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A Mixed-Methods Study of Student Perceptions of the Transition to Middle School

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Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Danyah McAllister Hill under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Abstract

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The study detailed in this dissertation was designed to examine and understand student perceptions of self-efficacy, motivation, student-teacher relationships, and procedural differences during the transition to middle school. The mixed-methods study utilized a survey, focus groups, and interviews to triangulate the data.

An analysis of the data revealed that there is a statistically significant difference between student perceptions of motivation and self-efficacy at School A and School B. The researcher found that students at School A had a more positive perception in the areas of motivation and self-efficacy than School B, yet School B met its predicted growth score and School A did not. The paired t test established that there is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of the difference between elementary and middle school and teacher/student relationships at School A and School B. The qualitative data provided by the focus groups and interviews allowed the researcher to establish that students from both schools have similar positive perceptions of consistency with teacher expectations from class to class, confidence, and being prepared for the transition to middle school.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As students begin their passage from childhood into adolescence, sustaining academic growth, motivation, and self-efficacy can be a challenge as they encounter mental, physical, and emotional changes (Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993). School represents a progression of intersecting transitions for students. These transitions are marked by personal, educational, and institutional challenges that can influence educational experiences and postschool success (Lane, Oakes, Carter, & Messenger, 2015).

For students who are not successful at navigating the transition into middle school, the long-term influence can be alarming (Estell, 2007). These long-term effects are linked to decreased use of metacognitive strategies such as connecting new information to existing knowledge and educational aspiration (Eccles & Roeser, 2009) along with a decreased interest in attending college (Eccles, 2009; Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2009).

Middle school has been emphasized as an essential time to provide extra support to adolescents identified as at risk for failure, lack of motivation, behavior issues, and poor peer relationships (Akos, Queen, & Lineberry, 2005). Rowan, Chiang, and Miller (1997) found that student learning is impacted by their school setting.

As students transition to middle school from single teacher, self-contained classrooms in elementary school, they encounter complex academic settings where multiple daily transitions are normal (Akos, 2002; Mullins & Irvin, 2000). A student's ability to handle these complex changes can influence school performance, peer relationships, self-efficacy, and their future (Eccles et al., 1989; Roeser & Eccles, 1998). "At no other time in development is a student likely to encounter such a diverse number

of problems simultaneously" than adolescence (Letrello & Miles, 2003, p. 212).

Midgley, Middleton, Gheen, and Kumar (2002) reported that the characteristics of middle

school many times are not a good fit with the changes occurring in adolescent

development. As students transition from elementary to middle school, their needs are

not being addressed (Akos, 2004; Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993).

This stage in the life of an adolescent is considered a "turning point" upon which

student success may depend on the support and opportunities provided by the school and

adults in their lives (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development [CCAD], 1989;

Roeser & Eccles, 1998). "As adolescence approaches, students experience rapid social,

emotional, cognitive and physical growth" (Carter, Clark, Cushing, & Kennedy, 2005, p.

9). At the same time, middle school teachers must manage larger classes, more students

per day, have greater classroom management, and complete administrative duties

(Seidman & French, 2000). Each transition in life is significant, but the transition to

middle school is critical because of the developmental changes of adolescence that are

occurring at the same time (Letrello & Miles, 2003).

West and Schwerdt (2012) found that achievement in reading and math will fall

dramatically for many students as they transition to middle school. As cited by Eccles

(2009), early adolescence marks the beginning of an increase in academic failure,

delinquency, substance abuse, and school dropout (Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Simmons &

Blyth, 1987). This can be especially true for students of color, lower SES families, and

those who struggled academically in elementary school (Connell, Spencer, & Aber,

1994).

Eccles (2009) found that declines during the transition to middle school are a

noteworthy predictor of dropping out before the completion of high school. When

students make more than one transition during their elementary to middle school years, high school dropout rates are greater (Alspaugh, 1998).

Carter et al. (2005) acknowledged "any sense of belonging enjoyed during elementary school may give way to feelings of isolation in middle school" (p. 9). The opportunity to establish new relationships with peers can be a challenge because of fears of rejection (Kingery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011). According to Leonard (2008), middle school environments that are sensitive and responsive to the developmental needs of the adolescents allow students to be more successful. Transition planning is essential in schools in order to support personal growth and encourage academic achievement for all learners (Augst & Akos, 2009).

A clearer understanding of the role of student perceptions of motivation, elementary and middle school differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school may provide insight and strategies that will help provide students with a more successful transition to middle school.

Statement of the Problem

Friedel, Cortina, Turner, and Midgley (2010) studied the transitions from elementary to middle school and found that a majority of students were experiencing declines in achievement and motivation which appear to coincide with a disconnect between student needs and characteristics of the learning environment. Sixth grade is a foundational year, and many students will struggle academically and socially as they transition from elementary school to middle school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Data from field tests conducted by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (2014) in 21 states support the consortium predictions that only 41% of sixth graders would score a level 3 or higher on the end-of-grade (EOG) reading test, and only 33% of sixth graders

would score a level 3 or higher on the EOG math test in 2014. School data are shared

each year from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI, 2014)

which provides predicted growth scores for EOG reading and math tests. Each year, the

state typically predicts a decline in the test scores of sixth-grade students after the

transition to middle school. Table 1 provides predicted growth scores for School B.

Table 1

2014 Predicted School Growth

Sixth Grade	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Math	5.0	-2.3	-3.0	-0.1	-1.3
Reading	9.2	-1.0	-2.3	-2.0	-3.5

Individual rising sixth-grade student **(**Education Value-Added Assessment System

[EVVAS], 2014) data are provided each year for teachers. Multiple forms of data are

used to document student past test levels and make predictions for student performance.

The figure below provides examples of the data available to teachers and administrators

showing individual student growth predictions.
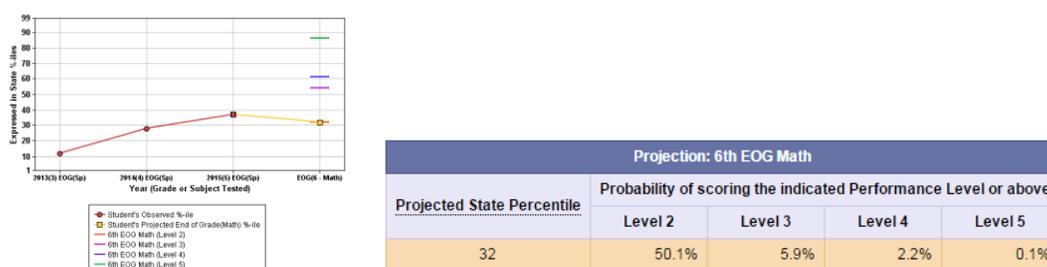
Figure. EVVAS Projection Scores.

EVVAS typically predicts a decline in student math and reading EOG test scores

after the transition to sixth grade. The research of West and Schwerdt (2012) noted that

student academic performance in reading and math continues to decline in successive middle school grades. Table 2 demonstrates how each of the Title I elementary schools met or exceeded their expected growth and how both of the high priority high schools exceeded their expected growth.

Table 2

2014 School Performance Grade and Score

School	Achievement Score	Growth Score	Met Goal
Middle School A	46	58.5	No
High School A	59	86.1	Exceeded
Elementary A1	56	73.9	Met
Elementary A2	69	88.8	Exceeded
Elementary A3	60	84.4	Met
Elementary A4	57	72.9	Met
Middle School B	39	94	Exceeded
High School B	50	85.7	Exceeded
Elementary B-1	31	74.6	Met
Elementary B-2	69	88.8	Exceeded
Elementary B-3	72	85.3	Met
Elementary B-4	37	86.7	Exceeded

High priority middle School A did not meet its expected growth, where middle School B exceeded expected growth. In order to provide the best learning environment for students, it is important to discover where the disconnect lies with School A and its students' abilities to meet expected growth.

Eccles (1993) believed that the disconnect in the timing of adolescence and the transition to middle school in a student's life can lead to lower motivation, lower self-efficacy, lower standardized test scores, higher rates of absenteeism, and behavioral issues.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand student perceptions of motivation, elementary and middle school differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school that occurs in a public school setting. This was important because

> current research shows that young adolescents go through tremendous brain
> growth and development. Significant intellectual processes are emerging as
> adolescents are moving from concrete to abstract thinking and to the beginnings
> of metacognition (the active monitoring and regulation of thinking processes).
> (Lorain, 2015, section 2).

According to Augst and Akos (2009), transitions are key times where students face new and challenging undertakings as they move from familiar to unknown and more complex environments. The stage-environment fit theory, which acknowledges the complicated developmental changes that occur during early adolescence and the mismatch with academic, procedural, and social changes that occur in the middle school environment (Roeser & Eccles, 1998) provided the framework for this study.

Significance of the Study

The transition to middle school parallels the time that national and state testing data predict declines in student academic performance. As students transition from elementary to middle school, support needs to be in place that will prevent these academic losses. Examining and comparing student perceptions at Schools A and B may provide insight as to why School A did not meet expected growth and School B did meet expected growth. School A and School B are both high-priority schools and have similar demographic and socioeconomic student enrollment. Through personal communication

with the counselor from School A (G. Polk, personal communication, September 24, 2015) and the principal from School B (S. Wray, personal communication, November 7, 2015), the transition support provided to rising sixth-grade students at each school consists of a tour of the assigned middle school during the spring of the students' fifth-grade year. Students then attend an open house to meet teachers before the start of school in the fall. The principal from School B held two "Meet the Principal" sessions over the summer because he had been newly reassigned. This was not a typical occurrence.

The data from this research had the potential to inform decisions that can assist in the planning and implementation of more supportive transitional programs. Any effort that enhances the understanding of student perceptions of motivation, elementary and middle school differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school could be important to persons concerned with providing a smoother transition to middle school.

Research Questions

1. How do students perceive their transition from fifth to sixth grade?

2. How do students perceive motivation during the transition from elementary to middle school?

3. How do students perceive elementary and middle school differences during the transition from elementary to middle school?

4. How do students perceive self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school?

5. How do students perceive teacher-student relationships during the transition from elementary to middle school?

Theoretical Framework

In the broadest interpretation, stage-environment fit theory states that developmentally appropriate or developmentally regressive shifts in the nature of social and learning opportunities in the home and school environments that young people experience as they develop during adolescence may help in explaining individual differences in the quality and course of their academic motivation, educational achievement, and social-emotional well-being during the transition from elementary to middle school (Eccles, 1993). Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit research revealed that some adolescents encounter adversity when transitioning from elementary school to middle school, frequently resulting in a decrease in academic success and motivation.

Assumptions

Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations present themselves in all scholarly work to define the "boundaries, exceptions, reservations, and qualifications in every study" (Creswell, 2003, p. 147). Because participants were volunteers and could withdraw from the study at any time without ramifications, the researcher made the assumption that the students willing to participate would answer the survey, focus group, and interview questions honestly.

Limitations

Limitations will always exist that are out of the researcher's control. Potential limitations of this study were related to the nature of mixed-methods research. Specifically, qualitative researchers become "part of the setting, context and social phenomenon" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 16) and therefore are subject to a lack of objectivity. As such, the researcher had an unbiased representative conduct focus

groups and interviews. A second limitation of this study was related to the use of surveys when conducting research. According to Ackroyd and Hughes (1992), people respond differently based on their own interpretation of the questions and the context in which it is being experienced. The researcher sent the survey home 10 days prior to being administered for parental and student review. Homeroom teachers administered the survey electronically at school during noncore subjects. A third limitation was student perceptions and memories of their sixth-grade year. Autobiographical memory incorporates both semantic and episodic knowledge relating to our own personal past (Anderson, Dewhurst, & Nash, 2011). The researcher instructed homeroom teachers to ask students to reflect back on their sixth-grade year before completing the survey. A fourth limitation was the researcher's relationship by being a sixth-grade teacher at middle School A. According to Warren and Lessner (2014), healthy teacher-student relationships allow students to act, speak, and think without fear of judgment. The researcher instructed homeroom teachers to explain the importance of the research and answering questions honestly.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to seventh-grade students at two middle schools. Seventh-grade students were selected because they have already completed their sixth-grade year. The two middle schools were selected because they are both high priority middle schools in the same district with similar demographic makeup. School A did not meet expected growth, yet all feeder schools in the cluster met or exceeded growth expectations. School B exceeded expected growth and all feeder schools for this cluster met or exceeded expected growth.

Definition of Terms

Adolescence. The period following the onset of puberty during which a young person develops from a child into an adult (CCAD, 1989).

Middle school. An intermediate school between an elementary school and a high school, typically for children in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades (CCAD, 1989; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2003).

Motivation. Beliefs about how one will perform on educational tasks and the incentive or reason for attempting and/or completing the task (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

Perception. Personal interpretation of information from one's own perspective; the way in which one interprets situations, places, and things and how those interpretations reflect the manner in which one views the world and influences the decisions one makes (University of Connecticut Neag Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development [University of Connecticut], 2009).

Procedural/organizational change. Differences between the elementary and middle school involving the structure of the daily schedule, assignment of students to more than one teacher, and getting lockers (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

School performance score. Scores that represent growth at the school level (EVAAS, 2015).

Self-efficacy. Refers to an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 2006).

Student-teacher relationship. An emotional connection between a student and a teacher that serves as a foundation through which children can develop more appropriate ways of interacting with others (Hanish, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Fabes, Martin, & Denning, 2004).

Transition. A time in which a student moves from one aspect of the educational process to another (Atkinson, 2010).

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the problem, purpose, and significance of the research. The problem, purpose, and significance of the research focused on student perceptions of motivation, elementary and middle school differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school. Through an in-depth review of the related literature, the researcher outlined the opinions of experts in the fields of education, motivation, elementary and middle school differences, perceptions, teacher-student relationships, self-efficacy, and school transitions. The research suggested that experts believe many students are struggling as they transition to middle school due, in part, to the student not being developmentally ready for the structure and environment of middle school. Subsequent chapters outline the methodology, analyze the data, and draw conclusions from the data.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

"School transitions are a pressing issue to practitioners; however, surprisingly little research exists about the extent to which school transitions pose a challenge and cause academic and social performance declines" (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008, p. 1). The researcher was looking to understand student perceptions of motivation, elementary and middle school differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school that occur in a public school setting. The knowledge gained can help develop programs that support students as they transition from elementary to middle school.

The review of literature focuses on student perceptions of motivation, elementary and middle school differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school along with adolescence, and the stage-environment fit theory. The review of literature is divided into eight major sections and a summary.

The first section provides an insight into the cognitive, social, and emotional development of the adolescent child. The second section reviews what research says about the stage-environment fit theory. The third section discusses self-efficacy of the student. The fourth section explores the idea of student motivation. The fifth section examines the nature of the teacher-student relationship. The sixth section focuses on elementary and middle school differences. The seventh section provides an overview of the Middle School Concept. The eighth section explains student perceptions of their transition to middle school. Chapter 2 is concluded with a summary.

Changing Adolescent

Benner and Graham (2007) stated adolescents traverse an array of transitions (e.g., puberty, changes in peer relationships) as they move through childhood into adulthood; and it is during this time that students must transition from elementary to middle school (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Steinberg, 2011). Except during infancy, cognitive and physical changes occur more rapidly during adolescence (CCAD, 1989).

According to past research, Randall and Engelhard (2009) stated when students enter adolescence, (a) relationships with their peers become more important (Brown, 1990); (b) typically they are insecure about their bodies; and (c) they are capable of more complex thought (Piaget, 1974). Carlisle (2011) stated that the physical onset of puberty may affect adolescents' socioemotional health by increasing insecurity and lowering self-esteem. The developmental stage of adolescence is a time of dramatic changes in the structure and function of the brain (Steinberg, 2011). During adolescence, students are developing metacognition; this allows them to analyze and synthesize their own thinking and learning (Carlisle, 2011). Adolescents will experience hormonal changes at different rates that impact physical changes in the body (NMSA, 2003).

It is during this changing time that adolescents may encounter a strengthened sense of self and an aptitude for intimate relationships (CCAD, 1989). Curry and Chote (2010) believed students embracing their uniqueness during adolescence and developing a sense of self allow them to feel secure, valuable, and worthy of respect. However, adolescents who experience psychological distress may also display low self-efficacy and varying levels of depression (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). Adolescents commonly become more apprehensive about their appearance and their body image (NMSA, 2003).

They may sacrifice academic concerns to satisfy their social needs (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000).

Scales (2005) found that adolescents experience social, emotional, moral, psychological, physical, and cognitive changes during this stage of life. Their socioemotional health and motivation are highly influenced by the relationships adolescents have with their peers. Relationships with parents and other adults frequently become unimportant during this developmental stage. This is an unsympathetic period of development where adolescent students are continuously changing mentally, physically, and psychologically (Santrock, 2004). They are learning and experiencing more about the real world while striving to be perceived as adults and maintain inclusion in peer groups (Santrock & Yussen, 1984). Relationships adolescents have with both their peers and teachers play a significant role in the development of their socioemotional health during this time of school transition. Many students report quality time decreases with middle school teachers compared to elementary school teachers (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005, as cited by Carlisle, 2011).

Curry and Choate (2010) stated perceived parental involvement affects adolescents' sense of psychological well-being, self-esteem, self-evaluation, self-efficacy, and relationships. "Although some adolescents experience academic and social success, others experience a time marked by major declines in academic performance and interest" (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006, p. 16). Adolescents begin constructing their own self-concept through observing the responses toward them by role models in their lives (Gibson & Jefferson, 2006). Early adolescence signifies a vulnerable period of development where young people are susceptible to establishing lifetime behavior patterns connected with deficient academic, health, and life outcomes (Mohay & Forbes,

2009; Morgan & Todd, 2009). Adolescents need guidance in creating environments that support opportunities for optimal brain development if they are to be successfully prepared academically, socially, emotionally, and developmentally to make crucial life decisions (Steinberg, 2011).

Stage-Environment Fit Theory

The stage-environment fit theory indicates that the educational environments in which students are expected to learn frequently lack a good fit for adolescents as a result of unsuccessful school climates that do not foster positive social processes (Tseng & Seidman, 2007, p. 228). Eccles, Midgley et al. (1993) proposed that some of the negative psychological changes faced by adolescents transpire because of a mismatch between the needs of developing adolescents and their school environment, a theory called stage-environment fit. Skinner (1983) stated, "Organism and person do not, of course, develop independently; the biological changes interact with the environmental contingencies" (p. 239).

Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory is based on Hunt's (1975) person-environment fit perspective, which emphasized the significance of examining the person-environment connection through a developmental lens.

Hunt's (1975) person-environment fit perspective emphasized that the school environment needed to provide the best possible level of support to assist students as they transition toward cognitive and affective maturity. Negative outcomes will transpire when the school environment is not created to match student needs (Hunt, 1975). Evidence of this disconnect is seen with declines in achievement, behaviors, motivation, school attitude, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-perception, self-management, and values (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993). When the environment of the

school and the needs of adolescents are a poor fit, Eccles, Midgley et al. (1993) proposed

there is a "decline in motivation, interest, performance, and behavior" (p. 91).

Undesirable effects of transitioning during this time have been shown to include declines

in academic achievement (Alspaugh, 1998; Gronna, 1999), lower self-esteem

(Richardson, 2000), and an increase in school-related stress (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, &

Kurlakowsky, 2001).

As students transition from elementary to middle school, if the developmental

needs of the students and their new educational environment are not matched, there will

be a negative impact on student academics and motivation (Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993).

As a result of this lack of fit, research has also found that the transition into climates that

do not match the developmental level of the students poses particular problems, with

multiple transitions being especially difficult (Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, &

Midgley, 1991). Eccles, Midgley et al. (1993) believed that traditional middle schools

are larger and less personal than elementary schools as well as being developmentally

inappropriate for early adolescents. During the transition, many students feel less

positive about their academic potential and the value of schooling, they tend to put forth

less effort, and their grades decline (Midgley & Urdan, 1992).

This research is particularly significant to adolescents in diverse middle schools

where the transition from elementary school can be more sensitive to the effectiveness

of the stage-environment fit of their schools (Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993). While there

are many personal factors that contribute to the difficulty of the transition to middle

school, much of the difficulty can also be attributed to the new environment of the

middle school itself (Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993; Fenzel, 2000; Simmons & Blyth,

1987; Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 1997).

Transitions

According to Rice (2001), transition is defined as a time in which a student moves from one level of the educational process to the next. Rice found that school transitions are associated with major changes for students relating to social structures, school climate, and self-perceptions. The transition to middle school is the most dramatic change that most students experience during their education (Fenzel, 2000). The disruptive nature of the transition process means that previously learned behaviors need to adapt to new requirements and more demanding environments, which may have a negative impact on student relationships and academic achievement (Ding, 2008). The sixth-grade year is critical in terms of providing the foundation for a student's middle school career (Barber & Olsen, 2004). Because of the timing of this transition, some students experience increased stress when moving from elementary school to middle school. The stress of the transition affects the student's adjustment to the new environment (Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993). If students have problems transitioning to middle school, the outcome for students may be negative (Akos et al., 2005). Transitions are key times where children face new and challenging tasks as they move from familiar to unknown and more complex surroundings (Turner, 2007). This is a time of significant change in their social and learning environments brought about by the transition from elementary to middle school (Gutman & Midgley, 2000). West and Schwerdt (2012) found that students who transition to middle school in sixth grade have positive achievement trajectories in math and reading from third grade to fifth. As students transition to middle school, achievement in both subjects falls dramatically.

According to Niesen (2004), transitions can be difficult for everyone; but for young people, one of the most difficult transitions is the one from elementary to middle

school. The impact of transition appears pervasive and significant, especially considering predictors of future school failure also increase during the transition to middle school (Eccles & Roeser, 2009).

Wampler, Munsch, and Adams (2002) looked at the impact of race on school transition among Black, Hispanic, and White students and discovered three distinct patterns of academic achievement across the first year of the transition. White students exhibited a slow, continual decrease in grades throughout the year, while Black students' grades remained fairly constant, and Hispanic students showed a sharp drop in grades. Other authors, however, have found that the transition to middle school for Black students correlates with a decline in math scores and an increase in the relationship between risk factors and behavior issues (Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel, & Rowley, 2008). Additional research has demonstrated that Hispanic students tend to have significantly more difficulty across the middle school transition and view their transition as more problematic than their non-Hispanic peers (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Niehaus, Rudasill, and Rakes (2012) also found a downward progression in GPAs among students of low SES during the transition to middle school.

Barber and Olsen (2004) conducted a 5-year longitudinal survey of 993 adolescents as they transitioned from elementary school into middle school and then into high school. As students transitioned into the middle school, students reported receiving lower grades, having lower self-esteem, being less motivation, receiving less adult support, experiencing more feelings of loneliness and depression, and experiencing a lower tendency to initiate social interactions with teachers and other students.

Hanewald (2013) conducted a meta-analysis where she combined and studied the findings from 37 independent research projects. A search was made across several data

bases (Academic Search, A+ Education Informit, Education Research Complete, ERIC, Ebsco Host, Humanities and Social Sciences Collection) for research on the transition between elementary and middle schools published between December 2005 and December 2011. The predominant data collection methods used in Hanewald's research were questionnaires, surveys, and interviews. Her analysis of the literature revealed the disruptive nature of the transition process and the impact it can have on student academic achievement, bullying, depression, violent behavior, student belonging and wellbeing, self-esteem, parental involvement, and student perception of peer, parent, and teacher support. Hanewald found that well-planned and implemented transition programs can support students, their families, and school staff in the transition process.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as a belief in one's personal ability to accomplish goals (Bandura, 1997a). People with high perceived self-efficacy will attempt a difficult task as a challenge and a failed task as one of failed effort or lack of skill on their part (Bandura, 1997a). According to Usher and Pajares (2008), achievement in educational settings is influenced more by self-efficacy or the belief people have in their abilities to reach their goals than self-esteem. According to Bandura (1997b), people will avoid difficult tasks if they have a low sense of sense of efficacy.

Ross and Broh (2000), uncovered in an analysis of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study in the United States, found that a sense of personal control affects academic achievement. Personal control has been linked to self-efficacy which requires a level of positive self-evaluations (Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1995). Schunk and Zimmerman's (2007) study of the link supporting self-efficacy and self-regulation supported the self-efficacy theory in their findings that students with high self-efficacy

work through challenges and persist when they encounter difficulties.

Bandura (1997a) maintained that people with high self-efficacy have more motivation to work because they believe the results of their work will be successful. The self-efficacy theory also suggested that people who doubt their ability to achieve their goals will not set goals or work to achieve them (Bandura, 1997a, 2001; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007). Bandura (1997b) and Valentine, DuBois, and Cooper (2004) agreed that student beliefs about their abilities to accomplish academic tasks (i.e., academic self-efficacy) foretell their actual achievement levels in school.

The theory of self-efficacy states that an individual's behavior is significantly influenced by the beliefs an individual holds about himself (McCabe, 2006). If students have battled with failure as they transition to middle school, they may already be fighting low self-efficacy.

Long, Monoi, Harper, Knoblauch, and Murphy (2007) and Pajares (2002) reported that students with superior academic self-efficacy earn higher grades, set higher goals, and exhibit superior effort and persistence in their work.

Perceptions

As cited by Pershey (2010),

self-perceptions have emerged from the body of literature on self-efficacy—the exploration of factors that influence individuals' self-perceptions of competence (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003) which explores how individuals define the factors and behaviors that can contribute to personal successes and failures. (p. 53)

Student perceptions impact their emotions and behaviors. These emotional and behavioral reactions form a student's environment and their beliefs (University of Connecticut, 2009).

According to Ybrandt (2008) and Steinberg and Morris (2001), there is a lot of focus as students work to clarify their environment and how they fit. Student development of perceptions characteristically transpires during adolescence and is believed to impact the middle school environments (Sebastian, Burnett, & Blakemore, 2008). Prior research has noted young adolescent self-perceptions of social skills are fluid and responsive to positive and negative stimuli (Rice & Dolgin, 2005).

Negative perceptions can become a way of life and impact student achievement (University of Connecticut, 2009). Pershey (2010) stated that students who do not identify themselves as capable may be at risk for school disengagement. Negative self-perceptions might correspond with negative academic achievement (Paris, Roth, & Turner, 2000). Every student develops his/her perceptions of his/her world based on an accumulation of personal success and failure (Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003).

Researchers have contended that academic perceptions play an essential role in academic achievement by empowering students to cultivate their potential (Marsh & Seaton, 2013). Benenson and Dweck (1986), as well as Moely (1995), found that student perceptions turned more negative as they left elementary school and transitioned to middle school.

Akos (2002) conducted a longitudinal study of student perceptions that occurred in four phases starting in January of fifth grade and concluding in December of sixth grade. The purpose of the investigation was to learn more about student perceptions during the transition from elementary to middle school. Participants included students from three different elementary schools who were scheduled to enter one large middle school (sixth to eighth grade). The research revealed that student questions about middle school were dominated by rules and procedures throughout the transition from fifth to

sixth grade. It suggests academic and motivational declines occur during the transition, and addressing these declines is especially important. Findings from Akos's (2002) research indicate that proactive programming is needed to assist students with the elementary to middle school transition.

Motivation

Biehler and Snowman (1993) defined motivation as "the forces that account for the arousal, selection, direction, and continuation of behavior" and noted that no one motivation theory can explain student interest or disinterest (p. 508). Mac Iver (1990) stated that for students who begin sixth grade in a new middle school, their ability to adjust may be impaired, leading to negative effects on their motivation, self-esteem, and psychological adjustment (as cited by Atkinson, 2010). Skinner (1974) claimed that students are motivated by a reinforcement of a desired behavior; the reinforcement may be some kind of reward such as praise, a grade, or some object desired by the student.

The transition to middle school is frequently marked by a period of decline in motivation for many students (Atkinson, 2010). During the transition to middle school, Goldstein, Boxer, and Rudolph (2015) determined that the differences in the social and academic climates of elementary and middle school may contribute to the decline in student motivation. Mullins and Irvin (2000) found that student motivation and self-esteem decline during the transition to middle school as students adjust to their new environment.

Maslow (1946) argued that people have needs, and their motivations arise from trying to fulfill their needs. According to Maslow, "All people in our society have a need or desire for a stable, firmly based, high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others" (p. 33).

Intrinsic motivation is reflected in students who engage in activities because of their curiosity, interest, and enjoyment of learning; and a substantial body of research has demonstrated positive relationships between intrinsic motivation and academic achievement (Gottfried, Marcoulides, Gottfried, Oliver, & Guerin, 2007). If a student transitions to middle school successfully, she/he will display higher levels of intrinsic motivation, complete homework more often, and have higher educational aspirations (Otis, Grouzet, & Pelletier, 2005).

Teacher-Student Relationships

As students begin the transition to middle school, student social relationships with peers begin to take precedence over those with parents and teachers (Ryan & Shim, 2008), though positive relationships with adults at home and at school remain integral to student success (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Sakiz, Pape, & Hoy, 2012). Ladd (2005) and Pianta (1999) found strong teacher-student relationships during the transition to middle school have a significant influence on children's academic, behavioral, and social-emotional adjustment.

Cornelius-White (2007) associated eight broad teacher-student relationship variables to actions teachers take in building relationships with students: non-directivity, empathy, warmth, encouragement of higher order thinking, encouraging learning, adapting to differences, genuineness, and learner-centered beliefs. When teachers are warm, engaged, responsive, and hold high expectations for student achievement, they create safe and supportive learning environments (Doll, Song, & Siemers, 2004; Olweus & Limber, 1999; Pianta, 1999).

Positive teacher-student relationships are recognized as being an important factor for the adjustment of at-risk children as they transition to middle school (Baker, Grant, &

Morlock, 2008). Caring yet challenging teachers are capable of developing students'

sense of belonging and can lessen peer conflict in the classroom (Barr & Parrett, 2001;

Emmett & Monsour, 1996). Doll et al. (2004) and Hanish et al.(2004) found that

through positive interaction with teachers during the transition to middle school, students

can develop empathy, respect for others, and peaceful conflict resolution skills. When

students have faith that their teacher is caring and fair, they trust the teacher will provide

a safe learning environment. Winograd and Others (1990) suggested that teacher roles

are influential in children's overall development. They considered the early relationships

founded between teachers and students predicted adjustment and functioning of students

in later school years. Supportive, positive relationships with teachers reduce student

feelings of separation and overcome emotional and behavioral problems (Skinner, Furrer,

Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008).

The quality of teacher-student relationships is defined by the ability of the teacher

to cultivate bonds of trust and establish a safe, supportive classroom environment. This

proves especially important for individuals teaching in multicultural and urban education

settings (Warren & Lessner, 2014). According to Cornelius-White (2007), positive

teacher-student relationships increase student achievement and establish healthier

attitudes towards school. Daily interactions between teachers and students influence

student academic, emotional, and social welfare (Davis, 2003; Hattie, 2009; Klem &

Connell, 2004; Resnick et al., 1997). In general, classroom environments that consist of

greater teacher control and poor quality teacher-student relationships can promote a

decrease in educational motivation, lower self-esteem, and increase behavioral challenges

especially during the transition to middle school (Eccles et al., 1991; Roeser & Eccles,

1998). Teachers who encourage students to act, speak, and think without judgment create

an environment for high-quality teacher-student relationships (Warren & Lessner, 2014).

Elementary and Middle School Differences

Parker (2010) proposed the middle grades years are a challenging time for students. Leaving the security of the smaller elementary environment, students find themselves exploring new relationships and procedural changes linked with middle school. Randall and Engelhard (2009) stated,

> Traditional elementary schools use a system in which students remain with one academic lead teacher throughout the day. Often, students have to travel to more specialized lessons such as art, music, and physical education, but they travel as a cohort and spend the majority of their days with one homeroom instructor who teaches social studies, science, mathematics, and language arts. The traditional middle school operates quite differently. Students routinely move from class to class, receiving instruction from teachers who specialize in specific academic subjects (e.g., English, history, mathematics, science, art, music). Students rarely spend more than 90 min in one class and do not transition from class to class as a cohort. In addition to the structural, or technical, differences between elementary and middle school classrooms, the social and academic contexts of these schools differ. (p. 178)

As a result, the transition from elementary to middle school can be challenging for many students (Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993; Gilderman, 2006).

Lane, Pierson, and Givner (2003) found that if students are not aware of teacher expectations across classrooms, grade levels, or educational settings, transitions become more difficult. Furthermore, previous studies suggest that teachers may have different personal expectations for younger children than for older ones (Taylor, 1987, pp. 175).

According to Duchesne, Ratelle, and Roy (2012), typical concerns for students entering middle school are the capacity to adjust to new teaching styles and grading policies, establishing positive relationships with teachers and peers, and maintaining academic levels of success from elementary school (Akos, 2002). Because of how students change classes in middle school, the teacher-student relationship is impacted (Akos, 2004; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994).

Teaching style is more than methodology and subject knowledge. Teaching style is how a teacher presents information, interacts with the students, manages classroom tasks, and supervises coursework (Sheikh & Mahmood, 2014). In elementary school, the single teacher is replaced by multiple teachers who may be sterner, less nurturing, and place more emphasize on performance (Duchesne et al., 2012). Typically, middle schools are bigger and less nurturing. This impacts class size which makes it harder for teachers to develop strong relationships with their students (Alspaugh, 2001; Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993). Because middle school teachers are subject-matter specialists, it is more difficult to establish a nurturing teacher-student relationship (Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Wells, 1989).

According to Duchesne et al. (2012), middle school students must transition through subjects with new demands that are taught in larger classes. Eccles, Midgley et al. (1993) found middle school classrooms maintain greater teacher control, stricter discipline, less student choice, and self-management. They also found middle school teachers deliver more whole-group instruction and less individual and small-group instruction as seen in elementary schools (Alspaugh, 2001; Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993; Wells, 1989).

With multiple elementary schools feeding into one or more middle schools, former classmates may not attend the same school which will be bigger and more impersonal (Duchesne et al., 2012). During students' first year of middle school, the work may utilize lower-level cognitive skills than when in elementary school (Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Wells, 1989). Akos (2004) recognized, "changes in scheduling, lockers, electives, increases in homework, new and more teachers, and new and larger peer groups" as procedural changes that transpire when students transition to middle school (para 3). According to Wells (1989), there is less parental contact in middle school. Alspaugh (2001) stated that middle schools are performance-oriented while elementary schools are task-oriented. Students are forced to confront these environmental and procedural differences with unsuccessful or absent transition programs (Akos, 2004).

Middle School Concept

The middle school movement began in 1963 with William Alexander. This concept was designed to meet the developmental needs of young adolescent students (Lounsbury, 2009). The following eight guidelines for "A Model Middle School" were established by Alexander and Williams (1965):

- Middle school should be designed to serve the needs of older children, preadolescents, and early adolescents.

- Middle school organizations should make a reality of the long-held ideal of individualized instruction.

- Middle school programs should give high priority to the intellectual components of the curriculum.

- Middle school programs should place primary emphasis on skills of continued learning.

- Middle school should provide a rich program of exploratory experiences.

- Middle school should provide a program of health and physical education designed especially for adolescent boys and girls

- An emphasis on values should underline all aspects of a middle school program.

- The organization of the middle school should utilize the unique abilities and interests of the teachers (pp. 219-221).

The middle school concept embraces flexible block scheduling, multiage grouping, looping, and a school-within-school structure. The model views school leaders as instructional leaders who embrace shared decision making, not building managers. There should be a standards-based curriculum and increased certification requirements to ensure quality teachers. Inclusion classrooms using co-teaching and collaboration are another middle school component (George, 2009). The middle school concept focus is to provide an educational environment that is developmentally appropriate for adolescents by supporting student transitions from elementary school while guiding them toward high school (George & Alexander, 2003).

Study School Settings

Due to the significance of elementary school and middle school contexts, it was important to provide data about the setting. According to the study district website, School A has three feeder elementary schools, and School B has three feeder elementary schools. Both schools receive students from one shared feeder elementary school.

According to the director of elementary education, all of the feeder elementary schools for middle School A maintain a traditional elementary configuration. Students are in self-contained classrooms receiving instruction for core subjects from one classroom teacher. Students receive instruction for related arts classes from teachers certified in the content areas of music, art, and physical education. Two of the feeder elementary schools for middle School B have a different configuration. One feeder elementary school departmentalizes in fifth grade and one feeder elementary school departmentalizes in third, fourth, and fifth grades (Director of Elementary Education, personal communication, September 23, 2015).

The total enrollment of School A was approximately 895 students. The population for School A included 284 seventh-grade students. The total enrollment of School B was approximately 1,086 students. The population for School B included 354 seventh-grade students. According to EVAAS data, 73% of the students in School A were economically disadvantaged, and 90% of students in School B were economically disadvantaged.

According to the director of middle school education, both middle Schools A and B maintained a four block student schedule. The middle school used teaching teams, four teachers per team that cover core subjects, and a different related arts teacher every 6 weeks. Students transitioned to different classrooms throughout the day to receive instruction from teachers licensed in their content area. Students spent about 70 minutes in each classroom. Students were introduced to lockers, showering in gym class, and more responsibility than in elementary school (Director of Middle School Education, personal communication, September 20, 2015).

Through personal communication with the counselor from School A (September

24, 2015) and the principal from School B (November 7, 2015), the transition support

provided to rising sixth-grade students at each school consisted of a tour of the assigned

middle school during the spring of the students fifth-grade year. Students then attended

an open house to meet teachers before the start of school in the fall. The principal from

School B held two "Meet the Principal" sessions over the summer because he had been

newly reassigned. This is not a typical occurrence.

The comparison of middle School A and middle School B allowed the researcher

to identify differences that can be utilized to help middle School A meet expected growth

in the future.

Summary

The present study examined student perceptions of motivation, procedural

differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from

elementary to middle school. Multiple studies on the transition from elementary to

middle school environments were reviewed and suggested that the transition into middle

school occurs during a time of substantial cognitive, physical, and social-emotional

change. Eccles et al. (1991) identified the mismatch between the physical and

psychological needs of early adolescent students and the middle school environment as

the major cause for the decline in motivation, relationships, self-efficacy, and

achievement by students after the transition to middle school. The stage-environment fit

theory, which views academic and social changes from the developmental and

environmental lenses, was investigated as it connects to the disconnect between

elementary school and middle school characteristics. Research studies that found

decreases in academic achievement, motivation, self-efficacy, and relationships along

with increases in behavioral struggles following the transition to middle school were

reviewed. Research has established that the organization of the academic environment places many students at risk for failure as they are not matched to the developmental needs related to the middle school aged child.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this sequential, explanatory mixed-method study was to explore

and understand student perceptions of motivation, procedural differences, teacher-

student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle

school. Student survey data coupled with student focus-group and student interview

data were analyzed to explain student perceptions of their transitional year. The study

took place in two traditional, high-priority, sixth through eighth grade middle schools

located in North Carolina. In addition, the study was implemented between March and

April of the 2015-2016 school year. The researcher provided feedback to school

leaders and teachers at both research sites. Local district leaders also received a copy

of the study results and recommendations.

Description of Research Design and Approach

An explanatory, sequential mixed-methods design was used, and it involved

collecting quantitative data first and then explaining the quantitative results with in-depth

qualitative data. A mixed-method approach is more than collecting and analyzing two

kinds of data. Collecting and analyzing both types of data build a stronger study than just

qualitative or quantitative research (Creswell, 2014). "In quantitative research, theories

are tested by assessing the relationship among variables. These variables typically can be

measured on instruments so that numerical data can be analyzed using statistical

procedures" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). On the other hand, qualitative research "is an

approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribing to

a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). In a mixed-methods approach, the

researcher is "integrating the two forms of data, and using distinct designs that may

involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4).

Using a mixed-methods approach when investigating any occurrence has its advantages

and disadvantages. Merging quantitative and qualitative approaches to research methods

can sharpen the understanding of the research findings (Gay & Airasian, 2000;

Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) added that by using mixed-

methods, researchers can build a study based on the strengths of both research methods.

This format may provide a more complete picture of the research problem. A mixed-

methods design can be especially useful when unexpected results develop from a

quantitative study and need to be explained in further detail (Morse, 1991).

Population–Setting and Sample

Table 3 demonstrates how each of the Title I elementary schools met or exceeded

their expected growth and how both of the high priority high schools exceeded their

expected growth.

Table 3

2014 School Performance Grade and Score

School	Achievement Score	Growth Score	Met Goal
Middle School A	46	58.5	No
High School A	59	86.1	Exceeded
Elementary A1	56	73.9	Met
Elementary A2	69	88.8	Exceeded
Elementary A3	60	84.4	Met
Elementary A4	57	72.9	Met
Middle School B	39	94	Exceeded
High School B	50	85.7	Exceeded
Elementary B-1	31	74.6	Met
Elementary B-2	69	88.8	Exceeded
Elementary B-3	72	85.3	Met
Elementary B-4	37	86.7	Exceeded

High priority middle School A did not meet its expected growth, where middle School B exceeded expected growth. The only efforts being made to help support sixth-grade students transitioning from elementary school are a tour of the school in April and open house in August. There is no communication between fifth- and sixth-grade teachers within the cluster. Students are clustered by grade level in the building and sixth-grade students are supervised during class transitions.

According to NCDPI, School Performance Grades were issued for the first time in the 2013-2014 school year as required by the North Carolina General Assembly. All public schools in North Carolina have been assigned an A through F letter grade based on achievement and growth. The achievement score is worth 80% of the school performance grade, and the growth score is worth 20 % of the school performance grade. After combining these two values, the score is placed on the following scale (NCDPI, 2015):

A: 85-100 points
B: 70-84 points
C: 55-69 points
D: 40-54 points
F: Less than 40 points

Two sixth through eighth grade high priority middle schools in North Carolina were used in this research. According to the data retrieved from NCDPI, School A failed to meet expected growth based on the 2014 school performance grade and score. However, the feeder elementary schools and high school from this cluster all met or exceeded their expected growth. School B has very similar demographics to School A, according to the data retrieved from NCDPI. Nonetheless, School B exceeded expected growth based on the 2014 school performance grade and score. In addition, all of the feeder elementary schools and the high school from this cluster met or exceeded their

expected growth.

The target population for this study included seventh-grade students from two sixth through eighth grade high priority middle schools in North Carolina. Students with parent permission were asked to complete a survey, participate in a focus group, and participate in individual interviews. The purpose of selecting seventh-grade students was to determine the perspective of students who have completed the sixth grade successfully.

The two North Carolina middle schools in this study are the only high priority middle schools in the district. Through personal communication with the eighth grade guidance counselor from School A (July 23, 2015) and the principal from School B (July 27, 2015), the following demographic information was provided to the researcher.

Table 4 displays the total enrollment of School A which was approximately 895 students. The population for School A included 284 seventh-grade students.

Table 4

School A Seventh-Grade Demographics

School A	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Two or More	Native Hawaiian	White
Seventh	284	3	77	95	0	11	0	98
Male	152	1	42	49	0	6	0	54
Female	132	2	35	46	0	5	0	44

When focusing on the demographic makeup of the seventh-grade student population for School A, the data showed that 1% of the student population is Asian, 27% Black, 33% Hispanic, 4% two or more races, and 35% White.

Table 5 displays the total enrollment of School B which was approximately 1,086

students. The population for School B included 354 seventh-grade students.

Table 5

School B Seventh Grade Demographics

School B	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Two or More	Native Hawaiian	White
Seventh	354	1	103	174	2	17	0	57
Male	174	1	54	88	1	6	0	24
Female	180	0	49	86	1	11	0	33

When focusing on the demographic makeup of the seventh-grade population for

School B, the data showed that .2% of the student population was Asian, 29% Black,

49% Hispanic, .5% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 5% two or more races, and 16%

White.

Table 6 displays the number of economically disadvantaged students. According

to EVAAS data, 73% of the students in School A were economically disadvantaged, and

90% of students in School B were economically disadvantaged.

Table 6

Number of Economically Disadvantaged Students

	School A	School B
Percent of Economically Disadvantaged Students	73%	90%

Through personal communication with the data manager from School A

(September 9, 2015) and the data manager from School B (September 1, 2015), the

following discipline referral information was provided to the researcher and is displayed

in Table 7.

Table 7

Discipline Referrals of Student 2014-2015 School Year

	Total Discipline Referrals	Sixth-Grade Discipline Referral
School A	2249	174
School B	689	187

School A, which had the smaller student enrollment, had the greater number of overall discipline referrals. Approximately 8% of the discipline referrals from School A were from students enrolled in sixth grade. Approximately 27% of discipline referrals from School B were from students enrolled in sixth grade. Discipline referrals at both schools included excessive tardies, dress code violations, lunch dentition, and behavior referrals.

Through personal communication with the county Powerschool coordinator (October 26, 2015), the following demographics of staff members from School A and School B were provided to the researcher and are displayed in Table 8.

Table 8

Demographics of Faculty

	Male	Female	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian	Mixed	P	X
School A	8	47	12	40	1		1		1
School B	18	53	10	56	3	1		1	

The breakdown of the demographics of faculty members at School A were 15% male and 85% female. The data show that 22% of the faculty members were Black, 73%

were White, 1.8% were Hispanic, 1.8% were mixed race, and 1.8 were identified as X. The breakdown of the demographics of staff members at School B were 18% male and 74% female. The data show that 14% of the staff members were Black, 78% were White, 4% were Hispanic, 1.3% were Asian race, and 1.3% were identified as P.

Data Collection Instruments and Materials

The researcher collected data utilizing three different methods that included a student survey (see Appendix A), student focus groups, and individual student interviews. A survey is a technique of data collection which utilizes questionnaires or individual interviews to collect data from a sample representation of a population to which the findings of the data analysis can be generalized. Focus-group interviews concentrate on addressing questions to a group of individuals who are gathered for this particular purpose (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Utilizing statistical quantitative data and themed narrative qualitative data related to the study's purpose helped the researcher understand and explain student perceptions of motivation, procedural differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school.

Quantitative Data

The research tool, created by LaPlante (2010), is a 35-item questionnaire (see Appendix A) that is designed to assess student perceptions of motivation, self-efficacy, student-teacher relationships, and procedural changes during the transition from elementary to middle school. LaPlante grouped her survey questions in the following manner.

Self-efficacy items (1, 7, 9, and 15) were adapted from the Patterns of Adaptive learning Scales (PALS, www.umich.edu). To fit the purpose of this study, the tense of items were changed from present and future tense to past tense. Two

self-efficacy items (23 and 24) were adapted from the Children's Self-efficacy

Scale (Bandura, 2006) available at www.des.emory.edu/mfp/self-efficacy. Items

were written into a past tense sentence format. Items 21 and 27 are original items

based on the constructs of self-efficacy reviewed in this paper. Procedural

differences items (2, 3, 8, 14, 16, 22, 28, 29) are original items based on results of

The School Transition Questionnaire (Akos & Galassi, 2004). The concerns

identified on the survey were written into past tense statements. Student-teacher

relationship items (4, 5, 10, 11, and 17) were adapted from a student survey

developed and validated by Wilkins (2006). Student-teacher relationship items 18

and 23 were adapted from Davenport-Dalley's (2009) Student Survey

Questionnaire. Motivation items (6, 12, 13, 19, 20, 25, and 27) were adapted from

the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich, Smith,

Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991). Because the MSLQ was designed for college

students, content was changed to be appropriate for and easily understood by sixth

grade students. (LaPlante, 2010, p. 71)

Original items (30, 31, 32, and 33) were created by LaPlante and are specific to assessing

the current transition program at the identified school in the study. For consistency,

questions 1-32 are on a 4-point Likert scale, and participants were required to answer by

selecting strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree. Participants responded to

question 32 by selecting not important, somewhat important, or very important.

Participants responded to question 33 by selecting worst year ever, okay, the same as

always, or best year ever. Participants responded to questing 34 by ranking a list of

statements in order from 1-6 with 1 being what the student liked most and 6 being what

the student liked least.

Qualitative Instruments

The second form of data collection implemented by the researcher was student focus groups. During the focus-group process, students were asked open-ended questions (see Appendix B) derived from the coded themes that arose from the survey. These questions were used to probe more in depth into student perceptions. The last form of data was gathered from individual student interviews. Questions (see Appendix C) were developed from the themes that surfaced from the focus groups. The researcher selected a neutral "third party" interviewer with CITI certification. According to Creswell (2014), selecting a "third party" interviewer reduces bias and the impact it may have on the quality of data collected.

Validity and Reliability

Creswell (2014) defined validity as "whether one can draw meaningful and useful inferences from scores on the instruments" (p. 250). Having validity means that an instrument measures what it is intended to measure, results are consistent, and items measure conjectural concepts (Creswell, 2014). Permission to use the survey instrument was obtained by writing to Dr. Kimberly LaPlante, the author and publisher. A letter of permission to use the instrument was sent to the researcher electronically. The creator of the survey assessed the reliability of the instrument using Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's alpha is a measure of internal consistency that is used to verify reliability. Appropriate pilot testing procedures were implemented by the creator to check content validity and reliability of each assessment tool. There was a high level internal consistency as demonstrated by the Cronbach alpha coefficient of .759. Also, five Career and Technical Education experts with a combined 50 years of teaching experience reviewed the survey instrument and provided feedback to the researcher to further establish validity.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher explained the purpose of the study and requested permission to conduct research at the targeted schools which was granted by the principal at each school and school system administration. In addition, a timeline was established with each principal that incorporated a starting date and a concluding date for the research study. Students received a parent consent letter (see Appendix D), student assent form (see Appendix E), and a copy of survey questions at least 10 days before administration of the survey per district policy. The letters stated the purpose of the study and provided students the opportunity to opt out with no consequences. Surveys, focus groups, and interviews were conducted during noncore classes.

The researcher requested a timeline for research data collection with a starting date of February 2016 and a conclusion date of April 2016. The 13-week timeframe allowed the researcher to administer the student surveys and oversee the student focus groups and individual student interviews that were conducted by a nonbiased, independent researcher.

In order to facilitate triangulation, data were solicited from multiple sources in an effort to verify data and clarify a theme (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). According to Creswell (2014), "triangulating different data sources of information by examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes, then converging the results" is a process that adds validity to a study (p. 201). In addition, triangulation is an essential and necessary element within a study that can help eliminate researcher bias (Gall et al., 2007).

The data collection procedures were implemented in three phases. Phase one began by the researcher overseeing the administration of a survey to all students with

parental permission, obtaining signed student assent forms, and making sure all students were enrolled in seventh grade at their middle school. The surveys were administered by the seventh-grade homeroom teachers, and the students recorded their responses utilizing an electronic survey. Once the student surveys were administered and results collected, the data were entered into Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) to calculate two different measures of central tendency and standard deviation. The mean, median, and standard deviation were analyzed to provide single numerical values that were used to describe the entire set of survey results. The researcher calculated positive response rates and negative response rates from the students. The numerical data produced by SPSS was utilized to establish statistical themes in order to produce narratives.

The second phase of data collection included student focus-group interviews. Students were randomly selected from students completing the survey by placing them in numerical order and selecting every fifth student. Selected students were then sorted into groups of four. A qualified independent researcher with CITI certification conducted the focus-group interviews using questions (see Appendix B) generated from the data analysis of the surveys and audio recorded the sessions. The audio recordings were transcribed and then coded for themes in order to develop interview questions (see Appendix C). Because they are content-certified and understand the middle school transition, the researcher met with members of the language arts department at School A to look over the data and verify the themes produced.

The third phase of the data collection was individual student interviews. Participants were randomly selected from students not participating in the focus groups for the individual interviews. These student names were placed on a list in numeric order, and the names corresponding with the middle and last number on the list were

asked to participate in an individual interview. The same qualified independent researcher with CITI certification conducted the interviews using questions (see Appendix C) generated from the data analysis of the focus groups and recorded the sessions. The purpose of the audio recording was to enhance and clarify various elements of feedback that emerged from the discussion within the groups. Audio recordings were transcribed and then coded for themes. The researcher met with members of the language arts department at School A to look over the data and verify the results and themes produced.

The purpose for utilizing a mixed-method approach was that questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews are used extensively in educational research to collect data about phenomena that are not directly observable—inner experience, opinions, values, interests, and the like (Gall et al., 2007). An advantage of interviews is their adaptability; interviewers can build a rapport with students, thus making it possible to obtain information that the individual probably would not reveal by any other data collection method (Gall et al., 2007). Furthermore, interviewers can follow up with the students' answers for clarification or obtain additional information. Data collected from the various instruments were used to identify themes that emerged from the study. Based on the identified themes, the researcher developed narratives presenting the results of the study. Furthermore, the researcher provided graphical representation of the survey data through SPSS software**.**

Data Analysis

The researcher utilized statistical software SPSS to calculate two different measures of central tendency and the standard deviation. The mean, median, and standard deviation were analyzed to provide single numerical values that were used to

describe the entire set of survey results. The researcher calculated positive response rates

and negative response rates from the students. The numerical data produced by SPSS

were utilized to establish statistical themes in order to produce narratives. The researcher

analyzed the qualitative data by looking for common themes that existed with student

perceptions of the transition from elementary to middle school. Overall, all data were

examined then compared by individual schools. Table 9 identifies and groups questions

from the survey instrument that provided answers to the research questions.

Table 9

Research Question Comparison

Research Question	Survey Question
1. How do students perceive their transition from fifth to sixth grade?	30, 31, 32, 33, 34
2. How do students perceive motivation during the transition from elementary to middle school?	6, 12, 13, 19, 20, 25, 27
3. How do students perceive elementary and middle school differences during the transition from elementary to middle school ?	2, 3, 8, 14, 16, 22, 28, 29
4. How do students perceive self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school?	1, 7, 9, 15, 21, 23, 24, 26
5. How do students perceive teacher-student relationships during the transition from elementary to middle school?	4, 5, 10, 11, 17, 18

Measures for Ethical Protection

The researcher is a licensed teacher with CITI certification who is and has been a

teacher at middle School A in this study since 2012. The researcher was a sixth-grade

math teacher in the year previous to this study, so some seventh-grade students would

have been students in the researcher's classroom. All aspects of this study were

conducted in an ethical and professional manner as set forth by the standards and

requirements of Gardner-Webb University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

To ensure that the study was ethical, several precautions were followed. First, a

letter of cooperating agreement from the principals was obtained, granting the researcher

formal permission to conduct research in each school. Further, the parents or guardians

of the participants were informed of the purpose of the study and how data were

collected. Per district policy, parents or guardians received a copy of survey questions

10 days prior to the survey instrument being administered. Participants were also

informed of the purpose of the study and how data were collected. Both parents and

students were informed that participation in the study was completely voluntary. When

parents agreed to allow their children to participate, signed consent forms were

collected. In addition, students signed assent forms to document their willingness to

participate in the study. Participants were informed that they could choose to withdraw

from the study; or if after the completion of survey they did not wish to participate in the

focus groups or interviews, they were allowed to quit at any time. To protect the identity

of students and schools, number codes were used to insure anonymity. Research

materials were kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's classroom. Once the research

was completed, materials were disposed of according to school district policy.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine and understand student perceptions of

motivation, procedural differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during

the transition from elementary to middle school. The primary focus of the study included

seventh-grade students who were enrolled in a traditional, high priority, sixth through

eighth grade middle school. The study provided feedback to administrators, teachers, and district leaders. Perceptions were measured on a Likert scale with an instrument designed specifically for the proposed study. Focus groups and interviews were used to better explain the results from the initial survey.

Chapter 4: Results

Restatement of the Purpose

  This study sought to understand student perceptions of motivation, elementary and middle school differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school that occurs in a public school setting. According to Augst and Akos (2009), transitions are key times where students face new and challenging undertakings as they move from familiar to unknown and more complex environments. This study followed an explanatory sequential mixed-method design in which data were collected from February 2016 through May of 2016. The purpose for utilizing a mixed-method approach is that questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews are used extensively in educational research to collect data about phenomena that are not directly observable—inner experience, opinions, values, interests, and the like (Gall et al., 2007).

Participants and Response Rates

  As described in detail in Chapter 3, the target population for this study includes seventh-grade students from two sixth through eighth grade high priority middle schools in North Carolina. The purpose in selecting seventh-grade students was to determine the perspective of students who have completed the sixth grade successfully. Students with parent permission and who had signed the student assent form were asked to complete a survey, participate in a focus group, and participate in individual interviews. At School A, 284 students were offered the opportunity to participate in the research project. At School B, 354 students were offered the opportunity to participate in the research. Table 10 reports the number of survey respondents by school and indicates the corresponding response rate.

Table 10

Response Rates

	Number of students in seventh grade	Number of students who completed the survey	Percentage of students participating
School A	284	71	25%
School B	354	37	10.45%

It is noteworthy that School B had a lower response rate than School A. The researcher is a sixth-grade teacher at School A, and this may be the reason School A had a higher response rate.

Table 11 displays the number of students participating in the survey, focus groups, and interviews.

Table 11

Student Participation

	Number of students who completed the survey	Number of students who participated in a focus group	Number of students who participated in an interview
School A	71	8	2
School B	37	4	1

All schools are identified as middle school and are comprised of Grades 6-8. The researcher planned for two individual interviews per school; however, only one participant was available at School B.

Data Collection Process

In this explanatory sequential mixed-method design, the researcher collected data utilizing three different methods which included a student survey, student focus groups, and individual student interviews. A survey is a technique of data collection which utilizes questionnaires or individual interviews to collect data from a sample representation of a population to which the findings of the data analysis can be generalized. Focus-group interviews concentrate on addressing questions to a group of individuals who are gathered for this particular purpose (Gall et al., 2007). Utilizing statistical quantitative data and themed narrative qualitative data related to the study's purpose helped the researcher understand and explain student perceptions of transition, motivation, procedural differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school.

To begin with, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and requested permission to conduct research at the targeted schools which was granted by each of the school's principals and from district administrators. The researcher then received permission to conduct research from the IRB committee at Gardner-Webb University in February 2016. In addition, a timeline was established with each principal that incorporated a starting date and a concluding date for the research study.

Students received a parent consent letter (see Appendix D), student assent form (see Appendix E), and a copy of survey questions (see Appendix A) 10 days before the administering of the survey per district policy. The letters stated the purpose of the study and provide students the opportunity to opt out with no consequences. Surveys, focus groups, and interviews were conducted during noncore classes.

The timeline for research data collection had a starting date of February 2016 and

a conclusion date of April 2016. This timeframe allowed the researcher to administer the student surveys, oversee the student focus groups, and individual student interviews that were conducted by a nonbias independent researcher with CITI certification.

The data collection procedures were implemented in three phases. Phase one began with the researcher overseeing the administration of the survey (see Appendix A) to all students with parental permission who are enrolled in seventh grade at their middle school. The surveys were administered by the seventh grade homeroom teachers and the students recorded their responses utilizing an electronic survey. Once the student surveys were administered and results collected, the data were reverse-coded before analysis to allow for negatively worded questions (Laerd Statistics, 2013). For this study, the researcher used the code 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, and 4=strongly agree. Negative responses were matched to 1 and 2, while positive responses were matched to 3 and 4. The mean, median, and standard deviation were analyzed to provide single numerical values that were used to describe the entire set of survey results. The researcher calculated positive and negative responses from the students. The numerical data produced were utilized to establish statistical themes. Because they are content certified and understand the middle school transition, the researcher met with members of the math department at School A to look over the data and verify the results and themes produced. Once themes were established from the survey, focus group questions (see Appendix B) were developed and vetted through the IRB committee and the school district administrators.

The second phase of data collection included student focus-group interviews. Parents were sent a letter (see Appendix F) reminding them of the research and their student's ability to opt of the focus groups at any time. Students were randomly selected

from students completing the survey (see Appendix A) by placing students in numerical

order and selecting every fifth student. Selected students were then sorted into groups of

four. A qualified independent researcher with CITI certification conducted the focus-

group interviews using questions (see Appendix B) generated from the data analysis of

the surveys and audio recorded the sessions. The audio recordings were transcribed (see

Appendix G, H, I) and then coded for themes in order to develop interview questions (see

Appendix C). Because they are content certified and understand the middle school

transition, the researcher met with members of the language arts department at School A

to look over the data and verify the themes produced. Table 12 displays the coded

themes that were indicated by frequency.

Table 12

Coded Themes Indicated by Frequency

School	School Tours	Confidence	Motivation	Teacher Expectations	Relationships	Different Teachers
A	15	22	4	16	14	25
B	7	9	3	3	3	4
Total	22	31	7	19	17	29

Note. Reported as number of separate times mentioned by participants.

Coding is a way to condense extensive data into smaller analyzable units through

the creation of categories and concepts (Lockyer, 2004). The six themes presented in the

table above were created by sorting responses into categories which are represented by

those with the highest frequencies. Students at School A appear to be more vocal than

students at School B. Students' most frequently mentioned theme was confidence

followed by having different teachers, school tours, and teacher expectations. The

researcher used the themes identified in the focus groups to create interview questions

that were vetted by the IRB committee and the school district administration.

The third phase of the data collection was individual student interviews. Parents

were sent a letter (see Appendix J) reminding them of the research and their student's

ability to opt of the interviews at any time. Participants were randomly selected from

students not participating in the focus groups for the individual interviews. These student

names were placed on a list in numeric order and the names corresponding with the

middle and last number on the list were asked to participate in an individual interview.

The same qualified independent researcher conducted the interviews using questions (see

Appendix C) generated from the data analysis of the focus groups and recorded the

sessions. The purpose of the audio recording was to enhance and clarify various

elements of feedback that emerged from the discussion within the groups. The audio

recordings were transcribed (see Appendix K, L, M) and then coded for themes. The

researcher met with members of the language arts department at School A to look over

the data and verify the results and themes produced. The data in Table 13 displays the

highest frequencies to be student perceptions of teacher expectations, confidence, and

being prepared for the transition to middle school as very important.

Table 13

Coded Themes Indicated by Frequency

School	Confidence	Reaching Goals	Teacher Expectations	Relationships	Preparing for Transition
A	5	5	8	4	5
B	2	1	2	1	2
Total	7	6	10	5	7

Note. Reported as number of separate times mentioned by participants.

Again, coding is the concrete activity of labelling data (Creswell, 2014). The five themes presented in the table above were created by sorting responses into categories which are represented by those with the highest frequencies. These data were used to help explain the quantitative data of the survey and to answer research questions in Chapter 5.

Statistical Analysis

A variety of statistical procedures was used to address each of the five research questions in this study. The researcher first compared positive and negative response rates to the survey in order to help understand how students felt about the transition to middle school. The mean, median, and standard deviation for each set of transitional factors were calculated and compared. The standard deviation discloses any variance that may exist from the average. A low standard deviation indicates that the data points tend to be very close to the mean and a high standard deviation indicates that the data points are spread out over a large range of values (Standard Deviation, 2016).

A paired *t* test was conducted to provide another level of statistical analyses. An alpha level of .05 was used since this is the most common criterion used to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between two variables (Field, 2013).

Research Question 1

To answer Research Question 1, "How do students perceive their transition from fifth to sixth grade," the researcher began by calculating the positive and negative percentages to the survey questions for both schools in order to compare how students perceived their transition from fifth to sixth grade.

Table 14 shows that students from both schools have an overall positive perception of their sixth-grade tour and open house.

Table 14

Summary of Positive and Negative Survey Responses to Transition Questions by Percentages

Questions	School A Percent/Number of negative responses	School B Percent/Number of negative responses	School A Percent/Number of positive responses	School B Percent/Number of positive responses
30. The Open House at my middle school was helpful.	11.27/8	5.41/6	88.73/63	94.59/31
31. The tour and presentations at my middle school during the day with my classmates was helpful.	7.05/5	16.22/9	92.95/66	83.78/28

Sixty-three of 71 students at School A and 31 of 37 students at School B found the open house helpful. Sixty-six of 71 students at School A and 28 of 37 students at School B found the tour of the school helpful; however, there are differences in how helpful students perceived the tour and open house. The researcher was unable to include questions 32-34 in the data analysis of this question. Students were to rank items 1-5 using each numeral only once. Many students misunderstood the directions and used the same number multiple times which caused the data to be inconclusive.

For the next step in comparison, the researcher calculated the mean, median, and standard deviation for questions 30 and 31 for School A and School B to add another level of comparison of student perceptions of their transition. Table 15 shows a slight difference in the mean, median, and standard deviation between School A and School B.

Table 15

*Mean, Median, and Standard Deviations of Individual Participant Responses to Survey
Items per Student Perception of their Transition to Sixth Grade*

Transition Factor	Questions	School A			School B		
		Mean	Median	SD	Mean	Median	SD
Transition	30, 31	3.18	3.18	0.04	3.03	3.03	0.13

The low standard deviation reveals that the individual data points are clustered

closely around the mean. This tells the researcher that overall students from Schools A

and B perceive the helpfulness of the open house and tours slightly different from each

other, but students perceive the helpfulness of the open house and tours at their individual

school about the same.

The last statistical test conducted by the researcher was a paired *t* test to determine

if a statistical difference exists in student perceptions of their transition from fifth to sixth

grade. Table 16 displays the *p* value of the data set to be greater than .05. According to

SPSS, the researcher can conclude that there is no statistically significant difference

(Laerd Statistics, 2013) between the two schools' perceptions of open house and school

tours.

Table 16

Paired T Test for Student Perception of Transition from Fifth to Sixth Grade

	School A	School B
Mean	3.189117	3.032258
Variance	0.001949627	0.018730414
Observations	2	2
Pearson Correlation	-1	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	1	
t Stat	1.225499234	
P(T<=t) one-tail	**0.217856879**	
t Critical one-tail	6.313751515	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.435713757	
t Critical two-tail	12.70620474	
P(T<=t) one-tail	**0.217856879**	

In the focus groups and interviews, students reported the tour of the middle school and open houses helped to ease anxiety and allowed them to be more confident in their ability to find their way around the building. "Because once we made that transition we were like more into school. So like it was fine" (Focus Group School A, Participant 2, personal communication, 2016). Students also reported that they learn more about the school and the expectations when tours are led by teachers instead of students.

I think that like on the first day of school sort of planning out stuff, or maybe like the first week. In my experience when we did that sixth-grade tour, the girl who did it just went around and like hunted their teachers and stuff, and we finally went to the cafeteria. We didn't know that this was like the eighth-grade hall, the seventh-grade hall, and stuff like that. So pointing that out as a teacher would be really helpful. (Individual Interview School A, personal communication, 2016)

Students reported that getting their schedules before open house is more beneficial.

"Schedules. When I was in elementary school, you had to go to the open house and get your schedule, and then look for your classes, but it was helpful to get your schedule in the mail" (Focus Group School B, Participant 3, personal communication, 2016).

Research Question 2

To answer Research Question 2, "How do students perceive motivation during the transition from elementary to middle school," the researcher began by calculating the positive and negative percentages to the survey questions for both schools in order to compare how students perceived motivation during the transition from elementary to middle school. Table 17 shows that there are differences in student perceptions of motivation during the transition from elementary to middle school between School A and School B.

Table 17

Summary of Positive and Negative Survey Responses to Motivation Questions by Percentages

Questions	School A Percent/Number of negative responses	School B Percent/Number of negative responses	School A Percent/Number of positive responses	School B Percent/Number of positive responses
6. If I tried hard enough, then I understood what was taught in all of my classes.	7.04/5	18.91/7	92.96/66	81.09/30
12. I finished my assignments on time.	28.16/20	29.72/11	71.84/51	70.28/26
13. I worked hard to do well in school even if I did not like what we were doing.	8.45/6	10.81/4	91.55/65	89.19/33
19. If I didn't understand something at first, I kept trying until I did.	7.04/5	27.02/10	92.96/66	72.98/27
20. I asked my teachers to help me on concepts I didn't understand well.	21.12/15	10.81/4	78.88/56	89.19/33
25. It was important to me to make good grades.	2.81/3	8.10/3	97.19/68	91.9/34
27. I cared about how well I did in my classes.	5.63/4	8.10/3	94.37/67	91.9/34

The biggest differences were with questions 6, 19, and 20. The following responses show the greatest differences. Responses for question 6 revealed 66 of 71 students at School A and 30 of 37 students at School B reported they could understand what was taught if they tried hard. Responses for question 19 revealed 66 of 71 students at School A and 27 of 37 students at School B reported that if something was hard they would keep trying to understand. For question 20, 56 of 71 students at School A and 33 of 37 students at School B reported they would ask their teachers to help if a concept was hard to understand.

For the next step in comparison, the researcher calculated the mean, median, and standard deviation for questions 6, 12, 13, 19, 20, 25, and 27 for School A and School B to add another level of comparison of student perceptions of motivation during their transition to middle school. Table 18 displays a difference in the perception of motivation between the mean and median for Schools A and B.

Table 18

Mean, Median, and Standard Deviations of Individual Participant Responses to Motivation Survey Items

Transition Factor	Questions	School A			School B		
		Mean	Median	SD	Mean	Median	SD
Motivation	6, 12, 13, 19, 20, 25, 27	3.27	3.22	0.24	3.18	3.16	0.25

Each school has a low standard deviation which reveals that the individual data points are clustered closely around the mean. This tells the researcher that overall students from Schools A and B perceive motivation differently from each other, but students perceive motivation at their individual school about the same.

The last statistical test conducted by the researcher was a paired *t* test to determine if a statistical difference exists in student perceptions of motivation during their transition from elementary to middle school. Table 19 displays the *p* value of the data set to be less than .05. According to SPSS, the researcher can conclude that there is a statistically significant difference between the two schools' perceptions of motivation during the transition to middle school (Laerd Statistics, 2013).

Table 19

Paired T Test for Student Perception of Motivation

	School A	School B
Mean	**3.27565757**	**3.18918914**
Variance	0.05784848	0.06476748
Observations	7	7
Pearson Correlation	0.91831098	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	6	
t Stat	2.26566777	
P(T<=t) one-tail	**0.0320238**	
t Critical one-tail	1.94318028	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.0640476	
t Critical two-tail	2.44691185	
P(T<=t) one-tail	**0.0320238**	

The findings from the focus groups and interviews support the findings from the statistical analysis by revealing how differently the students form each school perceive motivational factors. Students from School A reported drawing their motivation from the encouragement of teachers. "The motivation from the teachers, like they would always be like, you can do it, you can do it" (Focus Group School A, Participant 3, personal communication, 2016). Students perceive teachers pushing them to do their best as a motivating factor. "The teachers pushing you" (Focus Group School A, Participant 1, personal communication, 2016). Students from School B reported drawing their motivation from earning good grades and doing well on the EOG. When asked what motivated students to do their best, the response was "grades" (Focus Group School B, Participant 1, personal communication, 2016). Other students at School B reported being motivated by doing well on their EOGs. "Well, probably in your EOG, because if you

don't know it and your give up and it's on EOGs, it's going to be harder for you to actually solve it or answer it" (Focus Group School B, Participant 2, personal communication, 2016). Students at School B reported having confidence and asking teachers for help as important. "I'd like them to have confidence in themselves, and if they have a question they need they will tell me or tell a teacher" (Individual Interview, School B, personal communication, 2016).

Research Question 3

To answer Research Question 3, "How do students perceive elementary and middle school differences during the transition from elementary to middle school," the researcher began by calculating the positive and negative percentages to the survey questions for both schools in order to compare how students perceived elementary and middle school differences during the transition from elementary to middle school.

Table 20 displays student perceptions of the differences between elementary and middle school. Responses displayed show some slight differences in student perceptions between Schools A and B.

Table 20

Summary of Positive and Negative Survey Responses to Elementary and Middle School Differences Questions by Percentages

Questions	School A Percent/Number of negative responses	School B Percent/Number of negative responses	School A Percent/Number of positive responses	School B Percent/Number of positive responses
2. During the first weeks of being in sixth grade, I had a difficult time finding my way around.	64.7/46	51.35/19	35.3/25	48.65/18
3. I had a difficult time following classroom rules.	84.5/60	75.67/28	15.5/11	23.44/9
8. Throughout the year, I had a difficult time finding my classes.	94.3/67	83.78/31	5.7/4	16.22/6
14. I enjoyed having a locker.	9.85/7	24.32/9	90.15/64	75.68/28
16. I enjoyed having different teachers for different classes.	9.85/7	10.81/4	90.15/64	89.19/33
22. My sixth grade teachers clearly explained how they expected me to behave.	2.81/2	16.21/6	97.19/69	83.79/31
28. I had more homework in sixth grade than in fifth grade.	38.02/27	37.83/14	61.98/44	62.17/23
29. It was difficult for me to make it to class on time.	85.91/61	70.27/26	14.09/10	29.73/11

The following responses show the greatest differences. Responses for question 2 revealed 25 of 71 students at School A and 18 of 37 students at School B reported they had difficulty finding their way around school during the first few weeks of school. Responses for question 14 revealed 64 of 71 students at School A and 28 of 37 students at School B reported enjoying having a locker. Responses for question 22 revealed 69 of

71 students at School A and 31 of 37 students at School B reported teachers clearly

explained how students were expected to behave. Responses for question 28 revealed 44

of 71 students at School A and 23 of 37 students at School B reported having more

homework in sixth grade than fifth grade.

For the next step in comparison, the researcher calculated the mean, median, and

standard deviation for questions 2, 3, 8, 14, 16, 22, 28, and 29 for School A and School B

to add another level of comparison of student perceptions of differences between

elementary and middle school during their transition to middle school. Table 21 shows a

slight difference in the mean, median, and standard deviation between School A and

School B.

Table 21

Means and Standard Deviations of Individual Participant Responses to Elementary and Middle School Differences Survey Items

Transition Factors	Questions	School A			School B		
		Mean	Median	SD	Mean	Median	SD
Differences	2, 3, 8, 14, 16, 22, 28, 29	2.47	2.47	0.83	2.53	2.59	0.64

The low standard deviation reveals that the individual data points are clustered

closely around the mean. This tells the researcher that overall students from Schools A

and B perceive the differences between elementary and middle school about the same.

The last statistical test conducted by the researcher was a paired *t* test to determine

if a statistical difference exists in student perceptions of their transition from fifth to sixth

grade. Table 22 displays the *p* value of the data set to be greater than .05. According to

SPSS, the researcher can conclude that there is no statistically significant difference

between the two schools.

Table 22

Paired T Test for Student Perceptions of Differences between Elementary and Middle School

	School A	School B
Mean	**2.47359163**	**2.53040538**
Variance	0.69027925	0.41092277
Observations	8	8
Pearson Correlation	0.96774371	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	7	
t Stat	-0.60571426	
P(T<=t) one-tail	**0.28191003**	
t Critical one-tail	1.89457861	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.56382005	
t Critical two-tail	2.36462425	
P(T<=t) one-tail	**0.28191003**	

Schools A and B show no significant differences in their perceptions of differences between elementary and middle school (Laerd Statistics, 2013). Both schools reported enjoying having different teachers for each subject and the break you have from academics when you transition from class to class. "It was amazing. You didn't have to stay with the same teacher for the whole day" (Focus Group School A, Participant 1, personal communication, 2016). Students reported that it was easier to focus on one subject at a time. "It's easier to focus on one subject at a time" (Focus Group School B, Participant 3, personal communication, 2016). They also reported that the changing of classes allowed them to refresh their mind. "Yeah, like for instance math, and you go to reading, instead you could take a break while walking and refresh you mind again and

talk to some people, and then you go to your next class" (Focus Group School B, Participant 1, personal communication, 2016). Students reported having different teachers can help with behavior. "Because when people get caught talking and they get a warning in that class, they ain't going to talk in their other classes" (Individual Interview, School A, personal communication, 2016).

Research Question 4

To answer Research Question 4, "How do students perceive self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school," the researcher began by calculating the positive and negative percentages to the survey questions for both schools in order to compare how students perceived self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school. Table 23 displays data that show students from Schools A and B have different perceptions of self-efficacy during the transition to middle school.

Table 23

Summary of Positive and Negative Survey Responses to Self-Efficacy Questions by Percentages

Questions	School A Percent/Number of negative responses	School B Percent/Number of negative responses	School A Percent/Number of positive responses	School B Percent/Number of positive responses
1. I was certain I could figure out how to do the most difficult classwork.	15.4/11	35.13/12	84.6/60	64.87/25
7. I could do almost all the work in class if I did not give up.	7.04/5	27.02/10	92.96/66	72.98/27
9. Even if the work was difficult, I believed I could learn it.	7.04/5	13.51/5	92.96/66	86.49/32
15. I could do even the most difficult work in sixth grade if I tried.	19.71/14	21.62/8	80.30/57	78.38/29
21. I expected to do well on my report card.	8.45/6	13.51/5	91.55/65	86.49/32
23. I believed I could learn the math work in sixth grade.	7.04/5	5.40/2	92.96/66	94.6/35
24. I believed I could learn the reading, writing, and language skills in sixth grade.	5.63/4	5.40/2	94.37/67	94.6/35
26. I believed I could make passing grades on school assignments.	4.22/3	5.40/2	95.78/68	94.6/35

The following responses show the greatest differences. Responses for question 1 revealed 60 of 71 students at School A and 25 of 37 students at School B reported they were confident they could figure out the most difficult classwork. Responses for question 7 revealed 66 of 71 students at School A and 27 of 37 students at School B reported they could do most work if they did not give up. Responses for question 9 revealed 66 of 71

students at School A and 32 of 37 students at School B reported they could learn the

content even if the work was difficult. Responses for question 15 revealed 57 of 71

students at School A and 29 of 37 students at School B reported they could do even the

most difficult work in sixth grade if they tried. Responses for question 21 revealed 65 of

71 students at School A and 32 of 37 students at School B reported they expected to do

well on their report card.

For the next step in comparison, the researcher calculated the mean, median, and

standard deviation for questions 1, 7, 9, 15, 21, 23, 24, and 26 for School A and School B

to add another level of comparison of student perceptions of self-efficacy during their

transition to middle school.

Table 24

Means and Standard Deviations of Individual Participant Responses to Self-Efficacy Survey Items

Transition Factors	Questions	School A			School B		
		Mean	Median	SD	Mean	Median	SD
Self-efficacy	1, 7, 9, 15, 21, 23, 24, 26	3.27	3.34	0.16	3.12	3.17	0.21

Table 24 shows a difference in the mean, median, and standard deviation between

School A and School B. Each school has a low standard deviation which reveals that the

individual data points are clustered closely around the mean. This tells the researcher

that overall students from Schools A and B perceive self-efficacy differently from each

other, but students perceive self-efficacy at their individual school about the same.

The last statistical test conducted by the researcher was a paired *t* test to determine

if a statistical difference exists in student perceptions of self-efficacy during their

transition from elementary to middle school. Table 25 displays the *p* value of the data set

to be less than .05. According to SPSS, the researcher can conclude that there is a

statistically significant difference between the two schools (Laerd Statistics, 2013).

Table 25

Paired T Test for Student Perception of Self-Efficacy

	School A	School B
Mean	**3.27112675**	**3.1216215**
Variance	0.02685126	0.04654066
Observations	8	8
Pearson Correlation	0.87837369	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	7	
t Stat	3.97981097	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.00266259	
t Critical one-tail	1.89457861	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.00532518	
t Critical two-tail	2.36462425	
P(T<=t) one-tail	**0.00266259**	

School A had a higher positive response rate to self-efficacy than School B.

Students at School A sought help from peers, tried to figure out the answers on their own,

then asked for help from the teacher as a last resort. "Asked another student or figured it

out for a while, and then if you're still having trouble ask the teacher. I would just do it,

and if another student had trouble doing it, then I would help them" (Focus Group School

A, Participant 3, personal communication, 2016). Students at School B generally asked

teachers for help as their first line of defense. "I'd ask the teacher for help" (Focus Group

School B, Participant 1, personal communication, 2016). Their next recourse was to ask

a teacher's aide. "I'd ask the class aide for help" (Focus Group School B, Participant 2,

personal communication, 2016). Students at School B felt it was important to discuss

things that can help them to be more successful. "Talk about how they feel, and how

things can help them do better" (Individual Interview School B, personal communication,

2016).

Research Question 5

To answer Research Question 5, "How do students perceive teacher-student

relationships during the transition from elementary to middle school," the researcher

began by calculating the positive and negative percentages to the survey questions for

both schools in order to compare how students perceived teacher-student relationships

during the transition from elementary to middle school. Table 26 displays data that show

students from Schools A and B have slightly different perceptions of teacher-student

relationships during the transition to middle school.

Table 26

Summary of Positive and Negative Survey Responses to Teacher-Student Relationship Questions by Percentages

Questions	School A Percent/Number of negative responses	School B Percent/Number of negative responses	School A Percent/Number of positive responses	School B Percent/Number of positive responses
4. My teachers were willing to help me when I had questions.	7.04/5	13.51/5	92.96/66	86.49/32
5. I felt my teachers cared about me as an individual.	12.6/9	24.32/9	87.4/62	75.68/28
10. My teachers listened if I was upset or had a problem.	9.85/7	21.62/8	90.15/64	78.38/29
11. My teachers encouraged me to do my best.	5.63/4	2.70/1	94.37/67	97.3/36
17. My teachers had a sense of humor.	22.53/16	27.02/10	77.47/55	72.98/27
18. My teachers spoke to me in a positive manner.	11.26/8	8.10/3	88.74/63	91.9/34

      The following responses show the greatest differences. Responses for question 4 revealed 66 of 71 students at School A and 32 of 37 students at School B reported their teachers were willing to help if they had a question. Responses for question 5 revealed 62 of 71 students at School A and 28 of 37 students at School B reported they felt their teachers cared about them as an individual. Responses for question 10 revealed 64 of 71 students at School A and 29 of 37 students at School B reported their teachers listened if they were upset or had a problem.

      For the next step in comparison, the researcher calculated the mean, median, and standard deviation for questions 4, 5, 10, 11, 17, and 18 for School A and School B to add another level of comparison of student perceptions of teacher-student relationships

during their transition to middle school. Table 27 shows a slight difference in the mean

and median between School A and School B.

Table 27

Means and Standard Deviations of Individual Participant Responses to Teacher-Student Relationship Survey Items

Transition Factors	Questions	School A			School B		
		Mean	Median	SD	Mean	Median	SD
Relationships	4, 5, 10, 11, 17, 18	3.24	3.21	0.14	3.12	3.06	0.29

Each school has a low standard deviation which reveals that the individual data

points are clustered closely around the mean. This tells the researcher that overall

students from Schools A and B perceive teacher-student relationships slightly different

from each other, but students perceive self-efficacy at their individual school about the

same.

The last statistical test conducted by the researcher was a paired *t* test to determine

if a statistical difference exists in student perceptions of teacher/student relationships

during their transition from elementary to middle school. Table 28 displays the *p* value

of the data set to be slightly greater than .05. According to SPSS, the researcher can

conclude that there is no statistically significant difference between the two schools

(Laerd Statistics, 2013).

Table 28

Paired T Test for Student Perception of Student-Teacher Relationships

	School A	School B
Mean	**3.246479**	**3.12162167**
Variance	0.02195985	0.08436816
Observations	6	6
Pearson Correlation	0.83219414	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	5	
t Stat	1.64211328	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.08074458	
t Critical one-tail	2.01504837	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.16148916	
t Critical two-tail	2.57058184	
P(T<=t) one-tail	**0.08074458**	

Schools A and B show no significant differences in their perceptions of teacher-student relationships. Students provided examples of positive relationships. "Some would be like, 'Take your time.' And others would want to push us to be better of ourselves" (Focus Group School A, Participant 3, personal communication, 2016). They also reported teachers making sure each student understood the content. "Like they take a week on stuff, like if they know need help, they are going to keep taking time on it to make sure every single person in the class can get it done" (Focus Group School A, Participant 2, personal communication, 2016). Examples of negative relationships were provided as well.

> My sixth-grade math teacher moved up to seventh-grade, and she's still just as
> rude as last year. She made it seem like she didn't want to help us, and make us
> do it on our own. Like she never really explained it that well. Like she barely

even talked to us at the beginning of the class. (Focus Group School B,

Participant 3, personal communication, 2016)

Students also reported that having a teacher the entire year instead of semesters helped

build a better relationship.

Teachers that have the kids the whole year, math and reading, have better

relationships with the kids because they have them in the beginning of the year,

and they can do like "get to know you" stuff, and then you know them for how

many months we're in school. And the teachers who have them for one semester

can do it for a little while, but then they have three new classes of kids again, so

it's sort of hard to connect again. (Individual Interview, School A, personal

communication, 2016)

Summary

Descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted to establish student

perceptions of their transition from elementary school to middle school. Survey data

were examined by establishing the mean, median, and standard deviation for both

schools. These quantitative data were entered and analyzed using SPSS. School data

were tested using dependent sample t tests to verify any significant differences between

School A and School B. It was established that there is a statistically significant

difference between student perceptions of motivation and self-efficacy at School A and

School B. The researcher found that students at School A had a more positive perception

in the areas of motivation and self-efficacy than School B, yet School B met their

predicted growth score and School A did not. The paired t test established that there is no

statistically significant difference between student perceptions of the difference between

elementary and middle school and teacher-student relationships at School A and School

B. The qualitative data provided by the focus groups and interviews allowed the

researcher to establish that students from both schools have similar positive perceptions

of consistency with teacher expectations from class to class, confidence, and being

prepared for the transition to middle school. The results of the data produced are

discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

      The purpose of this study was to understand student perceptions of motivation, elementary and middle school differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school that occur in a public school setting. According to Augst and Akos (2009), transitions are key times where students face new and challenging undertakings as they move from familiar to unknown and more complex environments. Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit research revealed that some adolescents encounter adversity when transitioning from elementary school to middle school, frequently resulting in a decrease in academic success and motivation. The stage-environment fit theory, which acknowledges the complicated developmental changes that occur during early adolescence and the mismatch with academic, procedural, and social changes that occur in the middle school environment (Roeser & Eccles, 1998) provided the framework for this study. An explanatory mixed method was used to gather and explain data that would provide a better understanding of student perceptions of their transition to middle school. Seventh-grade students at two high priority middle schools in North Carolina were used in this study.

Conclusions

      Findings. This study sought to understand student perceptions of motivation, elementary and middle school differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school and the impact they may have on schools meeting or exceeding expected growth. In this explanatory sequential mixed-method research, participants completed a 34-question survey. Focus groups and individual interview data were used to help provide a deeper understanding of the data.

The data collected were examined to answer the following research questions.

Research Question 1

How do students perceive their transition from fifth to sixth grade? The researcher was unable to include questions 32-34 in the data analysis of this question. Students were to rank items 1-5 using each numeral only once. Many students misunderstood the directions and used the same number multiple times which caused the data to be inconclusive; however, data were derived from questions 30 and 31 because these questions were on the same Likert scale as the rest of the survey. Focus groups and interviews were used as well.

Student perceptions of the transition from elementary to middle school were assessed by determining how helpful students found open houses and tours of the middle school. According to statistical data, focus groups, and individual interviews, the overall student perceptions at both schools of their transition to sixth grade were positive.

By combining the "agree" and "highly agree" responses, the survey revealed 88.73% of students from School A and 94.59% of students from School B reported that the open house at their school was helpful. The survey also revealed that 92.95% of students at School A and 83.78% of students at School B believed school tours and presentations during the school day were helpful. The paired t test had a p value of 0.21. According to SPSS, the researcher can conclude that there is no statistically significant difference (Laerd Statistics, 2013) between the two schools' perceptions of open houses and school tours.

Student perceptions of their transition from elementary to middle school were further examined with focus groups and interviews. Students believed the tour of the middle school and open houses helped to ease anxiety and allowed them to be more

confident in their ability to find their way around the building. One participant

commented, "Because once we made that transition we were like more into school. So

like it was fine" (Focus Group School A, Participant 3, personal communication, 2016).

Students reported that it would be helpful if they could meet the teachers earlier. As one

participant explained, "I think they need to meet the teachers earlier than what they do"

(Individual Interview School A, personal communication, 2016). Students perceived that

they learn more about the school and the expectations when tours are led by teachers

instead of students. Another participant elaborated,

> I think that like on the first day of school sort of planning out stuff, or maybe like
>
> the first week. In my experience when we did that sixth-grade tour, the girl who
>
> did it just went around and like hunted their teachers and stuff, and we finally
>
> went to the cafeteria. We didn't know that this was like the eighth-grade hall, the
>
> seventh-grade hall, and stuff like that. So pointing that out as a teacher would be
>
> really helpful. (Individual Interview School A, personal communication, 2016)

Students perceived that getting their schedules before open house is more beneficial.

Another participant suggested, "Schedules. When I was in elementary school, you had to

go to the open house and get your schedule, and then look for your classes, but it was

helpful to get your schedule in the mail" (Focus Group School B, Participant 3, personal

communication, 2016). When thinking about the next big transition in their future,

students reported wanting some of the same support put into place. Another participant

expounded,

> I think that support would be the same, or sort of the same, from going elementary
>
> to middle and then middle to high, so I don't know if they do tours in high school
>
> as an eighth grader, but that would be really helpful, because high school is even

more confusing than middle, and maybe meeting some people there, principals

and teachers, and maybe some students. Just to get to know some people, so

you're not really confused when you get there. (Individual Interview School A,

personal communication, 2016)

The data revealed that students at School A and School B perceived their

transition from elementary to middle school to be a positive experience with no statistical

differences between the schools. This was supported by calculating positive and negative

responses on the survey, conducting a paired *t* test, and using focus groups and individual

interviews to further explain the findings. This is important because this is a time of

significant change in their social and learning environments brought about by the

transition from elementary to middle school (Gutman & Midgley, 2000). Because of the

timing of this transition, some students experience increased stress when moving from

elementary school to middle school. The stress of the transition affects the student's

adjustment to the new environment (Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993).

Research Question 2

How do students perceive motivation during the transition from elementary

to middle school? Student perceptions of motivation were assessed by determining if

students finished assignments, asked teachers for help, and worked hard even if they did

not like what they were doing. When comparing student perceptions on motivation for

Schools A and B, the researcher looked at the percentages of positive and negative

responses to each survey question. The largest differences in student perceptions of

motivation were identified between the following questions. Responses for question 6

revealed 92.96% of students at School A and 81.09% of students at School B reported

they could understand what was taught if they tried hard. Responses for question 19

revealed 92.96% of students at School A and 72.98% of students at School B reported that if something was hard they would keep trying to understand. For question 20, 78.88% of students at School A and 89.19% of students at School B reported they would ask their teachers to help if a concept was hard to understand.

For the next step in comparison, the researcher calculated the mean, median, and standard deviation for questions 6, 12, 13, 19, 20, 25, and 27 for School A and School B to add another level of comparison of student perceptions of motivation during their transition to middle school. There were significant differences in the mean and median of Schools A and B; however, each school has a low standard deviation which reveals that the individual data points are clustered closely around the mean. This tells the researcher that overall students from Schools A and B perceive motivation differently from each other, but students perceive motivation at their individual school about the same. The paired t test had a p value of 0.03. According to SPSS, the researcher can conclude that there is a statistically significant difference between the two schools' perceptions of motivation during the transition to middle school (Laerd Statistics, 2013).

Focus groups and individual interviews revealed students are motivated by the encouraging words from their teachers, the love teachers have for their job and students, and the willingness to help meet their students' needs. Also, in maintaining the middle school concept and utilizing the unique abilities and interest of the teachers can motivate students, establish a sense of belonging, and help create stronger teacher-student relationships (Alexander & Williams, 1965). One participant reported, "The teachers pushing you" (Focus Group School A, Participant 1, personal communication, 2016). Students reported their belief that teachers loved teaching. Another participant shared, "Because they loved their job with me and they loved teaching" (Individual Interview

School B, personal communication, 2016). When asked what motivated them, students stated it was important to make good grades. Simply put by one participant, "grades" (Focus Group School B, Participant 1, personal communication, 2016). They also reported the importance of doing well on their EOG test. Another student elaborated, "Well, probably in your EOG, because if you don't know it and your give up and it's on EOGs, it's going to be harder for you to actually solve it or answer it" (Focus Group School B, Participant 2, personal communication, 2016).

The researcher was able to conclude that there is a significant difference in how students from Schools A and B perceive motivation. The data revealed that students at School A had a more positive perception of motivation than School B; yet School B outperformed School A on EOG tests and exceeded expected growth for the year, where School A did not meet expected growth for the year. Focus groups and individual interviews revealed that students from School A drew their motivation from teacher encouragement. One participant reported, "The motivation from the teachers, like they would always be like, you can do it, you can do it" (Focus Group School A, Participant 3, personal communication, 2016). Students at School B drew encouragement from making good grades and doing well on their EOG test. Another participant elaborated, "Well, probably in your EOG, because if you don't know it and your give up and it's on EOGs, it's going to be harder for you to actually solve it or answer it" (Focus Group School B, Participant 2, personal communication, 2016).

This suggests that students at School B perceive motivation intrinsically, whereas students at School A perceive motivation extrinsically. This conclusion was supported by calculating positive and negative responses on the survey, conducting a paired t test, and using focus groups and individual interviews to further explain the findings. The

transition to middle school is frequently marked by a period of decline in motivation for many students (Atkinson, 2010). With students at both schools having success in varying degrees, it is important to understand that if a student transitions to middle school successfully, she/he will display higher levels of intrinsic motivation, complete homework more often, and have higher educational aspirations (Otis et al., 2005).

Research Question 3

> **How do students perceive elementary and middle school differences during the transition from elementary to middle school?** Student perceptions of differences in elementary and middle school were assessed by determining difficulty with finding their way around the school, following rules, and getting to class on time. Students also responded to questions that asked about the enjoyment of having lockers and having different teachers for each subject. When comparing student perceptions of elementary and middle school differences for Schools A and B, the researcher looked at the percentages of positive and negative responses to each survey question. The largest discrepancy in student perceptions of differences in elementary and middle school were identified between the following questions.

Responses for question 2 revealed 35.3% of students at School A and 48.65% of students at School B reported they had difficulty finding their way around school during the first few weeks of school. Responses for question 14 revealed 90.15% of students at School A and 75.68% of students at School B reported enjoying having a locker. Responses for question 22 revealed 97.19% of students at School A and 83.79% of students at School B reported teachers clearly explained how students were expected to behave. Responses for question 28 revealed 61.98% of students at School A and 62.17% of students at School B reported having more homework in sixth grade than fifth grade.

For the next step in comparison, the researcher calculated the mean, median, and standard deviation for questions 2, 3, 8, 14, 16, 22, 28, and 29 for School A and School B to add another level of comparison of student perceptions of differences between elementary and middle school during their transition to middle school. There was a slight variance in the mean and median of Schools A and B; however, each school has a low standard deviation which reveals that the individual data points are clustered closely around the mean. This tells the researcher that there are slight variances in how students from Schools A and B perceive differences in elementary and middle school from each other, but students perceive differences in elementary and middle school at their individual school about the same. The paired t test had a p value of 0.28. According to SPSS, the researcher can conclude that there is no statistically significant difference between the two schools' perceptions of differences between elementary and middle school (Laerd Statistics, 2013).

Focus groups and individual interviews revealed students perceived having different teachers for each subject as a positive experience. One participant elaborated,

> I think it's good that we have different classes with different teachers, because like in elementary school, we always get to stay in one class, right, with all the subjects. Well, you kind of get more pressure. It's like your brain wouldn't work anymore because you're just in that class all day, instead of transitioning. (Focus Group School B, Participant 2, personal communication, 2016)

Students enjoy the break between classes which allows them time to refocus and get ready for the next subject. Another participant detailed,

> Because they always . . . like in elementary school they used to do multiple subjects, and they would have to transition from one reading straight into math,

and sometimes they'd get confused with the terms, and sometimes we'll get

confused with the terms. So it's like once you have that 4-minute break between

classes, it gets your mind a little refreshed and ready for the next class. (Focus

Group School A, Participant 3, personal communication, 2016)

Students find it easier to focus on one subject at a time. A participant shared,

I think it was easier. Like in elementary school it was kind of hard to catch up,

and like having specific times for that class because in elementary school a lot our

classes got pushed back because of like disrespectful students and stuff. It's

easier to have specific times for different classes. (Focus Group School B,

Participant 1, personal communication, 2016)

Students reported having teachers who speak Spanish in their classes helps them to

understand the work better. "I think they're doing the right thing, because they have

people that speak Spanish, and so they can talk with students and help them do better"

(Individual Interview, School B, personal communication, 2016).

The data revealed that School A and School B student perceptions of differences

in elementary and middle school shows no statistical differences. It uncovered that

students at both schools struggled in the beginning of the year with finding classes. Most

students enjoy having different teachers and lockers. Many students felt there was more

homework in sixth grade than fifth grade as well as reporting that teachers did explain

their expectations for student behavior.

This conclusion was supported by calculating positive and negative responses on

the survey, conducting a paired *t* test, and using focus groups and individual interviews to

further explain the findings. Lane et al. (2003) found that if students are not aware of

teacher expectations across classrooms, grade levels, or educational settings, transitions

become more difficult. Students are forced to confront these environmental and procedural differences with unsuccessful or absent transition programs (Akos, 2004).

Research Question 4

How do students perceive self-efficacy during the transition from elementary to middle school? Student perceptions of self-efficacy were assessed by determining how students elected to handle classwork if work was too hard, too easy, or no grade was involved. When comparing student perceptions on self-efficacy for Schools A and B, the researcher looked at the percentages of positive and negative responses to each survey question. The largest differences in student perceptions of self-efficacy were identified between the following questions.

Responses for question 1 revealed 84.6% of students at School A and 64.87% of students at School B reported they were confident they could figure out the most difficult classwork. Responses for question 7 revealed 92.96% of students at School A and 72.98% of students at School B reported they could do most work if they did not give up. Responses for question 9 revealed 92.96% of students at School A and 86.49% of students at School B reported they could learn the content even if the work was difficult. Responses for question 15 revealed 80.30% of students at School A and 78.38% of students at School B reported they could do even the most difficult work in sixth grade if they tried. Responses for question 21 revealed 91.55% of students at School A and 86.49% of students at School B reported they expected to do well on their report card.

For the next step in comparison, the researcher calculated the mean, median, and standard deviation for questions 1, 7, 9, 15, 21, 23, 24, and 26 for School A and School B to add another level of comparison of student perceptions of self-efficacy during their transition to middle school. There is a difference in the mean and median of Schools A

and B. Each school has a low standard deviation which reveals that the individual data points are clustered closely around the mean. This tells the researcher that overall students from Schools A and B perceive self-efficacy differently from each other, but students perceive self-efficacy at their individual school about the same. The paired t test had a p value of 0.002. According to SPSS, the researcher can conclude that there is a statistically significant difference between the two schools (Laerd Statistics, 2013).

Focus groups and individual interviews revealed students from School A and School B perceive self-efficacy in different ways. Students would ask teachers, class assistants, and peers for help. One participant explained,

> If I didn't understand something in class I would just raise my hand and ask the teachers. If I didn't understand something that, like in a class I was transitioning to, I would just ask the teacher in the hallway, because they were always there to help. (Focus Group School B, Participant 2, personal communication, 2016)

Students would make use of afterschool tutoring programs and study at home. Another participant reported, "I'd ask for more help like maybe after school" (Focus Group School B, Participant 3, personal communication, 2016). Students believed that if they tried their hardest, they would always do their best. This participant elaborated,

> This is like a reference to sports, if you know you give it your all, then your brain and your heart knows if you gave it your all, in that game or that practice, and I think everybody could tell if you do your hardest work. (Focus Group School A, Participant 2, personal communication, 2016)

Students also reported working with a partner helped them be more successful, simply stating, "Letting them work with a partner. You can talk to them. Some people don't like to talk to the teachers" (Individual Interview, School A, personal communication,

2016).

The data revealed that there is a significant difference between School A and School B and how they perceive self-efficacy. With the questions surrounding self-efficacy, students at School A had a higher positive response rate than students at School B. Students at School A appear to be more confident in themselves than students at School B, yet students at School B outperformed students from School A on EOG tests. Students at School B exceeded their expected growth for the year, where students at School A did not meet expected growth for the year. Focus groups and interviews revealed that students from School A seek help from peers first, then from teachers. One participant explained, "Asked another student or figured it out for a while, and then if you're still having trouble ask the teacher. I would just do it, and if another student had trouble doing it, then I would help them" (Focus Group School A, Participant 3, personal communication, 2016). Students from School B seek help from teachers first, then class aids, afterschool tutoring, and studying at home. Two participants commented, "I'd ask the teacher for help" (Focus Group School B, Participant 1, personal communication, 2016). Their next recourse was to ask a teacher's aide. "I'd ask the class aide for help" (Focus Group School B, Participant 2, personal communication, 2016).

This conclusion was supported by calculating positive and negative responses on the survey, conducting a paired *t* test, and using focus groups and individual interviews to further explain the findings. Research by Bandura (1997b) maintained that people with high self-efficacy have more motivation to work because they believe the results of their work will be successful. According to Usher and Pajares (2008), achievement in educational settings is influenced more by self-efficacy and student efforts than self-esteem.

Research Question 5

 How do students perceive teacher-student relationships during the transition from elementary to middle school? Student perceptions of teacher-student relationships were assessed by determining how students believed teachers were willing to help, listen, speak in a positive manner, and care about students as individuals. When comparing student perceptions of teacher-student relationships for Schools A and B, the researcher looked at the percentages of positive and negative responses to each survey question. The largest differences in student perceptions of teacher-student relationships were identified between the following questions. Responses for question 4 revealed 92.96% of students at School A and 86.49% of students at School B reported their teachers were willing to help if they had a question. Responses for question 5 revealed 87.4% of students at School A and 75.68% of students at School B reported they felt their teachers cared about them as an individual. Responses for question 10 revealed 90.15% of students at School A and 78.38% of students at School B reported their teachers listened if they were upset or had a problem.

 For the next step in comparison, the researcher calculated the mean, median, and standard deviation for questions 4, 5, 10, 11, 17, and 18 for School A and School B to add another level of comparison of student perceptions of teacher-student relationships during their transition to middle school. There is a variance in the mean and median of Schools A and B. Each school has a low standard deviation which reveals that the individual data points are clustered closely around the mean. This tells the researcher that overall there is a variance in how students from Schools A and B perceive teacher-student relationships from each other, but students perceive teacher-student relationships at their individual school about the same. The paired t test had a p value of 0.08.

According to SPSS, the researcher can conclude that there is no statistically significant difference between the two schools (Laerd Statistics, 2013).

Focus groups and individual interviews revealed students from School A and School B perceived teacher-student relationships in similar ways. When students have a positive relationship with their teachers, they believe their teachers want them to be successful, and students will work harder to meet academic and behavioral expectations. One participant explained,

> I knew they wanted me to succeed. I knew that they wanted that because of their tone toward me. Because some of my other classmates, like some of them didn't care that they were going to make a good grade on a paper, but some of the teachers knew that I could do it, so they pushed me to that. (Focus Group School A, Participant 2, personal communication, 2016)

Students notice the simple displays of respect from teachers in a greeting. Another participant stated, "They would greet us, like even if you're in a different class, in a different grade, they still say 'Hi' to you, and they make conversation with you. They still remember you" (Focus Group School B, Participant 2, personal communication, 2016). When teachers create a strong classroom community "family," students notice. One participant shared,

> My best relationship was with my language arts teacher. It was really easy because she had kids like the same age, and she could reflect on how our attitudes were and what we were thinking, how the work was. Her kids went to different schools, but it was really easy because she knew my mom, and it was really easy to connect with her. And not really any of the other teachers. (Focus Group School B, Participant 1, personal communication, 2016)

Students reported being treated like the sons and daughters of their teachers. Another participant commented, "Those teachers would treat us like their son or daughter" (Focus Group School B, Participant 1, personal communication, 2016). Students find they can build a better relationship with their teachers when they have year-long classes instead of semester classes. A further explanation was,

> Teachers that have the kids the whole year, math and reading, have better relationships with the kids because they have them in the beginning of the year, and they can do like "get to know you" stuff, and then you know them for how many months we're in school. And the teachers who have them for one semester can do it for a little while, but then they have 3 new classes of kids again, so it's sort of hard to connect again. (Individual Interview School A, personal communication, 2016)

Students build better relationships with their teachers when there is consistency with academic and behavioral expectations. Participants elaborated,

> In the beginning of each day of class they would have like an "I Can" statement, so it's what we were doing that day or that week or something, and in the beginning of the year they would tell us like we were going to do five lessons in math, and we'll learn this in reading, and then you just go through it during the year. I think that the consistency is kind of good because like in science or something you would have lots of different rules like applying to the materials there. Like if you're doing an experiment, like a math experiment, you've got different tools to use. (Individual Interview School A, personal communication, 2016)

> The researcher is able to conclude that there is no significant difference in how

students perceive differences in teacher-student relationships. Most students at both

schools found teachers willing to help when they had questions. They felt teachers cared

about them and would encourage them to do their best. Most students also reported

teachers would speak to them in a positive manner.

This conclusion was supported by calculating positive and negative responses on

the survey, conducting a paired *t* test, and using focus groups and individual interviews to

further explain the findings. Also, positive teacher-student relationships are recognized

as being an important factor for the adjustment of at-risk children as they transition to

middle school (Baker et al., 2008). Teachers who encourage students to act, speak, and

think without judgment create an environment for high-quality teacher-student

relationships (Warren & Lessner, 2014).

Connection to Stage-Environment Fit Theory

As students are transitioning from elementary to middle school, their bodies,

brains, and relationships with parents, teachers, and peers are changing (Scales, 2005).

Research has shown if the developmental needs of the students and their new educational

environment are not matched, there will be a negative impact on student academics and

motivation (Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993).

The researcher found that student perceptions of school tours and open houses,

differences between elementary and middle school, and teacher-student relationships did

not differ between the two study schools; however, each of these factors pay a role in

providing an environment that supports students during the transition to middle school.

Students reported being more confident in finding their way around the new

school, getting to know their teachers, and being less anxious when they were able to take

a tour of the school led by teachers and received schedules earlier in the summer before

open house. Students reported that one of the biggest differences between elementary

and middle school was having different teachers for different subjects. They believe this

provides a better learning environment by helping students focus on one subject at a time.

Students reported the transition between classes gives students a break and allows them

to refresh their minds before the next class. Also, if students get into trouble in one class,

they get a fresh start in the next class. Developing positive teacher-student relationships

helps to support the learning environment as well. Students reported that teachers took

their time to make sure students understood the work. They believed that having a

subject content teacher for the entire year instead of semesters allows students to build

stronger relationships with their teacher. Hunt's (1975) person-environment fit

perspective emphasized that the school environment needed to provide the best possible

level of support to assist students as they transition toward cognitive and affective

maturity.

The researcher found that student perceptions of motivation and self-efficacy

were significantly different between the two study schools. The environments created to

foster motivation and self-efficacy in these two schools were perceived in different ways

as well. Students at School A perceived teacher encouragement and pushing students to

do well as the motivational factors in their environment. The environment at School A

fostered more outward motivational forces. Students at School B perceived having good

grades, doing well on EOG tests, and having confidence as the motivational factors in

their environment. The environment at School B fostered more intrinsic motivation.

The researcher found that students at School A perceived their sense of self-

efficacy when faced with a problem was to seek help from peers, try to figure out the

problem on their own, and ask the teacher for help as a last resort. Their environment did

not foster self-efficacy in students. Students at School B perceived their sense of self-efficacy when faced with a problem was to seek help from a teacher first, ask the class aide for help, attend afterschool tutoring, and study at home. Their environment did foster self-efficacy in students. The differences in the learning environments between the two schools were reinforced when School A did not meet expected growth and School B exceeded expected growth on EOG tests. Evidence of this disconnect is seen with declines in achievement, behaviors, motivation, school attitude, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-perception, self-management, and values (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993).

This study provided insight into student perceptions of their learning environment and found that when teachers and schools provide an environment where students feel supported, cared for, and safe, they will be confident and motivated and have greater self-efficacy and more success in reaching their academic and behavioral goals.

Recommendations

Results in this study indicated that there was no statistical significance with student perceptions of school tours and open houses, differences in elementary and middle school, and teacher-student relationships during the transition to middle school. The study did indicate statistical significance with student perceptions of motivation and self-efficacy during the transition to middle school.

Even though there were no significant differences in student perceptions with the transition to middle school, students had ideas they reported that would make tours and open houses better. Students preferred having teachers lead tours instead of other students. They believed they learned more about the school and it gave them a better opportunity to get to know the teachers. Students also reported that getting schedules

earlier helped to reduce anxiety about coming to middle school, as they are able to determine ahead of time which students they knew in their classes. Understanding student perceptions is important because of the timing of this transition; some students experience increased stress when moving from elementary school to middle school. The stress of the transition affects the student's adjustment to the new environment (Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993). Akos and Martin (2003) recommended that "sending" schools ought to help prepare students for the transition to middle school by addressing student concerns and questions prior to the changeover.

Other recommendations would be to escort students to their classes, lunch, and related arts during the first few weeks of school. With students reporting being nervous about finding all of their classes, this will help build student confidence in their ability to find their classes. Healthy teacher-student relationships involve the perceptions of high levels of support given to adolescent students by teachers within the school environment (Carlisle, 2011). Students expressed their feelings about having different teachers for each core subject. The students believed it was better to focus on one subject at a time. The transition between classes was seen as a time for a brain break and to be ready for the next class. Students also liked that each class was a fresh start if they had been in trouble.

Recommendations for teacher-student relationships are again based on student responses. Keeping core classes as yearlong classes and not semesters will allow students to build stronger teacher-student relationships. Maintaining consistent academic and behavioral expectations in all classes was another important factor students reported in order to build stronger teacher-student relationships. Students reported wanting their teachers to push them to succeed and set high expectations. They also want teachers to be respectful and show they care by listening to what students have to say. Teacher-

student relationships are expressed by the ability of the teacher to foster trusting relationships and establish a safe, supportive environment (Warren & Lessner, 2014).

Hanewald (2013) found that well-planned and implemented transition programs can support students, their families, and school staff in the transition process. Lorain (2016) and Wormeli (2011) considered a well-planned transition program that involves students, school personnel, and parents to be vitally important. Below are some of the research-based strategies Lorain and Wormeli recommended.

- Rising middle school students should have the opportunity to meet middle school students and teachers in their elementary school.

- Rising middle school students should have the opportunity to visit the middle school in the spring and meet the staff and students, particularly their homeroom teacher and classmates.

- School leaders should plan and provide for several events that involve students, teachers, and parents. These events should focus on providing a positive message about middle school, that it is safe and fun. They should also focus on providing information about the changes that early adolescents will be experiencing.

- Middle school teachers should be well versed in the developmental issues of their students.

- Send a letter of congratulations to all rising middle school students on their last day of elementary school.

- Have the leadership team visit with students in their elementary schools the year before the students enter middle school.

- Invite elementary and middle school teachers to switch jobs for a day. Each

    gets a sense of how the other school works in terms of daily operations,

    content, and both student and teacher expectations. This information not only

    will be of value to teachers as they work with their own students, but it will

    also help them provide clearer advice about transitioning to parents.

- Have all staff members wear "Ask Me" badges for the first 2 weeks of school.

    The badges nudge students to ask questions from safe and accurate sources of

    information.

Based on student responses, implementing these strategies will help build stronger

teacher-student relationships and ease student anxieties about transitioning to middle

school.

There were significance statistical differences in motivation and self-efficacy

between School A and School B. School A responses to survey questions were more

positive than School B responses. Also, School A did not meet expected growth on EOG

tests, where School B exceeded expected growth. Students at School A were more

extrinsically motivated. They looked for positive reinforcement from their teachers.

Students at School B were more intrinsically motivated. They sought to make good

grades, do well on EOG tests, and have more confidence. When faced with a difficult

task, students at School A sought help from peers, tried to figure out the problem by

themselves, or asked a teacher as a last resort. Students at School B, when faced with a

difficult task, sought help from a teacher first, class aide, afterschool tutoring, or studying

at home. Their sense of self-efficacy can be seen in how they chose to accomplish their

task. Bandura (1994) believed self-efficacy can be developed through four main sources

of influence. The most effective way of creating a strong sense of efficacy is through mastery experiences. When students experience success, their self-efficacy is boosted. The second way of creating and strengthening self-efficacy is through seeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort. Social persuasion is a third way of building self-efficacy. This can be done by providing timely feedback to students in order to support their efforts. The fourth way of developing self-efficacy is to reduce people's stress reactions. A positive environment can reduce anxiety and build student beliefs in themselves (Bandura, 1994). Based on student responses, implementing these strategies will help support the development of self-efficacy in students and provide the tools needed to meet their goals.

Davis (1993) and Kirk (n.d.) recommended the following compiled list of best practices to help foster student motivation.

- Give frequent, early, positive feedback that supports student beliefs that they can do well.

- Ensure opportunities for student success by assigning tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult.

- Help students find personal meaning and value in the material.

- Create an atmosphere that is open and positive.

- Help students feel that they are valued members of a learning community.

- Make it real: In order to foster intrinsic motivation, try to create learning activities that are based on topics that are relevant to your students' lives.

- Balance the challenge: Students perform best when the level of difficulty is slightly above their current ability level. If the task is too easy, it promotes

boredom and may communicate a message of low expectations.

- Seek role models: If students can identify with role models, they may be more likely to see the relevance in the subject matter.

- Use peer models: Students can learn by watching a peer succeed at a task.

- Establish a sense of belonging: In an academic environment, research shows that students who feel they "belong" have a higher degree of intrinsic motivation and academic confidence.

The use of these best practices is important because the type of learning environment created and teaching methods used can develop self-efficacy and motivation in the classroom (Bandura, 1994).

Based on the focus groups, individual interviews, and statistical data from this study, it is the recommendation of the researcher that the study district speak with the administrator of each school to examine the language, procedures, and routines used in the classroom and throughout the school. School B appears to be using strategies that build intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy without making students overconfident. When providing this type of environment, students will have the tools to accomplish new tasks and challenges and meet expected goals. The researcher would suggest examining how the administrator at School B developed the school schedule and structured the afterschool tutoring program.

Because of the variances in school-wide office referrals between School A (2,249) and School B (689), the researcher believes it is important look at the differences in classroom management in the two study schools. When teachers are contemplating classroom-management strategies for implementation, they need to consider students'

community, cultural contexts, and their own personal beliefs (Wickner, 2013). It is recommended by Wickner (2013) that the following classroom-management strategies be implemented. Make students feel welcome by greeting them at the door. Allow students to have a voice in establishing rules for the classroom. It is important to avoid confronting misbehaving students in front of peers. Teachers need to make expectations clear and reach out to parents early in the year. When necessary, student/teacher/parent contracts need to be used. Always look at situations from the students' perceptions. With strong classroom management and teacher-student relationships, classrooms can provide a supportive environment where students are engaged and teacher expectations are met (Ladd, 2005; Pianta, 1999).

It is recommended that the study district seek professional learning opportunities for their educators that will provide classroom management strategies educators can use to redirect students and deescalate explosive situations in order to maintain a productive successful learning environment for all students. Teachers who do not understand young adolescents may inadvertently create transition problems. Because of this, preservice and in-service teacher education specific to the middle grade students will help educators properly support school transition (Andrews & Bishop, 2012).

According to McKay (2015), academic mindsets are exceedingly important to student success. Students succeed academically when they perceive acceptance from their peers and a sense of belonging in their learning environment. Students will trust that hard work and persistence pay off. All of these mindsets have a powerful effect on student motivation and self-efficacy (Dweck, 2016).

Adopting these recommendations will foster a supportive learning environment that will allow students who are changing physically, mentally, and emotionally the

opportunity to find success during their transition to middle school.

Limitations

The major limitation of this study was the small number of students willing to participate in the research project. School B had significantly lower survey response rates than School A. Administering the survey at the end of the student's seventh-grade school year instead of the beginning can be seen as a limitation as well.

Future Research

This study focused on student perceptions of their transition from elementary to middle school. Based upon the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are presented for future research.

1. This study was conducted at two high priority middle schools in the study district. Including data from two high performing middle schools for comparison of student perceptions would provide even more insight as to how students can be supported during their transition.

2. With the survey in this study being administered in March of the participants' seventh-grade year, a more effect alternative may be to administer the survey at the beginning of students' seventh-grade year.

3. Conduct a longitudinal study where students are surveyed during their fifth-grade year, at the beginning of their sixth-grade year, and then at the end of their sixth-grade year to see how perceptions may have changed.

4. When looking at teacher demographics, teacher total years of service and how long they have worked at the school should be included.

Final Remarks

The stage-environment fit theory states that the environment must support the

stage of development a student is going through. Without proper support in place, students can struggle to meet academic and behavioral expectations. School transitions are a vital link to student success; however, limited research exists about the extent to which school transitions pose a challenge and cause academic and social performance declines (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). The study revealed students want to be prepared for their transitions to middle school and high school with programs that allow them to meet teachers earlier, tour schools, and get to know counselors and administrators. Researchers have contended that student perceptions play an essential role in achievement by motivating students to nurture their potential (Marsh & Seaton, 2013). Students will be motivated to engage in learning activities when they have a strong sense of self-efficacy (Pintrich, 2003).

Students reported the value of being able to seek help from all teachers, support staff, access to afterschool support, and opportunities to learn study skills. They want to be respected, and they notice when teachers show respect and acknowledge the student as an individual. Student perceptions impact their emotions and behaviors. These reactions structure students' environments and their beliefs (University of Connecticut, 2009). According to Bedel (2016), understanding motivation, self-efficacy, and attitudes toward learning are important for the improvement of educational quality.

In order to move forward, there needs to be more preservice and in-service training for teachers on how to increase student motivation, self-efficacy, build stronger teacher-student relationships, and classroom management. It is crucial to informing successful classroom practices and creating a safe, productive learning environment.

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument

Think about your sixth grade year when answering the questions below. Select the response that best describes your experience in 6th grade.

When I was in sixth grade:

1. I was certain I could figure out how to do the most difficult class work.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

2. During the first weeks of being in sixth grade, I had a difficult time finding my way around.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

3. I had a difficult time following classroom rules.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

4. My teachers were willing to help me when I had questions.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

When I was in sixth grade:

5. I felt my teachers cared about me as an individual.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

6. If I tried hard enough, then I understood what was taught in all of my classes.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

7. I could do almost all the work in class if I did not give up.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

8. Throughout the year, I had a difficult time finding my classes.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

When I was in sixth grade:

9. Even if the work was difficult, I believed I could learn it.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

10. My teachers listened if I was upset or had a problem.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

11. My teachers encouraged me to do my best.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

12. I finished my assignments on time.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

13. I worked hard to do well in school even if I did not like what we were doing.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

When I was in sixth grade:

14. I enjoyed having a locker.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

15. I could do even the most difficult work in sixth grade if I tried.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

16. I enjoyed having different teachers for different classes.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

17. My teachers had a sense of humor.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

18. My teachers spoke to me in a positive manner.

   Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

When I was in sixth grade:

19. If I didn't understand something at first, I kept trying until I did.

    Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

20. I asked my teachers to help me on concepts I didn't understand well.

    Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

21. I expected to do well on my report card.

    Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

22. My sixth grade teachers clearly explained how they expected me to behave.

    Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

When I was in sixth grade:

23. I believed I could learn the math work in sixth grade.

    Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

24. I believed I could learn the reading, writing, and language skills in sixth grade.

    Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

25. It was important to me to make good grades.

    Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

26. I believed I could make passing grades on school assignments.

    Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

27. I cared about how well I did in my classes.

    Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

When I was in sixth grade:

28. I had more homework in sixth grade than in fifth grade.

    Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

29. It was difficult for me to make it to class on time.

    Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

30. The Open House at my middle school was helpful.

    Strongly Disagree   **Disagree** **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**   **Did not attend**

31. The tour and presentations at my middle school during the day with my classmates was helpful.

    Strongly Disagree   **Disagree**   **Agree** **Strongly Agree** **Did not attend**

32. How important do you think each of the following is for helping a new middle school student adjust to middle school?

    a. Talk about what to expect in middle school

        Not Important   **Somewhat Important**   **Very Important**

    b. Help us become familiar with finding our way around within the school

        Not Important   **Somewhat Important**   **Very Important**

    c. Provide time for us to talk about issues that concern us

        Not Important   **Somewhat Important**   **Very Important**

    d. Provide tips on managing lockers and getting to class

        Not Important   **Somewhat Important**   **Very Important**

    e. Teach study skills and time management

        Not Important   **Somewhat Important**   **Very Important**

    f. Provide support groups with counselors about changes in middle school

Not Important   Somewhat Important   Very Important

33. Overall in thinking back over every aspect of your sixth grade year (friends, classmates, teachers, academics, the school environment) how would you rate your 6th grade year?

Worst year ever   Okay   The same as always   Best year ever

34. What did you like most about sixth grade? Rank the items listed below using the numbers 1 through 6 (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). Use a 1 to show what you liked the most and a 6 showing what you liked the least.

_____ a. More freedom in changing/getting to classes
_____ b. friends
_____ c. having different teachers during the day
_____ d. connections
_____ e. having a locker
_____ f. other _____

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions
Statement to Students
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. There are no risks to you in this study. All information is confidential, and no information shared in the sessions will be used for any reason beyond the research study, nor will it be shared with school personnel. Taking part in the focus group will allow you to give input about making the transition to middle school more successful for students. There is no advantage and you may stop at any time without penalty. If for any reason you should feel the need to discuss your experience in this study and the matters it investigates with someone other than the researcher, you will be allowed to meet with the 7th grade counselor at your school.

Transition
Think about your 6th grade tour and/or open house.
What do you think was the most helpful in supporting your move from elementary to middle school?
What part do you feel was least helpful in supporting your move to middle school?

Motivation
What did you do if something was hard to understand while in 6th grade?
What caused you to keep working or give up?

Self-Efficacy
What did you do if work in 6th grade became difficult?
What did you do if the work was too easy?
How did you know you had done your best work or not your best work even when the teacher did not give you a grade?

Differences
What is your opinion about having different teachers for different subjects in sixth grade?
What did you like?
What did you not like?

S/T Relationship
What was your relationship like with your 6th grade teachers?
If you had teachers in 6th grade who you felt cared about you, what did they do that made you feel they cared?
If you had teachers in 6th grade who you felt did not care about you, what did they do that made you feel they did not care?

Appendix C

Individual Interview Questions

Individual Interview questions
Statement to Students

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. There are no risks to you in this study. All information is confidential, and no information shared in the sessions will be used for any reason beyond the research study, nor will it be shared with school personnel.

Taking part in the interview will allow you to give input about making the transition to middle school more successful for students. There is no advantage and you may stop at any time without penalty. If for any reason you should feel the need to discuss your experience in this study and the matters it investigates with someone other than the researcher, you will be allowed to meet with the 7ᵗʰ grade counselor at your school.

Interview Questions

Students in the focus group said they were confident they had done well even when the teacher did not give them a grade…

1. What can teachers do to help students be more confident in their work and themselves?

2. What can the school do to help you be successful and reach your goals?

Students in the focus group were concerned about different teachers having different expectations…

3. How did your 6ᵗʰ grade teachers communicate their academic/ behavior expectations to you?

4. What do you think teachers can do to be more consistent with expectations in each classroom?

Students in the focus group said they had a good relationship with some teachers and not others…

5. What do you think teachers should know so they can a build better/stronger relationship with their students?

Students in the focus group said tours of the school, meeting their teachers, and having a schedule of classes before school started helped to ease their fears about coming to middle school…

6. What do you think students need from their 5ᵗʰ and 6ᵗʰ grade teachers so that they are more prepared for the transition to middle school?

7. If you had a sibling coming to middle school, what type of support would you like them have so they would be successful?

8. You will be transitioning to high school soon. What type of support would you like to see in place to help you be successful?

Appendix D

Parental Consent Form

Parental Consent Form

A Mixed Methods Study of Student Perception of the Transition to Middle School

I am conducting research on student perceptions of the transition from fifth grade to sixth grade. This research may be able to help educators make informed decisions about transitional support for students based on the impacts revealed in the study. If your child is allowed to participate in this study, he/she will complete a 34 item survey, and may be selected to participate in a focus group or individual interview as well. A copy of the survey questions will be sent home 10 days prior to the survey being administered for parents to review. Parents may also review the survey questions after it has been administered.

Focus groups and interviews will be recorded in order to allow the researcher to review student responses and code those responses for common themes. When the research is complete, the audio recordings will be destroyed according to the school district policy.

There are no risks to students in this study. All information is confidential, and no person or school will be identified in the study. All focus group sessions are with the research interviewer only, and no individual information shared in the sessions will be used for any reason beyond the research study, nor will it be shared with school personnel.

If your child takes part in this project, he or she will have the opportunity to give input about making the transition to middle school more successful for students. Taking part in this project is entirely up to you, there is no advantage and no one will hold it against your child if you decide not to allow your child to participate. If your child does take part, he or she may stop at any time without penalty. In addition, you may ask to have your data withdrawn from the study after the research has been conducted.

If you have any questions concerning your student's involvement or participation in this study, please feel free to contact me at XXXXl. I can be reached at XXXX or by email at XXXX. If for any reason your student should feel the need to discuss his or her experience in this study and the matters it investigates with someone other than the researcher, please contact XXXX, 7th grade Guidance Counselor at XXXX, at XXXX or by email at XXXX. She will be available to assist your student if the need does arise.

This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University. Information on Gardner-Webb University's policy and procedure for research involving human subjects can be obtained from Dr. Doug Eury at Gardner-Webb University.

Sincerely,

Danyah M. Hill

Consent Statement

I agree to let my child take part in this project. I understand that my child will complete a survey and may be selected to participate in a focus group or interview. I understand my child can withdraw from the study at any time.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

Audio Consent Addition

I agree to audio recording at XXXX during the months of February, March, and April, 2016.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

Danyah Hill and other researchers approved by Gardner-Webb University may use the transcripts of the focus group and interviews in which my child participated. The transcripts may be used for

this research project, teacher education, and presentation at professional meetings. I understand that there will be no link to my child's identity.

_____   _____   _____

Signature   Date   Address

Appendix E

Student Assent Form

Student Assent Form

Hello, my name is Danyah Hill, and I am a student at Gardner-Webb University where I am working on my doctoral degree. I am conducting a research project to learn about what things influence sixth graders when they come to middle school. I am inviting you to participate in this study because I need seventh-grade students who attended middle school during sixth grade. I want you to learn about this study before you decide if you want to be in it.

If you agree to be in this project, you will be asked to complete a survey, and possibly participate in a small focus group or interview. There is no advantage to participating in the project and you do not have to take part. You will not get into trouble with any of your teachers or anyone at school if you say no. At any time during the study you may stop.

Everything you answer during this project will be kept anonymous. This means that no one, including the researcher and any of your teachers, will know what response you gave. I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports of the study.

If for any reason you should feel the need to discuss your experience in this study and the matters it investigates with someone other than the researcher, please contact XXXX, 7th grade Guidance Counselor at XXXX, at XXXX or by email XXXX. She will be available to assist you if the need does arise.

This project will help new sixth graders by letting us know how we can help them when they move from elementary school to middle school.

Please sign this form if you want to join this project.

Name of Student   _____

Student's Signature   _____

Date _____

Researcher Signature   _____

Appendix F

Reminder to Parents for Focus Group

Parent Reminder: Focus Group

Parents,

I am writing to thank you for allowing your child to participate in my research on student perceptions of the transition from fifth grade to sixth grade. This research may be able to help educators make informed decisions about transitional support for students based on the impacts revealed in the study. For the next step in my research, your child has been randomly selected to participate in a focus group which will be recorded in order to allow the researcher to review student responses and code those responses for common themes. When the research is complete, the audio recordings will be destroyed according to the school district policy.

There are no risks to students in this study. All information is confidential, and no person or school will be identified in the study. All focus group sessions and interviews are with the research interviewer only, and no individual information shared in the sessions will be used for any reason beyond the research study, nor will it be shared with school personnel.

There is no advantage and no one will hold it against your child if you decide not to allow your child to participate. If your child does take part, he or she may stop at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions concerning your student's involvement or participation in this study, please feel free to contact me at XXXX. I can be reached at XXXX or by email at XXXX. If for any reason your student should feel the need to discuss his or her experience in this study and the matters it investigates with someone other than the researcher, please contact XXXX, 7th grade Guidance Counselor at XXXX, at XXXX or by email at XXXX. She will be available to assist your student if the need does arise.

This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University. Information on Gardner-Webb University's policy and procedure for research involving human subjects can be obtained from Dr. Doug Eury at Gardner-Webb University.

Sincerely,

Danyah M. Hill

Appendix G

Focus Group 1 Transcript School A

Focus Group 1 A

DH: Interviewer
P1, P2, or P2 -Participants

DH: Turn my volume way up. 1) XXXX. This is a statement to the students: "Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group. There are no risks to you in the study. All the information is confidential, and no individual information shared in the sessions will be used for any reason beyond the research study, nor will it be shared with any school personnel. Taking part in the focus group will allow you to give input about making the transition from middle school more successful for students. There is no advantage to you, and you may stop at any time without penalty. If for any reason you should feel the need to discuss your experience in the study and the matters it investigates with someone other than the researcher, you will be allowed to meet with the 7th grade guidance counselor at your school." All right. So think about your 6th grade tour or open house. What do you think was the most helpful in supporting your move from elementary to middle school?

P1: The tour around the school

DH: Why?

P1: Because at first I was scared. I was a little bit lost.

P2: I felt that too. It was like I didn't feel like a little welcomed, a little bit, but I did at the same time. So like all my friends, like I'd seen some from elementary school, and some from other schools that I knew, so I was just a little more interested in being there at the same time as them.

DH: I saw some head nodding. You all agree with what they're saying? Was it nice to get a tour around the school?

P3: Yeah it helped with navigation around the school.

DH: Is it a lot bigger than your elementary schools? Or different?

Chorus: Yeah.

DH: OK, and I heard somebody mention seeing other people that you knew. So did you see people from other elementary schools or other kids from your school?

P1: People that went to (inaudible)

DH: Oh, people that went to your same elementary school. OK What was the least helpful about maybe the tour or the open house that you had, part of it that wasn't helpful?

P2: I don't think (inaudible)

P3: Because once we made that transition we were like more into school. So like it was fine.

DH: What did you do once you got here in 6th grade when something was hard to understand? How did you deal with that?

P2: If I didn't understand something in class I would just raise my hand and ask the teachers. If I didn't understand something that, like in a class I was transitioning to, I would just ask the teacher in the hallway, because they were always there to help.

DH: Anybody else agree with that? Disagree with that? Or the same experience? I see a lot of head nodding so agreeing with that statement. Looking back to 6th grade, what caused you to keep working on something that was hard, or to give up on something?

P2: Grades.

DH: Grades, was that motivation?

P3: The motivation from the teachers, like they would always be like, "You can do it. You can do it." And keep pushing you.

P1: The teachers pushing you.

P2: Sometimes you'll get a little frustrated with them, but in the end you know what they are trying to do, you know that they're trying to help you succeed.

DH: What did you do if the work was too easy?

P3: I did my best to do it either way.

P2: I either zoomed through it, or I struggled and asked the teacher. So if it was easy enough I would just through it and ask for the next assignment.

DH: Did you feel like most of the work was too easy or too hard?

P3: Mostly like average.

DH: Any particular class or subject that was too easy or too hard?

P1: Language Arts

DH: It was hard or easy?

Chorus: Easy.

DH: OK. Language Arts in 6ᵗʰ grade was easy?

P3: For us language arts was a little bit difficult because he had his own tone to it, so…

DH: So some difficult language arts and some language arts was easier. How did you know you had done your best work or not done your best work, even when the teacher didn't give you a grade? Could you tell and how could you tell?

P1: Because if I knew I tried my hardest it was the best I could do.

P2: This is like a reference to sports, if you know you give it your all, then your brain and your heart knows if you gave it your all, in that game or that practice, and I think everybody could tell if you do your hardest work.

DH: What's your opinion about having different teachers for different subjects in the 6ᵗʰ grade?

P1: It was amazing.

DH: It was amazing? Tell me more about it being amazing?

P1: You didn't have to stay with the same teacher for the whole day.

P2: But then again it has its downside, because they all assign homework, which means more homework, because sometimes they don't realize we have homework from our other teachers, too.

P3: I think it makes it easier on the teachers, too.

DH: Why?

P3: Because they always…like in elementary school they used to do multiple subjects, and they would have to transition from one reading straight into math, and sometimes they'd get confused with the terms, and sometimes we'll get confused with the terms. So it's like once you have that 4-minute break between classes, it gets your mind a little refreshed and ready for the next class.

DH: Anything else about having different teachers? So overall was that a better experience or a worse experience? I heard many of them positive.

Chorus: Better.

DH: It's better? OK. What was your relationship like with your 6ᵗʰ grade teachers?

P2: It depends on which ones it was.

DH: Talk to me about that. Whether specific ones, try not to use names, but that it was good with or it was bad with.

P2: My homeroom and my math teacher, they were both the same teacher, that was pretty much my favorite teacher, and my science teacher.

DH: Why do you think that was?

P2: They just had good personalities.

P3: They just made it a fun experience. It was sort of like a family almost, because you'd gotten that bond with them the whole year. But it was like building off of that, so it was like you're bonding more.

DH: So you felt like a family with all of your teachers and all the students. That's interesting. What were you going to say? Do you remember? All right. Anything negative in terms of relationships with teachers? That's good. If you had teachers in the 6th grade that you felt cared about you, what did they do to make you feel that way, that they cared about you?

P1: Pushed you harder.

DH: Pushed you harder. OK.

P2: I knew they wanted me to succeed. I knew that they wanted that because of their tone toward me. Because some of my other classmates, like some of them didn't care that they were going to make a good grade on a paper, but some of the teachers knew that I could do it, so they pushed me to that.

DH: If you had teacher who you felt didn't care about you, what did they do to make you fell like they did not care about you?

P2: I don't think I've had this experience, but I think what they would do, because I know from some of my classmates experiences, the experiences would be like they raise their hand, and the teacher would sometimes look over them and go to the next person.

P1: Because that person would be impatient or won't (inaudible) the answers, they have to have more.

DH: Anything else about that? Is there anything else that you want to share about the transition from elementary school to middle school? Things that you thought were good, things that you thought were bad?

P2: Uniforms were the worst part. And that's all I've got to say about that.

DH: Uniforms were the worst part? You didn't have them in elementary school? But you have them now.

P3: Certain schools had them, but some didn't.

DH: So you don't like the uniforms.

P2: Well, they're not such a bad thing because of bully prevention, but they're not the best, because I know you have to wear almost the same thing every day. You don't get to express yourself as you want to. But there are certain things that you can do, like the signatures or maybe if you're on a sports team, you get to dress up that day, or something like that.

DH: What is it about the uniforms that you don't like?

P1: Tucking in your shirt.

DH: Tucking in your shirt, OK.

P2: After awhile the sweatshirts get old. This is like my 4th one this year.

DH: OK. Anything else that you can think of that was good or helpful that was done by the school when you transitioned that you want to share…All right. Thank you so much for participating.

Appendix H

Focus Group 2 Transcript School A

Focus Group 2 A

DH: Interviewer
P1, P2, or P2 -Participants

DH: All right. This is Focus Group 2, XXXX l. Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group. There are no risks to you in the study. All information is confidential and no individual information shared in the sessions will be used for any reason beyond the research study, nor will it be shared with school personnel. Taking part in the focus group will all you to give input about making the transition to middle school more successful for students. There is no advantage and you may stop at any time without penalty. If for any reason you should feel the need to discuss your experience in the study in matters it investigates with someone other than the researcher, you'll be allowed to meet with the 7th grade counselor at your school.

Any questions before we start? OK. So we're going to think about your 6th grade tour or open house that was done for you before you came here. What do you think was the most helpful in supporting you from elementary to middle school?

P1: The form they gave you for your classes and the room number.

P2: They introduced you to your teacher and how things work around here.

DH: So on your tour you got to meet your teachers.

P2: It helped me like when teacher took a summer tour that helped me a lot.

DH: So once you got here, and the teachers took you on the tour, why did that help you?

P2: Because I got to get to know my teacher a lot better when they took us.

P3: In the open house I got to see like how the school looked like and where to go and everything.

DH: What was the least helpful. Is there something that you did on the tour or the open house that was not really helpful to you?

P1: Well if people in AIG, and they're supposed to be and they're not, and they're put into the other grading, like the other side, and they're automatically switched back to the AIG, that wasn't helpful. I got to learn from another teacher, but then I was switched back.

DH: So some of the groupings you didn't meet with your actual teacher? OK. Anything else that people didn't find helpful?

P2: I did not find helpful the transition was very difficult when you first came. It was very hard to tell where your room is.

DH: So it was hard for you to figure out where your room was in the transition. OK Think back to 6th grade, if something was hard for you to understand, what did you do?

P1: Ask the teacher.

P3: I asked the teacher to explain what I didn't get and then if I got it, I said thank you, or whatever, but I actually got it.

P2: I asked people around the school like if I didn't know where things were I'd ask.

DH: What kind of people?

P2: Like teachers or maybe 8th graders that had been here for some time.

DH: So older students and staff. When you got to something that was difficult, what caused you to keep working on it or to give up on it.

P1: It was kind of motivating.

DH: What was motivating?

P1: How people study for a long time and give you that information that they've studied before.

DH: OK. So the example from a teacher.

P1: Um hum.

P2: The teachers motivated me a lot.

DH: How?

P2: They pushed me and whenever I didn't understand and I asked them, they (inaudible) to help me understand better.

DH: What did you do if the work became too difficult in 6th grade?

P3: Asked another student or figured it out for awhile, and then if you're still having trouble ask the teacher.

P2: I would (inaudible) other groups, like how (inaudible)

DH: Oh, so you have different groups here?

P2: We have 4 groups.

P3: Like different math teachers in each group in each grade level. You could ask them or ask for extra help.

DH: So you have access to teachers that are not your teacher. Is that right?

P2: Um hum. Yes, ma'am.

DH: What if the work was too easy what did you do?

P1: Ask for harder work

DH: You asked for harder work?

P2: I would just do it, and if another student had trouble doing it, then I would help them.

P3: I would just do it.

DH: How did you know if you had done your best work or not done your best work, even when the teacher didn't give you a grade?

P1: You just felt confident to yourself.

P2: When you don't try, it's a little bit (inaudible) and you don't.

DH: OK. What's your opinion about having different teachers for different subjects when you got to 6th grade?

P1: Sometimes when the teacher that has to split you up with other teacher that would find that.

DH: What do you mean when they just split you up.

P1: Well, if the teacher like had something to do, or the split you up into groups and you go to one group, and you go to one room, and then that's what period you'll be in.

DH: OK, so if a teacher was absent…

P1: He could have just called a sub.

DH: OK, so that was difficult. What about in general, just having different teachers for different subjects in 6th grade.

P2: At first it was kind of hard, because you had to get used to like 3 or 4 different teachers, and you had to keep switching during each period, and it was kind of confusing but I got used to it.

P3: Very difficult. I think like at first it was you had to learn what your teacher expected from you, but then after that, it helped me a lot, because if I had trouble with reading or something I could go to that reading teacher and ask them to help me.

P1: When you study a subject and like you can't go to a reading teacher and ask for math help, or you can't go to a math teacher to ask for reading help, so it's pretty (inaudible)

DH: So teachers focus on one topic. What was the hardest thing about changing the different expectations? You both mentioned expectations being different in different classrooms. What is the hardest about that?

P2: Because like one teacher would have high expectations for you to a grade, and another teacher would have lower expectations, because it would be a not (inaudible) class, but it was still important.

P3: Like my reading teacher, she really didn't expect a lot of us. But our math teacher, she was strict, and she expected a lot of us. And so it was kind of hard, because you've got to keep switching your brain. So that's what I found most difficult about it.

DH: Other thoughts on that?

P1: We had to like know, like after we had like a (inaudible) we have to like change our brain to math automatically, because (inaudible)

DH: Overall did you like having different teachers in the 6th grade or not?

P1: It was OK. It wasn't bad.

P2: It was in the middle.

DH: Everybody thinks it was kind of OK?

P3: Most of the time.

DH: Think about your relationships with your 6th grade teachers, what were your relationships like with your 6th grade teachers?

P1: Some relationships were like good and some were not very interesting, and some were like scary. Because sometime if you have a strict teacher.

P2: Some of your teachers would be like so nice to you and like patient, but one person and a teacher could be like enemies.

P3: I had a (inaudible) with my 6th grade teachers. They were pretty nice.

P4: (This is very hard to hear) My relationship with math and social studies teacher because I had had my social studies teacher before in elementary school, but I hadn't (inaudible)

P2: My English teacher I couldn't keep up with him and it really ticked me off.

DH: So what was that like for you?

P2: It was hard to keep up with him and I was getting very frustrated at various times, having to ask students' help.

DH: If you think back to your 6th teachers, if you had teachers that you thought cared about you, what did they do to make you feel like they cared about you?

P1: They would think, oh, if I was in the mind of a student, what would I do? And they found a way to help us even though we all had different levels of (inaudible).

P2: And they encouraged us students the best way they can, and they like helped them.

P3: Some would be like, "Take you time." And others would want to push us to be better of ourselves.

DH: If you had teachers that you felt didn't care about you, what did they do to make you feel like they didn't care about you?

P4: They wouldn't pay attention to you.

P2: If you asked them a question, they would like shorthand you, and then like go to another student and help them.

P3: They tended to help other students more than you. (inaudible)

P2: And you ask for help and they just shorthand you, and then they get mad when you ask another question.

P4: They zone out on you, even though you had your hand up the whole time. And it really tests your limits to keep than in yourself without going over.

DH: You felt disrespected, is that what you said.

P2: Oh, no. They just it seems like they test your limits of how you disrespect the teacher, and I don't like to disrespect the teachers.

DH: But it was frustrating? OK. Is there anything else that you want to share about your transition from 5th grade to 6th grade, elementary to middle school, that you think was good or not good?

P1: I met a lot of new friends, and I've got (inaudible)

P2: True. I mean your personalities in people and you make new friends.

P3: You get more mature in middle school, and like you don't get as much as baby student as you get in elementary school, so you have to get used to being independent on your own, and being more mature.

P4: There are a lot of obstacles to (inaudible) school to overcome.

DH: Do you feel like you were prepared for those?

P4: Not at first. It took a little time to find out the things you needed to be prepared. But once over time you got used to it.

P3: You get more opportunities and you get more responsibilities growing up, and going to middle school, because you get to see what's really there.

DH: Anything else? All right. Thank you, guys.

Appendix I

Focus Group Transcript School B

Focus Group B

DH: Interviewer
P1, P2, or P2 -Participants

DH: This Focus Group 1, XXXX. Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group. There are no risks to you in the study. All information is confidential and no individual information shared in the sessions will be used for any reason beyond the research study, nor will it be shared with any school personnel. Taking part in the focus group will allow you to give input about making the transition to middle school more successful for students. There is no advantage and you may stop at any time without penalty. If for any reason you should feel that you need to discuss the experience of the study and the matters it investigates with someone other than the researcher, you will be allowed to meet with the 7th grade counselor at your school. OK, any questions before we start? All right. So I want you to think about your 6th grade tour or open house, or whatever it is that you did at that point. What do you think was the most helpful in supporting you from elementary to middle school?

P1: I think knowing the locations where your classes were going to be.

DH: OK, so did you get to go on a tour.

P2: Yeah, and they took us around the school to find your classes.

DH: OK, what are some other things that people thought were helpful? Or not helpful?

P3: The extended dress code (inaudible)

P3: Schedules. When I was in elementary school, you had to go to the open house and get your schedule, and then look for your classes, but it was helpful to get your schedule in the mail.

DH: So you got it in the mail before you ever came. OK Anything else helpful about your tour or your open house? What was not helpful? Was there something about the tour or the open house that was not really helpful to you?

P2: There were a lot of kids there that weren't really there to look at classes. They were just walking around and causing trouble.

DH: OK. Anything else that wasn't helpful?…OK, thinking back to 6th grade, what did you do if something was hard to understand in the 6th grade?

P1: I'd ask the teacher for help.

P2: I'd ask the class aid for help.

P3: I'd ask for more help like maybe after school.

DH: And did that work?

P3: Yes.

DH: Anything else other than asking classmates or asking teachers?

P4: Try to figure it out yourself.

DH: To try to figure it out yourself?

P2: Studying at home.

DH: OK. What caused you to keep working on something that was hard, or to give up on it?

P1: Grades.

DH: So I see some nodding. So grades was a big one. Anything else that caused you to keep working on something.

P2: Well, probably in your EOG, because if you don't know it and your give up and it's on EOGs, it's going to be harder for you to actually solve it or answer it.

DH: Anything in particular that made you give up on working on something?

P3: When I ask the teacher for help and she doesn't explain it well, and I still don't get it.

DH: I see lots of agreement for that. OK. What did you do if the work became too difficult?

P1: I'd ask for easier work.

DH: You'd ask for easier work?

P1: That worked. I guess.

P2: I'd partnered up with somebody.

DH: What would you do if the work was too easy?

P1: I'd ask for harder work.

P2: I would do it.

DH: Did that happen? Was there work that was too easy?

Chorus: Yes.

P3: Yes, for me, especially this year in language arts class.

DH: So think about 6th grade for me. Is there a 6th grade specific class that was too easy?

P2: All my classes.

DH: OK

P3: My 6th grade math.

P2. 6th grade social studies

P1: 6th grade science.

DH: So 6th grade science was too easy for you. So all different. How did you know that you had done your best work or not done your best work if the teacher didn't give you a grade?

P1: You're just confident in yourself.

DH: Other thoughts on that? Was there a way for you to know?

P2: To see what some of the other classmates got on their answers.

DH: OK, compare them.

P1: I could tell by how I did, like how hard I think I worked.

P2: (inaudible) specific classes

DH: That's true, if they give you a grade, but if they don't you have to go on like some of the other things that you all were saying. Anything else about that one? What was your opinion about having different teachers for different subjects in 6th grade?

P1: I think it was easier. Like in elementary school it was kind of hard to catch up, and like having specific times for that class because in elementary school a lot our classes got pushed back because of like disrespectful students and stuff. It's easier to have specific times for different classes.

DH: Other thoughts about having different teachers for different subjects.

P2: I think it's good that we have different classes with different teachers, because like in elementary school, we always get to stay in one class, right, with all the subjects. Well, you kind of get more pressure. It's like your brain wouldn't work anymore because you're just in that class all day, instead of transitioning.

P3: It's easier to focus on one subject at a time.

P1: Yeah, like for instance math, and you go to reading, instead you could take a break while walking and refresh you mind again and talk to some people, and then you go to your next class.

DH: Anything that you didn't like about it?

P1: We didn't get enough time to (inaudible).

P2: I was going to say that.

DH: So say what you were going to say.

P1: We don't get enough time to transition to classes.

DH: How long is transition?

P1: 3 minutes.

DH: And what do you have to do during that transition time?

P2: They make us like use the rest room, like it's really hard to do that during transition time because sometimes teachers will let you out late. Sometimes teachers will close their door early.

P3: And then there are students standing in the hallway on their own, slows down the hall trying to get to class.

DH: Anything else you like or don't like about having different teachers and having different (inaudible) OK. Think about your relationships with your 6th grade teachers. What was it like? What were your relationships like with those 6th grade teachers?

P1: My best relationship was with my language arts teacher. It was really easy because had kids like the same age, and she could reflect on how our attitudes were and what we were thinking, how the work was. Her kids went to different schools, but it was really easy because she knew my mom, and it was really easy to connect with her. And not really any of the other teachers.

DH: OK

P2: I was just going to say that all my relationships with all my teachers was pretty good.

DH: Why do you think it was good?

P2: I don't know.

DH: What about you guys

P3: I still have (inaudible) teacher from last year.

DH: OK Do you have good relationships with them

P3: Um hum

DH What makes it good?

P3: They'll help you when you need help.

DH: I see some nods. OK. If you had teachers in 6th grade that you thought really cared about you, what did they do to make you feel that way?

P1: Those teachers would treat us like their son or daughter. Like if somebody (inaudible), we'd figure it out.

P2: They would greet us, like even if you're in a different class, in a different grade, they still say 'Hi' to you, and they make conversation with you. They still remember you.

DH: That's nice. Anything else about that? If you had teachers in 6th grade that you thought didn't care about you, what made you think they didn't care about you?

P3: My 6th grade math teacher moved up to 7th grade, and she's still just as rude as last year. She made it seem like she didn't want to help us, and make us do it on our own. Like she never really explained it that well. Like she barely even talked to us at the beginning of the class.

DH: Does anybody else have thoughts on that? Is there anything else that you want to share that was good or bad about your transition from elementary to middle school?

P2: The pressure that you have. Like when you're going to a new school, new grade and new people, everything. When you go through the doors you're just really nervous. It's hard for you to start being confident for the first few couple of classes, because you don't know anybody. But then after a couple of weeks it gets easier and you get less nervous about it.

DH: OK. Anything else anybody else wants to share about the transition from elementary to middle.

P3: I think you shouldn't be nervous about it because it's just a different school, because sometimes most of our friends are going to the same school and might be in the same classes.

P1: It's not really making (inaudible). Middle school was hard thinking about it, but it really wasn't that difficult a transition.

DH: OK.

Appendix J

Reminder to Parents for Individual Interview

Parent Reminder: Individual Interview

Parents,

I am writing to thank you for allowing your child to participate in my research on student perceptions of the transition from fifth grade to sixth grade. This research may be able to help educators make informed decisions about transitional support for students based on the impacts revealed in the study. For the next step in my research, your child has been randomly selected to participate in an individual interview which will be recorded in order to allow the researcher to review student responses and code those responses for common themes. When the research is complete, the audio recordings will be destroyed according to the school district policy.

There are no risks to students in this study. All information is confidential, and no person or school will be identified in the study. All focus group sessions and interviews are with the research interviewer only, and no individual information shared in the sessions will be used for any reason beyond the research study, nor will it be shared with school personnel.

There is no advantage and no one will hold it against your child if you decide not to allow your child to participate. If your child does take part, he or she may stop at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions concerning your student's involvement or participation in this study, please feel free to contact me at XXXX. I can be reached at XXXX or by email at XXXX. If for any reason your student should feel the need to discuss his or her experience in this study and the matters it investigates with someone other than the researcher, please contact XXXX, 7th grade Guidance Counselor at XXXX, at XXXX or by email at XXXX. She will be available to assist your student if the need does arise.

This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University. Information on Gardner-Webb University's policy and procedure for research involving human subjects can be obtained from Dr. Doug Eury at Gardner-Webb University.

Sincerely,

Danyah M. Hill

Appendix K

Individual Interview 1 Transcript School A

Individual Interview 1 A

DH: Interviewer
P -Participant

DH: This is Interview 1 XXXX. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. There are no risks to you in the study. All information is confidential, and no information shared in these sessions will be used for any reason beyond the research study, nor will it be shared with school personnel. Taking part in the interview will allow you to give input about making the transition to middle school more successful for students. There is no advantage, and you may stop at any time without penalty. If for any reason you should feel a need to discuss your experience in the study and the matters it investigates with someone other than your researcher, you will be allowed to meet with the 7th grade counselor at your school. Do you have any questions before we start?

So in the focus groups students said that they were confident that they had done well on assignments even when teachers didn't give them a grade. So what can teachers do to help students be more confident in their work and in themselves?

P: I think that encouragement and goes around the classroom and helping kids, asking them individually if they need anything, or have question would be really good. Sometimes teachers will just walk around and if you give your question, and then some people actually need help but they won't raise their hand.

DH: So just check in with everybody?

P: Yes.

DH: What can the school do to help you be more successful and reach your goals?

P: They're pretty good right now, because everyone in my class gets pretty good grades, and I do too.

DH: What do they do that's so good? And why is it so good you think.

P: The teachers have really good teaching…

DH: Model? OK

P: They have really good lessons too. It's all so bright and (?technical), whatever the word is.

DH: Oh, nice. Yeah, well great. It sounds like they're good. That's great. Students in the focus groups were concerned about different teachers having different expectations when they came in to the 6th grade. So how did your 6th grade teachers communicate their expectations for you, both academic and behavior?

P: In the beginning of each day of class they would have like an "I Can" statement, so it's what we were doing that day or that week or something, and in the beginning of the year they would tell us like we were going to do 5 lessons in math, and we'll learn this in reading, and then you just go through it during the year.

DH: What about behavior? How did you know what was expected in one class versus the other classes?

P: Well, really, you would get a warning for something in one class, and it would sort of follow into the next class. Like the school will follow different but some specific teachers had rules applying to their subjects.

DH: So it sounds like there was a lot of consistency. Is there anything that you think teachers need to do to be more consistent, so it's not so different from math to science?

P: I think that the consistency is kind of good because like in science or something you would have lots of (?inaudible) like applying to the materials there. Like if you're doing an experiment, like a math experiment, you've got different tools to use.

DH: Did you have the experience where you could do something in one class and not get in trouble for it, and then do it in another class, and you did break the rules? Or was it pretty consistent?

P: It was pretty consistent, but every once in awhile some thing that followed into another class (inaudible), so…

DH: The students in the focus groups said that they had good relationships with some teachers, and not with others. What do you think teachers should know so that they can build stronger and better relationships with their students?

P: Teachers that have the kids the whole year, math and reading, have better relationships with the kids because they have them in the beginning of the year, and they can do like 'get to know you' stuff, and then you know them for how many months we're in school. And the teachers who have them for one semester can do it for a little while, but then they have 3 new classes of kids again, so it's sort of hard to connect again.

DH: So what classes do you only have one semester with (inaudible)

P: Social studies and science you have one semester for each one.

DH: And then electives I assume. Student in the focus groups said that the tour of the school, meeting their teachers ahead of time, having a schedule of classes before school started helped to ease their fears about coming to middle school. What do you think students need from their 5th and 6th grade teachers so that they're more prepared.

P: Um…I think that like on the first day of school sort of planning out stuff, or maybe like the first week. In my experience when we did that 6th grade tour, the girl who did it

just went around and like hunted their teachers and stuff, and we finally went to the cafeteria without a ?(statement). We didn't know that this was like the 8th grade hall, the 7th grade hall, and stuff like that. So pointing that out as a teacher would be really helpful.

DH: So the tour was given by a student.

P: Yeah.

DH: OK. If you had a sibling coming to middle school, what type of support would you want for your sibling?

P: My sister is in 6th grade, so I sort of helped her out a little bit. We cam over the summer, so I pointed out to her some more details, and I think it might have helped her a lot.

DH: So if she didn't have you, are there things that you think would have been helpful.

P: It probably would have taken her longer to get to know the school and stuff, but since we showed her and stuff, it was helpful.

DH: So soon you're going to be transitioning to high school in a little over a year. What type of support would you like to help that be a successful transition?

P: I think that support would be the same, or sort of the same, from going elementary to middle and then middle to high, so I don't know if they do tours in high school as an 8th grader, but that would be really helpful, because high school is even more confusing than middle, and maybe meeting some people there, principals and teachers, and maybe some students. Just to get to know some people, so you're not really confused when you get there.

DH: Anything else you want to say to me about transitioning from elementary to middle or from middle to high?

P: No.

DH: OK. (end of recording)

Appendix L

Individual Interview 2 Transcript School A

Individual Interview 2 A

DH: Interviewer
P -Participant

DH: This is XXXX Interview 2. Thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview. There are no risks to you in the study. All information is confidential, and no information in the sessions is shared or used for any reason beyond the research study, nor will it be shared with any school personnel. Taking part in the interview will allow you to give input about making the transition to middle more successful for students. There is no advantage and you may stop at any time without penalty. If for any reason you should feel the need to discuss your experience in the study in the matter it investigates with someone other than the researcher, you will be allowed to meet with the 7th grade counselor here at school.

Do students in the focus group that I did a few weeks ago said that they were confident that they had done well on assignments even when the teachers didn't give them a grade. When can teachers do to help students be more confident in their work and in themselves?

P: Letting them work with a partner.

DH: So how does that help you be more confident when you work with a partner?

P: You can talk to them. Some people don't like to talk to the teachers, because they say (inaudible).

DH: What can this school do to help you be more successful and reach your goals?

P: Just keep doing what they're doing. I mean they've got an RTI class. If they know you're not doing good they'll put you in there.

DH: So that's what they're doing that's really helpful to you?

P: Yes, ma'am.

DH: Have you been to that before? And you get help in there and you feel good about that?

P: I'm of it now.

DH: That's awesome. Well, I'll try to hurry or you'll miss it. So what are the other things that the schools do that you think is really helpful.

P: Like they take a week on stuff, like if they know need help, they are going to keep taking time on it to make sure every single person in the class can get it done.

DH: OK. So students in this focus group were also concerned about different teachers having different expectations, so the rules were different in math maybe than English and science. How did your 6th grade teachers, if you think back to last year, how did they communicate their expectations for your behavior and for your work?

P: We had a clipboard, and if you did something bad, they'd write it down on the clipboard, and you get warnings. Then you get something like detention and all that.

DH: Was it the same in every class?

P: So the clipboard rotates with the class and then it comes back to your home room teacher.

DH: So it follows you all day long. If you got a warning in one class.

P: (inaudible) sentence.

DH: OK. And do you think that helped your behavior.

P: Because when people get caught talking and they get a warning in that class, they ain't going to talk in their other classes.

DH: So what about academics. How did you know what your teachers expected you to do academically?

P: Um, that's hard. I don't know.

DH: OK. What do you think teachers can do to be more consistent and more alike with what they expect from students?

P: I don't know.

DH: But you thought it was consistent?

P: Yeah.

DH: So in the focus group, teachers said that they had good relationships with some teachers and not good relationships with others. What do you think teachers should know so they can build better relationships with their students.

P: They should know that a student might pay more attention to…because like sometimes the student can sad, and then they ask them a question and they get tangled up in it and they don't know like what's wrong with them.

DH: Students in the focus group said that things like touring the school and meeting the teachers ahead of time, and having their class schedule before school helped them not be

so scared to come to middle school. What do you think that students need from 5th grade to 6th grade so they can be more prepared to transition?

P: I think they need to meet the teachers earlier than what they do.

DH: So even earlier than what you did?

P: Yes. Like we did here they talked for about an hour and we just rotated.

DH: If you had a sibling coming to middle school, what things would you want for them so they could be successful.

P: The same thing they're doing now with RTF, because my little sister needs help and I want her to be put in a class where she can get help.

DH: OK, good big brother. So soon you will be transitioning into high school, in about a year. What type of things do you want to see in place to help your transition for high school be successful.

P: I want to see my reading grade go up some.

DH: OK, and is there anything that you did coming to middle school, like those tours and things that you think would be important going to high school as well.

P: I think being put in that class again would help me.

DH: Putting in that extra support would help. Is there anything else you want to share with me?

P: No. (end of recording)

Appendix M

Individual Interview Transcript School B

Individual Interview B

DH: Interviewer
P -Participant

DH: OK, this is XXXX Interview 1. Thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview. There are no risks to you in the study. All information in confidential, and no information shared in the session will be used for any reason beyond the research study, nor will it be shared with school personnel. Taking part in the interview will allow you to give input about making the transition to middle school more successful for student. There is no advantage, and you may stop at any time without penalty. If for any reason you should feel the need to discuss your experience in the study and the matters it investigates with someone other than the researcher, you will be allowed to meet with the 7th grade counselor at your school. Do you have any questions before we start?

P: No.

DH: OK. Students in the focus group said that they were confident that they had done well even when the teacher didn't give them a grade. What can teachers do to help students be more confident in their work and in themselves?

P: Talk about how they feel, and how things can help them do better.

DH: Have the students talk about it?

P: The teachers.

DH: Have the teachers talk about the students with them. OK, what can the school do to help you be more successful and to reach your goals?

P: I think they're doing the right thing, because they have people that speak Spanish, and so they can talk with (inaudible) and help them do better.

DH: OK, anything else that the school could do to help you reach your goals?

P: Work better on the behavior.

DH: So work on the behavior. Students in the focus group were concerned about different teachers having different expectations as they changed classes. So how did your 6th grade teacher communicate their expectations to you? The academics and the behavior.

P: They were all (inaudible), but some people ran into (inaudible) and the teachers got all (inaudible)

DH: So how did you know what was expected of you in a classroom?

P: To behave.

DH: Did they tell you out loud.

P: Yeah, they tell you the first day the rules, and what the teachers expects from their students.

DH: What about academic expectations? How did you know what your teachers expected of you in terms of your work?

P: Because they wanted us to do better and be someone you like.

DH: And how did you know they wanted you to do better?

P: Because they loved their job with me and they loved teaching.

DH: So you could tell by something that they did or said?

P: Yeah, one teacher told me that "I know you can do better, and I want you to be someone that does."

DH: Great, so they tell you very clearly. The students in the focus group were also concerned about teachers having different expectations. What do you think teachers can do to be more consistent from class to class.

P: More what?

DH: More consistent, so more alike. So like when you went to math maybe there was one rule and when you went to English there was another rule, and another rule in science. What can teachers do to make it more alike in their classes?

P: Be nice to students. Have the same (inaudible) and to be nice with students.

DH: OK. Students in the focus group said that they had good relationships with some teachers and bad relationships or not as good relationships with others. What do you think teachers should know so they can build better relationships with their students?

P: I think the students should talk about how they feel about how they are treating them, maybe it's now the way they (inaudible)

DH: So students being able to say how they feel about what's going on?

P: Yes.

DH: Students in the focus group said that tours of the school and meeting their teachers and having a schedule of their classes before school started help them ease their fears about going to middle school. What do you think that students need from 5th grade and 6th grade teachers so that they're more prepared for middle school? To make it easier.

P: Um. I think they have the open houses and that's a good idea because they know what classes they have and what teachers are like, and they know where to go and there won't be that confusion when they first come to school.

DH: Did a lot of the kids attend open house when you came?

P: Yeah.

DH: Yeah? Could you tell a difference when you started school, about the kids who had been to the open house and the kids who hadn't been to the open house?

P: Well, the students that had been at the open house, they knew where to go, and they just went. But the student that didn't go to the open house, they were just walking around asking where they go.

DH: If you had a sibling, a younger brother or sister, coming to middle school, what would you like for them to have so they would be really successful?

P: Oh. Um, I'd like them to have confidence in themselves, and if they have a question they need they will tell me or tell a teacher.

DH: OK, to tell you or to tell or to tell a teacher. So what if you're already in high school, is there anybody else that, or anything else that you think they could do, or you would want for them.

P: Tell a counselor.

DH: So having a good relationship with the adults on campus.
You will be transitioning to high school soon. What would you like to see in place to help you transition to high school successfully.

P: Teachers from that school.

DH: Like teachers coming over and visiting from the school. Anything else? What do you feel like you need to know about the high school before you go?

P: I think we need an open house in high school.

DH: And what would you like to see at that open house?

P: The teachers, and what (inaudible)

DH: So schedules and things like that. Seeing the building ahead of time. Anything else that you think you would like to know or have before you got to high school?

P: (?How a board sliding.) Like here in middle school we have to find it, but I don't know about high school.

DH: What's the timer do?

P: It counts down and when it goes to zero you're like tardy a class.

DH: OK. So you know exactly what the expectation is. So you need to know what all the rules are for high school and how that works. OK. Is there anything else that you want to say to me about transitioning from middle school?

P: No.

DH: OK (end of recording)