MORE THAN JUST A NUMBER: STUDENT AND EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS

ABOUT THE TRANSITION TO NINTH GRADE

By

Jody K. Sloat

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Approved:

_____   _____

Iris Saltiel   Dawn Frazier
Professor of Educational Leadership   Associate Professor of Educational
(Committee Chair)   Leadership
                                              (Committee Member)

_____

Gary Shouppe
Associate Professor of Foundations
(Committee Member)

Name: Jody K. Sloat

Previous degrees:

Date of Current Degree: August 2014

Institution: Columbus State University

Major Field: Educational Leadership

Major Professor: Dr. Iris Saltiel

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Candidate for Degree of Doctor of Education

The transition to ninth grade can be a difficult time for adolescents. New students confront the unknown on the first day, and their anxieties combine with new surroundings, teachers, and older students, to make for a stressful experience (Benner & Graham, 2009). Some students enter high school more prepared to meet academic and social challenges, while others have not matured enough to realize success (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996; Steinberg, 2011). This lacking in maturity leads to high numbers of behavior problems and failures in ninth grade (Alspaugh, 1998; Frey, Ruchkin, Martin & Schwab-Stone, 2009). According to stage-environment fit theory, these transition issues are the result of high schools not meeting the developmental needs of ninth graders. Those adolescents who are in an environment that does not support or even suppresses their needs will experience negative outcomes. (Eccles & Buchanan, 1996; Gutman & Eccles, 2007). Districts across the country are discovering ways to ease the transition period from middle to high school for students−including "school-within-a-school"

freshman academies. Research indicates ninth-grade academies improve student

achievement and behavior (McIntosh & White, 2006; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Styron

& Peasant, 2010), yet few studies ask students and educators what they think about the

programs. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare both

student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school using

stage-environment fit theory in one Southeastern school district southwest of Atlanta.

Furthermore, comparisons of perceptions were made between students and educators

participating in a freshman academy and those in a traditional high school. This study

was made to help administrators learn more about perceptions of students and educators

regarding the first year of high school.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

For most first-time freshmen, the transition to high school occurs during middle adolescence, ages 14-15 (Buchanan, Eccles & Becker, 1992; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Healthy adolescents have mastered the social and cognitive skills that allow for a successful adaptation to the challenges of high school. However, even psychologically healthy adolescents often experience a decrease in self-esteem before and during this transition due to worries about challenging curriculum, balancing their time and interacting with new and older students. Offer and Offer (1975) noted increased adjustments (in terms of school, home and peer relationships) and vulnerability were pillars of this time period. The temperaments of adolescents differ from young children and adults and can often be described by swings in mood and energy and increased anxiety, self-consciousness and risk-taking (Buchanan, Eccles & Becker, 1992; Steinberg, 2011). They are also in the throes of puberty, struggling with the biological changes that influence behavior and self-esteem. Adolescents also have conflicting needs for increased autonomy and parental support (Frey, Ruchkin, Martin & Schwab-Stone, 2009). Moreover, students are trying to find their own identity, develop larger social

networks and cope with the pressures of sex, drugs and alcohol (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Along with developmental changes, 14- and 15-year-olds enrolled in most public schools must also adjust to a change in their educational environments. The transition from middle to high school not only involves a location change, but a change in the student hierarchy. Formerly students in the highest grade in middle school, ninth-graders must adapt to being the youngest and least experienced students at high school. Furthermore, the adoption of *No Child Left Behind Law* of 2001, replaced by the College and Career Ready Performance Index in Georgia, has led to high school curricula across the country becoming more challenging ("No Child," 2011, "Georgia receives," n.d.). After transitioning to high school, some students have lower GPAs and higher absences than when in middle school (Frey, Ruchkin, Martin & Schwab-Stone, 2009). Struggling students have higher absentee rates, several course failures and insufficient credits to advance to tenth grade (Legters & Kerr, 2001). These difficulties for ninth-grade students are a cause for concern. Students fail freshman year more than any other grade and remain ninth-graders for multiple years (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Fritzer and Herbst (1996) found ninth-graders have the lowest grade point averages and the highest classes failures, behavior referrals and absences than their older peers.

Why do some students have a difficult time adjusting to high school? According to stage-environment fit theory, the answer is the school, specifically the environment's inability to meet developmental needs of students. Negative behaviors during adolescence are the result of a *mismatch* between the needs of children and the opportunities provided by their social environments (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Gutman &

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Eccles, 2007). Adolescents whose environments respond positively to the young adults'

changes will experience positive outcomes, such as academic achievement and peer

acceptance. However, adolescents who are in an environment that does not support or

even suppresses their needs will experience negative outcomes, such as failing courses or

failing to make friends (Eccles & Buchanan , 1996; Gutman & Eccles, 2007). According

to stage-environment fit theory, ninth-grade students need a combination of increased

autonomy, respect and open communication with authority figures, both at school and at

home. However, during this time, parental figures often respond to these needs by either

detaching from their children or exercising more control and hostility in an effort to

thwart potential problem behaviors. Educators also are more likely to gravitate to the

latter option in an effort to maintain control in the classroom (Gutman & Eccles, 2007).

Districts across the country are discovering ways to ease the transition period for

students from middle to high school. One study found schools with nine or more

transition practices−such as a ninth-grade orientation, mentors for freshman and ninth-

grade academies−built into an overall transition plan had significant reductions in

retention for first time ninth-graders (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001). To truly meet the

developmental needs of students, transition strategies must encompass the entire district:

central office personnel should provide professional development for faculty and

coordinate plans between high schools and their feeder schools. At the high school level,

transition strategies must be a priority for administrators and faculty. Principals should

focus on choosing quality instructors for this pivotal age group, providing them with

professional development on the needs of ninth-graders and involving parents before,

during and after the transition. Teachers can provide the most direct assistance to ninth-

graders by offering encouragement and guidance and by communicating with parents and guardians (Queen, 2002). Even schools with the majority of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals (the indicator for low socio-economic levels) can experience high levels of academic achievement if educators focus on establishing a positive climate of learning with high expectations for students (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

One way to create a climate that meets the development needs of freshmen is by implementing small learning communities (SLC). Educators have espoused the benefits of smaller school environments as compared to larger high schools for many years (Blanchard & Harms, 2006; Breaking Ranks, 2001; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Ready, Lee & Welner, 2004; Styron & Peasant, 2010; Zvoch, 2006). These benefits include tighter bonds between teachers and students, amplified monitoring of student behavior and increased opportunities for student participation in extracurricular activities.

One type of SLC is the ninth-grade or freshman academy. Part of a larger high school is divided into a small cluster or academy that provides students with teachers who only educate ninth-graders and an assigned freshman administrator. Proponents believe ninth-grade academies relieve any student anxieties about getting lost, since all the classes will be in one area, and keep impressionable freshmen separated from older students. Using teachers who specialize in freshmen would create learning communities that focus on the needs of this specific age group (Ellberbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Morgan & Herzog, 2001). Ninth-grade achievement, however, cannot be viewed in just the academic sense. Teachers often receive data about students' academic performance and behavior, and while this information can be useful, educators need a comprehensive view

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about the transition and adjustment to high school from the experts–administrators, teachers and ninth-grade students (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2002).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment from middle to high school in a school district southwest of Atlanta. Specifically, using stage-environment fit theory as a basis, the researcher sought to discover if differences in impressions existed among ninth-grade students and educators, as well as among students and educators at a school with a freshman academy and those in a traditional high school.

One of the schools in this study has a freshman academy, while the other two maintain a traditional approach. Research regarding the transition to high school features myriad studies that have compared the achievement, attendance and behavior data of freshman academy students to traditional ninth-grade students (Hendrix, 2007; Jordan, 2009; Legters and Kerr, 2001; Leonard, 2011; McIntosh & White, 2006; Queen, 2002; Styron and Peasant, 2010; Teffeteller, 2010; Willingham, 2006). Researchers have also taken a qualitative approach to describe the perceptions of ninth-grade academy students about the transition to high school (Astbury, 2010), along with the perceptions of educators (McDaniel, 2008; Potter, 2004) and parents (Butts, 2011). However, limited research currently exists which compares the perceptions about transitioning to high school between academy and non-academy students and educators (Moore, 2009). Furthermore, few studies have utilized stage-environment fit theory at the high school level (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Kmiec, 2007).

Participants in this study included three administrators, one from each high school in the study; 22 ninth-grade teachers, five from School A, seven from School B and 10 from School C; and 19 students, five from School A, four from School B and 10 from School C. Data collected for this study included a teacher questionnaire, administrator interviews and student interviews. Interview questions followed a protocol; administrator questions targeted school transition strategies and perceived developmental needs of ninth-graders. The teacher questionnaire featured the same focus. Student interview questions concentrated on their impressions about the transition and adjustment to high school and how well the environment meets their developmental needs. High school transition programs, such as a freshman academy, are designed to help students transition to a new environment; students and educators need a voice to express whether these needs are being met. As Kozol (1992) writes in his book *Savage Inequalities*, "We have not been listening much to children in recent years of 'summit conferences' on education, of severe reports, and ominous prescriptions. The voices of children, frankly, have been missing from the whole discussion" (p. 5).

Statement of the Problem

Ninth grade has been described as pivotal year in terms of student achievement and its relationship to potential graduation (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). While some students rise to the challenge of meeting these changes, some choose to quit school, typically during and immediately after ninth grade (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the national graduation rate for 2012 was about 80% (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). In 2013, the graduation rate for Georgia was 71.5% which was lower than the rate for the district used in this study, which was 72.6%

("The Governor's Office," 2013). It has been found in some studies that struggling ninth-grade students exhibit high absentee rates, several course failures, and typically not enough credit to be promoted to tenth grade (Alspaugh, 1998; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Frey, Ruchkin, Martin & Schwab-Stone, 2009; Legters & Kerr, 2001). For example, according to the Georgia Department of Education, 1,117 ninth-graders were enrolled in the district chosen for this study in the fall of 2008 ("2008-2009 Report Card," 2009). However, four years later, only 776 seniors were enrolled during the spring of 2013 ("The Governor's Office," 2013). Those data helped one pose the question: What happened to the other 341 students?

You may find the answer to this question in the students' ninth-grade year. More students fail ninth grade than any other grade and some repeat the grade for several years (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Zsiray, 1996). Ninth-grade failure has enormous implications regarding whether a student will complete high school. A key predictor of whether a student fails to complete high school is if he earns more than one F in a semester in ninth grade (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Fritzer & Herbst, 1996; Zsiray, 1996 The student failures are the cause of what educators call the "ninth-grade bulge" which can be seen in the data of high schools that report extremely high enrollment declines from ninth to tenth grade and beyond. Furthermore, only 40% of students in K-12 who are retained in a grade once and 10% of students who are retained twice eventually complete high school ("Understanding high school," n.d.).

These behaviors can be derived from situations that take place before adolescents even step onto a high school campus. Proponents of stage-environment fit theory believe the cause of common early adolescent problems−depression, deviant behavior, lack of

motivation, and academic failures−is the school itself (Eccles & Buchanan,1996; Gutman & Eccles, 2007). According to their research, the root of the problem lies in a disconnect between school environments and the psychological needs of their students. The warm, caring environments of elementary schools are replaced with the more bureaucratic, structured middle and high schools that often feature more teachers for students, but fewer opportunities to develop a close bond with a school official. Along with negative teacher-student relationships, traditional high schools also are characterized by perceived lower levels of respect and trust from teachers by students and fewer opportunities for decision-making in the classroom (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Eccles & Buchanan, 1996). However, these aspects of positive school environments have not been evaluated in freshman academy schools.

Research Questions

Research questions for this study included:

- How do ninth-grade students' perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school compare to those of educators?

- How do the perceptions of students and educators at a school with a freshman academy compare to those in schools without freshman academies concerning the transition and adjustment to high school?

- How does stage-environment fit theory explain the differences in perceptions among ninth-grade students and educators?

- How does stage-environment fit theory explain the differences in perceptions among students and educators at a school with a freshman academy and those in schools without freshman academies?

Definitions

The following terms will be used throughout the study:

College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI): In February 2012, the U.S. Department of Education granted Georgia's waiver of No Child Left Behind in favor of CCRPI. This accountability program focuses on graduation rate and standardized test data such as No Child Left Behind. However, while the scores of juniors on the Georgia High School Graduation Tests in English Language Arts and Math were used for No Child Left Behind, CCRPI examines a wider variety of standardized test scores, including those taken by ninth-graders. ("Georgia Receives," n.d.).

End of Course Test (EOCT): Georgia high school students take End of Course Tests in six of their classes: ninth-grade literature and composition, American literature, biology, physical science, US history, economics, Math I and Math II. The tests comprise 15 to 20 percent of a student's final grade. Starting in 2012, the exams are used by the state for accountability purposes, including those taken by ninth-graders ("Georgia Receives," n.d.). In the school district of this study, students take the ninth-grade literature and composition, biology and Coordinate Algebra exams during their freshman year.

Freshman academy/ninth-grade academy: Freshman academies, also called ninth-grade academies, are designed to help students succeed during and after the transition to high school. Typically, first-time ninth grade students are isolated in their own portion of the campus (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).

Freshmen/ninth-graders: Students taking ninth-grade classes for the first time.

Stage-Environment Fit Theory: This theory states that negative behaviors during adolescence are the result of a "mismatch" between the needs of children and the opportunities provided by their social environments (Eccles & Midgey, 1989; Gutman & Eccles, 2007). In essence, students perform poorly academically and/or behaviorally because their school environments do not meet their needs.

Assumptions

Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative researchers are the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, and as such, their experiences and biases shape their findings (Merriam, 1997). For the past eight years, the researcher has taught English classes at one of the high schools in this study. Seven of those years the researcher was tasked with teaching freshmen, and observed hurdles ninth-graders have encountered: locating classes, adjusting to more rigorous coursework and attempting to balance school, extracurricular activities and personal lives.

At the end of the researcher's first year of teaching, they were asked to join a new initiative—an academy for first time ninth-graders. As an educator, the researcher recognized the benefits of the small learning community: impressionable ninth-graders were isolated from older peers, core classrooms and a freshman administrator were located on one hall, and teachers were given common planning periods for collaboration and analysis of student academic and behavior issues. However, every year the students often complained about the academy stating that they felt isolated and unable to truly experience high school. While the researcher believed the ninth-grade academy to be the best academic environment for first-time freshman students, many of the actual students

disagreed.. The discovery of this discrepancy between an educator's and students'

perceptions was the first step for this study.

In the past, researchers have found commonalities and differences in student and

educator perceptions about the transition to high school (McDaniel, 2008; Moore, 2009;

Potter, 2004). Ninth-grade students and teachers prefer structured and organized

classrooms with consistent classroom management; project-based, active learning; and

expressed concern that isolation from older peers that occurs in ninth-grade academies

denies freshmen access to potential role models (McDaniel, 2008). Both sides also agreed

that positive student-teacher relationships were important in making the transition

successful (Potter, 2004). On the other hand, Moore (2009) found that students viewed

the transition to high school as a more positive experience than did teachers. Students

were excited about the freedoms they experienced in high school, which educators

viewed as a potential negative aspect of the transition that could lead to failing grades and

behavior problems. Moreover, researchers have found that common fears exist for rising

ninth-graders, such as getting lost at the new school, not having enough time to go to

their locker or to the restroom, adjusting to the harder curriculum and bullying from older

peers (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell,

2006). In this study, it was assumed that all student participants, no matter their school

environment, would experience some of these reservations.

Furthermore, it was expected that perceptions of students who attend a school

with a freshman academy would differ from those whose schools do not because of

varied school environments. In addition, the school with a freshman academy may

provide classroom environments that are more developmentally appropriate than

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traditional high schools, especially regarding teacher-student relationships and increased

opportunities for decision-making. In Moore's (2009) study, students enrolled in a

freshman academy found the transition to high school easier than students at a traditional

high school and had more positive perceptions of their teachers as well. However,

Moore's study was quantitative; student perceptions were measured using a 41 question

survey. One of his recommendations was that "a qualitative study should be conducted to

supply the researcher more in-depth information regarding students and staff" (p. 99).

Significance

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare student

and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school by utilizing

stage-environment fit theory. In her study, Kmiec (2007) explored whether or not insight

into problems and solutions surrounding the transition from middle to high school <u>could</u>

be found by applying the principles of environment fit theory. A major focus of stage

environment fit theory is the transition from elementary school to junior high or middle

school (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Kmiec (2007) found that students enrolled in ninth-grade academies experience a

personalized learning environment. However, hers is the foundation for more questions

than answers: How did the perceptions of freshman academy students compare to those

of educators? How would those perceptions compare to students and educators at a

traditional high school without a freshman academy? This researcher addressed both

questions and extended previous research on stage-environment fit theory.

Moreover, by examining the data, educators worldwide could learn more about

the perceptions of students and educators regarding the first year of high school, which

could lead to the implementation or reconfiguration of ninth-grade transition programs in which student needs could be better met. Nationally, under the No Child Left Behind Law of 2001, graduation rate is one of several criteria used to evaluate whether high schools have met progress criteria. Schools' inability to meet these standards can lead to schools and/or districts having to offer free tutoring, to sending students to a school in the district that has met the standards, and after five years of not making progress, to restructure the high school by dismissing most or all of the teachers. ("No Child," 2011).

Furthermore, ninth-grade achievement has become even more important in Georgia, the site of this study. In February 2012, the U.S. Department of Education granted Georgia's waiver of No Child Left Behind in favor of the College and Career Readiness Performance Index. The new accountability program focuses on graduation rate and standardized test data as did the No Child Left Behind Law. However, while the scores of juniors on the Georgia High School Graduation Tests in English Language Arts and Math were used for No Child Left Behind, the College and Career Readiness Performance Index examines a wider variety of standardized test scores, including those taken by ninth-graders ("Georgia Receives," n.d.). In the school district of this study, students were administered the End of Course Tests (EOCT) in ninth-grade literature and composition, biology and Coordinate Algebra in May of their freshman year.

The 2013-14 school year was scheduled to be the last year the EOCT would be administered. On June 4, 2014, the Georgia Department of Education announced that Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT), given in elementary and middle schools, and the EOCT would be replaced by the Georgia Milestones Assessment System in 2014-15 ("Georgia Announces," 2014). While CRCTs and EOCTs utilized only

multiple choice questions, the new assessment will also include constructed response questions. In addition, student growth on standardized test scores also will count 50% of teachers' and 70% of administrators' yearly evaluations ("Teacher Keys," 2014; "Leader Keys," 2014). This testing change makes ninth grade an even more critical year for students and educators in light of new graduation and accountability standards. Since ninth-graders who fail more than one course are more likely to quit school, educational leaders need to know what will prevent freshmen from failing classes.

High school graduation rates have far reaching consequences. Students who did not complete high school in 2008 cost the nation $319 billion in lost wages, taxes and production ("Understanding high school," n.d.). Belfield and Levin (2007) found that the average adult that did not complete high school costs the economy approximately $240,000 over his lifetime in terms of lower tax payments, higher criminal activity, and higher reliance on Medicaid, Medicare and welfare. Researchers have reported that earning more than one F in a semester of the ninth-grade year correlates with the likelihood of students quitting school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Fritzer & Herbst, 1996; Zsiray, 1996); further research is warranted to determine the effectiveness of high school transition strategies. High school leaders gain insight from this study on the transition period from the experts−the educators and the students. The information gained can be used to improve or create a more developmentally appropriate environment for first time ninth-graders.

Limitations

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school in one Southeastern school

district southwest of Atlanta. Using stage-environment fit theory as a basis, the researcher examined if differences in impressions exist among students and educators. Comparisons also were made between students and educators in a freshman academy and those in a traditional high school. While studies have been conducted concerning the perceptions of students and educators participating in a freshman academy (McDaniel, 2008; Moore, 2009; Potter, 2004), only one of the studies (Moore, 2009) compared freshman academy students to traditional ninth-graders. Moreover, a limited number of studies have applied stage-environment fit theory to the transition to high school, and the foci of those studies were either only schools with freshman academies (Kmiec, 2007) or only traditional high schools (Barber & Olsen, 2004). The scope of this study–comparing perceptions of educators to students, freshman academy students to traditional ninth-graders− adds to the existing literature about stage-environment fit theory and the transition to high school.

Although stage-environment fit theory was the theoretical framework of this study, rival theories also were examined. Other theories used in examining the first year of high school include transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981), which views transitions as processes and examines the relationship of the individual to the change, and Henderson and Milstein's (2003) resiliency model, which examines the stressors (like transitions) on adolescent behavior (Kimball, 2007). Moreover, other limitations are created by case studies. This researcher concentrated on the perceptions of educators and first-time ninth-grade students; therefore, the opinions of parents and repeat ninth-graders students were not examined. Furthermore, with the researcher's expertise as a former ninth-grade teacher being the basis for the design of the case study-the study is not completely objective. As Hodkinson and Hodkinson said, "Like all good researchers, we try to

present adequate evidence, from the data, to support the stories we tell, but a certain amount has to be taken on trust" (2001, p. 10).

Summary

The transition to ninth grade is often a precarious time for adolescents−socially, emotionally and academically. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school using stage-environment fit theory. Furthermore, comparisons of perceptions were made between students and educators participating in a freshman academy and those in a traditional high school. Research questions for this study included:

- How do ninth-grade students' perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school compare to those of educators?

- How do the perceptions of students and educators at a school with a freshman academy compare to those in schools without freshman academies concerning the transition and adjustment to high school?

- How are the differences in perceptions among ninth-grade students and educators/explained by stage-environment fit theory?

- Can the explain the differences in perceptions among students and educators at a school with a freshman academy and those in schools without freshman academies be explained by stage-environment fit theory?

The researcher in this study aimed to help administrators learn more about the perceptions of students and educators regarding the first year of high school.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school utilizing stage-environment fit theory. Furthermore, comparisons of perceptions were made between students and educators participating in a freshman academy and those in a traditional high school. The researcher offers the results in order to help administrators learn more about the perceptions of students and educators regarding the first year of high school. Research questions for this study included:

- How do ninth-grade students' perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school compare to those of educators?

- How do the perceptions of students and educators at a school with a freshman academy compare to those in schools without freshman academies concerning the transition and adjustment to high school?

- How does stage-environment fit theory help the researcher explain the differences in perceptions among ninth-grade students and educators?

- How does stage-environment fit theory help the researcher explain the differences in perceptions among students and educators at a school with a freshman academy and those in schools without freshman academies?

Areas of exploration for this review of literature include theories associated with school transitions, common problems associated with the transition to ninth grade,

theories associated with the transition to high school, district and school transition strategies and freshman academies.

Theories Associated with School Transitions

During adolescence, teenagers experience a wealth of changes biologically, psychologically and socially, and these transitions are a time for adolescents to undertake opportunities for risk and resilience, depending on how they respond to the change (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). In examinations of the transition to high school, many researchers have chosen to focus solely on policy and/or practice (Butts, 2011; Crosby, 2011; Hendrix, 2007; Jordan, 2009; Martin, 2004; McDaniel, 2008; Potter, 2004; Willingham, 2006). However, some researchers have analyzed the *whys* and *hows* adolescents respond to the transition to high school through several theoretical lenses based on human/child development, psychology and sociology.

Life Course Theory

Literature regarding the transition to high school is full of examples about the outcomes of the change−academic performance and problem behaviors−without utilizing a theoretical context as a foundation. However, Benner (2011) argued that life course theory could effectively be used as an organizational framework for high school transition findings. Life course theory views lives as being connected to social and historical contexts and controlled by times of change (Elder, 1998). This theory emerged from Elder's readings of longitudinal studies of children at the University of California, Berkley during the Great Depression: the Oakland Growth Study (birth years 1920-1921) and the Berkley Guidance Study (birth years 1928-1929). The researcher found that how

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people respond to transitions in their lives depends on the social and historical contexts in which they live, and that these lives can be linked by theses contexts. For example, the children in the Oakland Growth Study experienced the Great Depression after their formative years, and then left their homes after the worst years for work, education or family. However, the children born in 1928-1929 developed during the worst years of the economic downturn, meaning that they were more adversely affected by the economy. Another aspect of life course theory is that transitions are not just a single event, but the culmination of several choices during a life. Elder provides the example of an unwed teenage mother. While this is a transition for her, it is also the result of several choices: premarital sex over abstinence, sex without contraception over safe sex, pregnancy over abortion or adoption, and unmarried over married. Elder believes that how a teenager decides to deal with these decisions depend upon the participant's social and historical context. In this view, the success of a student's transition to high school could result from choices he made before entering school.

Benner (2011) contended that an organizational framework for high school transition studies is needed to explain the commonalities and differences in the literature. She argues for life course theory because of the elegance with which it can be used to explain social and historical contexts impact's on transitions, and or link individuals to their larger populations. Given its encompassing nature, life course theory can be used to examine adolescents' varied reactions to high school because of its recognition that differing reactions to the same transition are due to individuals' developments, life pathways, social groups and their changing environments.   For this study, the social context aspect of life course theory could have been applied by comparing the

perceptions of students and educators participating in a freshman academy to those in a traditional high school about the transition to high school. However, due to the theory's focus on the transitions of participants during an expanded time frame, life course theory was not the best theoretical concept for this study, which only lasted for one school year. Furthermore, Neild (2009) argues problems in ninth grade can be attributed to the organization of typical high schools, which she describes as being bureaucratic in nature without an emphasis on student-teacher relationships. As a result of this organization, students feel anonymous and estranged.

Self Determination Theory

Child psychology gurus Piaget and Inhelder (2000) identified behavior patterns of the sequential stages of human intellectual development. Adolescence acts as a bridge between childhood and adulthood. By this time, according to Piaget and Inhelder, teenagers have or are acquiring deductive reasoning skills, formal operations, autonomy and ideas of social justice. In studies about the transition to high school, self-determination theory has been used to explain adolescents' need for autonomy in the classroom (Hamm & Reeve, 2002; Reeve, Bolt & Cai, 1999). Self-determination theory focuses on the interaction between the need for humans to be active and growth-oriented, and the social environments that can be either supportive or detractive of people's attempts to integrate their experiences into self-identity. Supportive environments are exemplified by having conditions that meet people's needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness, and assist teenager's efforts to be motivated, performance-driven and obtain feelings of well-being. Self-determination theory was formed from four met theories: cognitive evaluation theory, which is used to describe the effects of

environments on intrinsic motivation; organismic integration theory, which is used by researchers to describe internalization and extrinsic motivation; causality orientation theory, which is used to describe individual differences in choosing an environment that is supportive of self-determination; and basic needs theory, in which Ryan and Deci relate basic needs to goals and behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

In educational research, self-determination theory has been used to explain how autonomy has an impact on learning, and is comprised of two principles discussed here: students who are motivated inwardly flourish in classrooms, and students benefit when teachers support students' self-sufficiency. How do instructors support their students' autonomy? Reeve, Bolt and Cai (1990) identified the characteristics of autonomy-supportive teachers: listen more, praise mastery, avoid criticism, provide time for individual work and do not provide immediate answers to questions. Controlling teachers, on the other hand, are more likely to need to be in charge of the classroom and motivate students through pressure. Based on the findings of this study, Hamm and Reeve (2002) examined how teacher behaviors affected students' perceptions of their own self-determination and aptitude. Perceptions of self-determination and proficiency were higher when teachers provided time for independent work, listened to students and allowed students to reach their own answers for questions.

Ellerbrock and Kieffer (2010) used self-determination theory and stage-environment fit theory as the theoretical underpinnings in a qualitative case study in which researchers examined how one educators in one high school created a "community of care" in a freshman academy program (p. 393). Their study was based on the results of Ellerbrock's earlier dissertation (Kmiec, 2007). Researchers reported that positive

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student-teacher relationships and positive teacher perceptions about students were vital in creating a sense of caring in the ninth-grade academy (Ellerbock & Kieffer, 2010). Given its focus on how environments can be a lens used to explain behavior, self-determination theory could have been a viable option for a conceptual framework for this study. Stage-environment fit theory, however, has been described as being able to takes this focus on the relationship between school environments and students further by addressing adolescents' development needs as well.

Transition Theory

Schlossberg (1981; 2011) developed a model for analyzing human adaptation to transitions. While her studies were focused on adults in the midst of change, the model can be applied to anyone in transition, including students moving from middle to high school. Schlossberg identifies a transition as a change that can "result in growth or deterioration" (1989, p.5). Her model has three components: the perception of the particular transition as seen by the participant, the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments and the characteristics of the individual undergoing the transition. The combination of these components can be examined to see how well the individual will adapt to the transition. However, the same person can react differently to the same type of transition occurring at different times in his life, so a student who adapted well to the transition between elementary to middle school may not fare as well with the transition to high school. Consequently, Schlossberg believed that the transition itself was not as important as what other combination of situations was occurring in the participant's life at the time of transition.

Furthermore, Schlossberg (2011) later posited that individuals undergoing a transition often feel marginalized, especially if there is a large difference between their former and new roles. For example, the first adult students to attend traditional college campuses experienced a monumental change in roles, and they did not have predecessors on whom to rely. While first-time ninth-grade students, either in a freshman academy or a traditional high school, are not part of a new phenomenon at the schools in this study, the students are changing from being the oldest, most experienced group at middle school to the youngest, least experienced group at high school. Schlossberg recommended that institutions have policies and procedures in place to help those in transition to feel as if they mattered, such as ninth-grade academies and freshman orientations. However, adults, not adolescents, were the focus of Schlossberg's literature.

Henderson and Milstein's Resiliency Model

Another framework used in the examination of freshman academies is Henderson and Milstein's (2003) resiliency model. Henderson and Milstein assert that to achieve success in education, resiliency must be taught to students and created in the school environment. Their resiliency wheel includes six components:

- Increase bonding between educators and students.

- Set clear and consistent boundaries for students.

- Teach life skills to students.

- Provide a caring and supportive environment.

- Establish high expectations.

- Provide opportunities for significant contributions in classrooms and school.

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Kimball (2007) applied Henderson and Milstein's (2003) resiliency model as a theoretical framework in her quantitative study of two high schools in the same district−one with a freshman academy and one without. She utilized three of the six components of the resiliency wheel: provide caring and support; set and communicate high expectations; and increase pro-social bonding. Researchers reported that all groups of students in a ninth-grade academy experienced academic resilience in that their ninth-grade standardized test scores were higher than the average of their seventh and eighth grade standardized test scores. However, ninth-grade academy standardized test scores did not show a statistically significant difference over the traditional school. In addition, the freshman academy school's promotion rate was significantly higher than that of the traditional high school, even though the attendance rate was high for both schools (Kimball, 2007).

For this study, the Henderson and Milstein's (2003) resiliency model could have been a feasible theoretical concept for describing the perceptions of ninth-grade students and educators about the first year of high school. The six components of the resiliency wheel are all factors to creating school and classroom climates that are conducive to positive student adjustments to high school. However, one element of the model−teaching life skills−appears to be focused more towards at-risk students and may not be useful for all ninth-graders, especially high achievers.

Stage-Environment Fit Theory

Eccles and Midgley (1989) are known as the pioneers of stage-environment theory, which is comprised of the ideas that negative behaviors during adolescence are the result of a *mismatch* between the needs of children and the opportunities provided by their

social environments. The majority of research in this area has been at the junior high or middle school level, with more researchers focusing on transitions to high schools and colleges during the past decade (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Stage-environment fit theory's tenets are similar to several tenets with the aforementioned theories:

- Environments can affect transitions (life course theory, self-determination theory, transition theory);
- Students need autonomy in the classroom (self-determination theory);
- Educators need to create a sense of belonging for students (resiliency model);
- Educators need to create positive relationships with students (resiliency model).

Adolescents experiencing positive change in their environments will experience productive outcomes, such as academic achievement and peer acceptance. However, those adolescents who experience a less-than supportive or even suppressive environments will experience negative outcomes, such as failing courses or failing to make friends (Eccles & Buchanan, 1996; Gutman & Eccles, 2007).

Qualitative researchers often use a theoretical lens through which to view their work; stage-environment fit theory is the theoretical concept for this study (Creswell, 2007). All of the previously mentioned theoretical considerations could be utilized in the study of the transition from middle school to high school. However, after much consideration I concluded that stage-environment fit theory corresponded best to the purpose of this study, describing student and educator perceptions about the transition from middle to high school, because of its focus on how environments support or suppress adolescent development. I interviewed students and educators from one high

school with a freshman academy and two traditional high schools to compare and contrast their perceptions of the first year of high school. Therefore, I examined perceptions of the effectiveness of varying school environments and their transition programs for adolescents. Also, the theory has been previously established in school transition literature (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Eccles & Buchanan, 1996; Eccles, Lord & Roeser, 1996; Foreman, 2009; Gutman & Eccles, 2007; Kmiec, 2007; Osborne, 2012; Widner, 2010).

Stage-environment fit theory focuses on the relationship between school environments and adolescents. What are the environmental needs of those in the middle of adolescence (14-15 years old), which occurs when most students are in their ninth-grade year? According to stage-environment fit theory, the answer is a combination of increased autonomy and open communication with authority figures, both at school and at home. However, during this time, parental figures often respond to these needs by either detaching from the children or exercising more control and authority in an effort to thwart potential problem behaviors. This latter option is also common in classrooms when teachers wish to maintain classroom control (Gutman & Eccles, 2007).

The age of 15 is a pivotal time for adolescents regarding development of autonomy as well as experiencing depression and problem behaviors (Gutman & Eccles, 2007). Decision-making opportunities in the home increase for adolescents between the ages of 15 to 17, with Caucasian children experiencing more opportunities than African American children at the age of 15. Girls experienced the greatest increase in decision making between the ages of 15 and 17, while opportunities for boys were at the highest between the ages of 13 and 17.

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Moreover, delinquent behaviors were stable between the ages of 13 and 15, and then decreased between the ages of 15 and 19. This would explain why ninth-grade discipline reports are typically higher than those in upperclassmen grades. Furthermore, increases in depression were highest between the ages of 15 and 17, with girls experiencing a higher level of depression than boys at the age of 15. The majority of adolescents also experienced a decline in self-esteem between the ages of 13 and 17, with Caucasian girls having the lowest self-esteem at the age of 15, followed by African American girls, African American boys, and Caucasian boys. Gutman and Eccles (2007) believe these results are the effect of adolescents searching for and creating their own identities.

Furthermore, early and middle adolescence is a time for teenagers to explore different types of identities and behaviors. Since some of their chosen paths could be risky, Simmons and Blyth (1987) found it was imperative for adolescents to have caring adults at school and at home to guide them to a more positive path. However, students in the highly regimented structures of junior high and high schools, where the emphasis is more on teacher control and discipline, are prevented from forming relationships with instructors and practicing their increased desire for independence through decision making. Also, the researchers found several elementary schools typically feed into a single middle school, which in turn feeds into one high school. This means students spend the first part of their educational career in a less populated environment, and then are thrust into larger populations. This transition disrupts students' peer networks, which play an important role in the social development of adolescents (Eccles & Buchanan, 1996).

In addition, Simmons and Blyth (1987) linked disruptive transitions to the developmental readiness theory, which states environmental change will have negative effects on adolescents if they are not mature enough to handle the modification. Moreover, students are more active in extracurricular activities and perform better academically, socially and emotionally when they are the "top dogs" or in the highest grade at their school, like the eighth grade in a typical middle school. When students transition to ninth grade and become the "bottom dogs," the eighth-grade achievements disappear and are replaced with feelings of anonymity in this larger, more impersonal environment; drops occur in self-esteem, especially for females.

Simmons and Blyth (1987) assert that adolescents need a reasonably safe and academically challenging environment to help meet their developmental needs; however, students transitioning from elementary school to junior high school often do not find those characteristics in their new environment. The transition from elementary school to junior high school is characterized by less perceived support from teachers and more emphasis on grades and competition. While competition can be healthy, Eccles, Lord and Roeser (1996) believe that it can cause students to become too self-conscious about their academic deficiencies as compared to their peers. This self-awareness could lead to a decline in grades, testing anxiety and disengagement and alienation from school. In addition, teachers in typical junior high school classrooms focus more on control and discipline and less on providing students with opportunities for decision making regarding their school work (Eccles, Lord & Roeser, 1996).

Furthermore, junior high school teachers were described as less caring, supportive and likely to trust their students than elementary school teachers (Feldlaufer, Midgley &

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Eccles, 1988). This decline in the quality of teacher-student relationships could result because of the nature of junior high and high school classrooms; while many elementary school educators teach the same children multiple subjects throughout the day, junior high and high school teachers instruct 25 to 32 students per class, and as many as seven class periods per day. Forming close bonds with adolescents is much easier when a teacher has 30 students as compared to 200 students. However, researchers believe this distrust in the teacher-student relationship damages the adolescents' ability to establish personal identities and social roles (Eccles, Lord & Roeser, 1996).

At the junior high school level, Eccles, Lord and Roeser (1996) used stage-environment fit theory to examine the transition and adjustment of 15,000 students from 12 school districts in Michigan as they moved from sixth-grade in elementary school to seventh-grade. The adolescents answered the same questionnaire in math class during the fall and spring semesters of their sixth and seventh-grade years. Regarding to teacher-student relationships, the data revealed that students who transitioned from an elementary school math teacher they perceived to offer little support to a junior high school math teacher who was supportive attached higher value to learning the subject. The opposite was also true: students who were moved from a supportive elementary math teacher to a seemingly less supportive junior high school math teacher attached little value to learning the subject. Moreover, teachers and students reported that there were fewer opportunities for adolescent decision making in the classroom in regards to seating arrangements, class rules and assignments in the seventh grade, even though these students had a greater desire for autonomy than they did the prior year (Eccles, Lord & Roeser, 1996).

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Furthermore, Eccles, Lord and Roeser (1996) found that physically mature seventh-grade females expressed a higher desire for classroom autonomy than their less developed peers, yet these same adolescents perceived fewer opportunities for decision making than their less mature classmates. Additionally, physically mature females reported fewer decision making opportunities at the end of the seventh grade year than they did at the beginning. In contrast, less developed females reported an increase in autonomy as the year progressed. Physically mature females also reported higher truancy and misconduct than other females. While the researchers were unsure if autonomy actually decreased during the seventh-grade year for the more developed females or if it was just their perception, they contended that educational environments did not meet physically mature females' development need for increased classroom decision making. These reported problems with junior high schools have led districts to adopt the middle school paradigm, which often includes small house programs, team teaching and advisory sessions to address the development needs of adolescents. However, adolescents often encounter identical issues from junior high school−less autonomy in classes and negative teacher-student relationships−when they later transition from middle school to high school.

As an extension of the Eccles, Lord and Roeser study (1996), Barber and Olsen (2004) evaluated student perceptions of school and academic, social and interpersonal performance across four successive grade transitions, two of which involved adolescents moving to new schools (elementary to middle school, and middle to high school), in one Utah school district. Their research was based on stage-environment fit theory; therefore, students completed surveys concerning school conditions that Eccles and her colleagues

recommended in their 1993 research: perceived support and respect from educators, school organization, classroom decision-making and how well they liked school. Questions included: "Compared to last year, how much do you like school this year?", "How many of your teachers believe you can do well in school and are willing to help if you need help?," and " How many of your teachers this year treat you more like a grown-up than your teachers last year?" (p.12).

Eccles and her colleagues found that students perceived a decline in quality of the school environment and in scholastic, social, and personal performance across the four grade transitions except for the transition from elementary to middle school (fifth to sixth grade). While this appears to contradict research concerning the transition to middle school, Barber and Olsen (2004) attribute this discrepancy to the school system's use of small learning communities in sixth grade that they believe provided the adolescents with a sense of security in the new environment. The predominant pattern of decline occurred between grades six to seven, when students left the small learning community of sixth-grade and transitioned into middle school.

However, the transition from middle school to high school revealed the second largest negative perceptions of a grade transition. Participants reported liking school less, lower support from teachers and administrators, lower classroom autonomy, less involvement in school activities, lower self-esteem and higher depression. Moreover, Barber and Olsen identified the key element for predicting how well students function in school as teacher-student relationships, as supported by Eccles et al. (1993). The authors attribute these results to a combination of a non-supportive school environment and the developmental need of adolescents for more autonomy and supportive relationships with

educators, which is the foundation of stage-environment fit theory. They recommend that educational leaders examine their schools environments and how they affect student development (Barber & Olsen, 2004).

In a qualitative investigation, Kmiec (2007) relied on stage-environment fit theory in her case study of a Florida district with ninth-grade academies in their three high schools. A total of 67 people participated in the case study, which included interviews, individual and focus groups, with students and educators' and classroom observations. Kmiec examined students' and/or educators' perceptions' of the following domains:

- A sense of belonging: All three high schools offered transition programs including events during students' eighth-grade year, summer camps to address academic deficiencies, a ninth-grade only class in which or during which study and test-taking skills, were taught and freshman team teachers.

- A supportive, collaborative learning environment: As stated, all three high schools implemented ninth-grade academies, which increased the communication of ninth-grade teachers across various disciplines for planning purposes and to monitor the academic needs of students.

- Freshman-focused teaching and learning: Since all teachers in the ninth-grade academies taught only freshmen and had common planning, student-focused, integrated curriculum could be offered. Incentive programs were also provided to reward academic and behavior successes.

- A culture of commitment to ninth-grade success: To develop this type of culture, ninth-grade academy educators expressed the necessity of support from administrators and teachers, especially those teaching in the academy.

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To select the best teachers for a ninth-grade academy, educators said

instructors should be asked to participate, not forced, which resulted in

resistance to the initiative. Professional development about the purpose of the

academy is also needed to increase the support from the entire high school

campus.

Kmiec (2007) reported that freshman academies are sources of developmentally

appropriate environments for first-time ninth-graders if the small learning communities

are fully implemented and supported by all stakeholders--educators, parents and students.

This study can be seen as an extension of the Kmiec case study: the scope will be

explained to include the perceptions of educators and students from two traditional high

schools, which will be compared to the perceptions of participants from a high school

with a freshman academy.

Osborne (2012) examined a mixed-method, single-case study design to examine

the implementation and effects of the ninth-grade transition program at Tewksbury

Memorial High School in Massachusetts. The school's transition activities included: an

eighth-grade visit to the high school with presentations from clubs and sports; high

school students and faculty speeches at the feeder middle schools; increased

communication with eighth-grade parents; a freshman advisor; a ninth-grade only lunch

period; and required participation in a sport or club. Data were collected that included a

student survey, principal interview and a faculty focus group interview. Osborne also

examined pre- and post-program implementation records of course failures, attendance

rates, school suspensions and state-administered, ninth-grade biology standardized test

results.

Osborne found that participation in the transition program did not yield significant decreases in the number of absences or courses failed, but students who participated in the program had fewer suspensions and better scores on the biology exam. Also, both faculty members and students recommended having the freshman only period during the first half of the school semester, so that students would not feel so isolated from other grades. Moreover, 88 percent of students described their ninth-grade year as positive.

Similar to the Osborne (2012) study, Widner (2010) used stage-environment fit theory and case study design to examine the transition to high school. However, Widner investigated the variations in teachers of eighth- and ninth-grade in one Georgia school district to determine if a middle school and high school were developmentally appropriate and how adolescents were affected by the environments during their adjustment to the ninth grade. Data included classroom observations and teacher interviews with three eighth- and three ninth-grade teachers.

According to her findings; adolescent needs were best served by the middle school environment due to differing teacher practices and relationships with students. High school teachers' practices were more teacher-centered, with whole class instruction using lectures; middle school teachers were more student-centered, with small group instruction, peer collaboration and technology. Middle school teachers said using small group instruction also helped them build stronger relationships with students. Because of these differences, middle school students were able to become more independent learners, while the high school students are more dependent on their teachers for instruction. Furthermore, the eighth-grade teachers recommended that their district incorporate more high school transition practices, including a ninth-grade academy;

however, the only suggestion from the ninth-grade teachers was to communicate more with eighth-grade teachers about the units being taught. Based on these findings, middle school teachers create a classroom environment that better meets adolescents' needs for autonomy and stronger relationships with adults than high school teachers. However, Widner (2010) used a very small sample, only six teachers. Twenty-two teachers, three principals and 19 students were included in this study, strengthening the validity and reliability of the results.

Another case study involving stage-environment fit theory adolescent transition was conducted by Foreman (2009). However, instead of examining the students' high school, she focused on 13 young women's perceptions of their school environments before they were ordered to enter a juvenile justice facility. Data collected included one-on-one interviews, adolescent letters to their future teachers and their school and juvenile justice records. Foreman found that while the adolescents reported being engaged and experiencing a sense of belonging while in elementary school, they perceived a poor fit between their middle school environments and their needs, especially concerning their relationships with teachers. Most of the young women believed middle school teachers viewed them as failures, and as a result, became disengaged with school. Additionally, in all of the letters to their future teachers, the adolescents said they needed supportive and caring relationships with their instructors. While the focus of this study was on a different type of adolescent transition, the findings concerning the relationship between school environments and student performance parallel stage-environment fit theory literature about school transitions.

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Beginning in the 1980s with Simmons and Blyth, researchers have linked the problems associated with the transition to high school to how well the academic, social and emotional needs of its students are met by the new school (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Gutman & Eccles, 2007; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). However, most of these researchers focused on the transition from elementary school to junior high or middle school (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Eccles & Roeser, 2011), creating a need for stage-environment fit theory research focusing on first-time high school students (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Kmiec, 2007; Osborne, 2012; Widner, 2010).

Problems in Ninth Grade

Change is a necessity of life; however, trepidation can result from it. In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky (2001) writes that "taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what people fear most" (p. 2). For most public school students in middle adolescence (ages 14-15), one change they must encounter is the transition from middle to high school. The move to ninth grade can be a difficult time for adolescents (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Queen, 2002). The new students confront the unknown on the first day, and their anxieties are exacerbated by the new surroundings and teachers (Benner & Graham, 2009). Moreover, older peers may tease and harass the new students as a rite of passage to the new learning environment (Kniesler, 2001). Some students enter high school prepared to meet the academic and social challenges, while others have not matured enough to be successful (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). High numbers of behavior problems and failures are caused by immaturity of the students. (Alspaugh, 1998).

Culturally, adolescents are expected to form their own identities and prepare for adulthood. These identities are developed by discovering their values, talents and close relationships with peers. Adolescents experience more life events (both negative and positive) in early adolescent years than older teens or children. The peak in the number of important events happens at or about 14 years of age, which is the age of most first-time ninth-graders entering high school (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). Coupled with these key life events, ninth graders encounter new expectations for behavior as well as harder coursework in high school, often with little help in adapting to these changes (Benner & Graham, 2009). For adolescents, the transition to a new school can be a major life change when they are put into a different environment and have to cope with new and sometimes difficult experiences. Former connections−teachers, counselors, and sometimes peers−are also lost during the transition (Jindel-Snape & Miller, 2008). Furthermore, adolescents who are predisposed to depression or aggressive behavior and/or who live in a negative family atmosphere are even more at risk for problem behaviors (Buchanan, Eccles & Becker, 1992).

Benner and Graham (2009) found new ninth-graders faced feelings of loneliness and anxiety during the transition to high school. Soon after the transition, students reported liking high school better than middle school, yet these feelings vanished after the beginning of ninth grade and into tenth grade. Grades also declined during the first two years of high school as compared to middle school. Benner and Graham found the transition was more difficult for African-American and Latino students, especially if they perceived the high school had a low percentage of their race in attendance. The researchers believe that if students are able to develop close relationships with at least

one ninth-grade teacher, the negative effects of the transition may be lessened (Benner &

Graham, 2009). According to stage-environment fit theory, positive teacher-student

relationships are an aspect of a constructive school environment (Eccles, Lord & Roeser,

1996).

Similarly, Alspaugh (1998) conducted a study on achievement loss during the

transition to ninth-grade. Students who moved from several elementary schools into a

single middle school before entering into high school experienced greater achievement

loss than students who transitioned from a single elementary school to a single middle

school. The number of school transitions a student experiences affects achievement as

well. Students who attended middle school experienced greater achievement loss than

students who attended a K-8 school. Former middle school students also were more likely

to not complete high school, which Alspaugh (1998) attributed to the two transitions they

encountered (elementary to middle school, middle to high school), which could lead to

the loss of self-esteem.

Negative middle to high school transitions can have far-reaching consequences.

Researchers who performed two separate logistic regression analyses reported that

achievement loss during the transition to high school was associated with attrition at the

first year of college for all students sampled and within the sample of high-achieving

students (Smith, 2006). Smith also reported that students in the lowest socio-economic

quartile experienced higher rates of first year attrition than students in the highest socio-

economic quartile. Middle school achievement was a strong predictor of retention of their

first year of college, with high achieving middle school students 1.5 times more likely to

be retained during the first year of college than their non-high-achieving peers. Also, the

chances of first year college retention for students who experienced achievement loss

from middle to high school was one half the probability of retention than students who

did not experience achievement loss (Smith, 2006).

The transition to high school often fills both students and parents with anticipation

and dread. Smith, Feldwisch, and Abell (2006) conducted a study of students' and

parents' perceptions of the transition from middle to high school in a large Midwestern

public school system. Students and parents rated freedom of choosing an academic plan,

participating in extra-curricular activities, and getting good grades as aspects of high

school they were most excited about. However, students also were looking forward to

being around older peers, a classification about which few parents were excited. When

listing their concerns, students were most worried about getting lost, while parents

focused on peer pressure and acceptance from other students (Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell,

2006).

Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) conducted a transition study at a large Midwest

comprehensive high school with a population of about 2,300 in grades 9-12. The feeder

middle school enrollment ranged from 512 to 789 students and the school had no

transition plan to adjust freshmen to their new school. Approximately 60% of students

responded positively on the "I feel I'm being successful" survey question. As for positive

influences, students perceived that interesting classes and going to class everyday had the

most impact on success in ninth-grade. Other common responses included having friends

in the class and teachers who care, explain well and are amenable. The least common

responses were limiting time with friends, meeting with tutors and forgetting outside

problems. New ninth-graders also indicated they needed to know more about the high

school curriculum, facility layout and graduation requirements before attending the new school (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005).

In a similar study, Queen (2002) surveyed 5,000 first time ninth-graders across the United States. Students were asked a series of close-ended questions, including how they felt about school: 29% liked school, 18% disliked school, and 47% had no opinion. The author believes the 18% correlates to high school non-completion: "Interesting that these data compare closely with the near 20% of students we lose in schools. We as educators must find ways to lower these numbers" (p. 46).

Queen (2002) further identified several factors that predict how successful the transition to high school will be: the lower a student's grade drops during the transition, the higher the probability s/he will become a non-completer; the larger the high school, the harder the transition will be for students; students who experience two or more school transitions prior to ninth-grade have a greater probability of not completing high school; high school completion rates decrease for negatively transitioned minority students in schools with high-stakes testing; and ninth-graders require at least one caring adult in their lives to be academically and socially successful. Furthermore, many students do not realize the importance of ninth grade until it is too late; Zsiray (1996) interviewed students who failed one or more classes during their freshman year, and many claimed they would have worked harder if they had known how ninth-grade success correlated to graduating in four years.

Since the inception of the No Child Left Behind Law in 2001, graduation completion rates have been one of the foremost benchmarks for determining academic success in high schools ("No Child," 2011). Schools, districts, and states are held

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accountable for the number of students who complete high school in four years. In 2009, the national graduation rate was 80% (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). In 2013, the graduation rate for Georgia, the site for this study, was 71.5% which is a lower graduation rate than the district used in this study, which was 72.6% ("2013 4-Year," 2013). Furthermore, Georgia is one of only five states to have 70% or fewer graduates in four years for the class of 2010-11, with 70% of students graduating on time. The national average freshman completion rate was 80% with Wisconsin having the highest rate at 92% and Nevada the lowest at 59% (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014).

In the district for this proposed study, enrollment numbers are the highest in the ninth-grade and drop steadily every year for each of the three high schools. In the fall of 2009, ninth-grade enrollment was at 274, 406 and 429 students at the three schools ("2008-2009 Report Card," 2009). Four years later, in the spring of 2013, the number of seniors at each school was at 153, 322 and 300 students respectively ("2012-2013 Report Card," 2013). The lower enrollment numbers are due to students deciding to leave school, with adolescents, overage for their grade level and those living in poverty, having higher odds of not completing school compared to their peers (Zvoch, 2006).

Performance during freshman year can predict students' likelihood for graduation. Allensworth and Easton (2007) identified four freshman-based indicators for on-time graduation: grade point average, on-track (earned only one F per semester) versus off-track (earned more than one F per semester), course failures and absences. For example, a total of 28% of students graduated on time if they had a grade point average of 1.0 as freshmen, compared to 72% of students with a 2.0 grade point average, 93% with a 3.0 grade point average and 98% with a 4.0 grade point average. Also, 82% of students who

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were on-track during freshman year graduated in four years, as compared to 22% who were off-track (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

As students reach high school, most have been in school for 10 years (including pre-kindergarten). They will have completed more than 70% of their pre-secondary educational career, which prompts the question: Why do adolescents decide to leave school when they are only four years away from receiving a diploma? While there is no single reason, research indicates that a difficult transition to high school hinders timely graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). About 40% of ninth-graders in cities with low graduation rates repeat this pivotal grade, and only 10% of those repeaters finish school ("Understanding high school," n.d.). Ninth-grade is a critical time in terms of predicting high school completion. According to stage-environment fit theory, a ninth-grade student's maladjustment to high school is the result of a divergence between the developmental needs of adolescents and the school and classroom environments (Eccles, Lord & Roeser, 1996). Those students who succeed during their first year of high school are more likely to graduate, and the ease of breaking through this barrier requires educational environments that meet their developmental needs as well as the existence and effectiveness of high school transition strategies.

High School Transition Strategies

The authors of several studies have documented the need for strategies to ease students' transition to high school (Anderson, 2008; Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Legters & Kerr, 2001; McKenzie, 2009; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Somers, Owens & Piliawsky, 2009). Students transitioning to high school are typically introduced to a more complex organizational structure than in middle

or elementary school, with more teachers, a larger campus, and more freedoms (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). Administrators in districts across the country are creating ways to ease the transition period for students from middle to high school. Morgan and Hertzog (2001) found that schools with nine or more practices built into an overall transition plan had significant reduction in the retention of first time ninth-graders. The authors discovered five areas of student concern and developed suggestions to help educators assist freshmen in their transition to high school:

- Students worried about how hard the curriculum would be and had general questions about the amount of homework and how long classes last. The writers suggest informing rising ninth-graders about the curriculum and registration while they are still in middle school through panel discussions, PTA meetings, or small groups, and making ninth-grade textbooks accessible to the students.

- Students were very concerned about getting lost and the location of lockers and restrooms. The writers suggest arranging a tour of the building, providing students with a school map and distributing high school newsletters to the eighth-graders.

- Students worried about safety concerns, especially if drugs and violence were prevalent on campus. The writers suggest reviewing the high school discipline code with eighth graders, hosting a question-and-answer session with current high school students and holding an orientation session.

- Students had questions about the teachers, counselors and administrators. The writers suggest providing eighth-graders with a list of high school educators,

having eighth- and ninth-grade teachers swap classes for a day and holding a ninth-grade curriculum fair for rising eighth graders.

- Students also had general questions about the cafeteria, absentee policies and riding the bus. The writers suggest a question-and-answer session with educators and current high school students and a "what not to wear to high school" fashion show (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).

School leaders transition plans also need to include early interventions, rigorous classes in middle school and supportive environments in both middle and high schools. Creating positive relationships between students and school officials is important. Males who felt a strong attachment to their high school during and after the transition were less likely to engage in violent behavior. Furthermore, males and females with strong attachments to their high school had higher motivation and more positive perceptions of the school climate. Parental and teacher support also are important for the transition. Both types of support positively correlate with academic motivation (Frey et al., 2009).

According to stage-environment fit theory, adolescents need a supportive environment that allows for more autonomy in the classroom. Moreover, adolescents' increased desire for autonomy necessitates students' perceptions of receiving respect from their teachers. Furthermore, as adolescents seek less control from their parents/legal guardians, their relationships with educators act as a scaffold to prepare them for socially acceptable relationships with peers (Eccles et al., 1993).

Transition programs that involve all of the stakeholders—students, parents and educators—have the best impact on the transition period. Queen (2002) recommends high school principals create transition teams focused on improving student experiences

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transitioning from middle to high school. Struggling students should also be identified

early by their academic progress, which would allow for intervention strategies, like an

upperclassmen mentor, to be individualized for these students (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009;

Queen, 2002). Creating and strengthening lines of communication among parents and

middle and high school personnel helps students to transition successfully to high school

(Crosnoe, 2009; Tuner, 2007). Turner (2007) found that support from parents, teachers

and peers is positively related to inner-city adolescents' ability to successfully transition

to high school. Increasing academic counseling and adopting a cohort model where

students stay in small groups with the same teachers during the freshman year assists

students during the transition year.

       Confidence is also a factor cited in the success of a student's transition to high

school. Confident students often are more successful during and after the transition

process than their less confident peers. To feel more confident, students need to learn the

new procedures, locations and routines for their new educational environment. They

should be introduced to these changes prior to arriving on campus on the first day of

school (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001). Moreover, information that is often only shared with

high-performing students, such as information regarding Advanced Placement classes,

should be distributed and reiterated to all students before and after the transition to high

school (Cooper & Liou, 2007). The ninth-graders also need the support of their parents,

teachers and older peers to boost their self-esteem (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). Students

who believe their parents expect them to earn college degrees had higher GPAs and

engagement in their ninth-grade classes than did their peers who reported having low

expectations from parents (Chen & Gregory, 2010).

Schools with fully implemented transition programs have an average non-completion rate of 8%, while schools without transition programs have an average rate of 24% (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). To be fully operational, transition strategies must encompass the entire district: central office personnel should provide professional development for staff and coordinate plans between the high schools and their feeder middle schools (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). At the high school level, transition strategies must be a priority for administrators and faculty. Principals should focus on choosing quality instructors for this pivotal age group and providing them with professional development on the needs of ninth-graders and involving parents before, during and after the transition. Teachers can provide the most direct assistance to ninth-graders by offering encouragement and guidance and by communicating with parents and guardians (Queen, 2002). However, the development of positive student-teacher relationships can often be thwarted by the number of students an educator teaches. In response to this problem, districts are looking for ways to keep the student-teacher ratio low without spending millions on constructing new schools (Breaking Ranks, 2001).

Freshman Academies

According to Leithwood and Jantzi (2009), the most academically effective enrollment for high schools is 600 to 1,000 students, while Lee and Burkam (2003) found that students enrolled in high schools with fewer than 1,500 students were more likely to graduate in four years. Smaller enrollment, however, does not magically equal successful students. Instead, researchers believe the key is the ability for teachers to form stronger bonds with their students when they teach fewer adolescents (Breaking Ranks, 2001; Lee & Ready, 2007; Lee & Smith, 2001). Since constructing new high schools is costly, some

districts are moving to small learning communities (SLCs) to foster positive learning

environments and student-teacher relationships, especially at the high school level

(Blanchard & Harms, 2006; Breaking Ranks, 2001; Cohen & Smerdon 2009; Lee &

Burkam, 2003; Ready et al., 2004; Zvoch, 2006). SLCs are often employed because of

the positive correlation between student achievement and meaningful relationships with

the school staff due to the smaller student-teacher ratio size (Lee & Burkam, 2003,

Blanchard & Harms, 2006).

A large high school can be divided into smaller units in several ways, with the

two most common being career themes−such as health, business or education−and

freshman academies (Breaking Ranks, 2001; Ready et al., 2004). There are different

types of ninth-grade academies: some have their own campus and are not connected to a

larger high school, while others are housed on the same campus as the high school, either

in a separate building or wing (Fulco, 2009). In this study, the school with the freshman

academy is located in a wing of a larger high school and provides students with teachers

who only educate ninth-graders and an assigned freshman administrator. Morgan and

Hertzog (2001) believe this strategy relieves any anxieties about getting lost, since all the

classes will be in one area and keeps impressionable freshmen separated from older

students.

In their study, McIntosh and White (2006) focused upon an on-site freshman

academy at Findlay High School in Ohio. Administrators chose the concept to make the

school smaller and more personal in hopes of increasing academic achievement. The

cornerstones of the Findlay High School Freshmen Wing were academic teacher

classrooms, lockers, a principal and a counselor located in the same wing; formation of

cross-curricular freshman team teachers who share the same students; common planning periods for core teams of teachers; freshmen students and teachers having the same lunch period; annual retreats for the teachers of freshman students for bonding activities; increased transition activities in the eighth grade; and a three-hour orientation program at the beginning of the school year for freshmen.

The writers found promising results from the implementation of the Freshman Wing concept. The percentage of freshman students failing one or more classes declined steadily. Before the academy, 29% of freshmen failed one or more classes in the class of 2003. After the academy, numbers dropped to 22.6% in the class of 2007 and 20.3% in the class of 2008. There were also decreases in the numbers of students expelled: 20 in the class of 2003; 15 in the class of 2004; nine in the class of 2005; eight in the class of 2006; three in the class of 2007; and four in the class of 2008 (McIntosh & White, 2006).

Much research is available that pertains to the transition to high school and comparisons of the achievement, attendance and behavior data of freshman academy students to traditional ninth-grade students (Fulco, 2009; Hendrix, 2007; Jordan, 2009; Legters and Kerr, 2001; Leonard, 2011; McIntosh & White, 2006; Queen, 2002; Styron, 2010; Teffeteller, 2010; Willingham, 2006). Hendrix (2007) compared two high schools in Tennessee—one with a freshman academy and the other without—based on grade point average, standardized scores in algebra, core credits earned, attendance, promotion rate and discipline referrals. The students in the school with the freshman academy outperformed the students at the traditional school in respect to grade point average, test scores and core credits, and the students were issued significant fewer discipline referrals than the students at the other school. Females at the freshman academy school attended

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school more frequently than females at the traditional school, but there was no significant difference in promotion rate (Hendrix, 2007).

Similarly, Teffeteller (2010) compared a school before and after the implementation of a ninth-grade academy and found more credits were earned after the implementation, but no change in grade point average. On the other hand, just implementing a ninth-grade academy does not guarantee success. Four schools in Tennessee−two with a freshman academy and two without−were compared based on performance and attendance data (Thornton, 2009). The students at one of the freshman academy schools outperformed the students at its peer and the traditional schools in higher attendance and credits earned and with fewer discipline problems, while the students at the other freshman academy school performed lower than the students at the traditional high schools. Thornton attributed the discrepancy to the designs of the academy: the higher-performing academy included teachers who were trained in the academy's program and were asked to participate, while teachers at the other academy school received no training and were forced to participate.

Beyond the performance data, research has also been conducted concerning student perceptions of freshman academies (Astbury, 2010; McDaniel, 2008; Moore, 2009; Potter, 2004). Students in freshman academies have described the transition process as easier than those in a traditional school, specifically adapting to the larger school and experiencing more freedoms. These students also were less likely to be concerned with getting lost or making new friends at high school as compared to students at a traditional school (Moore, 2009).

Comparisons have also been conducted between students and educators about freshman academies. Ninth-grade students and teachers prefer structured and organized classrooms featuring consistent classroom management and project-based, active learning. They also expressed concern that isolation from older peers that occurs in ninth-grade academies denies freshmen access to potential role models (McDaniel, 2008). Both sides also agreed that positive student-teacher relationships were important in making the transition successful (Potter, 2004). On the other hand, Moore (2009) found that students viewed the transition to high school as a more positive experience than teachers. Students were excited about the freedoms they experienced in high school, freedoms which educators viewed as a potential negative aspect of the transition that could lead to failing grades and behavior problems.

While studies have been conducted concerning the perceptions of students and educators participating in a freshman academy (McDaniel, 2008; Moore, 2009; Potter, 2004), only one of the researchers (Moore, 2009) compared freshman academy students to traditional ninth-graders. Furthermore, analyzers applied stage-environment fit theory as the theoretical perspectives of their studies (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Kmiec, 2007; Osborne, 2012; Widner, 2010). Further research is needed utilizing stage-environment fit theory to compare student and educator perceptions about the transition to high school in differing school environments.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school, utilizing stage-environment fit theory. Furthermore, comparisons of perceptions were made

between students and educators participating in a freshman academy and those in a traditional high school. The transition to high school can be an arduous event for adolescents (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Queen, 2002). Several investigators have found that ninth-grade academies can make this change less stressful and improve student achievement and behavior (Styron & Peasants, 2010; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; McIntosh & White, 2006).

While studies have been conducted concerning the perceptions of students and educators participating in a freshman academy (McDaniel, 2008; Moore, 2009; Potter, 2004), only one of the researchers (Moore, 2009) compared freshman academy students to traditional ninth-graders. Furthermore, few analysts have used stage-environment fit theory as the theoretical framework to investigate the transition from middle to high school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Kmiec, 2007; Osborne, 2012; Widner, 2010). The scope of this study–comparing perceptions of educators to students and freshman academy students and educators to traditional ninth-grade students and educator's −will add to the existing literature about stage-environment fit theory and the transition to high school. Administrators will learn more about the perceptions of students and educators regarding the first year of high school from this study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school using stage-environment fit theory in one Southeastern school district southwest of Atlanta. Furthermore, comparisons of perceptions were made between students and educators participating in a freshman academy and those in two traditional high schools. Administrators will learn more about the perceptions of students and educators regarding the first year of high school from the results of this study. Research questions for this study included:

- How do ninth-grade students' perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school compare to those of educators?

- How do the perceptions of students and educators at a school with a freshman academy compare to those in schools without freshman academies concerning the transition and adjustment to high school?

- How are the differences in perceptions among ninth-grade students and educators explained by stage-environment fit theorists?

- How are the differences in perceptions among students and educators at a school with a freshman academy and those in schools without freshman academies explained by proponents of stage-environment fit theory?

Qualitative Research

Researchers of quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of variables, while investigators research focuses on processes, or how a social phenomenon is experienced (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Human nature cannot be fully captured numerically; The analyzer of qualitative research can delve further to describe the *whys* and *hows* of behavior (Creswell, 2007; Max & Lynn, n.d.; Roshan & Deeptee, 2009). While the poser of quantitative research often tests existing theory, qualitative researchers build towards theory through in-field observations and understandings. Furthermore, qualitative researchers produce a study that is thickly and richly descriptive in words (Merriam, 1997), view realities as being multiply constructed and the knower and known are interactive and dependent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare both student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school based on stage-environment fit theory in one Southeastern school district southwest of Atlanta. Furthermore, comparisons of perceptions were made between students and educators participating in a freshman academy and those in a traditional high school. Researchers examining the transition to high school have often utilized quantitative strategies to compare the achievement, attendance and behavior data of freshman academy students to traditional ninth-grade students (Hendrix, 2007; Jordan, 2009; Legters & Kerr, 2001; Leonard, 2011; McIntosh & White, 2006; Queen, 2002; Styron & Peasant, 2010; Teffeteller, 2010; Willingham, 2006). Researchers also have taken a qualitative approach to describe the perceptions of ninth-grade academy students about the transition to high school (Astbury, 2010), along with the perceptions of educators (McDaniel, 2008; Potter,

2004) and parents (Butts, 2011). However, limited research currently exists which compares the perceptions about transitioning to high school between academy and non-academy students and educators (Moore, 2009). Furthermore, few examiners of studies have utilized stage-environment fit theory at the high school level (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Kmiec, 2007; Osborne, 2012; Widner, 2010).

Moreover, Barber and Olsen (2004) measured student perceptions through one-time surveys in a quantitative study, which does not account for changes in perceptions throughout the transition year or allow the researchers to ask why and how questions about their perceptions. Additionally, Kmiec (2007), in a qualitative dissertation, only examined the perceptions of freshman academy students and educators; therefore, this questioner will expand the scope of previous literature to include the perceptions of students and educators at traditional high schools, which will be compared and contrasted to the perceptions of ninth-grade academy participants.

Case Study Research

When choosing a design, the researcher must focus on several factors: the philosophical foundations of the research, the compatibility between the researcher's personality and skills, and the demands of the designs and the knowledge of design choices within the paradigm (Merriam, 1997). Case study research is best suited for the emic (participant-focused) characteristic of the qualitative paradigm, unlike the etic (observer-focused) characteristic of quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1997). Lincoln and Guba (1985) said that qualitative researchers often use case study reporting because it is suited to describing multiple realities and the interaction

between the researcher and the participants, along with allowing for transferability because of its thick descriptions.

The investigator of case studies examines an issue by exploring a bounded system, or case, within its context, such ninth-grade students and educators (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2008). Case study methodology is a favorable method for answering *how* and *why* questions (Yin, 2008), for examining a phenomenon (Merriam, 1997), and for providing a holistic analysis of a bounded system (Stake, 2005). The intent of this researcher was to apply Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory to describe student and educator perceptions of the transition and adjustment to high school. Consequently, case study methodology was a logical technique to use in this study because the researcher focused questions on how students and educators perceived the transition to high school; the characteristics of a phenomenon−the transition to high school−were described; and a bounded system−ninth-grade students and educators−was analyzed.

The Role and Background of the Researcher
Experts contend that researchers need to be fully aware of their motivations for wanting to conduct a study, such as curiosity, personal gain and familiarity with the subject, so that biases will not tarnish the study (Maxwell, 2005; Watt. 2007). I began my teaching career began in the fall of 2005 after working for five years as an education reporter for a local newspaper, where I had hands-on experience conducting interviews with educators and students. For the majority of my teaching career, I have taught ninth-grade literature and composition. First-time ninth-graders are an interesting group; they are not quite children, but not quite young adults, and their behavior, or misbehavior,

symbolizes this paradox. Besides starting high school, there are no exciting opportunities for this group, unlike the possibility of driving for sophomores and prom for juniors and seniors.

However, I slowly found myself developing a warm spot in my heart for this age group. Their energy is infectious, and I learn more from them than the knowledge I pass along. After surviving my first year of teaching, I was asked if I would like to take part in a new initiative, a freshman academy. This was my school's second attempt at a ninth-grade academy; the first was dropped after the district adopted block scheduling. I gladly accepted the offer and was positive that the results my principal promised− higher student achievement and fewer discipline problems− would come to fruition.

During the past seven years, the design of our freshman academy has changed. The academy was once located at the bottom of a wing that included upper-level classrooms. Next, it followed a team-teacher approach, which was dropped after the district adopted a new grading/scheduling system. For the past three years, the academy has been housed at the bottom of another wing behind a glass door. However, two computer labs and classes in this same area for older students repeating ninth-grade curriculum mean that older students often frequent the ninth-grade academy.

Even though I now teach tenth-grade, I still consider myself to be a champion of our ninth-grade academy. Based on data provided by the school, test scores have increased while behavior referrals have decreased. I assumed that our freshman academy allows students to ease into high school with more teacher support and without being negatively affected by older peers. However, during discussions with students, I often heard that ninth-grade academy was "lame" and they felt as if they were being treated as

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babies. These statements led me to the research questions for this study: How do ninth-grade students' perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school compare to those of educators? How do the perceptions of students and educators at a school with a freshman academy compare to those in schools without freshman academies concerning the transition and adjustment to high school?

Sample

Introduction

In his case study, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America*, Kozol (1989) argued that his purposefully selected sample of homeless families in New York could be used to make generalizations about the problem nationwide because the city "gives America a preview of the future" (p. 18). On the other hand, Yin (2008) contends that case studies can be generalized to theories, not populations, making the purpose analytic rather than making statistical generalizations. Purposeful sampling is strengthened when researchers choose case studies rich with information that can provide insight about the phenomenon (Patton, 2001), such as educators' and students' perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school. Since the study will involve a purposefully-selected sample of a specific student grade, generalizations must be made carefully. The chosen school system and its three high schools were purposefully chosen as well for the researcher's convenience because she worked at the freshman academy high school in this system. However, the transferability of this study was strengthened by providing in-depth data descriptions, explaining the study's

importance and its archetypal characteristics and conducting a multi-site study (Merriam, 1997).

The study took place in a school system located about 60 miles south of Atlanta, Georgia. According to the 2012-2013 State Report Card, more than 12,000 students are enrolled in the system's 21 schools, which include three high schools. Enrollment percentages closely synchronize with the state regarding students with disabilities, non-English speakers and race, except the proposed district has a higher percentage of white students at 50 percent than the state's 44 percent. The district also has a higher percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch than the state, 64 percent to 60 percent ("2012-2013 Report Card," 2013).

The district in this study has three high schools which were identified as High School A, High School B and High School C, which is the only school with a freshman academy. Students are assigned to A school based on zoning lines, with one high school per zone. The schools closely mirror the enrollment percentages of the system by race, learning disabled students and non-English speakers. The district and its three high schools based on the 2012-2013 State Report Card ("The Governor's Office," 2013) on enrollment, end of course tests administered to ninth-grade students, scores on the College and Career Readiness Performance Indicator (CCRPI), and graduation rates are outlined in the following table. CCRPI scores for high schools are on a 100-point scale and are based on factors such as state assessment scores, attendance rates, graduation rates and student pathway completion ("CCRPI," 2013).

Table 3.1 School Demographics

School	Enrollment	Percentage of students to pass the Ninth-grade Literature and Composition End of Course Test	Percentage of students to pass the Biology End of Course Test	Percentage of students to pass the Coordinate Algebra End of Course Test- first year administered	CCRPI scores	Graduation Rate
District	12,166	84	76	33	68.3	72.6
High School A	792	80	68	28	63.3	72.1
High School B	1,390	86	75	39	68.3	74.8
High School C	1,297	86	81	31	69.7	72.7

Student Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select first-time ninth-grade students to study from each of the three high schools in the district. One of the schools has a freshman academy program, while the others follow traditional grade assignment configurations. While participants were chosen from my place of employment, none of the participants were assigned to my classes; moreover, the researcher was not teaching ninth grade during the time of the study.

After obtaining permission from the school district's research coordinator, the principals and teachers, the researcher visited ninth-grade classes to seek student participation. I visited two ninth-grade literature classes each at Schools A and B on Sept. 25, 2013, provided an overview of this study and asked for student volunteers. A total of 21 School A students and 12 School B students expressed interest in the study. During September, October and November, I contacted parents by phone to ask consent for their child to participate and to establish after school interview times. Students were also required to return their parental consent and student ascent forms before they could be interviewed. Five School A and five School B students participated in this study. Interviews were conducted at the students' school.

The researcher taught at School C and visited a ninth-grade biology class in September and a ninth-grade literature class in October to seek student volunteers during my planning period. Ten School C students participated in the study. Interviews were conducted in the researcher's classroom during her planning period for six participants and after school for four participants.

Adult Participants

Of the adult participants, three were asked to participate because they are administrators at the three high schools in the selected district; during an interview, they answered questions about the transition programs at their schools and the developmental needs of freshmen. Ninth-grade teachers were invited to answer questions about transition programs through an open-ended, emailed questionnaire. About 10 questionnaires were emailed to each school, for a total of 30. All 10 questionnaires from

High School C, the researcher's site of employment, were completed, while five were completed from High School A and six were completed from High School B.

Before the study began, adult participants and the parents/legal guardians of the student participants signed informed consent forms, while the student participants signed assent forms. Participants were told that their involvement was voluntary, and they could exit if they desire.

Relationships with Participants

Students

The researcher's prior career experiences as a newspaper reporter and a ninth-grade teacher were advantages in the field. As a former reporter, the researcher had experience creating interview questions, interviewing both educators and students, transcribing recorded interviews and writing the findings, or stories, based on the interviews. As teacher, the researcher learned how to develop a rapport with my students based on mutual respect and trust. The researcher tried to create an atmosphere where the students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of embarrassment. This atmosphere was re-created during interviews.

Educators

Potential relationship issues also existed with the educator participants in the study. The researcher was not in a position of authority with the faculty of the three high schools, besides serving on the School Improvement Team at the researcher's school, which is a collaborative committee rather than an authoritative one. It was assumed that the researcher had a strong working relationship with the colleagues and administrators at

the school and with those at other schools that were met at conferences and through past experience as an education reporter. Furthermore, the researcher hoped that her relationships and reputation would encourage the selected teachers and administrators to participate in the study; yet despite these established relationships, the researcher remained professional.

Data Collection

Unlike in quantitative studies, a qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The researcher is responsive to the context of the study and can adjust techniques to fit changing circumstances. Case study data collection is interactive and often circular because one strategy often leads to subsequent sources of data. The acts of interviewing, observing, and examining documents are comprehensive and holistic in the process of describing the studied phenomenon (Merriam, 1997).

Before data collection can begin, researchers must accomplish several tasks. I obtained permission from Columbus State University's Institution Review Board and the Troup County School system to conduct the study. Educator participants agreed, participated and signed informed consent forms (Appendices A-B). An administrator at each school was asked to select a diverse student sample by gender, race, academic ability and socioeconomic status. Parents/legal guardians of student participants signed informed consent forms to allow their children to participate in the study (Appendix C), and students provided assent to participate (Appendix D). After the above tasks were completed, the researcher used two forms of qualitative data: questionnaires and interviews with field notes.

Types of Data

Qualitative researchers have a variety of types of data to collect−observations, interviews, questionnaires, documents−and each source has its own strengths and weaknesses based on its nature, the abilities of the researcher and the purpose of the study. The purpose of this study was to describe student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school for first-time ninth-graders, and the types of data I used to gather this information included interviews and questionnaires.

The interview guides and questionnaire were based on the work of Kmiec (2007) with the author's permission. Her study focused on the transition to high school through stage-environment fit theory. According to stage-environment fit theory, a ninth-grade student's maladjustment to high school is the result of a divergence between the development needs of adolescents−increased autonomy in classrooms, a sense of belonging and supportive teacher-student relationships− and the school and classroom environments (Eccles et al., 1993).   However, Kmiec's work concentrated only on schools with freshman academies; therefore, while the administrator and student interview guides used in this study were adapted from the work of Kmiec, questions were reworded, added and deleted following a pilot of the instruments. For instance, in the Kmiec student focus interview guide, she requested "Describe a typical freshman academy school day." This statement was changed to "Describe a typical day at your school" to apply to students who do not attend a freshman academy school. However, some of the questions remained the same, such as Kmiec's student focus group interview, "Think back to the end of your 8th grade-year. What did you think high school would be like?" This question was the first question in my initial student interviews. Additional

questions about student involvement in school activities were added to reflect the way

stage-fit environment theory is used to describe how students experience a sense of

belonging, such as "Are you involved in sports or any activities?

Instrument Development

Administrator and student interview questions were piloted at my place of employment, during the week of May 14, 2012. The researcher interviewed two assistant principals using the administrator interview guide, recorded the interviews and took field notes. The field notes included participant nonverbal cues, such as head nods and gestures, repeated words and descriptions of the interview sites. The administrators were also asked to recommend additional questions. One administrator suggested adding advice for parents of rising ninth-graders as well as advice for students.

Interviews were conducted with students to pilot the interview guide during the same week and at the same site. The researcher interviewed a total of six students. These interviews also were recorded and I took field notes, which included nonverbal cues such as hand and facial gestures. The pilot study revealed which questions needed to be refined, deleted or added, such as changing "How are your classes going?" to "Describe your classes by their grade mixture (all freshmen or a mixture) and your academic achievement (grades, feelings of disappointment or success)." After the pilot interviews, the interview guides were refined and edited to remove biases, to be clear and understandable to the participants, and to create a smoother flow during the interview (Hatch, 2002). For example, one pilot interview question designed for freshman academy students was "How has the freshman academy helped you to adapt to high school" This leading question was changed to "Has the freshman academy helped you adjust to high school? Why or why not?" Also, probes were added to "How are your classes going?" because one student from the pilot interview answered with one word. Data from the pilot interviews were not included in the study.

Interviews

Interviews offer several advantages for researchers wanting to capture participant perceptions. This type of data allows researchers to meet face-to-face with participants; to discover participant perceptions about a phenomenon; to collect data in a natural setting; and to immediately seek clarification or expansion (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). However, several disadvantages exist with interviews. The interviewer is dependent on the cooperation and availability of the interviewee, who could choose at any time to opt out of the project or may need to reschedule meetings. Also, the researcher is absolutely reliant on the participant for information, so the researcher must establish a relationship of trust and honesty with the participant. If not, the interviewee may not feel comfortable sharing his/her story, which would lead to a lack of data, or s/he may only say what s/he thinks the interviewer wants to hear, damaging the credibility of the study. Marshall and Rossman urge researchers only to use interviews if they have strong people skills−listening, putting others at ease and establishing a rapport.

Standardized open-ended interviews, with built-in opportunities for probe and follow-up questions, were used in this study. All participants were asked the same questions in the same sequence, which increased consistency and comparability of interviews, while allowing participants to share their perceptions in their own words.

Administrator and Student Interviews

Qualitative research should take place in a natural setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); therefore, student and administrator interviews took place at their high school during the school day, either before or after school or during my planning period. Student interviews lasted approximately 15-30 minutes, while the administrator interviews lasted

about 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded with a digital tape recorder with the researcher taking field notes. Interviews with administrators took place during the first school semester of 2013-14. The interviews were held at the convenience of the participants and followed the researcher designed administrator interview guide (Appendix E), which focused on administrator perceptions of ninth-graders and high school transition strategies. Questions from the administrator interview protocol include:

- Let's talk about your school as a whole. Describe the school to me.

- Describe your perceptions on the ninth-grade year. How important is it academically?

- Compare and contrast ninth-graders to students in other grade levels. How are freshmen different and the same? In what way, if any, do ninth-grade students change during their first year of high school?

- What strategies does your school have in place to help students transition from middle to high school? Which of these strategies do you think is the most beneficial and why?

- What advice would you give rising freshmen and their parents/guardians?

- What are your perceptions about freshman academies?

Student interviews took place after school or during the researcher's planning period. I conducted the first set of individual interviews with the selected students during first semester. The purpose of this interview was to establish rapport with participants, introduce them to the focus of the study, discover their perceptions on the transition to high school, and examine how they have adjusted to high school (Appendix G). The subsequent interview (Appendix H) with students took place during second semester;

therefore, I interviewed all students individually two times during the school year. Questions from these interviews adhered to the follow-up interview guide to ensure reliability of the interview instrument (Patton, 2001). This guide included some of the same questions as the initial student interview guide, but did not include their initial perceptions of the transition. Questions that were asked during both interviews include:

- Describe your relationships with your teachers.

- Do you feel that you belong at your high school? Why or why not?

- Describe your relationships with older peers.

- Describe your ninth-grade year so far.

Questionnaire

Questionnaires are often used to supplement data collection in qualitative studies (Robinson, 2011). Questionnaires can either be self-completed, without the researcher on site, or interview-based, where the researcher is on site. Both types of delivery have their advantages; self-completed questionnaires are easier on the researcher because they do not have to be at the site and typically allow the participant flexibility with the time frame during which the questionnaire should be completed. On the other hand, interview-based questionnaires allow for high participation rates because all participants on site can take the questionnaire at the same time and participants have the opportunity to ask questions or c to seek clarifications about the questionnaire. The questionnaire in this study was emailed to participants, so it was a self-completed study.

Ninth-grade teachers completed the questionnaire, so the instrument included the purpose of the study—to describe student and educator perceptions of the transition to

high school—and the goals of the study—to help school leaders improve transition strategies for ninth-graders—to influence the instructors to participate. Moreover, I hoped established professional and personal relationships with several of the teacher participants, especially at the school where I teach, encouraged their participation in the study. By using email, I eliminated undue work for the participants: they just needed to click reply, type their answers and click send. Along with ease of use, the questionnaire only had four questions, which increased informant participation (Dillman, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

When questionnaire are emailed, Dillman (2007) believes further considerations must be made. Participants could have various email addresses and may not use the one the researcher has on file. Using the correct email address was not a problem with this study since the district's email system has all employee emails saved in the contacts section. All teachers received personalized emails containing the questionnaire rather than a bulk mailing to all participants. Personalized emails make respondents feel as if they were chosen and are important to the study, instead of just one person in a long list of email addresses. Teachers completed the questionnaire within a week. A personalized thank you and/or reminder email was sent within five days.

When creating a questionnaire, writers need to keep the questions connected to research questions, use simple language without jargon, avoid leading questions and avoid ambiguity (Dillman, 2007; Robinson, 2011). The teacher questionnaire (Appendix F) asked for instructor feedback on the importance of the ninth-grade year, which transition strategies are the most beneficial to students and their advice for rising ninth-grade students and parents, all of which are connected to the study's research questions.

Unlike in or during an interview, I was not able to immediately ask follow-up questions, yet I did seek further information or clarification in subsequent emails. The questions included:

- Describe your perceptions on the ninth-grade year. How important is it academically?

- Which of your school's high school transition strategies do you think is the most beneficial and why?

- What advice would you give rising freshmen and their parents/guardians?

- For teachers at the school with a freshman academy: What are the benefits and disadvantages of a freshman academy for students?

- For teachers at the schools without freshman academies: Would you like to see a freshman academy added at your campus? Why or why not?

Data Analysis

According to Patton (2001), a case study researcher's "first and foremost responsibility consists of doing justice to each individual case. All else depends on that" (p. 449). Data collection and analysis in qualitative case studies are not two separate activities but simultaneous strategies that begin when the first piece of data is collected (Merriam, 1997). Merriam describes data analysis as "the process of making meaning" from what the participants have said and what the researchers have seen (p. 178). Qualitative researchers rely upon two primary resources for organizing their data: their research questions and the themes that emerge during data collection (Patton, 2001). Research experts assert that thorough analysis needs to begin early because it helps the

researcher to remember to constantly transition between collection and analysis, and most qualitative data analysis begins with carefully reading the data (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2012).

Following each interview, handwritten field notes were typed in paragraph form with my name, the date and time, site location and the participant's pseudonym at the top of the report soon after the contact so that pertinent information was not forgotten (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Tape recorded interviews were transcribed by me using the same format as the field notes. Field notes included an account of the setting, the participant and descriptions of participants' body movements and facial gestures. Furthermore, I included any reflections I had before, during and after the interviews in my write-ups; however, I bracketed these thoughts in double parentheses, as suggested by Miles and Huberman, so that I did not mistake them for participant perceptions. Afterwards, I typed a contact summary sheet, which provided the main points, questions and concerns about the interview. The handwritten notes, along with a printed version of the field notes, transcribed interviews and the contact summary sheet, were stored in a notebook in a closed bookcase at my residence.

When coding data, Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend staying focused on the study's conceptual framework and research questions. They advocate beginning with basic, descriptive codes at the beginning of research, which could include a repeated word from the transcripts, field notes, or research questions. As data collection progresses, the researcher then can decipher pattern codes or emerging themes that exist within the data across time and sites. Pattern codes group data by similar summarizers, such as themes, causes/explanations, relationships among people and theoretical

constructs, reducing large amounts of data into smaller analytical parts. After reading and analyzing printed versions of the data, I wrote codes on the left-hand margin beside the data and used the right-hand margin for comments, as suggested by Miles and Huberman. Pattern coding took place following the collection of data, with the new information being analyzed and compared to previous data (Erickson, 1986; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2008).

I read the typed notes and transcribed data line-by-line until no new themes or patterns were detected for coding (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). After pattern coding the data, I typed memos about the codes that appeared to be most pertinent at that point of data collection. Writing memos helps researchers to clarify and revise the patterns of codes and develop categories that demonstrate relationships between the codes; furthermore, researchers can use memos to clarify unclear concepts from their research. The memos were labeled by the date they were written and their basic concept.

All of the typed and transcribed data and memos were entered into the Ethnograph version six, a qualitative data code-and-retrieval program. Qualitative data analysis software helps researchers to store large amounts of data, and code and retrieve passages of data by keywords. However, Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011) warn that the ease of coding with these programs often tempts researchers to arbitrarily placing data into one of the fixed codes, instead of continually rereading and refining the codes as new data are collected. This is why coding of data was an ongoing process throughout data collection and analysis. The Ethnograph was selected after reading several messages on qualitative listservs and viewing online versions of NVivo, ATLAS.ti and MAXQDA.

Readings and reflections of coded data and memos were used to create propositions, or related assertions that reflect a study's findings (Erickson, 1986; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Propositions were typed, grouped by participant and school type, and revised after additional data collection to analyze whether the new information supported or opposed the original claims. The propositions had to be supported by all of the existing data; if not, they were revised, set aside or listed with the discrepant evidence (Erickson, 1986). I began writing propositions after the first site visit, but I remained flexible and kept revising the statements as new data emerged. The next step with the propositions was to make generalizations between the assertions, which were completed through the use of matrices.

According to Miles and Huberman (2004), "You know what you display" (p. 91). The authors recommend two types of data analysis displays−matrices, with rows and columns, and networks, with connected clusters of information. Student data, which comprised the majority of the collected information, were displayed by school using time-order matrices, which depict information as it occurred. Columns marked the time, while my research questions and student interview questions were used to create the rows. This allowed me to analyze changes in students' perceptions as they adapted to high school throughout the year. Moreover, I compared and contrasted student perceptions by school−the two traditional high schools and the one with the ninth-grade academy−by analyzing the three time-ordered matrices side-by-side.

After the final collection of data, conclusive time-ordered and role-ordered matrices were constructed for educators and students. I compared and contrasted these matrices by school to detect patterns and dissimilarities in student and educator

perceptions among the three school environments. The matrices also included the propositions made by the researcher, and whether the data supported or contradicted those statements. As with the data coding and propositions, the matrices were revised with each round of data collection. I used these matrices to create a master outline for writing the study (Hatch, 2002). An example of the student matrix was included in my dissertation so that readers will be able to see how I used them to reach my conclusions (Appendix I).

Analysis, however, also involves testing to confirm researchers' findings. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend several steps for checking conclusions. The ones utilized in this study included:

- Check for researcher affects, which include how the researcher affects the site and sample, and also how the site affects the researcher. To avoid the first bias, the researchers recommend staying on site for a long period of time and making sure the participants know who you are and the purpose of your study. To avoid the second bias, the writers suggest that researchers include the view of outlier participants in the study, keep research questions at the forefront and triangulate data collection methods to ensure other measures confirm data findings.

- Focus on information from outliers, surprising results or negative evidence to test findings. The writers said researchers often ignore data points that veer from the norm of the other collected information. Instead, this data should be used to test researcher propositions and theoretical perspectives. If the propositions and theoretical perceptive still hold true against the negative

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evidence, then the research findings are strengthened; if not, revisions need to be made based on the differing data. This testing provides a clearer, more accurate picture of the phenomenon understudy because the researcher is not biased by their beliefs.

- Examine rival explanations. Miles and Huberman recommend embracing several possible theoretical explanations for the phenomenon being studied during data collection analysis until one theory, or a combination of theories, is shown to be strongest and most believable. Basically, researchers should not become so attached to a theory that they are blind to other, reasonable alternatives. Researchers should begin investigating the theories connected to their study before data collection, so they already will be knowledgeable of the possible rival explanations. For this study, rival explanations to stage-environment fit theory included transition theory, resilience theory, life course theory and self-determination theory.

- Obtain feedback from participants. After the final analysis, I asked three administrators and ten randomly-chosen student participants to read their interviews and provide feedback. Teachers were not asked to provide feedback because they submitted their responses in writing, which were stored in notebooks at my home. All principals responded: Principal B made no suggestions, while Principals A and C made editing corrections. Eight of the ten student participants responded, but none made any changes.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are of paramount importance to create rigor in research, whether the study is quantitative or qualitative. However, the terminology used in the literature of the two types of studies often differs. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest four criteria that equate to quantitative terms for validity and reliability: credibility instead of internal validity, dependability instead of reliability, transferability instead of external validity and confirmability instead of objectivity.

Credibility, or internal validity, focuses on how well the research findings match reality, or simply put, how credible the findings are (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1997). Triangulation, the use of multiple sources of data, is a necessity in establishing credibility (Merriam, 1997; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2008). To this end, student participants were interviewed twice, with several questions repeated. In addition, emailed questionnaires were used for teachers.

Transferability, as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), deals with how well a study's findings can be generalized to other, comparable settings. The ability to transfer a study's findings to another case depends on several factors: how well the researcher described the settings, participants and data collection and analytic procedures so that the study could be replicated in another setting; if the researcher recognized and addressed threats to generalization; and how well the findings connect to prior theory. To this end, the researcher recorded and updated a qualitative analysis document, as specified by Miles and Huberman (1994), that detailed data sets used in the study, data collection procedures, how the data was managed (transcribed, typed, stored), analytic procedures for the data, preliminary conclusions and comments after the final analysis. The form

strengthened the study's transferability and confirmability, as well as dependability. Dependability refers to how well the researcher describes the data collection and analysis processes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Not only did the researcher fully describe the data and analysis, she also examined findings for parallelism in my sources and fully described the theoretical perspective and analytic procedures for the study.

Finally, confirmability measures objectivity and how well the results could be corroborated by others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability is an important issue for qualitative research because, unlike quantitative studies, a qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. (Merriam, 1997). To achieve confirmability, the researcher examined rival theories (Merriam, 1997), such as transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981), which researchers have used to describe transitions as processes and examined the relationship of the individual to the change, and Henderson and Milstein's (2003) resiliency model, which enabled researchers to examines stressors (like transitions) on adolescent behavior (Kimball, 2007). Moreover, the researcher described my initial researcher biases and assumptions, along with how these changed during the research process, by summarizing information from my memos.

Ethical Issues

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative researchers have several ethical concerns they must consider before entering the field: harm and risk; privacy, anonymity and confidentiality; intervention and advocacy; and research integrity and quality.

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Harm and Risk

For students, the harm and risk of participating in this study were minimal. Students were asked to participate in interviews with me after the school day twice a year. Six School C students received permission from their teachers to participate in interviews during the school day during my planning period. I did not want my student informants to be academically penalized for their participation, so before student data collection began, I spoke to the School C principal and asked that participants be allowed to make up any work they miss while meeting with me. Emails were sent to the teachers of the student participants asking if they could meet during class periods before each student interview, and I asked students before the interviews if they are able to make up work they will miss. All students who met with me during the school day were allowed to make up any worked they missed.

The harm and risk of participating in this study for educators was minimal as well. Educators may have been concerned with how their answers would be perceived by their peers and supervisors, which could have impacted their employment. To ease these fears, I informed teachers that I would be the only person who had access to their survey answers, and that in my study, they would only be identified as a teacher from school A, B, or C. The same safeguards were also taken with administrators; however, the smaller number of administrators could have created issues for their confidentiality.

Privacy, Anonymity, and Confidentiality

While all participants were given pseudonyms, further steps were needed to protect their identity. As Miles and Huberman (1994) note, "What good is anonymity if people and their colleagues can easily recognize themselves in a case study?" (p. 288).

Each school enrolls about 400 ninth-graders a year, so students described as attending the one high school in the system with a ninth-grade academy had to have their privacy protected. The number of ninth-grade teachers at each school is much smaller, about 20 per school. To protect their confidentiality, I avoided descriptions of the participants, such as gender, race or years teaching, and described each informant as "teacher from School A, B, or C."

The numbers dramatically decrease when describing the administrators at each school. Each high school has one principal and varying numbers of assistant principals, from three to five. Based on the descriptions of the schools, my participants, peers and supervisors could deduce which school was which. Therefore, my administrator participants essentially lacked anonymity and could have lost confidentiality, a point I made to them before their participation.

Research Integrity and Quality

While as readers we hope that the findings of researchers are not based on fraudulent or plagiarized work, questions of research integrity and quality often arise not from blatant lies, but careless work. To assure readers of the study's integrity and quality, I included in-depth descriptions of the dissertation process: how and why samples and sites were chosen, types of data collected and how and when it was collected, how the data was coded and analyzed; and how a theoretical perspective was selected from rival explanations. Presenting a thorough and honest description of the study's processes increased the credibility of my findings and ensured that I did not engage in sloppy work.

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Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school utilizing stage-environment fit theory. Furthermore, comparisons of perceptions were made between students and educators participating in a freshman academy and those in a traditional high school. Qualitative research was used in this study to provide a comprehensive view of the transition and adjustment to high school through the perceptions of ninth-grade students, administrators and teachers using interviews, a questionnaire and student journals. Moreover, case study methodology was utilized to analyze the commonalities and differences in this study: ninth-grade students and educators; freshman academy students and educators; and traditional high school students and educators. The motivation of this study was to help administrators learn more about the perceptions of students and educators regarding the first year of high school.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school using stage-environment fit theory in one Southeastern school district southwest of Atlanta. The district in this study has three high schools: School A, the newest and smallest high school; School B, the oldest and largest high school; and School C, the only school with a ninth-grade academy. School A participants included the principal, five ninth-grade teachers and five ninth-grade students. School B participants included the principal, seven ninth-grade teachers and four ninth-grade students. School C participants included the principal, 10 ninth-grade teachers and 10 ninth-grade students. In addition, the researcher was employed at School C.

The following research questions were used in this study:

- How do ninth-grade students' perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school compare to those of educators?

- How do the perceptions of students and educators at a school with a freshman academy compare to those in schools without freshman academies concerning the transition and adjustment to high school?

- How can stage-environment fit theory be used to explain the differences in perceptions among ninth-grade students and educators?

- How can stage-environment fit theory be used to explain the differences in perceptions among students and educators at a school with a freshman academy and those in schools without freshman academies?

Stage-environment fit theory is based upon the premise that an environment can either be used to meet the developmental needs of adolescents and a way to promote maturation or it can be a vehicle that suppresses the needs of students and delays growth (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccle & Roeser, 2011). Two of the schools in this study, School A and B, used a traditional configuration while the third school, C, had an in-house ninth-grade academy. The analysis of this study will be discussed based on the following components of stage-environment fit theory: the organization and culture of schools must meet the developmental needs of students for adolescents to experience a successful transition; adolescents need a balance of autonomy and support from teachers to meet their developmental needs; and students undergo a smoother transition to a new environment if they experience a sense of belonging, such as establishing relationships with other peers and teachers and joining school activities.

Data utilized in this study included administrator and student interviews, and teacher questionnaires. Data analyses are presented by school in the following order−overview of each environment, educator perceptions about student development and school transition strategies; student perceptions about school culture and belonging, − and transition strategies; and comparisons of educator and student opinions. The findings from the traditional high schools are then compared to the findings from the school with the ninth-grade academy based on student development, transition strategies

and sense of belonging. Principals are identified by their school–A, B or C– and teachers and students are identified by school and assigned numbers, such as Teacher 1-A.

School A

Overview

School A is the newest high school in the county. It opened in 1996 in the northern part of the district and housed grades 6 through 12 until a middle school opened in August 2011 ("Schools"). Principal A began leading the school in Feb. 1, 2013, after serving seven years as registrar at the high school in the district with the ninth-grade academy. Other faculty members included two assistant principals, registrar, two counselors and 65 teachers. About 870 students were enrolled in August 2013, which grew by 100 students from the previous year due to a larger ninth-grade class. Principal A said:

> Even though we are the smallest high school in (the county), we still, in the extracurricular programs, offer pretty much what the other two schools do. Curriculum wise, we don't necessarily have as many things to offer particularly in terms of CTAE (career, technical, agricultural education) and fine arts just because we are smaller.

Demographically, about 50% of students were white, 45% were black and five% identified as another race. While the school had the smallest high school enrollment in the district, it also had the highest poverty rate, with approximately 65% of students qualifying for free-or-reduced-priced meals. In 2013, the rate of seniors who graduated in four years was 72.1%, compared to 74.8 % at School B, 72.7 % at School C and Georgia's 71.5 % ("Final 2013").

Educator Perceptions

Student development. Ninth-graders have to adjust from being the oldest students at the middle school (as eight graders) to the youngest at 14- and 15-years-old at the high school. For some, this is not a problem, and they quickly adapt to the freedoms and academic expectations of their environment: "The student begins to take responsibility for their actions and learning independently because of the new found freedom given to them in the ninth-grade year," Teacher 1-A said. However, for other students, the increased freedom of the high school environment can cause them to lose focus on academics in favor of peers: "They are more worried about who they are going to eat lunch with or what friends are in their classes, sometimes more so than the academic part," Principal A said.

Teacher 2-A said that some peer relationships can inspire students to perform better academically, while others "dig such a deep ditch that they require a level of dedication beyond themselves to get out of it." Moreover, while most first-time nine-graders are about the same age, that does not mean they are at the same maturity level, which Principal A says is the biggest social difference between freshman and other grades: "You can look down the hall, and regardless of shape, size, or color, you can pick a ninth-grader versus an upper classman just sometimes based on behavior."

Along with lower levels of maturity, ninth-graders are often lagging in study skills– including organizational, time management, study and test taking skills. As Principal A said,

> Often times students haven't had to do a lot of studying, even good students. School has just come naturally, but once they get into high school, some things may continue to come naturally, but they may also begin to encounter a subject

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that begins to give them trouble. They have to figure out how to be able to handle that, how to study, how to ask for help.

Principal A said that ninth-grade core classes embedded study skills in their curriculum, such as reading Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits for Highly Effective Teens* in literature class. Students are also encouraged to take responsibility for their learning and seek out extra help from teachers: "I think that those are the kind of things that upperclassmen tend to be more aware of and tend to be more likely to self-advocate versus a 14-year-old who is just starting high school," Principal A said.

Along with the increased freedom of high school, ninth-graders encountered new responsibilities, especially in terms of academics. While some students may have experienced social promotion in elementary and middle school, they are required to pass to earn credit for their high school courses: "That whole concept of 'if you don't pass Coordinate Algebra, you're not going to go on to the next math class. You're going to stay in this math class until you pass it' is a concept that they are not familiar with," Principal A said.

According to Principal A, students struggled more in math and history than in their literature and science classes. The high schools in this district established core classes for freshmen. However, some older students who failed ninth-grade courses are also enrolled in these classes. This scheduling problem increases ninth-grade class sizes by a few students and exposes impressionable students to older peers. Principal A said:

> Often we see students who don't earn their high school credits in the ninth grade if they get behind a grade. Unfortunately, when they get behind, they find themselves having to, even if they've aged and are 16-year-olds, but if they still haven't passed ninth-grade literature, they find themselves back in ninth-grade literature again with freshmen.

Not only did freshman academic failures create classroom issues, but they also negatively impacted students' grade point averages, which affected their post-high school prospects: "As we all know, it is much easier to bring down a GPA than to bring one up and, if a student is discouraged from the beginning of high school, it is often difficult to change that attitude and be set on a better course," Teacher 5-A said.

Transition strategies. The high schools in this study used a variety of transition strategies, which varied little by school, to help incoming freshman adapt to their new surroundings. Common practices among the schools include high school counselors visiting middle school campuses, eighth-graders visiting high school campuses near the end of the school year and freshman-only open houses before the start of school.

Educators begin preparing students for the transition to ninth-grade during the middle school year. Middle school counselors speak with students and parents about earning credits, passing high-stakes tests, choosing a pathway and electives and the connection between driver's licenses and attendance. CTAE teachers also visit the feeder middle school to discuss their course offerings. The same information is shared with parents and guardians of eighth-graders at middle school presentations.

During the spring semester, eighth-graders get a preview of their freshman year during a high school visit. Students, chaperoned by eighth-grade teachers, high school teachers and students, tour the school and listen to a presentation about what to expect the next year, including a focus on sports and clubs: "There are all these studies out there that show you that getting kids involved in something extracurricular is going to contribute to their academic success; they're wanting to stay in school," Principal A said. "So a lot of what we talk about with them during the eighth-grade visit is academic, but some of it is

extracurricular and fun." The principal and teachers were asked to name the most beneficial transition strategy for students. Of the six School A educators, only Teacher 3 perceived the eighth-grade visit to be the most beneficial: "They see what the high school students are doing in class; they have an opportunity to hear about all of the different activities that take place in high school," the teacher said.

Ninth-graders have another opportunity to view their new environment before the school year begins. School A offers a "Walk through Night" during preplanning for ninth-graders and their families only, which allows students to find their classes before the first day of school to help alleviate anxiety about getting lost. Open house for the entire school is typically held later in August. Teachers 1-A and 4-A found the open house to be the most beneficial because students become comfortable with the school's layout, and parents and teachers can establish relationships. Principal A stated the most advantageous strategies involve parents, students and teachers: "I think that anytime you are involving parents, and students, and teachers, that's going to give you the biggest bang for your buck."

According to Teachers 2-A and 5-A, the most effective transition strategies do not take place until students enter the classroom as ninth-graders. One teacher found students do not truly grasp the expectations of high school until they are high school students, while the other said positive student-teacher relationships are paramount for a successful high school transition: "Teachers who are skilled at helping students feel comfortable and confident in their class have an enormous impact on student success," Teacher 2-A said. "An effective teacher teaches lacking students the skills necessary to be successful."

While the other transition strategies at each high school are identical, only one of the schools had a ninth-grade academy, which was housed at the end of one hallway and provided students with core teachers who only educate ninth-graders and an assigned freshman administrator. The students took elective classes in other parts of the school, often with upperclassmen. As a former employee, the principal at School A was quite familiar with the district's one ninth-grade academy: She served as registrar for seven years at the school. She believed School C's ninth-grade academy provided students with "the best of worlds": experiencing some of the structure of middle school, while still encountering the freedoms of high school. The only disadvantage she experienced was in the logistics, such as having a location, educators and an administrator devoted solely to freshmen. "The biggest benefit I saw to having a freshman academy is that easing of that transition," she said. "They weren't thrown to the wolves, so to speak, from day one."

The five teachers interviewed perceived more disadvantages to an academy, and all replied that they would not want a ninth-grade academy on their campus. Teacher 4-A worked at school with a freshman academy that completely separated ninth-graders from older peers: "It did not seem to transition them," the teacher said. "All the students had the same classes with the same teachers and spent their freshman year being isolated and not integrating into high school life."

Teachers 1-A and 5-A said ninth-graders needed interaction with older peers to successfully adapt to their new environment, while the other three said a ninth-grade academy could impede student academic and developmental growth: "I feel the students are too restricted in the middle school, and if we continue to baby him/her, s/he will not be successful throughout the rest of their high school career," Teacher 3 said.

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Student Perceptions

As with teachers, five students also participated from School A: three African-American females, one African American male, and a white male. All students reported passing their classes at the time of their interviews in October 2013 and March 2014. Interviews with students contained a wider scope than those with educators. Along with being asked about transition strategies, students also answered questions about first impressions of high school, relationships with ninth-grade teachers, increased freedom in high school, encouragement to participate in extracurricular activities and recommendations for administrators to improve the transition to high school.

School culture and belonging. When students from School A stepped foot onto high school on Aug. 8, 2013, they experienced a common fear: getting lost. Student 2-A described it as "confusing, scary, chaotic" and another confessed to getting lost twice on the first day, but all said it did not take them long to find their way. Student 3-A expressed concern about being bullied as she was in middle school, but that fear proved unfounded: "Am I going to be 'fresh meat'? Will I be bullied by other girls because of jealousy and other stuff? Everything is pretty mellow. The older students, they don't really mess with us. The teachers are pretty nice. It's smooth."

Along with finding their classes, ninth-graders also had to adjust to the new freedoms found in high school. Student 4 described middle school as a "prison": In the hallways, students had to walk on a line, were escorted by their teachers, had assigned seats during lunch, two scheduled restroom breaks during the day and were not allowed to use their cell phones. As ninth-graders, there was no line painted in the hallways, students were expected to go to the restroom during class changes and could choose their

seat and use their phones during lunch. "I think it's good that we have more freedom because we are getting older and we need to learn more responsibility," Student 5-A said.

However, Student 2-A complained that they did not have enough freedom. She believed teachers treated students as if they were immature and disagreed with having to carry a pass in the hallways: "The teachers are always down your neck about your classes and grades like we are little kids, like we don't have our priorities straight. They worry about us more than we do ourselves."

During the first set of interviews, four students expressed they felt they belonged at their high school because of their friends. Another student added that teachers also made him feel welcomed. However, Student 2-A, who did not attend the feeder middle school, was undecided: "Certain people look at me a certain way that makes me feel like an outcast. I don't say anything back to them, but it makes me wonder why they are looking at me like that." Student 2-A was also undecided in March, and Student 4-A's perception had changed from yes to yes and no: "A lot of the students are very kind and help me, but sometimes I feel like I'm alone. Some days I feel like everyone is against me."

All students, including two who did not attend the feeder middle school, reported knowing at least one older high school student, a friend or family member, who provided guidance about their new learning environment. All students received help finding their classes, while others received information about faculty ("Older students told me who not to play with" Student 1-A said), rules and procedures and the stigma of being a ninth-grader: "I have a cousin who told me that we would have a lot more freedom, and you

would get some talk about how you are a ninth-grader or a freshman, but it would eventually go away," Student 5-A said.

While ninth-grade core classes were primarily freshmen, students said they were able to interact with older peers during electives, class changes and lunch. In October, all students said they preferred being in classes with a mixture of students so they can make new friends and learn from their older peers: "I like it where it's the mixture because you have people who have been through ninth grade, and they know about it, and they can give you help and advice on some of the teachers or anything you need to know," Student 3-A said. However, the same student said she preferred ninth-grade classes during the March interview because "I feel very confident around students my age. I can relate to them. We have a lot in common." The other four students still preferred classes with a mixture of grades.

In addition to older peers, three of five students received assistance adapting to high school from faculty members, including teachers, administrators and counselors: "I have a few teachers here and there that act as a mother figure and father figure to me. I have a lot of people I can go and talk to if I need them," Student 2-A said. The educators helped students find their classes, understand material through lunch and afternoon tutoring and inquired about their transition and adjustment. The other two students did not seek any help from faculty members, but they did have staff members they could turn to if they needed help. Moreover, four students said they have better relationships with their teachers in October than compared to eighth-grade and described most of their teachers as "nice" and "friendly." Student 1-A still felt closer to her eighth-grade teachers in October because the educators moved with students from seventh to eighth grade;

however, by March she said her relationships with her high school teachers were better than those with her middle school teachers.

While only one student reported being involved in extracurricular activities at the time of the October interviews, the other four expressed interest in joining at least one sport. Students unanimously agreed that educators encouraged students to join extracurricular activities through repeated announcements, sign-up sheets, fliers and posters.

Transition strategies. Students were asked about their high school's transition strategies, and each student responded with the visit to the high school during eighth grade and freshman-only open house. All students participated in an eighth-grade visit, including one student who was enrolled in another middle school and attended the visit to School B. Students said the visit included a pep rally, a presentation about school rules and extracurricular activities and a tour of the facility. Student 2-A did not attend the visit because she was enrolled in another middle school. Three of four students who attended the visit to School A described it as beneficial, while Student 4-A said it was "OK." The four found the tour of the school to be the best part: "It was very beneficial to me because it helped me to find my class and which halls were which," Student 3-A said. Learning the layout of the school and their classes was also deemed beneficial by the three students who attended the freshman-only "Walk through Night."

Along with their opinions about their school's transition strategies, students were also asked about their perceptions of a ninth-grade academy. The researcher described the ninth-grade academy at School C and asked students if they would have wanted a similar program at their school when they first began. As with the teachers, all students said in

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October they would not want a ninth-grade academy at their school because it would limit their chance to establish relationships with older peers: "The good thing about it is that you're around people your age, people you could easily relate to," Student 2-A said. "The bad thing about it is that you get used to seeing those people over and over again, and you don't really get a chance to integrate." However, some of these perceptions changed by March. Student 2-A said she would need to experience the academy before making a decision, and Student 5-A said he would have benefitted from a ninth-grade academy: "It would be less confusing. At our school, for example, the drama class is on a mainly English hallway. If the core classes were together, there would not be that much running around."

When asked why some ninth-graders struggle during their first year of high school, students responded with a variety of answers, including difficult work, intimidation from older peers, student immaturity and increased freedom:

- Student 1-A: It's a new experience, and they need to get used to it.

- Student 2-A: Because they feel intimidated by the upper classmen. They feel too much responsibility to try and do the work. Most of them want to do the work and want to excel, but it's too hard and it comes too fast. Now behavior, that's on them (the students), but that may be why they struggle academically.

- Student 3-A: We tend to struggle because the subjects are harder to learn and we are not used to having a lot of work to do. Also, there are some students who are very talkative, and they are not quite as focused. I'm like, "you really should focus because the next four years are going to count."

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- Student 4-A: Because they are just beginning at a new school and have more freedom that gets them distracted.

- Student 5-A: I think ninth-graders struggle because they realize the real world is approaching fast. Also, some freshmen get picked on because they are freshmen.

Furthermore, students were asked to provide recommendations for rising eight-grade students, eighth-grade faculty and ninth-grade administrators on easing the transition for ninth-grade students. The majority of advice for students was to study and not procrastinate because the new students will experience more classes with more rigors:

- Student 1-A: Pay attention in class, make sure you study, and get your work done.

- Student 2-A: Stay focused; don't stray from your plan. Don't do things at the last minute and you'll be fine.

- Student 3-A: Make sure you study. They will quiz and test you on everything every week.

- Student 4-A: That they have to really pay attention to get their credits together, and they can't play around like they did in middle school.

- Student 5-A: Next year, make sure their discipline is really good, and they need to be ready because ninth-grade teachers are going to expect a lot more from them.

For educators, students made the recommendations as recorded in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 School A Student Perceptions

Student	What advice would you give middle school educators to help students adjust to high school?	What advice would you give high school educators to help students adjust?
1	**Tell them about our work and give them more challenging problems like they'll do in ninth grade.**	**None.**
2	**Give them extra things to work on in all subjects.**	**Give ninth graders more time and leniency to adjust.**
3	**Go more in depth in some of the subjects, like math. Tell this is what you'll be learning next year. Change up the curriculum.**	**No, I do not. They stressed what the students should do (at the beginning of the year).**
4	**Don't give them 40's on work they didn't even do because in high school they would get a 0.**	**To take their time with them since they are just now coming from the middle school.**
5	**Try to put it into their heads that ninth-grade is a lot harder than eighth-grade, and the teachers expect a lot more from you. They also need to discipline the students.**	**None.**

Overall, students provided more feedback for middle school educators than for high school counterparts. Students believed middle school teachers should provide more challenging work and discipline students better to prepare them for the transition to high school. Only students 2-A and 4-A offered advice for high school educators, both of which focused on providing students with more time to adjust to their new environment.

Comparison of Educator and Student Perceptions

School A educators and students identified two common barriers facing ninth-grade students: immaturity and a more challenging curriculum. Principal A said many students are more concerned with peer relationships than academic performance, which was reiterated by a student who found freshmen too talkative during classes. Moreover, even though the majority of student participants welcomed the increased freedom, Student 4-A believed the changes were too distracting for struggling students.

Furthermore, older students were found to exert both positive and negative influences on the adjustment to high school. Teachers 1-A and 5-A said positive relationships with upperclassmen facilitated a successful transition to high school. All students reported having an older peer who helped them adjust to high school and enjoying classes with upperclassmen. However, Students 2-A and 5-A said intimidation and bullying by older students created problems for ninth-graders.

When asked about their school's transition strategies, educators and students mentioned the eighth-grade visit to the high school and the freshman-only open house. Teacher 3-A found the eighth-grade visit to be the most beneficial transition strategy, while four students who participated perceived it as beneficial. Principal A and the teacher said the eighth-grade visit helped to build excitement about opportunities in high

school, while students found the school tour to be most beneficial. In addition, two of six educators found the freshman-only open house to be the most beneficial transition strategy, while the three students who attended said it helped them transition to high school because they were able to locate their classes before the first day of school.

Along with their school's transition strategies, educators and students were asked their opinions on implementing a ninth-grade academy at School A like the one at School C. Principal A worked as an administrator for seven years at School C and believed that the freshman academy was a positive experience for students, with the only issues related to scheduling. However, all teachers and students were against establishing a ninth-grade academy during first semester. Teachers said an academy prevented students from fully integrating into high school, limited positive interactions with older peers and delayed students' social and academic development. Students believed a ninth-grade academy would limit their chance to create friendships with older students. However, by the middle of second semester, Students 2-A and 5-A had changed their minds. Student 2-A said she would need to experience the academy before making a decision, while Student 5-A thought the strategy would make navigating the hallways easier.

One teacher voiced that constructive student-teacher relationships helped students transition and adapt to high school the most. By March, all students believed they had stronger relationships with their teachers in ninth grade than in eighth grade, while three students received individual assistance adapting to high school from at least one faculty member.

In addition to student-teacher relationships, educators and students found it important for ninth-graders to establish positive bonds with older peers. Teachers said

interactions with upperclassmen helped students to adapt to high school, while all the

students said at least one older peer provided advice or assistance at the beginning of the

school year. However, Students 2-A and 5-A said that intimidation and bullying from

older peers can cause freshmen to struggle academically and behaviorally.

Principal A said participation in extracurricular activities also positively

contributes to students' sense of belonging at their school, so educators emphasized sport

and club opportunities during the eighth-grade visit and open house. While only one

student was involved in school-based activities, the other four expressed interest in

joining various sports. All students said educators encouraged participation.

School B

Overview

School B is the oldest high school in the district and is located in the county seat.

The first high school on the site opened in 1903 ("Schools"). Principal B said school

pride and tradition were strong in the community:

> We have been here a long time. Many of our students' parents and grandparents
> have attended and graduated from (here). Because of this long-time legacy, if you
> will, we are steeped in tradition. There are a lot of things that go on here that have
> been done that way for many, many years. There is a lot of school pride here.

The head administrator B began leading the school in August 2012, after working

first as an engineer before moving into education. Other faculty members include four

assistant principals, registrar, an assistant principal/athletic director, four counselors and

74 teachers. About 1,400 students were enrolled in August 2013. Fifty-two percent of

students were white, 40% were black and 8% were identified as another race. While the

school had the highest high school enrollment in the district, it also had the lowest

poverty rate, with approximately 40% of students qualifying for free-or-reduced-price meals. In 2013, the rate of seniors who graduated in four years was 74.8%, compared to 72.1% at School A, 72.7% at School C and Georgia's 71.5% ("Final 2013").

Educator Perceptions

Student development. As with School A, Principal B believed that the newfound freedom that students experienced in high school distracts some students who are not mature enough to handle their new responsibilities. Moreover, ninth-grade students have the highest number of behavior issues than any other grade, and the administrator said that most of those issues have to deal with "drama" within their peer relationships. These same issues typically do not exist by the time a student is a senior. Principal B believed these discipline discrepancies are due to the students' maturing over time.

Principal B and several of the school's seven teacher participants also believed that immaturity affects academic performance. Teachers 6-B and 7-B found that some freshmen do not take their school work seriously, which they blamed on students being socially promoted in the past. While some students experienced social promotion in elementary and middle school, in high school they must pass the majority of their classes to graduate within four years. In addition, while the principal believed middle school educators prepare students academically for high school, she felt that most students were not prepared for the amount of work they would encounter. Middle schools in this district operate on a block schedule with five classes, while the high schools have a year-round, seven-period schedule. Moreover, students who eased through middle school courses find

themselves ill-equipped when studying for high school tests, so study skills become an additional part of the ninth-grade curriculum. Teacher 5-B said it was important for students to establish effective habits early in the year: "The students who learn early to do what it takes to be successful usually remain successful for the remainder of their high school career. Those who fail to make this connection early (and end up failing multiple classes) often get so discouraged and frustrated that they are at high risk for dropping out."

Teacher 3-B, who worked with students in a credit recovery class, found that some ninth-graders were promoted in the past without passing courses, and they mistakenly believe this trend will continue in high school: "Students need to focus more than ever when they begin high school. Too often ninth-graders get behind and have a very hard time getting caught up. Once students get behind, many of them give up."

To help students avoid falling behind, the principal said that ninth-grade teachers offered remediation on pertinent middle school topics before tackling the new curriculum. Conferences were also held with failing ninth-graders after the first nine weeks. Principal B said:

> We showed them (grades) and said, "You're failing right now, and this is how many zeroes you have." Every single student that I spoke to was failing because of missing assignments, not because they didn't understand the work… We tried to help them understand that if you weren't missing all of these assignments, you would be passing this class.

Transition strategies. Teachers 1-B, 4-B, and 6-B listed the students' visit to the high school during their eighth-grade year as the most effective strategy; Teacher 6-B also mentioned open house for ninth-graders. The educators said the visit encouraged students to embrace their new school's culture and to finish their final year of middle

school strong. However, Teacher 7-B criticized high school students who led the tour: "Often I feel like the students who conduct the tours are not serious and do not emphasize the right things – studying, hard work, etc… Instead, they tend to run the students through quickly."

Before a new year begins, the school hosts an orientation and open house for ninth-graders and their parents. The same information is redelivered to students only during an assembly after school starts. The school also conducts a freshman parent workshop after the first month of school: "It allows students to get in here, it allows them start experiencing some of the challenges, and then it gives us an opportunity to talk to parents about what they're seeing and how they can help their child be successful in the process," Principal B said. Teachers 2-B, 3-B, 6-B and 7-B listed the freshman open house as the most beneficial strategy; however, Teacher 7-B said the event does not attract all parents:

> The down side to open house, you typically only get those students and parents to come who truly care. These students are not the ones who get behind. The students who fall behind are typically the kids who have discipline issues, live in poverty, etc. and these kids and families who are not in attendance at open house either because they don't care, can't get a ride, did not know about it, etc…

While other educators listed specific transition strategies that educate students and their parents, the principal and Teacher 5-B believed that the best strategy for a successful transition to high school was establishing positive student-teacher relationships. Principal B said effective ninth-grade teachers needed to be patient and nurturing: "I think we also do a good job of trying to select teachers and build our master schedule around the teachers who have the heart and the natural talent and the patience for teaching ninth-graders. They tend to be a little more nurturing if you will." Teacher 2-

B said that teacher-relationships in the ninth-grade can either increase or deter student academic success:

> Teachers who have great classroom management, know the content, and build that relationship with students can help mold ninth-graders into students who will mature and become successful throughout high school. I have also seen teachers who did not have great classroom management, know the content very well, not build that relationships with students send the wrong vibe to students, and those students, especially who come from low poverty levels, fail and can never catch up.

As with School A, Principal B also has experience at a school with a ninth-grade academy, but in a different district. She said that the other district's academy was similar to the one at School C. While she believed the academy helped students transition to high school, she also thought the program was logistically difficult to operate: "When I consider my experience at (the school with the academy) and my experience here after a year, I don't find myself saying that was a better way. It was just a different way."

Of teachers surveyed, Teachers 1-B, 4-B and 5-B would not want a freshman academy added at their campus because of repeating ninth-graders who could be in the courses and decreased interaction between ninth-graders and mature upperclassmen. Teacher 6-B was in favor of a ninth-grade academy because "it may assist with students' academic achievement as well as their social maturity with respect to education and their life's goal." Teachers 2-B, 3-B and 7-B said they did not know enough research to form a valid opinion. Teacher 7-B said she was excited by School C's academy when it began, but has heard mixed reviews from teachers: "My own son was very intimidated when he walked into speech (class) his freshman year and had several seniors and juniors in class with him. They didn't bully (him) or anything like that; my son was just nervous about it at first."

Student Perceptions

Four students participated from School B: two white females and two white males. All students reported passing their classes at the time of their interviews in December 2013 and March 2014.

School culture and belonging. The students were divided on their initial impressions of high school: One male and female found the first day to be overwhelming and confusing, while the other two teenagers were nonchalant.

"It's just school. I mean a lot of other students were worried, but it's just school," said Student 1-B. "It's a different campus. Other students were like it's too big, or other students are going to beat me up, but that rarely happens, unless you mess with someone."

When asked how the reality of high school compared to their perceptions, students also gave varied responses:

- Student 1-B: I guess it was just the fact that other students weren't prepared, and I was shocked at how other people were so stupid to complain about things there were so simple. Like, for example, I can't believe he gave me a 25 because I put the wrong test number on the Scantron, and I have to retake it. Well, that's your fault.

- Student 2-B: It is big. No one acts the same really. They've matured some, but some have dumbed down. They wanted to start over.

- Student 3-B: It is a little bit complicated at times, but it's not scary and it's not hard. At first, getting around was complicated, and sometimes during class it's hard to understand what the teacher is talking about.

- Student 4-B: It's pretty much great. I actually don't mind school at all.

All students said high school offered more freedoms, like not having to walk in a straight line or being able to use a cell phone at certain times. Yet those freedoms come with more responsibility, such as arriving to class on time. Students 3-B and 4-B, however, said the strictness of middle school should be tapered as students age so that the transition to high school would not be so jarring; "We didn't get a change from a little bit more freedom to a lot of freedom, so it was a big thing," Student 3-B said.

All four students expressed a deep connection to School B, which began before they set foot on campus. Two students said they lived within walking distance to the school, while another student described the school as "home." Another student said her connection intensified when she joined the band: "There are people I have known ever since elementary school and middle school, so I have a lot of friends," Student 1-B said. "I feel like I belong to the band family. It's not just a club or a group, we are family. We love each other."

All students described having positive relationships with the majority of their teachers. Students 3-B and 4-B named teachers who helped them adjust to their new school, while Students 1-B and 2-B said they did not need help, but they both had teachers they could turn to if they were in need: "Well, I'm in FBLA (Future Business Leaders of America) and two of my teachers are the supervisors of that, so I see them, like we go on trips and stuff. I've gotten to know them," Student 2-B said. "I think I'm going on a European tour with my world history teacher the year after next year. The other ones are just teachers really. All of my teachers are nice."

Moreover, all but one student received advice from older students—family members and friends— about the transition to high school. Student 3-B, who perceived high school as "scary and complicated" at first, received no input from older peers before school began. In addition, students in October were split on their opinions of freshman-only classes versus classes with a mixture of students from different grades. Student 2-B said he preferred classes with students from all grades so that he can make new friends, while the other three students said it depends more on the maturity level of the class than the students' grade levels: "It depends on which freshman they are," Student 1-B said. "In my math class, it's supposed to be an accelerated class, so it's all gifted students, they never stop talking though. The teacher said at least 20 minutes of the day is him trying to get them to stop talking. It's terrible. They just will not shut up. I get so frustrated. In band, that's people ranging from freshmen to seniors, and my computer class too, that's pretty much anyone in there, and those classes aren't as bad as the other ones. I guess the freshmen just talk too much."

Perceptions on classroom composition had changed slightly by March. Students 1-B and 2-B said their classroom preference is dependent more upon the teacher's personality and classroom management than the grades of the other students, whereas students 3-B and 4-B said they now preferred classes with students from a mixture of grades. Student 4-B said she felt more comfortable in ninth-grade only classes at the beginning of the school year, but "Now, I like it with a mixture of students because you get to know more about the school, students and teachers."

Three students reported being involved in extracurricular activities at the time of the interviews, which included marching band, FBLA, recycling club, service club and

football. Students in the organizations believed that their teachers encouraged students to join extracurricular activities through repeated announcements, sign-up sheets, fliers and posters. However, Student 3-B believed that educators promoted the activities, but did not encourage participation: "It makes me sound bad because I'm not in anything," Student 3 said. "I like track, and I was going to do it this year, but it was at the beginning, and I didn't want to be involved in something and then it be really hard for me to keep up my grades and stuff."

   Transition strategies. Students were asked what their high school offered to do to help them transition to high school, and each student responded with the visit to the high school during eighth grade and freshman-only open house. Students 2-B and 3-B found the eighth-grade visit beneficial because of the campus tour. Student 1-B's group did not have time to tour and waited on the bus for 10 minutes, while Student 4-B said the best part of the day was getting out of middle school classes. The four students found the freshman-only open house more beneficial because students had their schedules and could find their classes: "If I hadn't done it, it would have been a really rough first day," Student 4-B said.

   Along with their opinions about their school's transition strategies, students were also asked about their perceptions of a ninth-grade academy. The researcher described the ninth-grade academy at School C and asked students if they would have wanted a similar program. In December, Students 2-B and 4-B were against the idea, with 4-B calling it "segregation." Student 1-B said having freshman core classes on one hall did not "sound too bad," and Student 3-B said she may have supported the idea before she became a ninth-grader: "Coming in to being a freshman, I might, but now seeing how it is, I

wouldn't like it so much. It's like going from eighth grade to ninth grade without it really being a change, and then you have to start over again the next year." By March, all students said they were glad their school did not utilize a ninth-grade academy.

School B students responded about why some ninth-graders have an arduous time their first year:

- Student 1-B:Some students are nervous in a new school, new environment- they might struggle to make new friends, catch up with old ones, or even find a place to sit at lunch (some people just have social anxiety).

- Student 2-B: I think it's more them. It's all about how they think about (high school). I think they are trying too hard and very self-conscious.

- Student 3-B: We're really immature, a lot of us are. I know I'm not perfect or anything, but I noticed that a lot of people are immature.

- Student 4-B: Because they are not used to it, and they don't know how to act.

Moreover, students were asked to provide recommendations to rising ninth-grade students to help them succeed in high school.

- Student 1-B: You may feel like you want to drop out because it's a lot of work, and I know high school is different, but you have to think about your future … You don't want to live with your mom until you're old. You may think school is that place where you get to charge your phone and talk to all your friends during class, but you have a job to do in the future, and if you are one of those people who think no one can boss you around but your mom and dad, I feel sorry for you. Sometimes the people you don't like in high school are going to be your bosses one day.

- Student 2-B: Don't try to be someone you are not. Be yourself; people will respect you more.

- Student 3-B: Work hard for their grades, even though they may not want to.

- Student 4-B: Don't be stupid.

Furthermore, students were also asked to provide recommendations for middle school and ninth-grade faculty on easing the transition for ninth-grade students. Students 1-B and 2-B said middle school educators exaggerated the difficulty of high school. Student 1-B said students will adjust as soon as they feel comfortable in their new environment, and Student 2-B said middle school and high school were similar except for the freedoms of high school. Student 3-B recommended tapering the restrictions on middle school students as they progress by grade so that the transition to high school would not be so jarring. Student 4-B had no suggestions. Students had less advice for high school administrators. Students 3-B and 4-B had no recommendations, while Student 1-B and 2-B implied that the responsibility of adjusting to high school lies with adolescents. Student 1-B said high school administrators should, "Just treat the freshmen like high schoolers, and they'll adjust to being more responsible. Those who don't will fail, but the teachers can't help someone's work ethic."

Comparison of Educator and Student Perceptions

School B educators and students identified immaturity as the issue that creates the most problems with ninth-grade students. Principal B said behavior problems were the result of ninth-graders lacking interpersonal skills, while Student 4-B said that her peers were too immature. Moreover, Student 1-B 1 found freshmen to be more concerned with

talking rather than learning in one of her classes. Educators also mentioned lagging study skills and academic deficiencies as problem areas in students, while the students focused on immaturity and harder curriculum as reasons why adolescents do not perform well academically.

Educators and students mentioned the eighth-grade visit to the high school and the freshman-only open house as the school's transition strategies, but their responses on the programs' effectiveness varied. Three of seven educators said the eighth-grade visit was the most effective strategy because it creates excitement about the possibilities in high school. Two students said the campus tour was the best part of the visit, while the other two students said the visit was a waste of time. Moreover, four teachers believed the freshman open house was the most beneficial strategy, even though the parents of at-risk students do not attend, while all students found the open house beneficial.

Furthermore, educators and students were asked their opinions about implementing a ninth-grade academy at School B like the one at School C. The educators were divided in their opinions: three would not want a freshman academy added at their campus; three said they would need to research the issue more before making a decision and one teacher was in favor of ninth-grade academy. In December, two students found positives with the academy idea: Student 1-B said having core classes together would make it easier to arrive to class on time, while Student 3-B said she would have liked an academy during the first few days of school, but would have quickly tired of it afterwards. Students were unanimous in not wanting an academy on campus by March because they feared it would have limited their interaction with older peers and their experience at high school.

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While the eighth-grade visit and freshman-only open house prepared students for high school, the principal and two teachers believed the best strategy for a successful transition did not occur until students were in class and began to form bonds with their teachers. Principal B said ninth-grade teachers need to exhibit more nurturing and patience than teachers in later grades to help students transition to high school. All four students said they had positive relationships with the majority of their teachers, and they had all had one teacher they could go to if they were in need. Moreover, three of four students said they had older peers who gave them advice about high school. Student 3-B, who did not know an older student described the first day of school as scary and chaotic, while her peers had an easier adjustment. She also would have preferred a ninth-grade academy at the beginning of the school year.

Furthermore, all students felt a connection to the school before they were students due to living in close proximity and/or having older family members who attended. This connection deepened for the three students who joined extracurricular activities, which students said educators heavily advertised.

School C

Overview

School C opened in 1956 at the site of a current elementary school to serve the rural portion of the county, and the current location opened in 1986 ("Schools"). The ninth-grade academy, the only one in the district, was implemented in 2006. While some freshman academies are housed in their own facility, School C's version includes core classes, lockers and administrator at the end of a hallway separated by glass doors. The

majority of ninth-graders have the same lunch period. Along with the freshman academy, Principal C said the school was known statewide for its career and technical education programs: "I think there is an opportunity for every kid who comes in the door to get involved in something, whether its athletics, clubs, or whatever it may be," said the administrator, who has served since August 2012. Staff members included four assistant principals, a registrar, three counselors and 83 teachers. About 1,300 students were enrolled in August 2013. Sixty-five percent of students were white, 35% were black, 10% identified as another race. Approximately 40% of students qualified for free-or-reduced-price meals. In 2013, the rate of seniors who graduated in four years was 72.7%, compared to 72.1% at School A, 74.8% at School B and Georgia's 71.5% ("Final 2013").

Educator Perceptions

Student development.
Principal C and 10 teacher participants described ninth grade as a critical year in determining student success in high school and beyond. The academic stakes are raised for students as they begin taking high-stakes tests required for graduation and entrance to college.

"It's like a trial and error period," Teacher 8-C said. "They make a lot of their biggest mistakes this year. Some of those mistakes are salvageable, but some can change their entire high school academic careers."

Educators believed that some of those mistakes ninth-graders make are because of students not being mature enough to handle the social adjustment from middle to high school. Students transitioned from being the oldest students in a very structured, controlled environment to being the youngest in an environment that provides more

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freedom: "Students often begin the freshman year overwhelmed by their new

independence," Teacher 6-C said. "They are not used to having the freedom that they

have in high school. In middle school, they have scheduled locker times and restroom

times. They even have to walk on [a] painted line and aren't allowed to talk in the

hallway. Transitioning from this to high school can be overwhelming for some students.

They can quickly lose focus on their academic responsibilities."

For some students, this change in environment led to increased behavior

problems: "If you looked at our data, the maturity level is definitely lacking with ninth-

graders," Principal C said. "If you looked at our discipline referrals, ninth-graders far

outweigh any other grade, and probably if you combined all grades, ninth-graders are

going to have a large majority of the referrals, so maturity is a big part of it."

Along with more freedom, ninth-graders also encountered increased courses and a

more rigorous curriculum. Students who easily passed classes in elementary and middle

school often struggle because they do not possess the necessary study skills. "Students

seem to be accustomed to taking tests with more rote memorization and a lower level of

thinking than high school tests," Teacher 2-C said. "Many seem unprepared to prepare

for tests at the high school level and are surprised when the good grades they received in

middle school do not come so easily. Many appear to lack the skills to study

appropriately and to pay attention – not only to instruction and lessons – but to

directions." One teacher said teaching study skills to students is the highest priority for

ninth-grade teachers: "Ninth-grade is important academically for training the student how

to learn and do well in high school and college," Teacher 1-C said. "The subject does not

matter much compared to the importance of the method by which the student achieves academic success."

Students who do not experience academic success find their options in high school limited. They are not able to choose elective courses because they have to retake classes, and they are ineligible for extracurricular activities: "What we find is that overwhelmingly the majority of students who are ineligible to participate in sports due to academics are freshman students after the first semester grading period," Teacher 4-C said. Failed courses also negatively impact students' grade point average, which is cumulative through twelfth grade. Educators find that some ninth-graders do not realize that their academic performance in the present will impact their college and career options in the future: "I think the ninth-graders really don't have a light at the end of the tunnel," Principal C said. "Graduation seems so far away, so there is a big difference between an 11th grader, a 12th grader and a ninth-grader just because you don't have that tangible diploma sitting in front of you."

Transition strategies. Principal C and Teachers 2-C and 9-C listed the eighth-grade visit as the most effective transition strategy because it created excitement about the change and alleviated fears of the new environment: "I just think it is very, very important for them to go ahead and establish that you are now going to be a part of (our) family, and you're actually still in the middle school when you get that introduction," Principal C said. "I think that is by far and away the most important thing we do as far as a strategy."

In addition, Teachers 2-C and 9-C also mentioned the freshman-only open house as beneficial, and 9-C also named the ninth-grade academy, but was "unsure as to

whether we are fully utilizing it to the best of its ability." Principal C said students hear some of the same information as the eighth-grade visit, but during this tour, they familiarize themselves with their schedule, ninth-grade teachers and lockers. Attendance was typically high at this event for ninth-grade students and their parents.

Unlike the other two high schools in the district, School C has a ninth-grade academy located at the end of one hallway. Freshman core classes−English, math, science and social studies− are located in this area, along with an assistant principal, computer lab, lockers and restrooms. The majority of ninth-graders also have the same lunch period. Freshman, however, were not completely isolated from older peers. Ninth-grade core classes include older students repeating the course or taking it for the first time after transferring from another district. Upperclassmen whose classes are on the top half of the hallway are allowed to use the restrooms, and the computer lab is open to all classes. In addition, ninth-graders ventured out from the academy for their elective classes, which contain a mixture of students in all grades.

Principal C believed having an environment similar to middle school, where students are grouped by grade on hallways, helped to ease the transition to high school: "I think having that controlled environment where everyone is still that family class of 2014, and they are still together is very important for them," he said. "I also think that having an administrator that is down there . . . There is no gray area as far as expectations. You know exactly what the expectations of your administrator and your school are."

Teachers 1-C, 3-C, 4-C, 6-C and 9-C cited ninth-grade academy as being the most beneficial transition strategy. Teacher 9-C also named the eighth-grade visit and the

ninth-grade open house. Educators said the academy provided ninth-graders with teachers who have experience with freshmen and their difficulties and allowed for easier collaboration amongst the teachers: "Discipline issues are more easily addressed and academic challenges can be plotted according to particular trends," Teacher 1-C said. "The academy approach allows for some sense of community among the teachers and the students that allows for mutual understanding of student and teacher challenges."

However, Teacher 1-C expressed concern "as to whether we are fully utilizing the academy to the best of its ability." All teachers were asked to explain the benefits and disadvantages of the ninth-grade academy. Most believed that the academy provides students with extra structure to adjust to high school without the negative influence of older peers; however, the controlled environment prevented students from fully experiencing high school. Moreover, students lose interaction with positive older peers, who could act as mentors with academics and behavior: "I teach all freshmen classes and classes where they are in the mix with upperclassmen," Teacher 5-C said. "From my experience they tend to behave better, and have a better work ethic, when they are in classes with peers in a higher grade than they are. I believe having classes outside of freshman academy benefits them the most."

Teacher perceptions about the ninth-grade academy are displayed in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 School C Teacher Perceptions

Teacher	What are the benefits of your school's ninth-grade academy for students?	What are the disadvantages of your school's ninth-grade academy for students?
1-C	Simplicity, greater knowledge and accountability.	Students do not have a full grasp of what it will be like in a fully integrated high school where they will have to deal with seniors who are twice their size and with much more ability to manipulate them and use them. Also, if the freshman academy is not used to train students how to succeed in the coming three years, why do it? If it's just separated classrooms, but does not include instruction on what actually works for high school, college, and life, then what's the point?
2-C	Students get more structure and support than they would in the general population. For many this is extremely helpful (if not necessary) as they transition from middle school to high school.	To be honest, I really like the ninth grade academy set up in our school, and I would not want to change anything.
3-C	Students get a year to acclimate to high school.	It shelters the kids from a total high school experience.
4-C	The freshman academy allows students to negotiate the many pitfalls of the high school socialization process more gradually, and I believe this allows them to focus more on their school work.	None.
5-C	The benefits of freshman academy include being around peers and other students who are on the same level as you grade wise, and it helps with the transition from middle school. They aren't just thrown in the fire.	The disadvantages would include limiting a student's growth. I think the freshmen could mature faster if they were around older classmates sometimes. I think that would also offer them a challenge academically

Table 4.2 continued

Teacher	What are the benefits of your school's ninth-grade academy for students?	What are the disadvantages of your school's ninth-grade academy for students?
6-C	**Freshman academy gives students more structure and gives them an opportunity to adjust to high school and gain organizational skills.**	**I can't think of any.**
7-C	**Students have time to adjust to the schedule and academics without so much peer pressure or influence from older students.**	**Students are sheltered thus making the transition to 10th grade more difficult. Students feel isolated and segregated and may act out in order to make an impression on the older students. Repeater students are often placed in classes with freshmen, which can be a distraction.**
8-C	**Freshman academy, when done correctly, is a great transitional tool for students and parents. It allows students to make a smooth change from middle school to high school.**	**In my opinion, freshman academy is really only effective when it is housed in a totally separate building. That way they get used to changing classes and the new rigor, but they are still somewhat sheltered and protected.**
9-C	**I feel that the benefits of a freshman academy are that they are (for the most part) confined to one area, with the same group of teachers and the same lunch period.**	**I feel that the disadvantages of a (in particular, the one at our school) freshman academy are that the students do have several classes that they have with upper classmen. Also, they are somewhat "babied" their first year, and then must go through another transition the next year when they enter their sophomore year.**
10-C	**The benefits of a freshman academy are having a close knit of teachers that know each student. The teachers can easily communicate with each other to ensure the students' needs are being met. Also, the students' classes are in one centralized area. They do not get lost in the flow and feel overwhelmed.**	**A disadvantage of having a freshman academy is that ninth graders are not allowed a lot of interaction time with upper classman. The ninth graders do not see the different maturity levels until they leave freshman academy.**

Principal C said he believed students thought the academy isolated them too much; however, he perceived the structure as offering a balance between containment with same age peers and some exposure to older students. "I would think that they would want more freedom then we probably give them in some areas," he said. "I think that the wisdom that we have in the years that we have been doing this is that we understand that having this contained environment, to the degree that we do it is based on years of experience, is to their benefit, even though they may not understand why."

Along with the above transition strategies, School C also provides students the same homeroom teacher for all four years in high school. Students meet with their teacher twice a month for about 20 minutes to discuss grades, attendance and behavior issues. Teachers 8-C and 10-C believed that the homeroom program was the best transition strategy because it helps to build positive relationships between students and teachers: "I went through advisement when I was in high school and that relationship that I built with that teacher was invaluable," Teacher 8-C said. "Having a familiar face makes a world of difference. It gives them a place to vent and feel encouraged."

In addition, School C teachers provided students in all grades with an "academic success action plan." These plans were issued twice a semester to failing students and allow students to retake tests and turn in missing assignments for partial credit. School B offered a similar plan. One School C teacher listed the academic success action plans as the most beneficial transition strategy. "It helps some students adjust to the academic rigor and pacing of high school," Teacher 7-C said. "Students are given the opportunity to retake tests which gives them time to adjust to new testing styles."

Student Perceptions

Ten students participated from School C: three white females, three white males, three black males and one Hispanic male. Eight of 10 students reported passing their classes at the time of their interviews in November 2013 and March 2014. Students 9-C and 10-C were failing two classes in November, and Students 6-C and 10-C were failing two classes in March.

School culture and belonging. Before starting high school, six students expected classes to be more challenging than middle school, two believed they would experience more freedom than in middle school, one was scared and the another student knew what to expect because his mother worked at the school: "I knew the transitions were crazy in the hallways, and I knew if you didn't get to class on time you had to go to the front office (to get a tardy pass), which made you extra late to class," Student 1-C said.

The majority of students said they were nervous on the first day of school, and four were concerned about getting lost, but that feeling quickly disappeared as they grew accustomed to their new environment. Since adjusting to high school, students have found that the curriculum was harder than eighth-grade. Even though four students said the work is not as challenging as they thought it would be, the other six disagreed: "In ninth grade, the ball is dropped per se," Student 1-C said. "You're loaded down and every weekend you have homework and usually it is algebra, you have multiple projects, and you have tests unlike anything else. You're going to have at least two tests a week."

Despite the increased and more challenging work, the majority of students said they favored ninth-grade over middle school, even though they had to adjust from being

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the oldest students to the youngest: "You don't have much command over certain people because you're the youngest people in the school," Student 5-C said. "It's all right. It's not like the movies, where the seniors bully the freshmen. It's not like that. I knew a lot of people because my sister is a student, so I wasn't that scared."

Along with students facing a more challenging curriculum and being the youngest students, ninth-graders also experienced more freedom than in middle school: "I like the new freedoms because it makes me feel not like a little kid," Student 3-C said. "It makes me feel older, more responsible." All students agreed that high school offered more freedom, and provided examples such as not having to walk silently on a line in the hallways, being able to choose elective classes and career pathways and using cell phones during lunch.

In November, all but Student 9-C, who did not attend the feeder middle school, said they felt they now belonged at their high school. The nine students attributed this feeling to having friends at the school, even though one student had a harder time separating from middle school: "When I came to (high school), I felt like an oddball or out of place," Student 2-C said. "It was not home yet; I still felt like I belonged at (the middle school). But the more I come here, the more I look around and walk around the school, I'm like, this is where I am now. I got to let that whole (middle school) thing go. I just got to get used to it and get a feel for it." However, by March, all students said they experienced a feeling of belonging at their high school, usually because of their friends.

Students had mixed perceptions on their interactions with upperclassmen. Six students said they had older family members and friends at the school who provided them with advice about the transition to high school. Moreover, Students 1-C, 2-C, 6-C, 8-C

and 9-C preferred classes with a mixture of grades as compared to freshman-only classes: "I like the classes with a mixture because some of the people have done this before, so they can help you," Student 10-C said. "Like when I'm in my (computer class), I don't know how to operate the computer, so they can teach me and show me. They can give you some pointers because they have experience."

Students 3-C, 4-C, 5-C, and 7-C, who preferred ninth-grade only classes, said they felt more comfortable interacting with students their own age: "I like it when it's just freshmen," Student 3-C said. "I just feel more in place, and it's not as awkward as being around older people." Student 10-C said he did not have a class makeup preference but that "it depends on the class and how it's organized." In addition, Students 1-C, 2-C, 5-C and 10-C said they received assistance transitioning to high school from school personnel: "My mom grew up with (an administrator) and (an administrative assistant) who just retired," Student 1-C said. "So it helped having people above me know me to more get through the first week of figuring out where you go, what you do, and how to do things in the hall." The six students who did not receive help said they did not ask for it. Furthermore, in November, all but one student, Student 10-C, said they had established a positive relationship with at least one faculty member from whom they would feel comfortable seeking help. The one student who did not have a positive relationship blamed the problem on his behavior in class: "Most of the time I talk in their class, and I have a lot of referrals for talking and disrupting class,' Student 10-C said. "Then sometimes I play when I am done with my work, so they get on me a lot, and I feel like I can't go to them." However, by March, Student 10-C said he had established positive

bonds with one teacher and one administrator. Student 10-C was failing two classes at the time of both interviews.

Additionally, eight students established a connection to their school by participating in an extracurricular activity, while two students who had not joined a group were interested in at least one activity. All students said faculty encouraged student participation in extracurricular activities through announcements, pep rallies, posters and a club schedule: "We have so many things, and one incentive of that is when we have club schedule," Student 1-C said. "You get to get out of class if you're in a club (once a month). If you're not, you stay in class, but if you are in a club, you get out of class for that half hour, so it encourages people to get in a club so they can get out of class and do something other than that everyday grind of going to class, get lectured and go to another class."

Transition strategies. Eight students attended the eighth-grade visit to School C; Student 9-C attended the visit to another high school in the district, and Student 10-C could not attend because he was assigned to in-school suspension. Students 2-C, 3-C and 4-C said the visit was beneficial because they were exposed to the layout and rules and procedures of the school, and it built excitement about coming to high school. Student 1-C said the visit was not fun or helpful, while Students 5-C, 6-C, 7-C and 8-C said the event was somewhat beneficial, but more information could have been provided. In addition, Students 2-C, 3-C, 4-C, 5-C, 6-C and 7-C attended the freshman-only open house before school began. All students who attended found this event more beneficial than the eighth-grade open house because they were given schedules, allowed to find their classes and met their teachers.

Additionally, School C schedules students to have the same homeroom teacher all four years of high school. Students meet in homeroom for about 20 minutes twice a month to discuss grades, attendance and other issues. Eight students believed having the same homeroom teacher throughout high school was beneficial because they could establish a bond with their teacher: "I think it's good because she learns about you as you get older," Student 2-C said. "She learns about you and what you like and don't like, how to talk to you and what helps you the best. She is really sweet. I love her." Students 1-C, who made A's and B's year round, and 9-C, who was failing two classes in November, said they did not find homeroom helpful because their teachers did not interact with them.

While the majority of students at Schools A and B feared the implementation of a ninth-grade academy because of potential isolation from older peers, six of 10 School C students expressed positive perceptions of the academy due to separation from upperclassmen : "I thought in middle school that I was going to be in the same hallways as seniors and stuff, but I'm glad that all of our academic classes are close," Student 5-C said.

Moreover, only Student 2-C viewed the academy's seclusion from older peers during core classes as negative:

> The whole glass doors (that separate the top part of the hall from freshman academy) just drive me crazy because I feel like I am cut off from everybody else. Whenever you are walking around (the other hallways), you feel top dog or higher up, but when you're going to freshman academy and you have to keep walking down the hallway while all of your friends are going down the B hall breezeway, you feel like, 'Back to freshman academy again.' I just want to get freshman year over with kind of just so I can say been there, done that, don't want to go back.

In November, Students 1-C and 9-C said that ninth-grade academy had not helped them transition to high school because they still have to leave the academy to go to electives, and the academy hallway is often congested during class changes. Student 4-C said she was mixed on her perception of the academy. She said it was beneficial to be isolated from negative older peers; however, she did not like how the academy isolated ninth-graders from meeting new people.

By March, Students 4-C's and 9-C's perceptions of the academy had changed, so that eight students reported that the ninth-grade academy was beneficial because it separated ninth-graders from upperclassmen, prepared them for the next three years and reduced the amount of walking for ninth-graders. Students 1-C and 2-C, however, were still against the academy. Student 1-C said it made school "boring," while Student 2-C said it makes her feel trapped at times: "My 5th – 7th periods are all core classes, and I don't feel like being stuck in there. Sometimes I want to stand up and just get out. You don't see everybody; you're stuck around other ninth-graders."

Most participants believed that ninth-grade students often struggle because they do not take school seriously at the beginning of the year, they are not accustomed to the more challenging work, or they felt increased pressure because they know their grades will determine what they do after high school. Students offered the following advice to rising ninth-graders to help them avoid failure:

- Student 1-C: Study, do not procrastinate.
- Student 2-C: Work-wise, keep your head on straight. Don't slack any. Friendship-wise, don't just throw yourself out there. Be respectful even if you can't stand the person.

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- Student 3-C: Study.

- Student 4-C: The work is a lot harder, so [you] have to pay attention, do your homework, and study more.

- Student 5-C: Just be ready to learn every day, study, and when that first test comes, jump on it and be ready for it. Just listen to your teachers because they know [what] will be on the test. Do what they say and be respectful.

- Student 6-C: Do all of your projects and Class I (test) grades.

- Student 7-C: Pay attention in class and be responsible for themselves.

- Student 8-C: Study a lot.

- Student 9-C: To do their work and keep up with all of their work.

- Student 10-C: It's pretty much the same as eighth grade. The first two to three months, it will be stuff you know, and it'll get harder. It creeps up on you real fast.

Moreover, students were asked to provide recommendations to middle and high school faculty to help students adjust to the challenges of high school (Table 4.3).

Comparison of Educator and Student Perceptions

Educators and ninth-graders agree that students face a more rigorous curriculum when they transition to high school. Principal C and teachers believed that many students struggle because they have not developed appropriate study skills, which was corroborated by students who believed that ninth-graders struggle academically due to the increased importance of grades and the advanced coursework. Moreover, educators and students also said that immaturity can contribute to academic and behavior problems in some ninth-graders.

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Table 4.3 School C Student Perceptions

Student	What advice would you give middle school educators to help students adjust to high school?	What advice would you give high school educators to help students adjust?
1-C	Don't be so in their face about turning in school work, it really does not matter what you say to them, they are either going to turn it in, or they are not.	Eradicate freshman academy.
2-C	Start treating them with more responsibility. Treat them like they are older kids.	Maybe they should give us a couple of days at the beginning of the year for students to roam around and get to know their teachers and new friends in the classes. This probably won't happen, but it would be worth a try.
3-C	I guess with math give them worksheets and stuff.	They should enforce the dress code. I have seen so many boys with their pants down and girls with their tops down. I think the school could do more than what they do now to prevent this.
4-C	Give them practice to prepare them for what they are going to do in high school.	Reduce the number of classes we take.
5-C	Maybe before they take the CRCT, work on everything you did that past year. After the CRCT, get them ready for high school.	None.
6-C	Tell that they should study more than they did in middle school.	None.
7-C	None.	Start classes off with easy assignments.
8-C	I don't know.	They should let us come for an entire day for the eighth-grade visit.
9-C	Probably show them stuff they'll see when they get here.	None.
10-C	No, they did everything.	None.

Establishing bonds between students and educators was a common theme among participants. Nine students in November described having positive relationships with the majority of their teachers. Student 10-C said he had been in trouble in some of his classes, and he feels this hindered him from establishing strong bonds with those teachers, but by March he had established relationships with one teacher and the ninth-grade administrator. Seven students said they had at least one faculty member they could turn to if they were in need. Students 6-C and 7-C said they had not asked for help, while Student 8-C did not feel close to any educator. Eight also found the school's homeroom program to be beneficial because they have four years to establish a relationship with the same teacher; however, Students 1-C and 9-C said their homeroom teachers did not interact with them much. Students 8-C and 10-C named the homeroom program as the best transition strategy because it built positive relationships between students and teachers.

Moreover, some educators and students found that positive relationships with older peers assisted in the transition process. Six students−1-C, 2-C, 3-C, 5-C and 6-C − said older students provided them with advice about the transition to high school, and five students− 1-C, 2-C, 6-C, 8-C and 9-C − favored classes with a mixture of grades as compared to freshman-only classes. Students who enjoyed interacting with older peers said they preferred the opportunity to make new friends and seek assistance from mentor students. In addition, four teachers said positive interactions with older peers teach ninth-graders how to act mature and be academically successful.

When asked about their school's transition strategies, educators mentioned the eighth-grade visit, freshman open house, ninth-grade academy, homeroom and the

academic success action plan. Students, however, focused on the eighth-grade tour and open house. Principal C and three teachers perceived the eighth-grade visit to be the most beneficial transition strategy, while three of eight students who participated described it as helpful. Two students did not attend the visit, and therefore, could not answer the question. In addition, two of three teachers who chose the eighth-grade visit as the most beneficial also praised the freshman-only open house. However, the six students who attended the ninth-grade only open house believed it was more valuable than the eighth-grade visit.

Educators and students had varying views concerning the ninth-grade academy. Five educators and eight students deemed ninth-grade academy as being an effective transition strategy. Educators perceived the academy's advantages to include extra support for students, opportunities for collaboration among teachers and isolation of freshman from negative older peers. Some students appreciated that the academy offered them core classes that were mostly ninth-graders only and close in proximity. The most common disadvantage mentioned by educators was isolation from older peers hindered ninth-graders from gaining positive relationships and experiences with upperclassmen. However, six of 10 students said they benefitted from the academy due to the segregation from older peers. Only Students 1-C and 2-C expressed negative perceptions about the academy throughout the school year.

Comparison of All Schools

The preceding findings described and compared educators' and students' perceptions of the transition to ninth-grade by individual schools. The next section of this

chapter will focus on how the perceptions of students and educators at a school with a freshman academy compare to those in traditional schools.

Student Development

Commonalities existed amongst educator perceptions across the three high schools. Educators identified three common hindrances to student success: immaturity, deficient study skills and a more rigorous curriculum. Each principal identified immaturity as the issue that creates the most problems with ninth-grade students and found behavior problems are the result of lacking interpersonal skills in ninth-graders. Moreover, principals and teachers said some ninth-graders lack the study skills needed for the more challenging curriculum and additional coursework students face in ninth-grade.

Students at the traditional high schools and the school with the ninth-grade academy appear to concur with their educators. Common responses among students across schools about why students struggled included immaturity, lack of preparation and harder coursework. One of five School A students said ninth-graders often struggled because they are too distracted by the new freedoms offered by high school, while two mentioned intimidation by older peers. At School B, all four students also cited nervousness and immaturity as common barriers, while one of 10 School C students said students experienced increased pressure because their academic performance carries more weight in high school.

Transition Strategies

The three high schools offered comparable transition strategies, with two tactics including the eighth-grade visit to the high school and the freshman-only open house. One School A, three School B teachers and three School C teachers and the principal found the eighth-grade visit to be the most beneficial transition strategy. Students, however, were more critical of the strategy. Some of their groups were unable to complete the tour, or they felt the experience was too rushed. The student participants were more favorable of the freshman-only open house because they were given copies of their schedules and allowed to find their classes and meet their core teachers. As for the educators, two school A teachers, four School B teachers and two School C teachers chose the open house as the best strategy for helping ninth-graders.

While the three high schools practiced similar transition strategies, only School C implemented a ninth-grade academy. Educators and students at Schools A and B were asked their opinions on executing a ninth-grade academy. Both principals had experience working at a high school with a ninth-grade academy. Principal A was the registrar at School C, while Principal B was employed at a neighboring district. They both found freshman academies to offer positive experiences for students, with the only negative issues related to scheduling.   However, the majority of teachers and all students at the traditional high schools were against establishing a ninth-grade academy. Teachers said an academy would prevent students from fully experiencing high school and would limit positive interactions with older peers. All students expressed concern that an academy would prevent them from establishing relationships with older students.

Furthermore, School C educators and students expressed perceptions about their ninth-grade academy. Five of 10 teachers cited ninth-grade academy as being the most beneficial transition strategy; however, seven educators did find faults with the program. For the disadvantages, School C teachers cited the same concerns that traditional high school teachers expressed —lack of older peer interactions and lack of full integration into the high school experience.

In addition, eight students in the ninth-grade academy also found the program to be effective because their core classes were contained and they were isolated from older students. Two students found the academy ineffective and believed it hindered their transition to high school, while one student said she enjoyed the academy's centralization of classes, but did not appreciate the stigma of being isolated in the ninth-grade academy.

Establishing a Sense of Belonging

One School a teacher, the School B principal and two School B teachers believed positive student-teacher relationships assist the most in helping students transition and adapt to high school. In addition, two School C teachers said their homeroom program was the best strategy because it forged relationships. The majority of students believed they had stronger relationships with their teachers in ninth grade than in eighth grade. In addition to student-teacher relationships, educators and students found it important for ninth-graders to establish positive bonds with older peers. Teachers said interactions with upperclassmen helped students to adapt to high school, while most students said at least one older peer provided help at the beginning of the school year. The majority of students also preferred classes with older students in lieu of ninth-grade only classes.

Furthermore, educators also contended that involvement in sports and clubs positively contributes to students' sense of belonging at their school. All but one student at School B said educators encouraged involvement in extracurricular activities, and all students expressed interest in joining a club or sport if they had not already.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school using stage-environment fit theory in one school district. Results focused on the perceptions of educators and students concerning problems facing ninth-graders, transition strategies, ninth-grade academies and connections to school. Interviews and questionnaires revealed a myriad of commonalities among educators and students no matter the type of school. The most prevalent difference in opinion occurred in the perceptions of ninth-grade academy. Chapter 5 will present a brief summary of the findings, conclusions, discussion, implications and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school using stage-environment fit theory in one Southeastern school district southwest of Atlanta. Furthermore, comparisons of perceptions were made between students and educators participating in a freshman academy and those in two traditional high schools. Administrators can or may learn more about the perceptions of students and educators regarding the first year of high school from the research of this study.

Summary of Findings

The findings presented in Chapter IV were guided by the research questions below:

1. How do ninth-grade students' perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school compare to those of educators?

Ninth-grade students, administrators and ninth-grade teachers shared comparable answers in several data areas. When asked why some ninth-grade students struggle their freshman year, students and educators identified immaturity, deficient study skills and a more rigorous curriculum as the most common deterrents to ninth-grade students' success in high school. This finding is supported by other research on the ninth grade experience. Fulk (2003) surveyed ninth-grade teachers about their greatest areas of concern and ninth-grade students about their academic weaknesses. Teachers worried about students'

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time management skills, motivation and homework completion, while students perceived their weaknesses to be study habits, motivation and test anxiety.

However, differences in perceptions among students and educators arose when participants were asked about high school transition strategies. The three high schools offered comparable transition strategies, with two tactics including the eighth-grade visit to high school and the freshman-only open house. Eight of 25 educators found the eighth-grade visit to be the most beneficial transition strategy. Students, however, were more critical of the strategy. Some groups were unable to complete the tour, or they felt the experience was too rushed. The student participants favored the freshman-only open house because they were given copies of their schedules and allowed to find their classes and meet their core teachers before school began. As for educators, eight chose the open house as the best strategy for helping ninth-graders.

While the eighth-grade visit and freshman open house help students familiarize themselves with their new environments, adolescents need more than tours to help them adjust to high school. Researchers have found that students experience a smoother transition to high school if they experience a sense of belonging through positive relationships with teachers and peers and participation in extracurricular activities (Fulk, 2003). In my study, four educators believed positive student-teacher relationships assist the most in helping students transition and adapt to high school. In addition, two School C teachers said their four-year homeroom program was the best transition strategy because it forged relationships. The majority of students believed they had stronger relationships with their teachers in ninth grade than in eighth grade.

Along with student-teacher relationships, educators and students found it important for ninth-graders to establish positive bonds with older peers. Teachers said interactions with upperclassmen helped students to adapt to high school, while most students said at least one older peer provided help at the beginning of the school year. The majority of students also preferred classes with older students in lieu of ninth-grade only classes. Furthermore, educators believed that involvement in school sponsored extracurricular activities contributes to students' sense of belonging at their school. All but one student said educators encouraged involvement in extracurricular activities, and all students expressed interest in joining a club or sport if they had not already.

2. How do the perceptions of students and educators at a school with a freshman academy compare to those in schools without freshman academies concerning the transition and adjustment to high school?

Not surprisingly, the only distinguishing difference between the perceptions of traditional high school students and faculty and those at the ninth-grade academy school occurred in regard to ninth-grade academies. All three principals had experience with a freshman academy: Principal C leads the school in this district with the ninth-grade academy, Principal A was the registrar at School C and Principal B was employed at a neighboring district with an academy. The administrators found freshman academies to offer positive experiences for students, with the only negative issues related to scheduling and space.

However, the majority of teachers and students at the traditional high schools were against establishing a ninth-grade academy, with concerns focusing on student isolation. Teachers said an academy would prevent students from fully experiencing high

school and would limit positive interactions with older peers. The majority of students expressed concern that an academy would prevent them from establishing relationships with older students. On the other hand, educators and student involved in the academy expressed mostly positive views. Half of the School C teachers cited the ninth-grade academy as being the most beneficial transition strategy, while eight of 10 students found the strategy to be helpful. While the idea of isolation was negative for participants at the traditional high schools, separation from older peers was cited as a benefit for the majority of School C educators and students.

Conclusions

The final research question will be answered in the conclusions section:

3. How can stage-environment fit theory be used to explain the similarities and differences in perceptions among ninth-grade students and educators in different high school environments?

Transitions are examined by stage-environment fit theory through the lenses of developmental and ecological theories. Based on the theory, a school can be the vehicle by which needs are met and maturation is promoted, or it can be a tool that suppresses the needs of students and hinders growth (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccle & Roeser, 2011). Two schools in this study, School A and B, use a traditional configuration while the third school, C, had an in-house ninth-grade academy. For the most part, educators and students at the three high schools expressed common views on the transition and adjustment to high school; however, perceptions of the effectiveness of ninth-grade academies varied greatly by school type and within School C. The conclusions of this study will be discussed based on the following tenets of stage-environment fit theory:

- Environments must meet the development of students to be effective.

- Adolescents need a balance of autonomy and support from teachers to meet
  their developmental needs.

- Transitions are more effective when students experience a sense of belonging
  in their new environment.

Environment and Developmental Needs

Educators in this study concurred with current research that has found ninth-grade students to have the highest percentage of failures and discipline problems than any other grade (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Alspaugh, 1998; Bornsheuer et al.; 2011; Karriker-Jaffee et al., 2008; Kennely & Monrad, 2007; Queen, 2002; Witherspoon & Ennett, 2011). Moreover, educators and students blamed some of these academic and behavioral issues on the immaturity of students and the freedom afforded by their new environment. In their three years of middle school, students were controlled by educators: they had to walk on a painted line on the floor, eat lunch quietly with their teachers and use the restroom or go to lockers during scheduled breaks. In high school, these restrictions are lifted. Students are responsible for scheduling their own bathroom and locker breaks, for arriving to class on time and for choosing where to sit in the cafeteria: "I enjoy (the new freedoms) because in middle school, you felt like you were in prison," Student 4-A said.

According to stage-environment fit theory, increased autonomy at school and home is one of the needs of 14 and 15-year-olds, the age of most first-time ninth-graders (Gutman & Eccles, 2007). So why do some ninth-graders struggle in an environment that

meets their developmental needs? The answer may lie in the disparity between the middle and high school environments. Administrators in middle schools environments focus on schedules and teacher-control, while high school administrators place more responsibility on students. Student 3-B recommended that educators at the middle school level taper the restrictions on middle school students so they could be better prepared for the freedoms and responsibilities of high school: "They didn't give us a lot of freedom, so when we go to high school, it was a big change."

Along with adjusting to the freedoms of high school, the new schools can also be a place for the students to seize the opportunity to socialize with older peers. Adolescence is characterized by peer relationships taking a more predominant role in students' lives. School environments can be a factor that explains student relationships and interactions, such as students being separated by grade-level wings in the middle school or in small-learning communities in high school (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). In middle schools, all lunches and classes were isolated by grade level. However, while most ninth-graders have core classes with others in their grade, electives and lunch periods feature older students, even at the school with the ninth-grade academy. The students in this study were divided about their preference for classes with only ninth-graders and those who preferred mixed-grade classes. Those who preferred the ninth-grade only classes said they felt more comfortable with their peers, while those who enjoyed the mixture wanted to meet new people and gain new perspectives on their new environment. Both sets of students were able to experience their preference in their high schools since core classes contained mostly ninth-graders and electives often featured a mixture of students from all grades.

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Student-Teacher Relationships

Although adolescents crave autonomy, that does not mean educators need to detach from them. On the contrary, researchers have found that students develop autonomy, self-identity and intrinsic motivation better when they experience close ties to supportive adults (Deci et al. 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2002). In addition, adolescents perform better in classrooms where teachers balance order and student autonomy. Students crave procedures and guidelines in the classroom setting, yet they still desire the freedom to make certain choices in regard to their education. Students in classrooms where they are provided decision-making opportunities have higher intrinsic motivation, while students in teacher-controlled classrooms are more extrinsically motivated (Deci et al., 1991). However, high school teachers often limit this freedom in an effort to maintain behavior control. Researchers have found that high school teachers enforce stricter rules, maintain control and allow fewer opportunities for student choice than elementary school teachers (Midgley, 2002; Midgley, Fedlaufer & Eccles, 1988). Eccles et al. (1993) believe this lack of student autonomy decreases adolescent academic motivation.

Student perceptions of their relationships with teachers correlate to a sense of belonging in school and self-esteem in the classroom (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Osterman, 2000; Wigfield, Byrnes & Eccles, 2006). In a study by Ryan et al. (1994), adolescents who felt secure and supported by their teachers were more academically engaged and possessed stronger coping skills than peers without close ties to their instructors. Yet, as students transition from elementary schools to secondary schools, their perceptions of teacher support declines (Wigfield, Byrnes & Eccles, 2006). During the first semester, all but two students said they had better relationships with their high school teachers than

their middle school teachers. By the middle of second semester, all students reported having more positive relationships with high school teachers than their middle school teachers and had at least one adult on the faculty they could depend on if they were in need. Participants described their high school teachers as more "supportive," "respectful" and "lenient" than middle school educators: "All my (high school) teachers joke around, but in middle school, they try to be mean all the time," Student 6-C said. In addition, the majority of students said high school teachers offered more choices in classrooms, such as the type of performance assessment completed.

In research about the transition to junior high school, Eccles et al. (1997) found that students who experienced an increase in self-esteem during the transition to junior high school experienced higher self-esteem in tenth and twelfth grades than adolescents whose self-esteem dropped during the transition. Additionally, an increase in self-esteem was found to positively correlate to a positive transition to junior high school. Moreover, students who had supportive adults typically experienced an increase in self-esteem during the transition to junior high school, while students who felt their family was too controlling experienced a decline in self-esteem. Researchers discovered that students who experienced support in decision making from their teachers and families, respect from adults and were confident in their academic and social skill abilities, adjusted the best to a new school environment (Eccles et al., 1997). Therefore, constructive student-teacher relationships can be viewed as a positive factor in students' transition to a new school and their lives in the future, as supported in this inquiry focused on a Southeastern school district. In this inquiry, students who reported having a positive relationship with at least one faculty member throughout the school year were more likely to pass all of

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their classes than adolescents who had not established strong relationships with adults at school.

Sense of Belonging

Positive student-teacher relationships are one aspect of creating a sense of belonging in a new environment. As school size increases, students' engagement and attachment to their teachers decreases (Crosnoe, Johnson & Elder, 2004; Lee & Smith, 1995; Weiss, Carolan & Baker-Smith, 2010). Since high schools are typically larger than middle schools, creating a sense of belonging is imperative to helping students adjust to their new environment. Osterman (2000) said students' sense of belonging at school encompasses sense of school community, sense of classroom community and teacher/peer support and acceptance, and found that family and peer support have the strongest influence on student perceptions and behavior, while teacher support is the strongest indicator of student engagement.

Adolescents who feel accepted by their peers perform higher academically than socially isolated students (Langenkamp, 2010; Wentzel & Asher, 1995; Wentzel & Caldweel, 1997). Students who feel accepted by teachers and peers were more likely to be intrinsically motivated to succeed, interested in school and experience lower levels of anxiety than adolescents who do not experience a sense of belonging (Langenkamp, 2010; Watson, Battistich & Solomon, 1997). These findings were replicated in my study. During the first interview, Student 2-A and 9-C were the only students not to respond positively to whether they felt they belonged at their high school. While Student 9-C had changed his mind by March, Student 2-A said there were times she still felt as if she did not belong. Neither student attended the feeder middle school for their high schools, so

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they did not attend the eighth-grade visit or the freshmen-only open house. Students

provided different reasons for experiencing a sense of belonging at their school, with the

most common being that they knew other students.

Adolescence is characterized by peer relationships taking a more predominant

role in students' lives. School environments have been described as having an impact on

student relationships and interactions, such as students being separated by grade-level

wings in the middle school or in small-learning communities in high school. Moreover,

Eccles and Roeser (2011) contend the degree and nature of the peer influence depends on

a social group's values and motivations. Highly motivated students can influence their

like-minded peers positively, while disengaged students can affect their peers negatively.

Moreover, another shift in the transition from middle school to high school is that

students have the opportunity to interact more with peers in different grades. In middle

school, students attend all classes and lunch period by grades. In high school, while core

classes are primarily ninth-grade only, students have the opportunity to interact with

older peers during electives and lunch, even students at the ninth-grade academy school.

A total of 15 of 19 student participants had positive perceptions of older peers, with

several students saying that they are able to "provide insight on work." Five students had

mixed views on older students, basically saying that their perceptions depended on

individual students: "Some older students feel like they're nothing but better than you, but

my friends in older grades help me with things I don't already know about the school,"

Student 1-B said.

Along with establishing relationships with older peers and educators, Eccles et al.

(1993) found that students who participate in extracurricular activities also have a

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stronger connection to their school (Eccles et al., 1993), and extracurricular activities encourage positive development in adolescents, improved grades and a higher likelihood of high school completion (Bohnert et al., 2010; Eccles & Barber, 1997; Eccles, Barber & Hunt, 2003; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006). In a 2001 study, Barber, Eccles and Stone found that high school students' participation in different types of extracurricular activities was a predictor of academic achievement, substance use and psychological development. Students who were active in community service organizations had lower instances of substance abuse and higher self-esteem than their peers. However, involvement in volunteer activities did not predict academic achievement. In addition, students in the performing arts were more likely to use alcohol and attempt suicide, but were also more likely to graduate college than their peers. Moreover, student athletes were more likely to experience academic achievement and use alcohol and had lower levels of social isolation.

Student participants in this qualitative inquiry were involved or interested in a variety of sports, community service and curricular clubs. Student 3-A was involved in band and Family, Career and Community Leaders of America, while the four others were interested in joining a sports team. At School B, Student 1 was a member of marching band and recycling club. Student 2 was a member of Future Business Leaders of America and service club; Student 3 was interested in the track team; and Student 4 was a member of the ninth-grade football team and the service club. At School C, Student 1 was a member of the golf team, marching band, Skills USA and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes; Student 2 played volleyball; Student 3 was a member of FFA; Student 4 was interested in clubs; Student 5 played baseball and football and was a member of FFA;

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Students 6 and 8 played basketball; Student 7 played football; Student 9 played football; and Student 10 wanted to played basketball but was ineligible due to too many discipline referrals.

In this study, students' sense of belonging reflected how well they adapted to high school and how academically successful they were. All students who said they had a positive relationship with at least one staff member, had older peers who helped them transition, participated in extracurricular activities and felt as if they belonged at their school, not only were passing at the time of both interviews, but reported earning A's and B's. Student 10-C, who reported failing two classes during both interviews, said he felt he belonged at his school and had older friends, but his classroom behavior hindered close relationships with teachers and participation in extracurricular activities. During the first semester interview, Student 9-C was failing two classes and said he "didn't know" if he felt like belonged at his high school and had not formed close relationships with his teachers. By March, he was passing all classes and answered positively about school belonging and teacher relationships.

Ninth Grade Academy Perceptions

As stated above, the only consistent difference between the perceptions of students and educators at the traditional high schools and their peers at the school with the ninth-grade academy concerned the implementation of freshman academies. The majority of teachers and students at the traditional high schools said they would be against the implementation of the ninth grade academy due to social concerns, while teacher and student perceptions about the academy were mostly positive at School C. At Schools A and B, educators and students expressed concern that a ninth-grade academy

would hinder students' sense of belonging at the high school due to isolation. However, the majority of School C educators and students espoused the benefits of the academy's isolation: students' cores classes were conveniently located and they were somewhat separated from older students. In November, six of 10 students found the academy beneficial, while four said the strategy had not helped them transition to high school. Five months later, two students had changed their minds. These students said they felt more comfortable in core classes with peers their own age, and they were still able to interact with older students in the hallways during class changes and in elective classes. For these adolescents, the ninth-grade academy made them feel more comfortable in their new environment, without hindering their sense of belonging, because they experienced a mixture of interactions with same grade and older peers.

On the other hand, two Students 1-C and 2-C found the academy ineffective and believed it hindered their integration to high school. For these students, both of whom who earned all A's and B's, the structure of the academy did not meet their developmental needs. As Student 1-C said, "I think when these people come up with these ideas, it's ideas to get them higher up in the educational industry, and present them saying, 'Oh, this is so brilliant.' Most of the time, they don't really see it from a student aspect, or if they do use a student aspect, they try to use aspects that would best help them, like a lower-level student who struggles all the time."

Theories Associated with School Transitions

Stage-environment fit theory was used in this study to compare the perceptions of first-time ninth-graders to educators from two different school environments about the transition to high school. However, stage-environment fit theory is not the only lens that

can be used to examine perceptions about school transitions. The following section

reviews how other transition theories also can be used in this study.

Life Course Theory

Life course theory has been used to explain the way in which lives are connected

to social and historical contexts and controlled by times of change (Elder, 1998). Benner

(2011) utilized life course theory to compare commonalities and differences in the school

transition literature because the theory can be used to understand how social and

historical contexts impact transitions, and how individuals are linked to their larger

populations, increasing the generalization of studies. However, due to the theory's focus

on the transitions of participants during an expanded time frame, life course theory was

not the best theoretical concept for this study, which only lasted for one school year.

Moreover, Neild (2009) refutes the use of life course theory for examining the

difficulties experienced by some adolescents during a school transition period. She

concurs that if theory were applicable, then more ninth-graders would experience

academic and behavior problems during the transition, no matter the type of school they

attend, their academic and social skills or support from adults. She believes problems in

ninth grade can be attributed to the organization of typical high schools, which she

describes as being bureaucratic in nature without an emphasis on student-teacher

relationships. Students may feel anonymous and estranged in this organization.

Self-Determination Theory

Like stage-environment fit theory, self- determination theory has also been used

to provide an understanding about how social environments can be classified as being

supportive of, or a hindrance to, development. This theory has served as an explanation for the interaction between the need for humans to be active and growth-oriented, and the social environments that can be described as either supportive of or a hindrance to people's attempts to integrate their experiences into self-identity. Positive environments are a way in which people can meet their needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness, which leads to motivation, performance and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Another similarity with stage-environment fit theory is that self-determination theory also can be used to understand the importance of student autonomy. According to this theory, students who are motivated inwardly flourish in classrooms, and students benefit when teachers support students' self-sufficiency (Reeve, Bolt and Cai, 1999). Autonomy-supportive teachers listen more, praise mastery, avoid criticism, provide time for individual work and do not provide immediate answers to questions. Controlling teachers, on the other hand, are more likely to need to be in charge of the classroom and motivate students through pressure or discipline.

In my study, all students said they had better relationships with their high school teachers than their middle school teachers. Moreover, the majority of students said high school provided them with more autonomy than middle school and that high school teachers provided more choices in the classroom. Based on self-determination theory, the majority of students in this study experienced a positive transition to high school because the new environment had autonomy-supportive teachers and they felt a sense of belonging. However, the most important factor in this theory is motivation, specifically if participants are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. For this study, the researcher

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adapted interview guides from Kmiec (2007), who focused on stage-environment fit theory and did not include questions about motivation. A future study could be conducted to examine how students' motivation is affected by different school environments.

Transition Theory

While the literature focusing on Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition model predominately featured adults, the aspects could also be used to examine school transitions. The researcher identified a transition as a change that can "result in growth or deterioration" (p.5), which described the transition to high school for students. While some students struggle to adapt to their new environment, other thrive (Eccles et al, 1999). Three aspects of Schlossberg's (1989), 2011 model that apply to this study include:

- The perception of the particular transition as seen by the participant: Students in this study were asked to describe their perceptions on the transition to high school. Students described the first day of school as "chaotic," "confusing" and "strenuous," but all students said they had adjusted to their new environment by the end of the first week.
- The characteristics of the pre- and post- transition environments: During the first semester, 13 students expressed positive perceptions of high school, one had a negative perception because ninth-graders are "the bottom dogs" in the building and five had mixed views. The most common response of students with mixed views was that the classes were harder, but they enjoyed the freedoms of high school. In the second semester interviews, two students had

mixed views, citing "difficult days" and finding it "hard to keep my grades up," while the other 17 students expressed positive perceptions of their first year of high school.

- The participant feeling as if they mattered in their new environment rather than feeling marginalized. For participants to experience a sense of belonging, Schlossberg (1989, 2011) said they must feel needed, appreciated, noticed and important. A total of 17 students in this study said they felt as if they belonged at their high school; however, the most common response as to why they felt that way was because of relationships with peers.

Henderson and Milstein's Resiliency Model

Another framework used in the examination of the transition to ninth grade is Henderson and Milstein's (2003) resiliency model. Of all the theories used in transition literature, the resiliency model can be viewed as the one with the most characteristics that are similar to those within stage-environment fit theory. The main components of the theory are that for students to achieve success in education, they must be taught how to be resilient through: bonding between educators and students; setting clear and consistent boundaries for students; teaching life skills to students; providing a caring and supportive environment; establishing high expectations; and creating opportunities for significant contributions in classrooms and school.

For this study, Henderson and Milstein's (2003) resiliency model could have been a feasible theoretical concept for describing the perceptions of ninth-grade students and educators about the first year of high school. The six components of the resiliency wheel

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are all factors in creating school and classroom climates that are conducive to positive student adjustments to high school. Included in the model are supportive student-teacher relationships, opportunities for autonomy in the classroom and a caring environment, all of which are components of stage-environment fit theory. However, since the purpose of this study was to compare perceptions of students and educators at two different school environments, stage-environment fit theory can be considered the one that works the best as the theoretical framework because of its focus on the impact of school environments.

Implications

The findings from this study were based on interviews and questionnaires with volunteer participants (administrators, teachers and ninth-grade students) from three high schools in one school district; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all students making the transition from middle to high school. Additionally, findings cannot be generalized to all ninth-grade academies, which could vary based on organization and support. Despite these limitations, the findings from this study have implications for school administrators.

Researchers suggest that high schools utilize transition programs that will enable school administrators to include these important components: sharing information with all stakeholders at the middle and high school level and providing students with support during the transition, such as the implementation of a ninth-grade academy (Dorman, 2012; MacIver, 1990; Russell et al., 2012).

Sharing Information

Staff at all three high schools and their feeder middle schools conduct informational meetings at night for parents/guardians and students that outline important information regarding the transition to high school. While faculty or staff at the middle and high schools also redeliver the information to students during in school meetings, parents/guardians who are unable to attend the weeknight meetings at school could miss out on vital information. School leaders could hold meetings on weekends or in the community to bolster parental attendance. However, as one teacher at School B said, not all parents attend the meetings, often due to a lack of transportation or work schedules. Administrators should consider new ways to reach parents who do not attend schools meetings, such as scheduling meetings in parts of the community that are not well represented. School websites, social media and online videos about the transition to ninth-grade could also be used to reach parents/guardians who are unable to attend meetings (Mizelle, 1999).

Along with sharing information with incoming students and their parents/guardians, high school administrators should also remain in communication with their middle school counterparts. The administrators at the three high schools in this study coordinate transition program efforts with their feeder middle school leadership through joint parent meetings, high school counselors visiting middle schools and eighth-grade students visiting the high school. There needs to be a level of increased communication between middle and high school educators as well, not only about the transition to high school, but about curriculum, behavior and school culture issues. Researchers further recommend vertical planning by subjects, administrator and teacher

visitations and teacher exchanges between high and middle schools (Dorman 2012; Kmiec, 2007; Mizelle, 1999).

One implication inferred from student and educator interviews is that the eighth-grade visit needs to be improved. The three high schools host eighth-graders from their feeder middle schools during spring semester. The visit is designed to alleviate fear and increase enthusiasm about attending high school. Five of 22 teachers and one principal deemed it as the most effective transition strategy. However, the majority of students said it was "kind of helpful." Student 1-B said her tour group ran out of time for a full tour of the school and spent 10 minutes on the bus waiting to return to the middle school. Administrators at the middle and high schools should consider providing an entire day for the eighth-grade visit, with tours that include observations of ninth-grade classrooms and opportunities for eighth-graders to ask current high school students questions (Geltner et al., 2011).

Ninth Grade Academies

Current popular school grade configurations for elementary, middle and high school are based on the research of Dacus (1963), who studied the emotional, physical and social maturation of fifth- through tenth-graders. He found that sixth-graders were more similar to seventh-graders than fifth-graders, and ninth-graders were closer to tenth-graders than eighth-graders, so he recommended grades six through eight middle schools and grades nine through twelve for high school. However, Blyth, Hill, and Smyth (1981) believed that Dacus' recommendation did not account for the individual developmental differences of students, but instead assumed that all adolescents in a certain grade have the same development. The researchers examined the influences of older peers by

exploring how the placement of ninth-grade with either seventh-and eighth-grades in junior high school or with tenth grade in a freshman/sophomore-only school impacts younger students. They found the influence of tenth-graders on ninth-graders can be detrimental to student development. These students reported feeling more anonymous, participating in fewer activities, being offered drugs by older peers and engaging in sexual activities more than when they were with seventh- and eighth-graders. Conversely, seventh- and eighth-grade students reported having fewer sexual encounters, participating in more extracurricular activities and belonging at their school after the ninth-grade was removed.

During the past 20 years, school administrators across the United States have implemented small learning communities, or schools within-schools, to personalize student learning by creating bonds between teachers and students, intensifying monitoring of student behavior and boosting opportunities for student participation in extracurricular activities (Blanchard & Harms, 2006; Breaking Ranks, 2001; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Ready, Lee & Welner, 2004; Styron & Peasant, 2010; Zvoch, 2006). These smaller schools include career academies and ninth-grade academies.

According to the School C principal, their ninth-grade academy offers a mixture of the "controlled environment" of middle school with the freedoms of high school. The academy houses ninth-graders' core classes, but they still venture to other areas of campus for elective classes, which often include upperclassmen. An assistant principal is also assigned to the ninth-grade academy, so students have consistent consequences for behavior issues. The principal also believes the academy allows core teachers to

collaborate more since they all have the same lunch period. However, a majority of teachers and students at the traditional high schools said they would be against the implementation of a ninth-grade academy at their campuses because it is too much like the middle school environment and limits students' high school experiences. Both sets of participants also were concerned that students would not have the opportunity to interact with positive older peers who could teach them about mature behavior and study skills. Student 3-B said she may have preferred an academy during the first week of school while she was learning her new environment, but she believed she would have quickly grown tired of the isolation from older peers.

In spite of this, Students 2-A and 5-A experienced a change in perception about the academy from the first semester to the second semester interviews. Both students said they would be against an academy in October, but by March, Student 2-A said she would need to experience the academy before passing judgment, and Student 5-A said an academy would have made navigating the hallways during class changes easier. Based on her interviews, Student 2-A had a more difficult adjustment to high school, even though she reported making A's and B's. She expressed ambivalence during both interviews when asked about her sense of belonging at her school. Even though she had several positive relationships with educators, she did not have many older friends and was not involved in extracurricular activities. Her lack of interaction with older peers was most likely due to the fact that she attended the middle school that fed into School B, so she did not have preexisting peer relationships with same age or older peers. Utilizing stage-environment fit theory, a ninth-grade academy could benefit a student like Student 2-A

who lacks connections to her school because the isolation from older peers could help her focus on establishing relationships with same-age students during core classes and lunch.

At the school with the ninth-grade academy, educators and students expressed mixed views about the organizational structure. Educators listed the benefits of ninth-grade academy as providing students with more structure, giving students more time to acclimate to their new environment, limiting exposure to negative older peers and creating closer bonds between teachers. Yet, only half of the teachers believed the academy was their school's most effective transition strategy. Common disadvantages included lacking a full integration to high school and limiting ninth-graders' exposure to positive upperclassmen. Teacher 1-C said the academy would only be effective when it was combined with instruction on how to succeed in high school, while Teacher 8-C said ninth-grade academies work best when they are housed in their own facilities.

On the other hand, most School C students expressed positive views of the academy from their interviews at the beginning and near the end of their freshman year. Eight of 10 students said they were glad they attended a school with an academy because it allowed them to spend most of the school day with same-age peers, prepared them for the remaining three years of high school and reduced time spent walking to class. For them, isolation was not an issue because they could still interact with older peers during class changes and elective courses.

Students 1-C and 2-C, however, expressed disgust with the academy at the time of both interviews. They said it made their school experience "boring" and "segregated." Why did these two students have such negative perceptions of the academy as compared to their peer participants? According to stage-environment fit theory, the academy may

not have met their developmental needs. Based on their interviews, the researcher found

both students to be bright, outgoing and mature, so their development levels may not

have benefitted from the containment of a ninth-grade academy. Moreover, both students

had established relationships with high school teachers and older peers through

participating in high school sports during their eighth-grade year. They had established a

connection to high school before even becoming ninth-graders. While these two objected

to the ninth-grade academy, both students still expressed positive perceptions about their

ninth grade year.

The majority of ninth-grade academy student participants believed the academy's

centralization of classes and partial isolation from older peers helped them to transition to

high school. However, researchers examining ninth-grade academies often hold beliefs

similar to those stated in the comment of Teacher 1-C: "If freshman academy is not used

to train students how to succeed in the coming three years, why do it?" (Kmiec, 2007;

Neild, 2009; Offerman, 2000). In one study, Neild (2009) reviewed data from Project

Transition, which implemented small learning communities in high schools in Kansas

and Wisconsin. Teachers were divided into interdisciplinary teams who taught the same

students. Team teachers were given common planning time and academic coaches, but

only the high school in Kansas fully implemented the plan. Therefore, only their school

showed gains in ninth-grade academic performance. Neild believed these findings were

indicative of the need for having a high school structural change that must be combined

with a strong instructional focus to be effective, which supports the findings of Kmiec

(2007) and Osterman (2000).

Based on student interviews at School C, an in-house ninth-grade academy that can be used to provide students with a mixture of a contained environment and opportunities for activities on other parts of the campus with positive older peers could help some adolescents during the transition to high school. However, administrators should also implement instructional practices focused on preparing students to meet the demands of high school, such as a study skills class as a freshman elective, which would be used to address the academic issues that educators in my study said hindered students from academic achievement. Moreover, researchers have suggested that ninth-grade core teachers be divided into teams of students (Bernstein et al, 2008; Kmiec, 2007; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001). Through the use of such teams, teachers could track the academic and behavior progress of the same students, which can increase student achievement and collaboration amongst instructors and with parents/guardians.

Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

The following section pertains to two recommendations for administrators to improve the transition for first-time ninth-graders and suggestions for further research in high school transition literature.

Multi-Year Homeroom Assignment

Researchers have stated that positive student-teacher relationships can be a source of easier school transitions for adolescents (Bennett, 2012; Eccles et al., 1997; Fulk, 2003; Offerman, 2000; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Roeser et al., 1996; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). All students in this study reported having at least one faculty member they could seek assistance from and better relationships with their high school educators that their

middle school teachers. However, not all ninth-graders experience positive relationships with their teachers. High school classrooms have often been described as having more emphasis on teacher control and discipline and competition amongst students, which can prevent adolescents from forming relationships. Moreover, administrators often place the least experienced teachers in ninth-grade classrooms, while experienced teachers instruct upperclassmen (Gold et al., 2010; Moore, 2009; Neild, 2009). These issues can prevent students from forming strong bonds with a caring adult on campus.

In an effort to improve student-teacher bonds for all students, administration at School C implemented an advisement program in 2012 that provides students with the same homeroom teacher for all four years in high school. Students meet with their homeroom teacher twice a month for about 20 minutes to discuss grades, attendance, behavior issues, study skills and post-secondary options: "The teacher creates a relationship with those students and is able to aid them with whatever they need," Teacher 10-C said. Fulk (2003) recommended a similar strategy so that teachers could develop stronger relationships with their students. Creating this type of advisement would be easy and inexpensive for administrators to implement and would provide students the opportunity to build a strong relationship with their homeroom teacher during their four years of high school.

Upperclassmen Mentor Programs

While educators often focus on the negative impact of upperclassmen-freshman relationships, such as bullying and peer pressure, researchers have found that positive relationships can improve the transition process for ninth-graders (Cushman, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Kmiec, 2007; Mizelle, 1999). Several educators in this study

said that ninth-graders need the influence of positive upperclassmen to successfully

transition to high school. Kmiec (2007) found that upperclassmen can positively impact

the ninth-graders' transition through mentoring programs. However, in her study of three

high schools that implemented ninth-grade academies, the administration at only one

school attempted a student mentoring program, but it ended before the end of the first

semester. In addition, Fulk (2003) found that ninth-graders said they were more receptive

to hearing advice from older peers rather than their teachers. The following are research-

based mentor program suggestions administrators can implement to assist ninth-graders

in forming bonds with positive older peers:

- Pen pal writing activities between eighth-grade and high school students
  (Kmiec, 2007). This would allow eighth-graders to ask questions they may be
  too embarrassed to ask teachers, and for older students to provide practical
  advice on how to succeed in high school.

- Before and after school tutoring with ninth-graders and upperclassmen
  (Kmiec, 2007). As previously stated, students are more apt to receive advice
  from older peers than their teachers, and they may not feel as intimidated to
  seek clarification from another student than with an adult. Struggling students
  would also be provided with the ability to learn content in a one-on-one
  setting.

- Include upperclassmen in more transition activities (Fulk, 2003).
  Academically successful upperclassmen could speak to eighth-graders
  throughout the school year and offer advice to ninth-graders during homeroom
  about how to be successful in high school.

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Older peer participants for these programs could be teacher selected or members of school organizations that focus on academics and service projects, such as Beta Club or National Honor Society. Blythe, Hill and Smyth (1981) found that younger adolescents often try to emulate older peers, which can lead to improvements if those peers are academically successful and behaviorally mature.

Further Research

This researcher raised several questions that warrant further study. One area requiring additional research would be to compare ninth-grade academies by types. The researcher in this study examined two traditional high schools and one with an in-house freshman academy. However, two different types of ninth-grade academies also exist. Some academies are housed on their own campus and are schools just for ninth-graders, while other academies are located on the high school campus but use their own building for classes. The on-campus/separate building academies may be housed in parts of the high school's facilities, like the media center or cafeteria, or be entirely self-contained. The existence of these different types of academies is the basis for a variety of questions:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages for each type of academy for ninth-grade students?

- What are the various levels of academic, attendance and behavior data among different types of academies in similar demographic settings?

- How do the perceptions of ninth-graders and educators about the transition to ninth-grade compare at the different types of academies?

- Are the different ninth-grade academy environments successful at meeting the development needs of first-time ninth-graders?

Another transition topic that should be further explored is a comparison of struggling ninth-grade students to academically successful students. Eccles et al. (1997) said that many students experience an easy adjustment to ninth-grade, and that the recommendations for improving transition practices are typically targeted toward at-risk students. Future research could examine the developmental, social and academic needs of

at-risk students and successful students to determine how to best implement transition

practices that can be used to meet the needs of each group. Moreover, researchers could

try to determine if the focus on struggling students could be detrimental to the needs of

successful students.

Furthermore, researchers also could conduct a longitudinal study through several

transitions that can be used to understand the impact of different school settings: K-12

schools, K-5 schools, 6-8 middle schools, 7-9 junior high schools, traditional high

schools and high schools with ninth-grade academies. Researchers could begin their

studies when student participants enter kindergarten and continue it until the end of

twelfth grade. Quantitative data would include student academic, behavior and attendance

reports, while qualitative researchers could compare student perceptions about each type

of environment. Researchers involved in this large-scale type of study could provide

powerful insight into which type of school environment can be used to best meet different

students' developmental needs.

Summary

Depending on the adolescent, the transition and adjustment to high school can be

filled with anxiety and dread or excitement and opportunity. Educators in this study

described the ninth-grade year as pivotal in predicting student success in high school.

However, researchers have demonstrated that ninth-grade students have the highest

number of failures and behavior problems than any other grade (Cohen & Smerdon,

2009; Fritzer & Herbst, 1996; Zsiray, 1996). Why do some students have a difficult time

adjusting to high school while others do not? According to stage-environment fit theory,

the answer is the school, specifically the environment's inability to meet developmental

needs of students. Adolescents who live in environments that are considered supportive, and enable them to respond positively to the young adults' changes will experience positive outcomes, such as academic achievement and peer acceptance, while adolescents who live in an environment that can not be considered supportive of their needs will experience negative outcomes, such as failing courses or feeling isolated from the school (Eccles & Buchanan, 1996; Gutman & Eccles, 2007).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe and compare student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment to high school using stage-environment fit theory in one Southeastern school district southwest of Atlanta. Furthermore, comparisons of perceptions were made between students and educators participating in a freshman academy and those in two traditional high schools. For the most part, perceptions of educators and students about the transition to high school were similar at the three high schools. Participants listed the same transition strategies, blamed student academic and behavior problems on immaturity and lacking study skills and expressed the importance of student-teacher relationships in easing the transition to high school.

Nevertheless, participants were divided on the issue of ninth-grade academies. The majority of educators and students at the traditional high school said they would be against the implementation of a freshman academy on their campus because ninth-graders would be limited in their transition to the full high school experience. Some of the educators at the school with the ninth-grade academy expressed the same views. On the other hand, eight of 10 students who participated in the academy perceived it as a positive strategy that helped them adjust to high school, specifically due to the isolation

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from older peers. For the majority of traditional high school students, isolation was viewed as a negative aspect, while for most School C students, being segregated provided a positive impact. However, since students possess different developmental needs, environments that are beneficial for some students, like the School C ninth-grade academy, can be detrimental to others.

Researchers in this study aimed to help administrators learn more about the perceptions of students and educators regarding the first year of high school. Two findings of this study, supported by transition literature, were that students undergo a smoother transition and perform better in high school if they have a strong relationship with at least one faculty member and are influenced by positive older peers. To this end, the researcher recommended that adolescents have the same advisement teacher all four years of high school, and students begin to establish relationships with positive older peers through mentor programs while they are still in middle school. Both of these strategies would be easy and inexpensive for administrators to implement.

Results from this study will be shared with administrators and central office personnel from the school district that was examined. Moreover, the administer perception results of this study were shared during the 37th annual Eastern Educational Research Association on Feb. 21, 2014, in Jacksonville, Fla. In addition, preliminary results of all participants were presented at the Tenth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry on May 24, 2014, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The researcher also plans to submit articles based on the findings of this dissertation to education journals.

Author Gail Carson Levine (2014) once said, "When you become a teenager, you step onto a bridge. You may already be on it. The opposite shore is adulthood. Childhood lies behind. The bridge is made of wood. As you cross, it burns behind you." First-time ninth-graders encounter more freedom and responsibility as they cross the bridge to adulthood and transition to high school. Administrators need to implement programs to ensure students' developmental needs are met as they make their journey, so that their journey will include a walk across a stage to receive a high school diploma in four years.

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APPENDIX A

ADMINISTRATOR INFORMED CONSENT FORM

ADMINISTRATOR INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: More Than Just a Number: Student and Educator Perceptions About the Transition to Ninth Grade

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this qualitative case study is to describe and compare student and educator perceptions about the transition and adjustment from middle to high school. Furthermore, comparisons of perceptions will be made between students and educators participating in a freshman academy and those in a traditional high school. This study aims to help administrators learn more about the perceptions of students and educators regarding the first year of high school.

What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked to participate in one, 60 minute interview where you will be asked to talk about students' in your school and your school's middle to high school transition and adjustment strategies.

Time required: 1 hour

Risks and Benefits: No more than minimal risk is anticipated. The names of the district and schools will be omitted in the study, and you will be given a pseudonym. The tape recorded interview will be deleted after all research has been gathered and transcribed. There is no direct benefit to the participant in this research. However, the information from this study gained can be used to improve or create new strategies to ease the move from middle to high school.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participating in the study.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential. The final results will be presented as partial completion of an Ed.D. program.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.
.
Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:
Researcher: Jody Sloat, doctoral student, Columbus State University College of Education & Health Professions, 770-328-4328, sloatjk@troup.org
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Iris Saltiel, professor, Columbus State University, 706-565-7818, saltiel_iris@columbusstate.edu
Columbus State University Institutional Review Board chair: Dr. Clay Nicks, 706-507-8293, nicks_clayton@columbusstate.edu

I have read the procedure outlined above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study and have received a copy of this description.

Participant's signature and date
_____

Researcher's signature and date
_____

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APPENDIX B

TEACHER INFORMED CONSENT

TEACHER INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: More Than Just a Number: Student and Educator Perceptions About the Transition to Ninth Grade

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this study is to describe and compare student and educator perceptions about the transition from middle to high school. Furthermore, comparisons of perceptions will be made between students participating in a freshman academy and those in a traditional high school. This study aims to help administrators learn more about the perceptions of students and educators regarding the first year of high school.

What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked to complete a questionnaire about the high school transition process of students in your school.

Time required: 30 minutes

Risks and Benefits: No more than minimal risk is anticipated. The names of the district and schools will be omitted in the study, and you will be given a pseudonym. There is no direct benefit to the participant in this research. However, the information from this study gained can be used to improve or create new strategies to ease the move from middle to high school.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participating in the study.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential. The final results will be presented as partial completion of an Ed.D. program.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.
.
Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:
Researcher: Jody Sloat, doctoral student, College of Education, 770-328-4328, sloatjk@troup.org
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Iris Saltiel, professor, Columbus State University, 706-565-7818, saltiel_iris@columbusstate.edu
Columbus State University Institutional Review Board chair: Dr. Clay Nicks, 706-507-8293, nicks_clayton@columbusstate.edu

I have read the procedure outlined above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study and havereceived a copy of this description.

Participant's signature and date
_____

Researcher's signature and date
_____

APPENDIX C

PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Parent/Guardian,
I am a doctoral student in the College of Education & Health Professions at Columbus State University doing research on ninth-graders. The purpose of this study is to describe educators' and students' thoughts about the move from middle to high school. This study aims to help administrators learn more about the beliefs of students and educators regarding the first year of high school.

With your permission, I would like to ask your child to participate in this study.
All children will take part in up to four individual interviews during school hours where they will talk with me about their experiences during ninth-grade. They also will be asked to keep a journal, which will be provided, about their first year of high school. Each interview will be taped and will last no longer than 60 minutes. At the end of the study, the tapes will be erased and journals will be returned to the students. I will keep the notes and transcripts from the study. Each student will receive a fake name to ensure privacy. Participation or non- participation in this study will not affect your child's grades or any other part of your child's schooling.
You and your child have the right quit the study at any time without consequence. Your child does not have to answer any questions s/he does not want to answer nor complete the journal. No money or grade is being offered for participation.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at 770-328-4328 or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Saltiel, at 706-565-7818. Questions or concerns about your child's rights as a research participant may be directed to Dr. Clay Nicks, chair of Columbus State University's Institutional Review Board, at 706-507-8293.

Please sign and return this copy of the letter. A second copy is provided for your records. By signing this letter, you give your consent for your child to participate in this study.

Thank you for thinking about this request.
Jody Sloat

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily give my consent for my child, _____, to participate in Jody Sloat's study on educator's and students' thoughts on the move from middle school to high school. I have received a copy of this description.

APPENDIX D

STUDENT ASSENT FORM

STUDENT ASSENT

I am a doctoral student in the College of Education & Health Professions at Columbus State University. As part of my studies, I'm conducting a research project on the move from middle to high school, something you know a lot about. I'm hoping to be able to learn how you feel about the change from middle school to high school. This study will help educators better understand how to help students successfully make the transition into high school, and I would like to ask you to be a part of this study.

If you want to be a part of this study, you will meet with me individually during the school day at your school up to four times during the school year. Each meeting will last up to 60 minutes. You will be taped, but only I will listen to the tape. The tapes will be erased when I finish my paper, but I will keep my notes from the interviews.

Also, I will ask you to keep a journal about your first year of high school. I will provide you with the journal and a list of suggested topics. I ask that you try writing once a week. For each nine weeks that you write in a journal, you will receive a small reward. The journals will be returned to you. When I write my dissertation, you will be given a different name, so no one reading the paper will be able to know that you were involved.

Your participation is voluntarily. You do not have to be a part of this study if you do not wish. If you want to participate, please know you do not need to answer any question you do not wish to answer or complete the voluntary journals. You will not receive anything for being a part of this study. Your participation or non-participation will not affect your grades or your standing in school in any way.

You have a choice of whether you would like to be a part of this study or not. If you are interested, your parent/guardian also will have to sign a form.

Thanks for thinking about it,
Jody Sloat
_____ No, I'm not interested.
_____ Yes, I'm interested in participating in the study. I understand that my participation will not affect my grades, and I can quit the study anytime.

Student Signature   Date
_____   _____

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APPENDIX E

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW GUIDE

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Please tell me your name and your position at your school.
2. Let's talk about your school as a whole. Describe the school to me.
3. Describe your perceptions on the ninth-grade year. How important is it academically?
4. Compare and contrast ninth-graders to students in other grade levels. How are freshmen different and the same? In what way, if any, do ninth-grade students change during their first year of high school?
5. What strategies does your school have in place to help students transition from middle to high school?
6. Which of these strategies do you think is the most beneficial and why?
7. What advice would you give rising freshmen and their parents/guardians?
8. Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions or comments?

9. ONLY FOR THE ADMINISTRATOR AT THE SCHOOL WITH A FRESHMAN ACADEMY: What are the benefits and disadvantages of a freshman academy for students and educators?
FOR THE TWO ADMINISTRATORS AT SCHOOLS WITHOUT FRESHMAN ACADEMIES: Would you like to see a freshman academy added at your campus? Why or why not?
Thank you for your time.

Questions adapted from Cheryl Kmeric (2007) Freshman academies and the transition to high school: An investigation of stage-environment fit theory.

APPENDIX F

TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Describe your perceptions on the ninth-grade year. How important is it academically?

2. Which of your school's high school transition strategies do you think is the most beneficial and why?

3. What advice would you give rising freshmen and their parents/guardians?

4. ONLY FOR TEACHERS AT THE SCHOOL WITH A FRESHMAN ACADEMY: What are the benefits and disadvantages of a freshman academy for students?

ONLY FOR TEACHERS AT SCHOOLS WITHOUT FRESHMAN ACADEMIES: Would you like to see a freshman academy added at your campus? Why or why not?

Thank you for your time,
Jody Sloat

APPENDIX G

INITIAL STUDENT INTERVIEW GUIDE

INITIAL STUDENT INTERVIEW GUIDE

We are here to talk about your experiences and feelings regarding your transition to high school and your freshman year. I would like to ask you some questions and see where the conversation takes us.

1. Think back to the end of your 8th grade year. What did you think high school would be like?
2. How is high school similar / different from your thoughts?
3. What was it like to be an eighth-grader?
4. Compare being an eighth-grader to being a ninth-grader. Tell me what it is like to be a freshman.
5. What are your first impressions of your high school?
6. How have the administrators /teachers / fellow students helped you adjust to high school? What more could be done to help you adjust?
7. Have there been any activities or programs specifically for freshmen? If so, how have these helped you adjust to high school?
8. Describe a typical day at your school.
9. Describe your classes. Are they easy or difficult? Why? Are your classes freshman only or a mixture? Which do you prefer and why? Did your middle school courses prepare you for high school? Why or why not?
10. Describe your relationships with your teachers.
11. What do you like and dislike about school?
12. Are you involved in sport or any activities? Why or why not?
13. Does your school encourage students to become involved in activities? If yes, how? If not, what could they do to increase involvement?
14. What are your goals for high school- sports, clubs, honors?
15. What are your plans for after you complete high school?
16. Do you feel like you belong at your high school? Why or why not?
17. Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions or comments?
ADDITIONAL QUESTION FOR STUDENTS NOT IN ENROLLED IN A SCHOOL WITH A FRESHMAN ACADEMY
1. Another high school in the county has a freshman academy. Would you like for your school to adopt a freshman academy? Why or why not?
ADDITIONAL QUESTION FOR STUDENTS ENROLLED IN A SCHOOL WITH A FRESHMAN ACADEMY
1. Describe what a freshman academy is.
2. How do you think next year will be different?
3. Has the freshman academy helped you adjust to high school? Why or why not? If so, how?
4. Have there been any activities or programs specifically for freshmen? If so, how have these helped you adjust to high school?
5. What are your feelings about the freshman academy?
6. What do you like and dislike about the academy?
7. What would you like to see change about freshman academy?

Thank you for your time.

Questions adapted from Cheryl Kmeric (2007) Freshman academies and the transition to high school: An investigation of stage-environment fit theory.

APPENDIX H

SUBSEQUENT STUDENT INTERVIEW GUIDE

SUBSEQUENT STUDENT INTERVIEW GUIDE

We are here to openly talk about your experiences and feelings regarding your transition to high school and your freshman year. I would like to ask you some questions and see where the conversation takes us.

1. How do you feel about attending your high school?

2. Do you have a faculty member you could turn to if you were in need?

3. Describe your relationships with your teachers.

4. Do your teachers respect you? How do they show this?

5. Do your teachers support you? How do they show this?

6. Do your teachers offer you choices in class?

7. Describe your relationships with other students.

8. Are most of your friends in your grade, older, or younger? Why?

9. How do you feel about older students?

10. Do you prefer classes with other ninth-graders or older students? Why?

11. Have you experienced more freedom in high school? How do you feel about this?

10. How would you describe your ninth-grade year?

11. What advice would you give the current eighth-graders about how to do well next year?

12. Do you feel like you belong at your high school? Why or why not?

13. What advice would you give middle school teachers to help students adjust to high school?

14. What advice would you give high school educators to help students adjust?

ADDITIONAL QUESTION FOR STUDENTS NOT IN ENROLLED IN A SCHOOL WITH A FRESHMAN ACADEMY
    1. Another high school in the county has a freshman academy. Would you have liked for your school to adopt a freshman academy? Why or why not?
ADDITIONAL QUESTION FOR STUDENTS ENROLLED IN A SCHOOL WITH A FRESHMAN ACADEMY
    1. Are you glad that you attended a school with ninth-grade academy? Why or why not?

Thank you for your time.
Questions adapted from Cheryl Kmeric (2007) Freshman academies and the transition to high school: An investigation of stage-environment fit theory.

APPENDIX I

STUDENT MATRIX EXAMPLE

STUDENT MATRIX EXAMPLE

Proposition: Students who feel a sense of a belonging at their school experienced an easier transition.	Interview question: Do you feel like you belong at your high school? Why or why not	Interview #1	Interview #2
Supported by evidence?	**Students**	Fall 2013	March 2014
Yes, peer support	**1-A**	Yes because of my friends.	Yes because of my friends.
Yes. She attended a different feeder middle school. Had mixed views on the transition	**2-A**	Yea and neigh. There are certain people I hang around with, but certain people look me a certain way that makes me feel like an outcast.	Not sure. Sometimes I do, but sometimes I feel like an outsider.
Yes, had issues with older students	**3-A**	Yes, through friends really.	Yes and no at the same time. A lot of the students are very kind and help me, but sometimes I feel like I'm alone. Some days I feel like everyone is against me.
Yes, peer support	**4-A**	Yes because of my friends.	Yes, it's a good school
Yes, staff support	**5-A**	Yes because of my teachers and friends.	Yes because the faculty asks about you.
Yes, extracurricular activities	**1-B**	Yes, most of the people I've known since elementary school or because of band.	I feel like I belong at my high school because I have friends in every part of the building. I'm not scared because there's always someone I know who can help me.
Yes- connected to school before ninth grade	**2-B**	Yes, I've grown up around it.	Oh, yes. I've grown up with all the people there. You just know everybody.
Yes, called it home	**3-B**	Yes, it's home.	Yes because of my friends.
Yes, peer support; prior connection	**4-B**	Yes, it where I'm from.	Yes because of the people.
Yes, has a niche, clique	**1-C**	Yes, I have a lot of friends	Yes, I am I'm in that little niche group of nerds that have to help teachers fix their computers.

Not at first, but made new connections	**2-C**	When I first came to (high school), I felt like an oddball or out of place. It was not home yet; I still felt like I belonged at (the middle school). But the more I come here, the more I look around and walk around the school, I'm like, this is where I am now.	I do because the people around me have the same interests and traits. The people around you are what make you feel at home. It depends on if you're comfortable.
Yes, peers	**3-C**	Yes because I know a lot of people.	Yes because of my friends
Yes, peers	**4-C**	Yes because I know a lot of people, and it was not hard to get used to it.	Yes because of her friends
Yes, earned it	**5-C**	Yes, I would rather be here than another high school	Yes because I have earned it.
Yes, peers	**6-C**	Yes, I have friends and no problems with anybody.	Yes because I know most everybody.
Yes, peers and hard work	**7-C**	Yes, I've known everybody (peers) a long time.	Yes I worked hard to get here by passing all my classes.
Yes, peers	**8-C**	Yes because of my friends	Yes because I knows a lot of the students.
Yes- Not first semester; from a different feeder middle school; failed two classes first semester	**9-C**	Not sure	Yes because I know more of the students now.
No- Outlier- failing two classes during both interviews	**10-C**	Yes. I know most people (peers), and I feel comfortable here.	Yeah, I've got some real good relationships at the school. I know the people and the teachers.