after his freshman year, was late and absent so often that he was unable to develop relationships with friends. He was not connected to teachers either since he was missing so much school work and class time. He felt isolated, and suffered socially and academically.

To answer the question, "*How do eighth grade teachers and school staff report involvement in preparing students for ninth grade?*" I utilized teacher and student interviews. Generally, most teachers reported being actively engaged in the transition process, whether adjusting the rigor of the curriculum or letting students practice with certain freedoms. It was clear from my research though, that the students who graduated from McHeartly's eighth grade class were given the added benefits of community and social capital, with many adults working for them so they could attend better high schools. There were two teachers at Leemer who were instrumental in the high school application process for their students. These teachers assisted with the high school

research, and in completing applications but their efforts were not enough to reverse the negative culture of the school.

To answer the question, *“How do ninth grade teachers and school staff report supporting students during their ninth grade year?”* I utilized teacher and student interviews. The high school teachers are overwhelmed as they have many responsibilities. Ms. Zane, the counselor from Parkesburg, reported not being able to spend time with ninth graders because of her caseload. She reported that she began working with the ninth graders after she had finished the twelfth grade college applications, which was in the spring of their ninth grade year. This support is given too late in their transition, and so the students sought out other adult mentors in the teaching staff.

The ninth grade teacher at Monroe reported focusing on developing relationships with students to help them feel more connected. He suggested that his connection with them, and the connection they make with peers in school organizations were important in order for students to experience social success, and thus academic success.

To answer the questions of: *“How do students perceive these relationships?”*, and *“How do these relationships differ across the four different types of schools?”* I utilized student and teacher interview data. Students were grateful to the teachers from both the sending and receiving schools who were helpful to them. Positive student-teacher relationships are critical in a student’s transition experience. Negative student-teacher relationships are a source of stress, and students reported that in these situations, they did not work to their potential.

In this research, students experienced the transition differently, depending on which school they attended. Both sending schools were neighborhood schools. Since one was a K-8 school, the class sizes were significantly smaller, which could have contributed to the community feel of the school. Since there was a tight knit community at McHeartly, and strong social capital, the students engaged in the high school application process had more opportunity than the students from Leemer did.

Extant research shows that most high school students experience an academic decline. This finding held true for this study. In ninth grade, finding their new social circle became a priority for students, regardless of their sending and receiving schools. The students were actively looking for new friends, and for the first few months of the school year, they neglected their academics. For some of these students, the damage was irreversible. Mason struggled so much that he could not make up the work, failed all of his classes for the year, and was asked to leave the special admission high school in June. For other students, they received more Ds or Fs than they ever had before during the first marking period of freshman year. For most of them, they were well-connected socially, but their grades suffered.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Stage-environment fit theory argues that an environment must meet student needs in order for them to be successful. It appears that students' need for teacher connection and peer acceptance was a priority for them as they made the transition to high school. Overall, the students reported needing to connect with teachers as if they were family.

In addition to developing close relationships with their teachers, students reported that student-student relationships were important to them because they contributed to a

family-like environment. The importance of developing these relationships between students can be seen in their focus on them during the first three months of high school. Many students reported a positive transition to high school because socially, they were successful at building a new community. Since students reported experiencing social success, but also experienced academic declines we can assume that their greatest needs were interpersonal and that the environment did not support them to pursue organizational, interpersonal and academic goals at the same time.

In this section, I will outline transition suggestions to help schools work to meet the needs of students in interpersonal, instructional and organizational areas. An ideal transition program would seek to meet student needs in all three of these areas so the suggestions below may need to be utilized in conjunction with each other. Additionally, these suggestions are for students in poor, urban districts, since they experience the transition differently than those in wealthier organizations.

Bridge Program

In order to meet these interpersonal needs without the pressures of new instruction, I suggest that all receiving schools work to organize a summer bridge program. The bridge program would connect the end of eighth grade to the beginning of ninth grade over the summer. It could also be considered a longer orientation program. While the program would not need to include a full offering of academic classes, it should emphasize academic enrichment so that students do not experience regression between eighth and ninth grades. During the bridge program, ninth grade students can meet each other and build community before school starts. This way, by the time school

begins, they are more comfortable in their new relationships with peers and teachers, and can focus on their new instruction.

Advisory

Extant research suggests that adolescents need to feel known and that relationships with adults in their life are important. Considering stage-environment fit theory, a large high school would be considered a poor match with a student who needed familiar adult support. I would argue that all adolescent students entering high school need this familiarity and support.

One way to ensure that the interpersonal needs of students continue to be met is to organize the school so that small groups of freshman have a “home.” This can be achieved through freshman advisories, where small groups of freshman students meet once a day for a purposeful lesson. Another way to do this is through “families,” where students from each grade in high school are grouped together for regular meetings and mentorship. Ninth grade students need a smaller group of peers to connect with at the beginning stages of the transition.

Adult Mentor

Since adolescents look to build healthy relationships with adults in their lives who are not their parents, helping them to build a relationship with their teachers is critical. These adolescent students are struggling with living between childhood and adulthood. They need independence, but also constant guidance. Having an adult mentor who is not part of their family will help them meet these complex needs. If the school utilizes a freshman advisory structure, this adult mentor might be their advisory teacher. The adult mentor should provide instructional support as well as opportunities for the student to

talk with them about non-instructional related issues. Extant data, as well as the data from McHeartly students shows how effective strong student-teacher relationships are, both in and out of the classroom.

Instructional Support

Instructionally, students need more guidance with adjusting to the curriculum and academic structure of high school. Students are entering high school with different eighth grade experiences. The students in my research were thrown into the new setting, and given more freedom than they could handle. Ninth grade students should be given a planner, as well as access to classwork and homework online. Ninth grade teachers should plan together, so that large projects are assigned with space in between. Tutoring should be available as an in school activity, possibly during a club period. The students need to be given much more academic support in order for them to be successful.

Student Feedback

Since neither adolescence nor the high school transition is considered a singular event, the fluidity of student experiences needs to be emphasized. Very rarely, however, are students asked to give feedback on their experiences. In fact, attempts to intervene in school improvement efforts rarely consider the effect of the school environment on adolescents (Booth & Gerard, 2014). Since successful transition programming should address the main three groups of people who are affected by the process: parents, teachers and administrators, and students (Smith, 1997), it is important to begin to survey our students regarding their educational experiences on a regular basis. To ensure that the environment is meeting the changing needs of adolescent students, educational leaders should be surveying students on their school experience quarterly. I was able to

obtain significant data simply by meeting with students to get their input. Additionally, staff and faculty of ninth grade students should be offered professional development about the adolescent developmental period. As educational leaders, we need to be more aware of this tumultuous transition time and to be ready to make academic or structural changes to ensure that our students are being best supported.

Reflection on Stage-Environment Fit Theory

While stage-environment fit theory is not one which educational leaders often use, my research suggests that it could be an important one to consider, especially if working with adolescents, because it emphasizes their unique needs in interpersonal, instructional and academic areas of school. This theory suggests that in order to create developmentally responsive high schools, we must meet student needs in all three areas. While students may organically work towards meeting their own interpersonal needs, schools must consider their contributions towards student success, especially in instructional ways since it is difficult for students to meet those needs on their own.

Opportunity

Extant research tells us that the transition to high school is a tumultuous time. The data of this study echoes this thought since almost all of the students experienced the academic decline that the literature predicts. Through this research, however, we know how important the interpersonal needs of students are, and that they naturally focus on these when adjusting to a new school setting. This research, particularly the interviews from McHeartly, helped us to understand the importance of students having a trusted adult mentor in their academic lives. Further, while all students experienced an academic decline in this area, those who reported interpersonal success were least affected. Those

students like Mason, who reported not having a connection with peers or teachers, or Joseph, who was enrolled in a school that did not support student interpersonal needs, experienced the greatest loss.

It is discouraging that almost all of the students, even those who felt prepared to excel in high school, experienced failure. However, if we utilize the implications outlined above in future educational policy and practice, there is a chance for us to improve the quality of school transition programming and increase student success, in high school and beyond.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Study

This study aimed to add to existing school transition research by examining the high school transition process for a group of students in an urban city in Pennsylvania. In this section, I will outline the strengths of this study. I will also discuss the limitations of this research and make suggestions for future research in this area.

One strength of this study is that it utilized students from two different settings, K-8 and 6 – 8. It was also beneficial that these two schools were part of the same district and located in the same general area. This allowed for comparison between the school settings. Additionally, there were two different high school settings included in this research, one special admission school and one comprehensive high school. This allowed for cross-comparison of students from both sending and receiving school settings.

Another strength of this research is that it included the teachers' perspectives at each level. I collected input from teachers who had worked with students on the high school application process in eighth grade as well as those teachers who worked with the

same students on a ninth grade level. Additionally, I was able to interview a counselor from both eighth and ninth grade, which was important feedback across grade levels.

One weakness of this research was that the data collection time period was short given the nature of the project. While the students were followed from eighth grade to high school, the second interviews occurred in November of ninth grade year, only three months into their high school transition. Extant research demonstrates the existence of a “honeymoon period” where students report their transition experience more positively initially but as time goes on, the students find more negative things to report about the school programming and structure (Booth & Gerard, 2014). If this is the case, it would have been beneficial to examine students throughout their ninth grade year to see if/how their reports changed.

Another weakness of this research was that parent data was not collected. Extant research tells us that the three main groups of people involved in the transition process are the students, teachers and parents. Without parent interviews, the data on the parent-teacher relationships and parent support of students is only one-sided.

A third weakness of this study was the existence of my relationship with the students and parents before I recruited them as participants. I went to great lengths to ensure the students did not feel coerced into participating and also made it clear before the interviews that there were no right or wrong answers. Despite this, it is possible the students answered me differently because I was their counselor. This existing counselor-student relationship may have encouraged the students to report more positively to me than they would an interviewer they did not know.

A final weakness of this research is that my sample was much more uneven than I intended it to be. Initially, I aimed to recruit 20 students in eighth grade, but was only able to recruit 14 across the two sending schools. I hoped to follow all of them to ninth grade where the plan was for half of the students to attend Parkesburg and half to attend Monroe. This, unfortunately, was not possible. Only one of my students ended up enrolling at Monroe while eight ended up enrolling at Parkesburg. This imbalance created a data set with very little student data from Monroe, which could mean that it was not portrayed accurately. Additionally, I only was able to recruit two teachers from the high school level, one from each high school. This limited my data on the teacher reported ninth grade experience.

Since the time frame to complete the study was short, I only collected data on the initial transition to ninth grade. Additionally, since I did not include parent interviews, the data set was only from the perspectives of the students and teachers. Finally, since I was the counselor for the students in eighth grade, and had an existing relationship with the students, it is possible that they felt the need to answer questions about the transition in a positive way. While these are considered weaknesses of this research, they do help shape the direction of future research.

Suggestions for Future Research

Suggestions for future transition research would include extending the timeline for the project, either for the full year of ninth grade or for the full four years of high school to see how students ultimately performed. This would allow us to collect data outside of the “honeymoon” period and more fully examine the fluid transitional process. While the community feel of McHeartly did not isolate the students from the academic

decline in ninth grade, it would be interesting to see if it had any long-term positive effect.

Additionally, since they are considered an important part of the transition triangle, I would suggest that future research include parent interviews. Having the parent perspective would help balance out the teacher interviews and would give us a more comprehensive data set. Parent interviews would help us understand more about the student's developmental transition as seen at home.

Finally, in future transition research, it will be beneficial to limit the number of schools involved and focus on just one sending school and one receiving school. The schools in this urban district are so distinct from each other that to compare the experiences of students between both sending and receiving schools was challenging. Focusing on one sending school and one receiving school might help us understand which supports students need in place in one specific setting.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Akos, P., & Galassi, J. P. (2004). Gender and race as variables in psychosocial adjustment to middle and high school. *Journal of Educational Research, 98*(2), 102-108.
- Akos, P., & Galassi, J. P. (2004a). Middle and high school transitions as viewed by students, parents, and teachers. *Professional School Counseling, 7*(4), 212-221.
- Alliance for Excellent Education. (2011) *Education and the Economy: Boosting the Nation's Economy by Improving High School Graduation Rates*. Retrieved from https://www.all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/NationalStates_seb.pdf
- Alspaugh, J. W. (1998a). Achievement loss associated with the transition to middle school and high school. *Journal of Educational Research, 92*(1), 20.
- Alspaugh, J. W. (1998b). The relationship of school-to-school transitions and school size to high school drop-out rates. *High School Journal, 81*(3), 154.
- Baker, D. & Stevenson, D. (1986). Mothers' strategies for children's school achievement: Managing the transition to high school. *Sociology of Education, 59*(3), 156-166.
- Barber, B. K., & Olsen, J. A. (2004). Assessing the Transitions to Middle and High School. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 19*(1), 3-30.
- Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. (2004). *Locating the drop-out crisis. which high schools produce the nation's drop-outs? Where are they located? Who attends them?*. (Research No. Report 70). Baltimore, MD: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPR/Johns Hopkins University). Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED484525.pdf>
- Barone, C., Aguirre-Deandreis, A. I., & Trickett, E. J. (1991). Means-ends problem-solving skills, life stress, and social support as mediators of adjustment in the normative transition to high school. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 19*, 207-225.
- Benner, A. & Graham, S. (1997). Navigating the transition to multi-ethnic urban high schools: Changing ethnic congruence and adolescents' school related affect. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 17*(1), 207-220.
- Benner, A. D., & Wang, Y. (2014). Shifting attendance trajectories from middle to high school: Influences of school transitions and changing school contexts. *Developmental Psychology, 50*(4), 1288-1301.

- Bohnert, A. M., Aikins, J., & Arola, N. T. (2013). Regrouping: organized activity involvement and social adjustment across the transition to high school. *New Directions for Child & Adolescent Development*, 2013(140), 57-75.
- Booth, M. Z., & Gerard, J. M. (2014). Adolescents' stage-environment fit in middle and high school: The relationship between students' perceptions of their schools and themselves. *Youth and Society*, 46(6), 735-755.
- Bornsheuer, J., Polonyi, M., Andrews, M., Fore, B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. (2011). The relationship between ninth-grade retention and on-time graduation in a southeast Texas high school. *Journal of At-Risk Issues*, 16(2), 9-16.
- Bry, B. H., & George, F. E. (1980). The preventive effects of early intervention on the attendance and grades of urban adolescents. *Professional Psychology*, 11(2), 252-260.
- Calabrese, R. L. (1987). Adolescence: A growth period conducive to alienation. *Adolescence*, 22(88), 929.
- Catterall, J. (1998). Risk and resilience in student transitions to high school. *American Journal of Education*, 106, 302-333.
- Cohen, J. S., & Smerdon, B. A. (2009). Tightening the drop-out tourniquet: Easing the transition from middle to high school. *Preventing School Failure*, 53(3), 177-184.
- Crosnoe, R. (2009). Family–school connections and the transitions of low-income youths and English language learners from middle school to high school. *Developmental Psychology*, 45(4), 1061-1076.
- Eccles, J., Lord, S., & Midgely, C. (1991). What are we doing to early adolescents? The impact of educational contexts on early adolescents. *American Journal of Education*, 89, 521–542.
- Eccles, J., & Midgley, C. (1993). Development during adolescence. *American Psychologist*, 48(2), 90.
- Eccles, J. S., & Roeser, R. (1999). School and community influences on human development. In M. Bornstein & M. Lamb (Eds.), *Developmental psychology: An advanced textbook* (4th ed., pp. 503–554). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Editorial Projects in Education, Diplomas Count 2011: Beyond High School, Before Baccalaureate, special issue, Education Week 30, no. 34 (2011). Retrieved from https://www.edweek.org/media/dc11_event_presentation1.pdf

- Edwards, J. R., Caplan, R. D., & Harrison, R. V. (1998). Person-environment fit theory: Conceptual foundations, empirical evidence, and directions for future research. In C. L. Cooper (Ed.), *Theories of organizational stress* (pp. 28-67). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellerbrock, C. R., & Kiefer, S. M. (2013). The interplay between adolescent needs and secondary school structures: fostering developmentally responsive middle and high school environments across the transition. *High School Journal*, 96(3), 170-194.
- Falbo, T., Lein, L., & Amador, N. A. (2001). Parental involvement during the transition to high school. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 16(5), 511.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing Drop-outs: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Gutman, L. & Midgely, C. (2000). The role of protective factors in supporting the academic achievement of poor African-American students during the middle school transition. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 29(2), 223-249.
- Gullotta, T. P. (1983). Early adolescence, alienation, and education. *Theory into Practice*, 22(2), 151-154.
- Habeeb, S. (2013). The Ninth-Grade Challenge. *Principal Leadership*, 79(3), 19-25.
- Heppen, J., & Therriault, S. (2008). *Developing early warning systems to identify potential high school drop-outs*. (Descriptive). Washington, D.C.: National High School Center. American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED521558.pdf>
- Herlihy, C. M., & Quint, J. (2006). *Emerging evidence on improving high school student achievement and graduation rates: The effects of four popular improvement programs. issue brief*. National High School Center. American Institutes for Research, 1000 Thomas Jefferson Street NW, Washington, DC 20007. Retrieved from <https://www.mdrc.org/publication/emerging-evidence-improving-high-school-student-achievement-and-graduation-rates>
- Hertzog, C. J., & Lena' Morgan, P. (1998). Breaking the barriers between middle school and high school: Developing a transition team for student success. *NASSP Bulletin*, 82(597), 94-98.
- Hesse-Biber, S. & Leavy, P. (2011). *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

- Horvat, E. (2013). *The Beginner's Guide to Doing Qualitative Research: How to get into the field, collect data and write up your project*. New York, NY: Teacher's College, Columbia University.
- Isakson, K. & Jarvis, P. (1999). The adjustment of adolescents during the transition into high school: A short-term longitudinal study. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 28(1),1-26.
- Letgers, N., & Kerr, K. (2001). *Easing the transition to high school: An investigation of reform practices to promote ninth grade success*. Baltimore, MD: Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University.
- McIntosh, K., Flannery, K. B., Sugai, G., Braun, D. H., & Cochrane, K. L. (2008). Relationships between academics and problem behavior in the transition from middle school to high school. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 10(4), 243-255.
- Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of organization* (Updated ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Morgan, P. L., & Hertzog, C. J. (2001). Designing comprehensive transitions. *Principal Leadership*, 1(7), 10-16.
- Neild, R. & Balfanz, R. (2006). An extreme degree of difficulty: The educational demographics of the urban neighborhood high school. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 11(2), 123-141.
- Neild, R., & Balfanz, R. (2006). *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of [REDACTED]'s Drop-out Crisis, 2000-2005*. [REDACTED] Youth Network. Retrieved from https://pyninc.org/docs/projectuturn_annualreport2006.pdf
- Neild, R., Stoner-Eby, S., & Furstenberg, F. (2008). Connecting Entrance and Departure: The Transition to Ninth Grade and High School Drop-out. *Education & Urban Society*, 40(5), 543-569.
- Neild, R. C., & Weiss, C. C. (1999). *The [REDACTED] education longitudinal study (PELS): Report on the transition to high school in the school district of [REDACTED], [REDACTED], PA: [REDACTED] Education Fund*. Retrieved from <http://www.philaedfund.org/sites/default/files/research-reports/PELS.pdf>
- Newman, B., M., Myers, M. C., Newman, P. R., Lohman, B. J., & Smith, V. L. (2000a). The transition to high school for academically promising, urban, low income African-American youth. *Adolescence*, 35(137), 45-66.

- Newman, B., Lohman, B., Newman, P., Myers, M., Smith, V. (2000b). Experiences of urban youth navigating the transition to ninth grade. *Youth Society*, 31(4), 387-416.
- OECD (2014), *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2014-en>.
- Pearsall, M., (2017). The challenge of advisory and why it's worth the effort: Successful advisory programs can have significant positive impacts on student engagement. *AMLE Magazine*, 5(4), 19-21.
- Reyes, O., Gillock, K., & Kobus, K. (1994). A longitudinal study of school adjustment in urban, minority adolescents: Effects of a high school transition program. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 22(3), 341.
- Rice, J. (2006). The disruptive transition from middle to high school: opportunities for linking policy and practice. *Journal of Educational Policy*. 12(5), 403-417.
- Riehl, C., Pallas, A., Natriello, G. (1999). Rites and wrongs: Institutional explanations for the student course-scheduling process in urban high schools. *American Journal of Education*, 107(2), 116-154.
- Roderick, M., & Camburn, E. (1999). Risk and recovery from course failure in the early years of high school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36, 303–343.
- Roeser, R. W., & Eccles, J. S., Sameroff, A. (2000). School as a context of early adolescents' academic and social-emotional development: A summary... *Elementary School Journal*, 100(5), 443.
- Schaefer, M. B., Malu, K. F., & Yoon, B. (2016). An historical overview of the middle school movement, 1963-2015. *Research in Middle Level Education Online*, 39(5), 1-27.
- Schiller, K. (1999). Effects of Feeder Patterns on Students' Transition to High School. *Sociology of Education*, 72(4), 216-233.
- Seidman, E. (1994). The Impact of School Transitions in Early Adolescence on the Self-System and Perceived Social Context of Poor Urban Youth. *Child Development*, 65(2), 507-522.
- Smith, J. B. (1997). Effects of eight-grade transition programs on high school retention and experiences. *Journal of Educational Research*, 90(3), 144.

- Smith, J. (2008). Student and stakeholder perceptions of the transition to high school. *High School Journal, 91*(3), 32-42.
- Stetser, M., and Stillwell, R. (2014). *Public High School Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Drop-out Rates: School Years 2010–11 and 2011–12*. First Look (NCES 2014-391). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2014391>
- Stone, S. (2003). The Transition to High School. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 12:1*, 47-67.
- Snyder, T. D., *Digest of Education Statistics 2015* (2016-014), (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, 2016). Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2016014>
- Suldo, S. M., & Shaunessy-Dedrick, E. (2013). Changes in stress and psychological adjustment during the transition to high school among freshmen in an accelerated curriculum. *Journal of Advanced Academics, 24*(3), 195-218.
- Thompson, A. & Gregory, A. (2010). Examining the influence of perceived discrimination during African American adolescents' early years of high school. *Education and Urban Society, 43*(3), 3-25.
- Ullman, J. (2014). Ladylike/butch, sporty/dapper: Exploring 'gender climate' with Australian LGBTQ students using stage–environment fit theory. *Sex Education, 14*(4), 430-443.
- Wallace, T., Ye, F., McHugh, R., & Chhoun, V. (2012). The Development of an Adolescent Perception of Being Known Measure. *High School Journal, 95*(4), 19-36.
- Weiss, C. C., & Baker-Smith, E. (2010). Eighth-grade school form and resilience in the transition to high school: A comparison of middle schools and K-8 schools. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 20*(4), 825-839.
- Whitley, J., Lupart, J. L., & Beran, T. (2007). Differences in achievement between adolescents who remain in a K-8 school and those who transition to a junior high school. *Canadian journal of education, v30 n3 p649-669 2007. Canadian Journal of Education, 30*(3), 649-669.

Vasquez-Salgado, Y. & Chavira, G. (2014). The transition from middle school to high school as a developmental process among Latino youth. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 36(1), 79-94.

APPENDIX A**ES/MS STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Tell me a little about yourself. What types of things do you do in your free time?
2. Describe your eighth grade experience.
3. Where do you think you'll be going next year? How do you feel about that?
4. What are you most excited/nervous about?
5. Can you tell me the story of how you ended up choosing that school?
6. Did you get help from any teachers or anyone else at your school when you were making your decision about high school? If yes, tell me more about it.
7. How are you feeling about being in high school next year? Tell me some of your goals.
8. Do you feel ready for high school? Did your school do anything special to help you get ready for making this move?
9. What will you miss most about Elementary/Middle school?
10. What do you need to be successful in this high school setting?
11. How have your teachers been involved in the high school decision process? How have your parents been involved in the high school decision process?

APPENDIX B**ES/MS TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Describe the effect of the high school transition when students advance from eighth grade to ninth grade.
2. What do eighth grade students need most as they make their transition to high school?
3. What do eighth grade students worry most about before the transition? What are they most looking forward to?
4. What do parents worry most about before the transition? What are they most looking forward to?
5. How does High School choice affect student transition?
6. What types of transition programming does this school offer to eighth grade students?
 - a. How effective are these programs?
7. In what ways do you prepare students for their high school experience?
8. What additional characteristics of this school affect their transition experience?
9. What are some ways to improve the current school transition programming?
10. What role do parents play in the transition? How do parents and teachers work together for the benefit of the eighth grade students?
11. What are some characteristics of students who are successful in advancing from eighth grade to ninth grade?
 - a. What are some characteristics of students who struggle with this transition?

APPENDIX C**HS STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. We talked last year when you were in 8th grade. Tell me how it felt moving from 8th to 9th grade.
2. How did you choose this high school? Was this school your first choice? Describe your high school application process.
3. What are you most worried about when you come to school each day? What are you most excited about when you come to school each day?
4. What types of programming does your school offer you to help you meet other students?
5. Are your teachers in high school different than your middle school teachers?
6. What do you need to be successful in this high school?
7. How have your teachers help you these past couple of months?
8. Do you feel that your parents and teachers work together?
9. Have you been able to make new friends here? What are they like?
10. What are your goals for this school year and beyond?
11. Describe one of your best days at school so far. Describe one of your most challenging days.
12. What do you hope stays the same in high school? What do you wish would change?
13. What are some characteristics of students who are successful in high school?
 - a. What are some characteristics of students who struggle with this transition?

APPENDIX D**HS TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Describe the effect of the high school transition when students advance from eighth grade to ninth grade.
2. What do students need most as they make their transition to high school?
3. What do students worry most about during the transition? What are they most looking forward to?
4. What do parents worry most about during the transition? What are they most looking forward to?
5. How does High School choice affect student transition?
6. What types of transition programming does this school offer to incoming ninth grade students?
 - a. How effective are these programs?
7. How connected are the incoming ninth graders to this school? Explain.
8. In what ways do you assist new students in acclimating to their new school environment?
9. What additional characteristics of this school affect a student's transition experience?
10. What are some ways to improve the current school transition programming?
11. What role do parents play in the transition? How do parents and teachers work together for the benefit of ninth grade students?
12. What are some characteristics of students who are successful in navigating the high school transition?
 - a. What are some characteristics of students who struggle with the high school transition?

APPENDIX E**EIGHTH GRADE STUDENT CODES**

1. Current Academic Standing
 - a. Student laziness versus ability
 - b. Student attendance
2. 8th grade experience
 - a. Most challenging part of 8th grade
 - b. Best part of 8th grade
3. School culture
 - a. Student descriptions of Parent/Teacher relationship
 - b. student friendships
 - c. Positive student/teacher relationships
 - d. Negative student teacher relationships
4. High school expectations
 - a. Student excitement
 - b. Student worries
5. Transition Programming
 - a. Application process
 - i. Special admission versus neighborhood school
 - b. Parent involvement
 - c. Teacher involvement
 - d. Counselor role
6. Other transitions (other schools)
7. Application Results
 - a. Disappointed over high school selection
 - b. Regret
 - c. Advice to future students
8. Student connection to current school
9. Student needs to be successful
 - a. Academic needs
 - b. Behavioral needs
10. Student Reported Goals
11. General Student Struggles
 - a. Leemer
 - b. McHeartly

APPENDIX F**NINTH GRADE STUDENT CODES**

1. 9th grade Transition
 - a. Transition Programming
 - b. Transition Fails
2. Positive Reports about 9th Grade
 - a. Best Days
 - b. Student Excitement
3. Negative Reports about 9th Grade
 - a. Challenging Days
4. Teacher Help
5. Student suggestions
6. Parent Support
7. High School Worries
 - a. Social Issues
8. Neighborhood School Comments
9. Missing Middle School
10. Student Goals
11. Connections to School
12. Isolation
13. Academic Decline
14. Unprepared Students
15. Prepared Students
16. High School Differences
17. How I Chose This School
18. Student Excitement
19. Social Success with Transition

APPENDIX G**EIGHTH GRADE TEACHER CODES**

1. Student Relationship with Parents
2. Middle school versus Elementary school
 - a. Benefits of K-8
 - b. Benefits of 6-8
3. Expected barriers moving from 8-9
4. Teacher relationship with Student
 - a. Negative relationship between teacher and student
 - b. Positive relationship between teacher and student
5. Enabling of students
6. Teacher Expectations of high school
 - a. Teacher perception of student needs –as they enter high school
7. Resources
8. Teacher perception of student excitement in regard to transition
9. Teacher perception of student worries in regard to transition process (academic, social)
10. 8th Transition Programming
 - a. Teacher role and experience with 9th grade transition
 - b. Counselor Role
 - c. Suggestions for improvements in transition programming
 - d. Application Process
11. Teacher perception of student preparedness
12. Student Expectations
 - a. Student perception of high school versus reality
 - b. Expected Transition Programming in 9th grade
13. Student Needs
14. Urban environment struggles
15. Teacher relationship with Parents
16. Teacher perception of parent role in the transition process
17. Suggestions for improvements in transition programming
18. Parent Involvement
19. Examples of failure in transition
20. Student Stress
21. Teacher/Parent worries for students moving to 9th
22. School Choice
23. Adolescence
24. School Culture
 - a. 6-8
 - b. K-8
25. Negative teacher to teacher Talk

APPENDIX H**NINTH GRADE TEACHER CODES**

1. Level of Student Preparation
2. K-8 Versus Middle School
3. Transition Programming Effect on 9th grade
4. Student Struggles
 - a. Social Issues
 - b. Academic Issues
5. Successful Students
6. Parental Involvement
7. Effect of School Choice
8. Parent Worries about HS Transition
9. Neighborhood School
10. Student Teacher Relationships
11. Connected to School