

ABSTRACT

Kenna L. Wilson, *STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON BELONGING: THE TRANSITION OF STUDENTS FROM MIDDLE SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL* (Under the direction of Dr. Matthew Militello). Department of Educational Leadership, December 2021.

The transition from middle to high school for students is filled with social and academic challenges. Students who do not successfully navigate these obstacles are more likely to drop out of high school resulting in a myriad of negative consequences for them and their communities. Student voice is an important but often overlooked asset in education. Therefore, to design improved transition programs, it is worthwhile to empirically study the student perspective. This study gathers perspectives about the school supports that most contributed to their success in ninth grade from students who did not drop out. Using InQuiry methodology, three distinct viewpoints emerged: Captains, named due to their self-reliance, Passengers who relied on support from school structures, and Crew who thrived due to supportive social network. The findings of this study can be used by school leaders to better understand how to design effective supports for students as they make the important step from middle to high school.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON BELONGING: THE TRANSITION OF STUDENTS FROM
MIDDLE SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL

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by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my loving husband, Joe, and my two sons, Avery and John-Tyler. All of my work is made possible by the unwavering love and the steadfast support of these three amazing human beings. I would also like to dedicate this work to my parents, Bob and Karen, who did not see their talkative, opinionated little girl as bossy but rather as a little girl with leadership potential with a passion to change her world.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

Beginning with entry into kindergarten, children face many transitions as they move through the traditional public education school system as a student. Students adjust to new teachers, different peers, unique social expectations, and changing academic standards as they journey through each grade level. Elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools operate in vastly different ways in all aspects of organization. Each level in the traditional public education school structure maintains different standards of accountability and holds dissimilar perceptions of student needs (Chapman & Sawyer, 2001). As a result, the kinds of support offered to students during transitions differ across districts and schools within districts.

The ability to connect within the school environment and sustain a sense of belonging is challenged by the natural transitions presented by movement through public school. All children have a need for belonging (Barr & Gibson, 2013; Maslow, 1943). Children must feel a sense of connection, safety, and value within the educational environment before the child can fully reach their academic potential (Maslow, 1943). By understanding these needs, the requisite for careful planning of transition supports for all students becomes apparent (McLeod, 2016). A child's ability to navigate through transitions presented within public school can be negatively impacted when a child faces life factors such as poverty, physical illness, parent divorce, substance abuse, early pregnancy, criminal activity, and/or frequent relocation (Wang et al., 1998). As a result, the factors faced by children defined as at risk present unique challenges in developing systems of support at each stage of change in their educational career.

Currently, students at every grade level face high stakes accountability measures. While acknowledging transitions within elementary grades and the middle grades are challenging for

students, the stakes become more complex at the secondary level as students begin to perceive the chances of life success or failure on the basis of their experiences in high school (Chapman & Sawyer, 2001; Doll et al., 2013). The move from middle school to high school is recognized as particularly difficult for many students (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1992). Students in the 9th grade often experience a decline in grades and in attendance as well as an increase in discipline issues. Students often report increased feelings of isolation during their transition to high school. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) cite an increase in exit exam requisites, higher stakes standardized testing, and graduations requirements as factors creating even greater pressure on 9th graders. Additionally, 9th graders are often enrolled in the most demanding coursework during their initial year in high school. Many rising 9th graders are simply unprepared for the independence and rigor offered at the high school level (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Even typical students who do not appear to be at risk for academic failure face challenges entering high school (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008; Langenkamp, 2010).

Students who are at risk may encounter even more obstacles than other students as they enter high school because of a history of physical, social, and emotional challenges. Students identified as at risk comprise the group of students most likely to experience an academic loss during the transition period to high school (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008; Langenkamp, 2010). Logically, the losses experienced during the 9th grade school year for an at risk student add to already existing obstacles making the work of recovering from failure for the student more difficult. Horwitz and Snipes (2008) reported between 70% and 80% of students who fail in 9th grade will not graduate from high school. With the consequences of failure being so high, the importance of success in 9th grade is complicated further by the courses contemporary students are required to take in the 9th grade. The obligation of schools to put supports in place during the

first year of high school for all students with specific emphasis on those students who are most at risk becomes apparent. The impact of the success or failure of a child during 9th grade year will likely determine whether the child graduates from high school with chances of positive post-secondary outcomes.

Districts can ensure positive outcomes for students at the high school level by proactively addressing the factors that lead to failure. Strategic interventions to support students during the 9th grade year which create a “culture of caring” and provide a sense of belonging are necessary (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014; Ma, 2003). By preventing academic failure, the outcomes of at risk students are greatly improved (Rumberger, 1995). Students who fail during high school and drop out follow a process described by Finn (1989) as one of “failure—frustration—low self-esteem (p. 134).” Research by Jordan et al. (1996) outlined that academic performance, relationships, and student perceptions of high school decreased as students moved towards dropping out of school. Specifically, student self-perception of the context of the high school experience has been found to influence academic achievement and graduation outcomes (Fall & Roberts, 2012). The trend of the drop in the performance did not change across gender or racial lines. Lan and Lanthier (2003) also found significance in the relationship between students’ perceptions of school, teachers, and academic work during the 9th grade year in respect to dropping out of high school. Similarly, Simon (2013) found parents’ perceptions regarding their child’s transition to high school significantly impacts student performance. Simon (2013) also indicated strong communication with high school personnel with parents of rising 9th grade students improves transition. School districts focused on providing systems of support for 9th grade students reported greater positive outcomes for at risk students during the transition to high school (Ravenelle & Roche, 2016). With initiatives focused on the unique needs of 9th grade students, schools have observed

increases in passing rates of core courses and higher test scores in both reading and math courses (Sparks, 2016). Christie (2008) suggests high schools must “personalize” the 9th grade experience for students to ensure success (p. 157). To prevent academic failure and reduced post-secondary outcomes, districts must place intentional emphasis on designing transition supports for at risk 9th grade students. Districts can do this by developing intentional strategies which develop a sense of belonging and prevent early academic failure (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). Some examples of notable transition supports tried in high schools in recent years include summer bridge programs, double dose of reading and math, advisory programs, peer support programs, smaller learning communities, lower teacher/student ratios in 9th grade, increased parent communication about core curriculum and scheduling, attendance initiatives, and middle school programs providing exploration into high school offerings (Christie, 2008; Delamar, 2012; Ilic, 2011; Roybal, 2011; Straksis, 2010).

Focus of Practice

This study addresses the need for effective elements of transition supports for students entering the 9th grade from the middle school level. The question of what elements create successful transition supports to improve secondary educational outcomes for students is answered using students’ own perceptions as a guide. Research exists regarding the importance of 9th grade transition as well as the need for improvements in the area of transition. However, the absence of empirical research studying the issue using student voices is apparent. Research is readily found regarding parent perceptions, principal perceptions, and teacher perceptions related to student success in high school (Block, 2016; Grillo, 2012; Hauser et al., 2009; Simon, 2013; Walker, 2016). The research exists about the need for asking students about their educational programming, but the research is scant when looking for those who actually ask secondary

students (Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Wickert, 2015). The study of student voice related to their own educational experiences is an underexplored area of research. This lack of study extends to local school districts, including the district used in this study. Currently, no student input is sought by formal or informal means regarding transition supports. Parker (2013) summarizes the changes occurring in teens as they move to high school to include hormonal, mental, and physical changes. In addition, the self-perception, motivation and beliefs of the teens are impacted (Parker, 2013; Perkins & Gelfer, 1995). Pickhardt (2016) points to how challenging interacting with adolescents becomes for adults because of the development changes occurring in their bodies and minds. This may be a reason parents, teachers, and administrators do not typically seek input from adolescents regarding the district transition process.

The district used in this research faces unique challenges which create a high number of students who are defined as at risk. Locally, trends observed in the district regarding patterns of academic failure, drop out, frequent absenteeism, teenage pregnancy, discipline issues, criminal activity, gang involvement, and incarceration raise important questions. All are experienced in the Sandhills region of North Carolina by the at risk student population at significant rates. Juvenile crime rates, as reported in 2019, were at 19.9 per 1,000 (Moore County Health Department, 2020).

This number is higher than the state rate and higher than other peer counties. Nationally, the increase in the incarceration of African American and Hispanic youth has created a disproportionality in dropout rates (Child Trend Databank, 2015; Rios, 2009). Likewise, the negative impact of local juvenile crime is evident on the achievement of African American and Hispanic adolescents in the district. While dropout rates in the district have seen a decline in recent years, minorities continue to drop out a higher rate than their white counterparts.

The long term unemployment rate for the county of 5.67% in 2020 is slightly lower than the state average at 6.47% (*NC Commerce: Data, Tools & Reports, 2020*). Unemployment rates have a direct impact rates of poverty. Similarly, rates of poverty in a community increase the number of students who are at risk (American Psychological Association, 2009). In addition, teenage pregnancy rates in 2017 were reported at 21.9 per 1,000 which was a historic low with the state rate in the same year of 24.0 per 1,000 for the year. The district sees disparity in teenage pregnancy rates between Hispanics and African Americans who have higher rates of teen pregnancy than whites. African American teen girls are almost two and a half times as likely as white teen girls to become pregnant. Hispanic teen girls are almost twice as likely (Moore County Health Department, 2020).

While the district shows a declining number of teenage girls aged 15 to 19-years-old who became pregnant in the years between 2014 and 2017, teenage pregnancy continues to pose substantial challenges for the school district. The impact of teenage pregnancy on both girls and boys increases the need for intentional support for at risk factors related to academic performance and postsecondary outcomes. Both experience higher rates of substance abuse, decreased educational outcomes, higher incidence of later criminal activity, and long term negative outcomes regarding their financial well-being (Swierzewski, 2015). Both genders face greater chance of dropping out of high school; as a result, both face the likelihood of a lack of skills necessary for gainful employment (Laird et al., 2006).

Traditional state accountability measures such as standardized test scores, including end of course tests and the ACT, show all high school students in the district either underperform or slightly outperform compared to their counterparts across the state (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2020) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

District 2018-2019 End of Course Testing Results/State Testing Results

Students/Subject	District	State
Students Scoring Non Proficient (Level 1, 2)		
English 2	38%	40%
Math 1	46%	59%
Math 3	47%	53%
Biology	38%	40%
Students Scoring Proficient (Level 3, 4, 5)		
English 2	62%	59%
Math 1	50%	39%
Math 3	53%	47%
Biology	52%	58%

Note. Level 1: Limited Command of knowledge and skills; Does not performing at or above grade level; Does not meet North Carolina standard for college and career readiness. Level 2: Partial Command of knowledge and skills; Does not performing at or above grade level; Does not meet North Carolina standard for college and career readiness. Data from North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2020 (https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/src/reports/530LEA_2016_LEA.html).

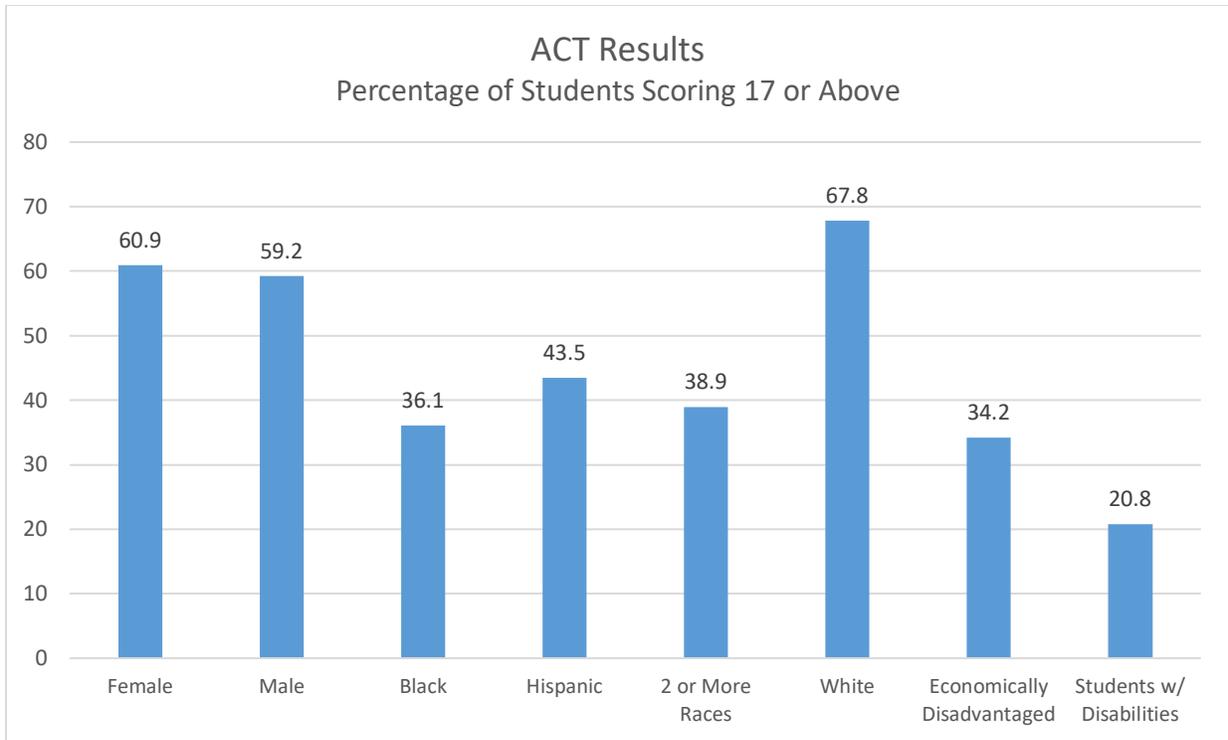
There is a sizeable achievement gap between those who are at risk and those who are not defined at risk in the district. Traditional data sources indicate a long-standing disparity of high school achievement between the two populations which has impacted the postsecondary outcomes of students who are at risk in the community. Disparities between minority student outcomes and their white counterparts exist in the district as well as the nation. Figure 1 illustrates one example of the academic outcome disparity in the district.

The same gaps are noted across all end of course measures in the district. The district mirrors the data observed nationally. Using a longitudinal study of 23,000 students who entered 9th grade in 2009, the researchers found that 2.7% of the 9th grade students had dropped out by 2012 when they were supposed to be 11th graders (United States Department of Education, 2015; see Figure 2).

The study explored how high school students view the supports provided by the district during a time identified as the most vulnerable transition for them and the time that is most closely tied to post-secondary outcomes. Using InQUIRY as a method of study, the researcher determined how students who have completed their 9th grade year perceive the transition supports in place for 9th grade students in the local education agency (LEA).

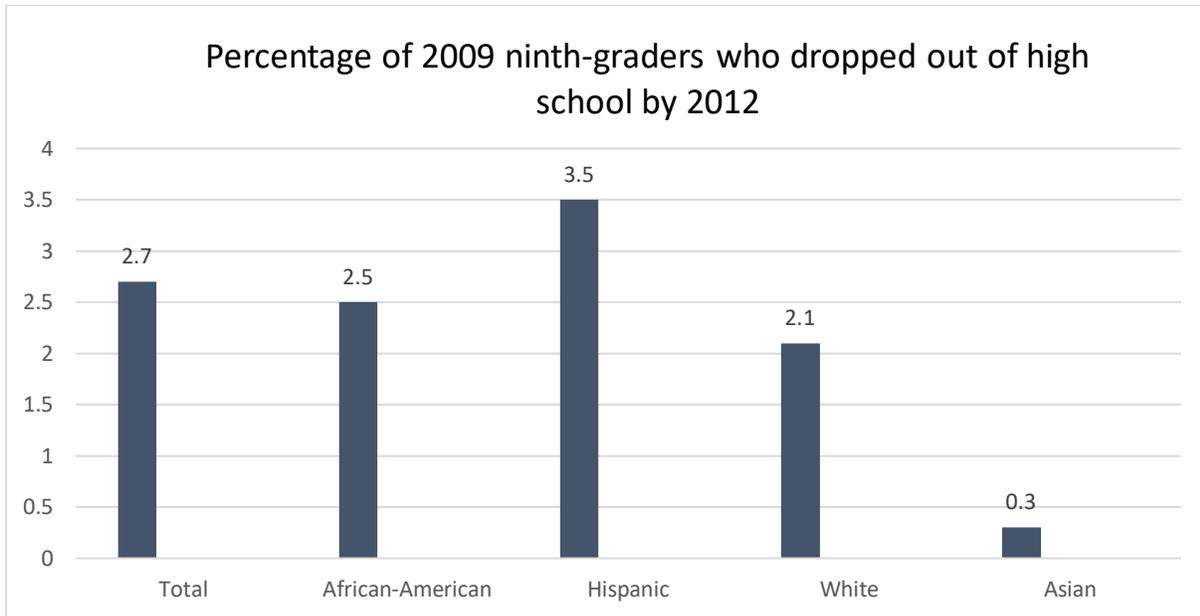
Research Questions

1. What are the effective elements of a transition supports for students entering the 9th grade from the middle school level?
2. What do current high school students in the LEA perceive as effective elements of their transition to high school from 8th grade to 9th grade?
3. Why do current high school students hold these perceptions?



Note: A score of 17 is considered the minimum ACT score to be considered for college admission in the UNC system. Data from North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2020. Retrieved from https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/src/reports/530LEA_2016_LEA.html

Figure 1. ACT Results: Percentage of students scoring 17 or above.



Note: Data from “Early High School Dropouts: What are Their Characteristics?” by United States Department of Education, 2015; Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015066.pdf>

Figure 2. Percentage of 2009 9th graders who dropped out of high school by 2012.

Overview of Methodology

This study investigated student perceptions about the transition to high school. The study used the InQuiry approach, applying Q methodology, to quantify 9th grade students' perceptions of transition supports. As one of the oldest methods in psychological research, Q methodology allowed the researcher to investigate the subjective breadth of the topic for which many different viewpoints, beliefs, and perceptions are held by stakeholders (Willig & Rogers, 2017). Through InQuiry and by using a Q methodology research design, readers are provided with a visual representation of various student perspectives on effective transition supports for rising 9th grade students entering a comprehensive high school. Participants consisted of a heterogeneous groups of students in a rural comprehensive high school. Two stages were utilized to determine how students perceived transition supports. Initially, the researcher compiled a set of Q Statements, referred to as the concourse, generated from literature and research. Next, the statements were compiled into a Q set. The Q set was used to determine factors of students with differing perceptions of effective transition supports. During the second stage, the researcher interviewed students about why they chose the items to better understand why they have the perceptions they do about what factors had the most impact on their transition from middle school to high school.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 provides the background and context of the study, the purpose and significance of the study, the research questions to be examined, and an overview of the research methodology.

Chapter 2 provides a review of research and literature focused on developmental needs of 9th grade students, the impact of transition to high school, relationships and academics, high school completion, and the importance of student perceptions on school success.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the methodology and research design used to answer the research questions. This study investigates student perceptions about the transition to high school and why students hold those perceptions.

Chapter 4 will present the findings and factors among the student population, known as the P set, and how these groupings were identified and named.

Chapter 5 will discuss the findings with the implications for future research and educational practice.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The impact of the success or failure of a child during their 9th grade year is one felt not only by the child but also by families, educators, and the community. Researchers have established a strong connection between student performance in 9th grade and high school completion as well as increased chances of positive post-secondary outcomes (Barajas-Ledesma, 2017). With the substantial cost of students not completing high school, the urgency for all students to graduate continues to be a predominate focus of current educational research. Schools across the country seek practices to assure the graduation of students. With 9th grade being viewed as the critical year for future high school completion, the middle to high school transition garners specific attention. As a result, extensive research outlines the challenges faced by adolescence making the transition to high school from middle school (Akos & Galassi, 2004b; Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014; McLeod, 2016; Ravenelle & Roche, 2016). As Chapman and Sawyer (2001) stated, “As the transition to high school approaches, the stakes become higher as students begin to connect school success or failure with perceived life chances” (p. 235).

In the United States, all children experience many transitions as they progress through the public education system. Transitions not only include those they experience through the growth process by aging from year to year but also include the transitions from elementary, middle, and high school. The demands of coping with the both physical and emotional developmental changes paired with the changes at each level of schooling can be challenging. Beginning in kindergarten, students adjust to new teachers, different peers, unique social expectations, and changing academic standards. Organizational changes at school levels often include increased school size and more departmentalization.

The need for high school completion is noted predominately across sources. National statistics indicate the one impact of more students graduating from high school includes significantly improved national, state, and local economies (Alliance of Excellence, 2017). As a result, there is a unique urgency to address all challenges for high school students that may prohibit their success, including those aspects of their transition from middle to high school. Incoming 9th grade students are met with rising academic standards, different teacher expectations, and greater freedom within the school setting. All are found to be potential challenges for students as an almost universal decline is found across studies on the academic performance of 9th grade students. Some experience a slight decline and recover quickly with traditional supports, however, for others the transition becomes a considerable stumbling block in their journey toward high school completion. Rising 9th grade students are often entering a school environment with different social demands. Each level in the traditional public education school structure face different standards of accountability and hold dissimilar perceptions of student needs (Anderson et al., 2000; Chapman & Sawyer, 2001). Additionally, the incongruity between the organization of the country's traditional comprehensive high school and the developmental needs of 9th grade students is cited as one reason for the challenges presented in the middle to high school transition (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). Murnane (2013) indicated the percentage of 9th grade students who failed to meet requirements to be promoted has increased in recent years. As a result, the kinds of support offered to students during transitions occurring within each level differ across districts and schools within districts. Social changes place additional demands on students transitioning as peer populations become more diverse and roles of teachers change in a comprehensive high school.

Maslow (1943) established all children have a need for belonging. Prerequisites for learning include feeling a sense of connection, safety, and value within the educational environment. As the natural transitions presented by movement through public school present challenges for some students to make connections and maintain a sense of belonging, the need for careful planning of transition supports for all students becomes apparent (Chou et al., 2015; McLeod, 2016). School transitions can be further complicated when a child faces life factors such as poverty, physical illness, parent divorce, substance abuse, early pregnancy, criminal activity, and/or frequent relocation (Wang et al., 1998).

While acknowledging transitions within elementary grades and the middle grades are challenging for students, the stakes become more complex at the secondary level as students begin to perceive the chances of life success or failure on the basis of their experiences in high school (Anderson et al., 2000; Chapman & Sawyer, 2001). The move from middle school to high school is recognized as particularly difficult for many students (Anderson et al., 2000; Chapman & Sawyer, 2001; Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1992). Students in the 9th grade often experience a decline in grades and in attendance as well as an increase in disciplinary issues. Students report more feelings of isolation during their transition to high school. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) cite an increase in exit exam requisites, higher stakes standardized testing, and graduation requirements as factors creating even greater pressure on 9th graders. Additionally, 9th graders are often enrolled in their most demanding coursework during the initial year in high school. Many rising 9th graders are simply unprepared for the independence and rigor offered at the high school level (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Even typical students who do not appear to be at risk for academic failure face challenges entering high school (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008; Langenkamp, 2010). Since the high

stakes climate of accountability established by the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 leaves little flexibility on the academic side of the equation, addressing the needs of identified at risk student groups has forced schools to improve their systems of support, including transition programs for rising 9th grade students (Camera, 2015).

Research has been wide spread to attempt to better understand the unique needs of students transitioning to high school. The myriad of factors at play during the transition to high school for students has led researchers to investigate the factors through many lenses. Literature focused on the middle to high school transition concentrates on ways to accommodate the developmental needs of 9th grade students, finding a better understanding of the distinctive challenges faced by 9th grade students, and determining effective practices to support 9th grade students. Some research efforts have also been made to measure the value of attaining the perspectives of those impacted by a problem. The literature reviewed for this study will give the reader an enhanced understanding of importance of effective transition supports for 9th grade students, an increased awareness of the distinctive needs of the learner in the 9th grade, and the need for inquiry regarding student perceptions of their school experiences.

The literature review begins with a discussion of the developmental needs of 9th grade students including the physiological, intellectual, psychological, and social and emotional factors and how those needs impact the transition to high school. The effect of puberty on transition is also investigated. The review looks at the importance of high school completion. By doing so, the relevance of contemplating high school transition supports is shown. The literature regarding the connection found between relationships and academic performance is then discussed in the review. These relationships are those made between students and their peers, students and their families, and students and their educators. The literature review ends with a look at the

importance of seeking and understanding student perceptions and beliefs in relation to their 9th grade transition experiences.

Developmental Needs of Ninth Grade Students

With the bulk of research pointing to the success of students in the 9th grade year as a predictor of earning a diploma, the importance of understanding the developmental needs of freshmen is clear. The responsiveness of school systems to the developmental needs of students is correlated with positive high school outcomes (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). School systems and organizational structures often are misaligned with the development needs of young adolescence (Demetriou et al., 2000). The misalignment within organizational structures in the middle school to high school transition as they relate to adolescent needs are described in the literature as including a 9th grade student's need to become accustomed to a new environment, changing classes, less individualized attention, time management, and learning new rules (Akos & Galassi, 2004b; Cushman, 2006; Haviland, 2005; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Neild, 2009). In addition, patterns are found in research pointing to students entering 9th grade as often lacking the academic and emotional skills needed to ensure success in high school (Bridgeland, 2010; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Camera, 2015; Demetriou et al., 2000; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Morgan et al., 2015; Murnane, 2013).

Social Bonding Theory asserts adolescents' connection to school is central to their academic success. This theory defines school attachment as how much the student likes school and their teachers (Cassino & Rogers, 2016). The importance of the social atmosphere to adolescents cannot be understated as means to strengthen the bond to school referenced by Social Bonding Theory. Early adolescence is marked by a need to seek autonomy, power, social determination, and social approval. Without attention to the relationship between a sense of

social approval and academic performance, schools have the potential of missing the mark in understanding where adolescents are developmentally during their transition to high school.

Students experience significant individual changes during puberty which often is occurring in students' lives at the time of their school transition from middle school to high school (Caskey & Anafara, 2014). The developmental changes experienced by students at the time they transition to 9th grade are complex and wide-ranging. The interrelationship between developmental changes and school changes are notable. The changes have been found to often be troublesome for individual students (Akos & Galassi, 2004a). While girls and boys find different aspects of the transition troublesome, Akos and Galassi (2004a) suggest a need for fostering social connectedness in both is necessary. In a study by Mosley and Lex (1990) student respondents cited school-related events, such as changing schools, as stressors more often than experiences related to home. The unsettling nature of moving to high school is indicated repeatedly throughout the literature. For example, several researchers point to the potential of broken social networks resulting from a move to 9th grade at the time adolescents need them most (Akos & Galassi, 2004a; Barone, et al., 1991; Wampler et al., 2002). By definition, the transition to high school has the potential to impact a student's sense of connectedness to their own school experience. Moving to 9th grade has the significant potential to be a disruptive event in the lives of many students (Williamston, 2010). Furthermore, emotional changes traditionally attributed to puberty may also be attributed to external changes in an adolescent's environment like changing schools (Block, 2016). Researchers point to a variety of external factors like school changes, peer changes, and life stressors as factors which may change the adolescent emotional experience (Larson et al., 2002).

At risk 9th Grade Students

With the passage of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 and its reauthorization into the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, accountability has increased for groups of students who are considered at risk because of historical underachievement (Education Post, 2018). An at-risk student is defined as one whose performance is significantly below average academically (Kayler & Sherman, 2009; Marchetti et al, 2016). Similarly, students at-risk of dropping out of high school are typically characterized by low self-concept and skills, disengagement with school, and low self-efficacy (United States Department of Education, 2013). These students face a much higher probability of dropping out which increases even more when the required academic credits are not earned during their initial year in high school (Ruth, 2009). Reports have indicated that as many as one third of freshman who enter high school will not earn enough credits to be promoted to the 10th grade (Editorial Projects in Education, 2006).

Additionally, at-risk teenagers commonly experience problems such as substance abuse, emotional issues, and delinquency, all of which are seen as warning indicators for academic failure. In studies, researchers have found educators accurately identify students at risk by the following characteristics: difficulty forming relationships with peers, difficulty forming relationships with teachers, lack of basic needs being met, reduced communication between parents and school, internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and abrupt negative behavior changes (Hallfors et al., 2006; Hecker et al., 2014).

At risk students face more challenges than other students as they enter high school because of physical, social, and emotional factors. These students are identified as most likely to fall behind during the transition to high school (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008; Langenkamp, 2010). Horwitz and Snipes (2008) reported between 70% and 80% of students who fail in 9th grade will

not graduate from high school. The academic loss experienced during the 9th grade school year for an at-risk student adds to already existing obstacles. As a result, the consequences of having to recover from early high school failure are compounded by the risk factors faced by these students (Editorial Projects in Education, 2006). As schools face increased pressure to place greater emphasis on academic rigor, success in 9th grade is complicated further for at-risk students who are entering high school already behind. As required courses for contemporary 9th grade students increase in rigor, many remain focused on meeting physiological needs which often go unmet in the lives of at-risk students (Marchetti et al, 2016). Maslow (1943) outlines individual motivations being first focused on adequate nutrition and shelter. Next, individuals seek to be safe. When these needs are satisfied, individuals can then move to fulfilling needs related to acceptance of others, esteem, and achievement. Achievement is presented as one of the final motivations by Maslow. Logically, this leads one to postulate that many students who are at risk may be expending energy to focus on other needs before they are able to focus on academic achievement.

Relationships and Academics

Early academic factors point to general risk factors for students but, specifically, Horwitz and Snipes (2008) found students who were unprepared academically were most likely to have poor transitions to high school. The increased academic expectations and changes in how instruction is delivered from middle school to high school are noted throughout the literature (Anderson et al., 2000; Chapman & Sawyer, 2001; Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1992). While many complex, interrelated factors exist in the transition to high school, the level of connectedness a student feels to their school has been shown to have a direct impact on the

student's academic success (Roybal et al., 2014). Connectedness is defined as a feeling of belonging to or having affinity with a particular person or group (Oxford University Press, n.d.). With the awareness that many students experience a lack of connectedness to their surroundings upon entering the 9th grade, some educators have created programs and systems to address the needs of transitioning students as a means to increase student academic achievement (Roybal et al., 2014).

Relationships with Teachers

Montgomery and Hirth (2011) found teachers building strong relationships with students is essential in creating a sense of belonging. The sense of belonging becomes central to a successful transition support for students. A correlation between student learning outcomes and positive relationships with their teachers has been found (Chou et al., 2015; Montgomery and Hirth (2011)). For at-risk teens, having a positive relationship with at least one caring adult has shown a significant favorable impact on commitment to school achievement and school in general (Somers et al., 2016).

In this stage of adolescent development, students often judge the level of their teacher's competence based on how they are treated by their teacher rather than just on what they are taught by their teacher. The feeling students have about the level of caring their teacher shows for them can be a critical part of students' commitment to learning (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Demetriou et al., 2000). With the correlation between student academic success and positive relationships with teachers, the researchers point to the need for committed teachers who can maintain consistent support to transitioning students. By developing strong relationships with students, educators reduce the likelihood of disengagement by adolescents significantly. The importance of positive rapport between students and educators increases in the lives of students

who are defined as at risk (Chou et al., 2015; Somers et al., 2016). Bridgeland et al. (2006) found four out of five participating dropouts stated they wanted better teachers but the at-risk youth did not provide a definition of “better.” Three fourths of participating dropouts would have preferred smaller classes in high school, which provides greater access to individualized instruction and more opportunities to develop a connection with teachers. Furthermore, the dropouts surveyed indicated they “craved one-on-one attention from their teachers” (Bridgeland et al., 2006). These findings provide further evidence of the need for teachers and students to have positive relationships to ensure success in high school.

Relationships with Peers

Research exists highlighting the impact positive peer relationships have on student academic achievement in 9th grade (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Pearson & Banerji, 1993). Isakson and Jarvis (1999) pointed to how students’ Grade Point Average (GPA) can be affected by whether they have healthy relationships with their peers. The move to high school can compound stressors on the need for positive peer relationships. Students’ existing social networks can be disrupted by the transition just when they are developmentally needed most (Barone, et al., 1991). Furthermore, gender and culture compound the complexity of peer relationships and peer pressures when trying to understand the role of relationships in the lives of 9th grade students (Barone, et al., 1991; Wampler et al., 2002). Additionally, Akos and Galessi (2004a) outline how existing research points to gender and race influencing perceptions and outcomes during school transitions.

Relationships with Family

Parental involvement has been linked to school performance throughout the literature. The impact of relationships with family on student achievement does extend to students who are

transitioning to high school (Akos & Galessi, 2004a; Jeynes, 2007; Wampler et al., 2002). For secondary students, parental expectations, communication, and overall involvement with school has a significant influence on achievement (Falbo et al., 2001). The reduction of parental supervision is cited as having a connection to the 9th grade decline in student performance (Ruth, 2009). Wang and Sheikh-Khalil (2014) found parents merely attending school functions like conferences did not produce a large impact on achievement; however, their involvement did provide their children with a sense of caring and connectedness. Montgomery and Hirth (2011) found rejection of parents adversely affected at risk students' high school performance in particular. The researchers surmised by the parents being present for their children in high school their children's developmental need for confidence was reinforced (Chen & Gregory, 2010). Gains in the emotional health of adolescents were observed when their parents were active in school activities.

Importance of High School Completion

Although graduation rates grew rapidly early in the twentieth century, the next thirty years showed a decline in the numbers of students completing high school, with Black and Hispanic youth graduating at a much lower rate than their Caucasian peers (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Murnane, 2013). Similarly, students from lower socioeconomic levels have lower rates of graduation than their higher socioeconomic peers. Historically, high schools in the United States were focused on producing a work force in a highly industrial society. Completing high school for most meant entry into a skilled trade without the need for post-secondary education. The current demands of a changing labor market with a more global focus has created the need for students who complete high school ready to complete some form of post-secondary education (; Morgan et al., 2015). Over the last twenty years, the United States has seen an increase in jobs

requiring at least an Associates of Arts degree (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). Predictions by the U.S. Department of Labor (2015) have said jobs requiring post-secondary education will develop quicker than jobs requiring no post-secondary education. In 2017, 25 governors across the United States made promises to improve access to post-secondary education, however, many noted the continued high drop-out rate as a barrier to progress (Hatfield, 2017).

In 2010-2011, the United States Government began collecting an indicator called the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR). The National Center for Education Statistics (1992) uses an indicator to study the percentage of public high school students who graduate on time. A student who earns a high school diploma within four years is considered on time for the purposes of calculating the ACGR. States are required to calculate their ACGR by identifying cohorts of first-time 9th grade students in a school year. Cohorts can be amended only when one of the following circumstances occurs: (1) students transfer into the cohort after 9th grade, (2) students transfer out, (3) students immigrate to another country, or (4) students die. The ACGR is the percentage of students in this adjusted cohort who graduate within 4 years with a regular high school diploma. With graduation requirements outlined in the original No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements and its reauthorized version, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), state are mandated to recognize the importance of all children graduating with a high school diploma within four years (Education Post, 2018).

Significant consequences exist for the nation as well as for individuals who fail to complete high school (McIntosh et al., 2008). Reduced wages, greater chance of incarceration, early pregnancy, and substance abuse are indicated at higher levels in groups who drop out of high school (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Chapman et al., 2001; Murnane, 2013). Individuals who fail

to complete high school limit their post-secondary options including employment and higher education opportunities (Chapman et al., 2001).

Importance of Student Perceptions on School Success

While the stories of students who drop out and their individual experiences remain mostly untold, researchers agree authentic inquiry into student perspectives on transition supports may lead to improved outcomes for at-risk students. When input is sought in developing school initiatives, organization, and systems, the student voice is often neglected (de la Ossa, 2005; Levin, 2000; McGregor, 2011). Student self-perception of the context of the high school experience has been found to influence academic achievement and graduation outcomes (Bridgeland, 2010; Chou et al., 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Scanlon, 2012). A pattern in research points to a disconnect between the perceptions of students, parents, and educators around the topic of high school completion. Bridgeland (2010) asserted a need for further study of the perceptions of all stakeholders in relation to school completion and post-secondary readiness.

When studied, researchers found students' disengagement in high school was a gradual process for a myriad of reasons including boredom and absence of coursework relevance. High school students also reported longing for relationships with teachers who provided instruction with increased relevance. Students shared that they felt improved communication between their parents and their educators would make a significant difference in their chances for successful completion of high school. Furthermore, when asked, teenagers reported hopes of careers which require high school completion, however, life circumstances including school and community factors led them to drop out (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Demetriou et al., 2000; Doll et al., 2013).

Not only do researchers suggest more can be learned about student needs by asking them their perspectives but inquiry into student perspectives may also facilitate a “*buy in*” from at risk students and greater understanding of their own needs (Demetriou et al., 2000; Demetriou & Wilson, 2010; Levin, 2000; Rudduck, 2004; Scanlon, 2012; Zhao, 2011). By interviewing students about school improvement, researchers discovered evidence of practices which led to their disengagement as well as the consequences of their disengagement. Allowing students to express their perspectives and giving them a voice facilitates greater understanding of their needs and empowers them to understand the impact of high school completion. Anderson et al. (2000) displayed the requisite for schools to take intentional steps to prepare rising 9th grade students for the transition to high school.

The importance of student perception in better understanding how to serve them in school relies on the belief that children are valuable stakeholders in their own education. Nthontho (2017) suggests rejecting children a voice as stakeholders in their education denies their rights to the “democratic participation” afforded to all other stakeholders in educational planning. This is echoed by Mitra and Gross (2009) who highlight the benefits of students being encouraged to share their opinions to improve school conditions. The researchers further suggest the developmental turbulence seen in adolescence may strengthen the power of their voices when guided by adults in a positive direction (Osso, 2005). The assertion made by Nthontho (2017) follows this idea, and states that while student voice should not be the single determinant in the educational planning of initiatives, the opinions and perceptions of students should matter. Flutter (2007) takes the notion of student voice a step further by suggesting student perceptions can contribute positively to teacher development. To better understand how to prepare,

researchers agree the student voice is critical in understanding the challenges faced by all students during the transition to high school.

Summary of Literature

The literature reviewed in this chapter outlined the existing research regarding the transition to high school. The literature review begins with a discussion of the developmental needs of 9th grade students including the physiological, intellectual, psychological, and the social and emotional factors and how those needs impact the transition to high school. The effect of puberty on transition is also investigated. The review looks at the importance of high school completion. By doing so, the relevance of contemplating high school transition supports is shown. The literature regarding the connection found between relationships and academic performance is then discussed in the review. These relationships are those made between students and their peers, students and their families, and students and their educators. The literature review ends with a look at the importance of seeking and understanding student perceptions and beliefs in relation to their 9th grade transition experiences.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Overview of InQuiry

The InQuiry process attempts to quantify the distinctive beliefs and perceptions of people (Militello et al., 2016). The research method differs from others because instead of relying on an external evaluator, InQuiry utilizes stakeholder input to gather perceptions of people (Militello et al., 2016). Furthermore, why people hold their uniquely individual perceptions is studied. The impact of the perceptions is determined through the use of factor analysis in Q methodology (Zabala & Pascual, 2016). Input from participants assist in interpreting viewpoints. Participants in a Q methodology study are given a set of statements known as the Q sample (Dziopa & Ahern, 2011). The Q sample can also be pictures or other stimuli (Akhtar-Danesh et al., 2008). The statements are then ranked through a process known as Q sorting (van Excel & de Graaf, 2005). Participants will rank the items in the Q-sample according to their perception or point of view. A factor analysis of each person's responses is then completed. The subjective nature of the responses is accounted by the participant ranking process (Brown, 1980).

InQuiry, a research technique that combines Q methodology and focus group interviews, was used in the study. Qualitative data is collected through the focus group interviews. In the study, quantitative data was gathered to determine student perspectives. Qualitative data was then sought to ascertain insights about student perspectives. By conducting a study using Q-methodology, a mixed-method approach, to better understand student perceptions of transition supports, the local education agency can compare current models of transition supports in place with what students perceive as the most impactful.

Discussions with students also provide focus and relevancy to the study. By understanding student viewpoints related to transition, school district administrators can better

understand how the existing transition programs impact at risk students. Furthermore, improvements to current transition programs can be made (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Steps in the study included:

1. Identifying and defining a set of statements pertaining to the topic of inquiry
2. Selecting a sample of statements to be used
3. Recruiting and selecting participants
4. Card sorts
5. Analyzing results
6. Interviewing participants based on their responses (Watts & Stenner, 2012; Webler et al., 2009)

Additionally, a detailed study of current policies and practices that impact high school transition in the district was an important step in the study of the problem. Looking at how transition is addressed differently across the district's secondary schools is also important. Studying the consistency of practices across schools and perceptions of those practices highlights specific areas of concern, and is described and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. A comparison between current best practices in the literature and the practices of local education agency in the ways at risk students are served during the transition to high school was also critical to illustrate the problem.

By conducting a study using Q-methodology, differences of how at-risk students and their peers who are not at risk perceive the transition to the high school were discerned. Patterns of how these differences impact the high school academic achievement and secondary outcomes of at-risk students demonstrates the problem and the urgency of a need for solutions to the problem.

Development of the Q Sample

In creating the Q sample, a set of items also referred to as the Q set or concourse, was generated by reviewing literature related to the transition of students from middle school to high school and an increased awareness of the distinctive needs of the learner in the 9th grade. Items were also generated by asking a random sample of individuals including educators and non-educators what factors they view as most impactful in the transition of a student to 9th grade. As is customary in Q methodology, an extensive assortment of items was created to reflect the variety of viewpoints related to the topic of transition to high school (Dziopa & Ahern, 2011). The concourse initially contained 60 statements. The Q set was reduced to 44 items through a process of focusing on factors that have been noted in a comprehensive review of the literature and responses of a sample of individuals.

Ten individuals including school administrators, support staff, and teachers provided input on the statements in the concourse. The individuals reviewed the statements and were asked to provide feedback with the following questions in mind:

- Are the statements clear and understandable? If not, what changes would you suggest?
- Are there any statements that are redundant? If so, should they statements be combined or removed?
- Are there any statements you would remove from the list?
- Are there any statements you would add to the list?

After review of the list of 60 statements, edits were made to the list of statements based on feedback from the educators. Statements were edited to ensure clarity, appropriate length and

avoidance of redundancy (Militello et al., 2016). Each edit made based on their feedback is explained below:

- Statement 1 originally read as “My transition to 9th grade was impacted by teachers being nicer to me at first.” Two teachers commented that the statement was unclear. Both indicated the meaning of “at first” was confusing. The teachers stated clarification needed to be provide through specificity. The statement was changed to read, “My transition to 9th grade was impacted by teachers being nicer to me when I first came to high school.”
- Statement 10 originally read as, “My transition to 9th grade was impacted by me having help with my homework.” Several educators argued the statement should include who helped the student with homework. The statement was changed to read as, “My transition to 9th grade was impacted by my parents helping me with my homework.”
- Statement 24 originally read as, “My transition to 9th grade was impacted by my motivation to do my school work.” More than three educators believed the statement was redundant with Statement 23 which read as, “My transition to 9th grade was impacted by my effort to do my school work.” The educators expressed concern that 9th grade students would not recognize the difference between effort and motivation. The decision to remove Statement 24 was made based on the feedback provided by the group.
- Statement 27 originally read as, “My transition to 9th grade was impacted by going to the 9th grade orientation at my high school.” One teacher stated the statement should be changed to read as, “My transition to 9th grade was impacted by going to open

house at my high school.” The teacher explained not every high school in the district had a 9th grade orientation but all held an open house event.

- Statement 58 read as, “My transition to 9th grade was impacted by me hanging out with the right people.” One educator stated students may not recognize if they have been friends with the “right” people. The researcher explained the statement is based in research about adolescents’ perceptions. Further discussion was held regarding the statement but the majority of the educators felt the statement was appropriate as written.
- Statement 59 read as, “My transition to 9th grade was impacted by students and teachers cooperating at my high school.” Several educators stated the statement was redundant and strongly related to Statement 60 read as, “My transition to 9th grade was impacted by kids at my school having good behavior in the classrooms.” The group expressed the Statement 60 would provide the same information as Statement 59 and was also clearer. Statement 59 was removed based on the feedback from the group.

The Q Sample statements are presented in Appendix B and includes the source and category of each statement. Statements were categorized based on the literature in Chapter 2.

P Sample

The P sample in a study using the InQuiry process are the participants in the study. The participants are the individuals who will be sorting the statements. A large sample of participants is not necessary as Q methodology relies only on the number of participants required to determine factors (Militello et al., 2016). For this study, 37 10th grade students completed the

study following their first year in high school. The students were a heterogeneous group across gender, socioeconomic level, ethnicity, and academic ability.

The context of the study is a rural high school in the Sandhills region of North Carolina. The results of the study provide current district administration and school-based administrators valuable data to be used when making decisions regarding transition support initiatives at both the middle school level and the high school level.

The Q Sort

For this study, the condition of the sort is “What experiences impacted your success in your transition from middle school to 9th grade?” The Q Statements (available for review in Appendix B) were displayed on the computer screen. Participants were given all of the statements at once and asked to sort the statements individually into the grid shown in Figure 3 with a forced choice distribution. The distribution ranges from the positive pole, where participants place statements with which they most strongly agree to the negative pole, where the participants indicate the statements they agree with the least (Hodgkins, 2017; Militello et al., 2016). All Q set items will be given a ranking (Watts & Stenner, 2012). It is important to note that statement rankings are important only in relation to each other, and it is possible for participants to place items they feel are like their viewpoints in a neutral or negative space (Kandalec-Holm, 2019). In other words, the numbers on the grid are unimportant, it is the statements’ relational placing to each other is what matters.

The Q sorts produced quantitative data which was then analyzed using the HQTML statistical software program. The software program performs a by-participant factor analysis to develop a correlation matrix. The matrix shows how each participant’s sort relates statistically with the other completed sorts. Groups of participants with similar perceptions, referred to as

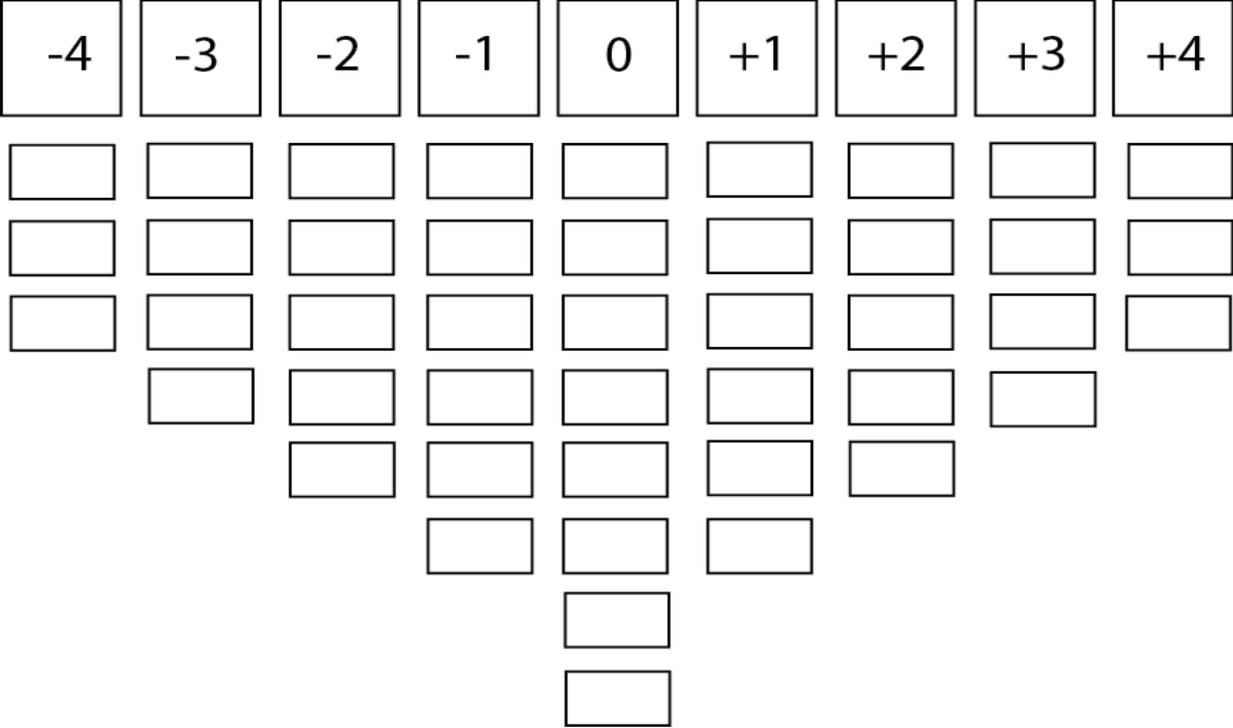


Figure 3. Q sort distribution grid.

factors, were found through Q factor analysis. The factors were then used during post-sort interviews. Patterns in participant responses are studied through the participant factor analysis rather than variables (Militello et al., 2016).

Follow Up Interviews

After quantitative data was collected, qualitative data was collected through post-sort surveys with selected participants. Only the participants with the highest statistical correlations with each factor were selected. The post sort protocol is presented in Appendix C. A consent form was given to each participant and each was informed their participation in the follow up interview is voluntary. The consent form is presented in Appendix D.

Participants were to be grouped according to similar viewpoints identified through the completed analysis in order to facilitate discussion about their perceptions. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, the focus group aspect of this study was adapted to include telephone interviews and written responses to the follow-up prompts. Participants were given the opportunity to explore their own feeling and opinions around their sort (Militello et al., 2016). After being shown an example sort that is representative of their factor they were asked to answer the following questions (Hodgkins, 2017):

1. Who is in your group? Describe any similarities and/or differences (e.g., demographics, job, etc.).
2. Which statements best represent your shared perspective?
3. What has had the greatest impact on how you sorted your cards the way you did? (Examples – past experience, course, current knowledge, etc.). Please explain your answers.

4. What name would you assign that represents the perspective illustrated by this model sort? Explain why and the meaning associated with that name-use cards statements to provide justification for your name.

Detailed notes were recorded throughout the interviews and were analyzed for similarities and patterns.

Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data were to be used to understand the participant perceptions of their transition to high school. However, due to the constraints of conducting the study during school closings because of the coronavirus, focus group interviews could not be completed. While the group conversations and interviews would offer a deeper understanding of participants' beliefs, the researcher was able to draw upon the quantitative data to identify patterns of beliefs and commonalities.

Subjectivity Statement

The researcher provides a subjectivity statement to ensure transparency regarding any life experiences that may impact their research. By providing a subjectivity statement, the researcher ensures the reader can access the possibility of any bias. Disclosing the life experiences of the researcher allows examination of any impact on the validity of the research and conclusions made by the researcher. As a public educator with twenty-six years of experience, it is important for me to share my background information that could potentially influence my interpretations.

I earned a Masters of Education in Special Education from the University of Florida and began teaching in 1994. My first teaching position was serving elementary students with emotional disabilities in a small, rural community in North Carolina. The school was predominantly made up of African American and Hispanic children with over 80% qualifying

for free or reduced lunch. My first years of teaching were successful as I created relationships with my students and their families which have endured until present day.

In 1996, I joined the faculty of a public separate school for students with severe disabilities in the same community. The demographics of the student population was similar to my previous school with the main difference being the severity of their disabilities. I spent three years teaching grades kindergarten through 5th grade until I had my first child.

After returning from a year of maternity leave, I transitioned to a position at the same school district's first year-round elementary school to meet a need in the district for a special education teacher at the school. The school served a very different population than I had served in my previous years of teaching. The student population was predominately White and affluent. My experiences were rewarding with the students in my classroom, however, I found barriers existed for my students with disabilities in this setting of affluence. I transitioned back to the public separate school when a position became open in 2001. I spent the next four years teaching the middle school grade levels at the school.

In 2006, I earned my Masters in School Administration from Campbell University. I was chosen to become an assistant principal at a middle school in 2005 prior to my degree and worked to complete my degree while serving in the position. The middle school was the largest in the district with a student population that was predominantly African American and Hispanic with over 80% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch. I became interested in creating supports for students who transitioned to middle school while in this position. I developed the district's first summer bridge program for rising 6th grade students while in this role.

In 2009, I served as the district's Director of Exceptional Children to meet a need and then was chosen to open the district's newly constructed middle school in 2008. I was principal

of the middle school for five years. The middle school served approximately 860 students with African American, Hispanic and White populations equally represented by percentage. The overall socioeconomic status of the families the school served was one of poverty but did have a small group of families from two neighborhoods with greater wealth. While in this position, I continued the transition support for rising 6th graders but also developed initiatives to support rising 9th graders as they transitioned to high school from my middle school.

In 2013, my district asked me to serve as a high school principal at the community's largest high school. The high school served approximately 1,600 students with a student population that was similar to my middle school. I was tasked by the superintendent with bringing "accountability" to the high school. In this role, I discovered the authentic struggle 9th grade students experienced when disconnected from supports and worked to create equitable access to supports for those students in 9th grade as well as those who had been left behind and failed to earn enough credits to move from 9th grade in spite of years they spent trying to do so.

In 2016, I transitioned to my previously held role as Director of Exceptional Children to address program needs identified by my superintendent. I served in this role for two years. While in this role, I provided leadership for the district exceptional children's program including the development of comprehensive programs, improving curriculum and instruction, and monitoring compliance with local, state, and federal guidelines and laws. During my tenure in this role, the superintendent tasked me with being his designee in numerous due process cases resulting from issues from previous years in the district.

In 2018, I became the principal of a secondary alternative school serving a large rural district in North Carolina. Serving students from 7th to 12th grade, the school serves alternative learners with a focus on restorative practices, targeted interventions, and individualized planning

to increase student achievement in academics, behavior, and social/emotional skills. Student demographics reflect a higher percentage of African American and Hispanic students than White students. The percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch is over 60% with many students living in poverty. The importance of transition support continues to present a sense of urgency in my role as the majority of students attending the alternative school show a pattern of difficulty during their 9th grade year at their comprehensive high school. With this study, my purpose is to better understand how students perceive existing supports offered in their high school. I will communicate the findings with district leadership with the goal of improving the student outcomes of 9th grade students.

Summary

An overview of Q methodology and InQuery methodology was presented in this chapter. Procedures of the research were detailed including each step in the InQuery process. The findings of the study will be presented in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this InQuiry study was to identify and examine the factors impacting the transition of students to the 9th grade. The study was designed to learn the perceptions of what students who successfully completed 9th grade believed positively impacted their transition to high school.

Many districts work to provide supports for student transition to 9th grade. Investigating student perception about what impacted them positively in their transition to 9th grade and comparing those perceptions to current literature adds value to the work of educators related to transition supports. The study was designed to listen directly to student voices to answer the research questions. The use of InQuiry in the study not only helps determine shared viewpoints on what impacted the successful transition to 9th grade but also has the potential to begin a conversation around the likelihood some transition supports will be more effective than others. Results from this study might give districts some ideas about how to customize approaches while understanding the complexities of student perceptions around transition to high school.

Quantitative data were collected to determine student perceptions about what impacted them during the transition to 9th grade. Easy HTQML software was used to analyze quantitative data. The software was used to compute variance, identify factors, and determine relationships between and among the participants using data from 37 Q sorts. Qualitative data was sought through participant interviews. Five of the 37 participants indicated a willingness to be interviewed. Written responses were obtained through the on line format of the post-sort questionnaire. Written responses included in the post sort questionnaire were utilized for the purpose of determining some level of deeper understanding. Focus group interviews were not

available because of coronavirus restrictions, limiting the qualitative data obtained. Written responses were utilized to add some level of deeper understanding of the quantitative results.

Using the Easy HTQML software, a correlation matrix was generated utilizing principal component analysis. Principal component analysis combines input variables in a distinctive way, eliminating the less significant variables while keeping the most useful parts of the entire set of the variables (Brems, 2019, June 10). A correlation matrix allows associations to be discovered between participant Q-sorts (McKeown & Thomas, 2013). By creating a correlation matrix, the researcher can determine numerical representations of relationships between Q sorts of participants. The correlation matrix for the current study measured 37x37. A truncated version of the correlation matrix is presented in Table 2. Correlation coefficients range from -1.0 to +1.0. A correlation of +1.0 represents an exact match with all cards placed in the same column. A correlation of -1.0 indicates an opposite match between participants with all cards placed in the opposite column as the reference sort (Hodgkins, 2017).

To illustrate, Participant 1 had relatively high correlation matrix sort values with Participant 37 of 0.47 indicating some similarity with each other. These participants are both represented by Factor One, while Participant 2 and Participant 35 had a correlation matrix sort value of -.07, showing minimal similarity between their sorts. As a result, these participants are represented in two different factors.

Factor Analysis

In Q Methodology, patterns in participant responses are studied through the participant factor analysis rather than the study of items as variables (Militello et al., 2016). Participant sorts are analyzed with consideration given to the ways the sorts are interconnected as parts of a whole. The statements are not compared on the basis of how the statements were individually

Table 2

Correlation Matrix Between Sorts (Truncated)

Sorts	1	2	3	...	35	36	37
1	1.0	.01	.54	...	.24	.42	.47
2	.01	1.0	.04	...	-.07	.08	-.05
3	.54	.04	1.0	...	.13	.35	.34
...
35	-.14	-.06	-.29	...	1.0	.28	.21
36	-.02	.03	-.08	...	.28	1.0	.18

sorted. Q Methodology does not count how many people have a particular viewpoint but rather how and why they think the way they do about a construct (Valenta & Wigger, 1997). In other words, statistical analysis is completed by person rather than statement. Q-sorts are categorized into similar orders of preference, clustered, to create factors. Factors then represent distinct viewpoints showing how people correlate to others with similar opinions (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Factors were generated through an analysis using Easy HTMLQ. The initial analysis produced a solution creating eight unrotated factors by clustering participants who ranked statements into similar orders of preference. Eigenvalues were provided showing the variance pulled out from each factor (Coogan & Harrington, 2011). A Scree Plot of the Eigenvalues, displayed in Figure 4, was used to study the variance between factors. The first factor had an Eigen Value of 6.18; the second 3.41; the third 2.75; the fourth 2.48, the fifth 2.05; the sixth 1.89, the seventh 1.76, and the eighth had a value of 1.64.

A two-factor solution accounted for 26% of variance among the sorts and included 28 of the 37 participants at $p < .05$ significance. In the two-factor solution, 75.6% of participants successfully loaded. The factors using a two factor solution showed correlation values of .0087. Thirteen consensus statements were identified between the two factors. Eigen Values for the two factor solution included 6.1856 and 3.4155. A pattern emerged showing half of the sorts in the two factor solution presenting negative but remaining correlated in the two factor sort. This ultimately led to the selection of the two factor solution but considering them as Factor One, Factor Two A and Factor Two B.

Using a three-factor solution increased both the variance and the number of participants

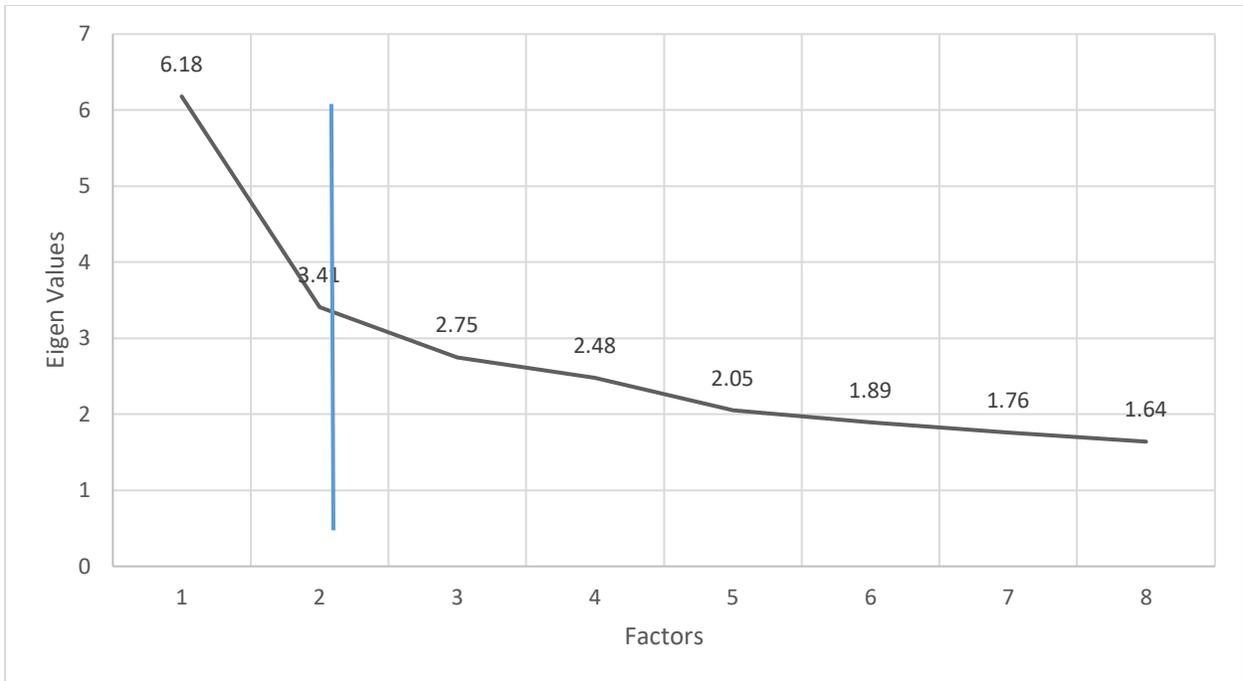


Figure 4. Scree Plot of Eigen Values.

who loaded successfully. The variance increased to 33% with 30 of the 37 participants at $p < .05$ significance. Eighty percent of the participants loaded successfully using the three factor solution. Correlation values of $-.0612$, $-.0916$ and $-.131$ were determined showing a decrease among factors. Three consensus statements were identified between the three factors.

A four factor solution increased the variance at 40% with 27 of 37 participants loading successfully. At 72.9%, the number of participants decreased. Eight consensus statements were found in the four factor analysis. While the correlation between factors increased, the number of participants decreased.

Eigen Values, variance, correlations, and the number of participants loading on factors were considered in the decision to choose a two-factor solution for this study. The number of consensus statements were also considered. In Table 3, an illustration of the variables used is provided. While the three-factor solution offered a high number of participants, the lower correlation values presented less opportunity to determine clear, distinct viewpoints. The four-factor solution offered fewer consensus statements and the least number of participants.

The table of correlation values among factors for the two-factor solution is shown in Table 4. The correlation between Factor One and Factor Two are statistically distinct. The correlation found was $.0087$. When considering the correlations found in all sorts performed, the lower value for the correlation among Factor One and Factor Two indicated the clearest factors.

Factor Loadings

Factor rotation was completed using a Varimax rotation. Varimax rotation is a statistical technique used at one level of factor analysis to help illuminate the relationships between factors (Allen, 2017). The purpose of the rotation is to maximize the variance shared among items. With increased variance the correlation of items related to one factor will likely increase while

Table 3

Information Used to Determine Factor Solution

Factor Rotation Solution	Eigen Values	Explained Variance	Number of Participants	Correlation Among Factors	
2 Factors	6.18	26%	28 out of 37	.0087	
	3.41			.0087	
3 Factors	6.18	33%	30 out of 37	-.0612	
	3.41			-.0916	
	2.75			-.131	
4 Factors	6.18	40%	27 out of 37	-.0035	.6195
	3.41			-.1898	.0875
	2.75			.1222	.0477
	2.48				

Table 4

Correlations Among Factor Groups

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Factor 1	1.000	0.0087
Factor 2	0.0087	1.000

the correlation decreases on other factors. Following the rotation of all extracted factors each loading of the Q sort is shown (Damio, 2018). The rotated factors represent 26% variance with Factor One representing 16% and Factor Two representing 10%.

Each participant has a unique correlation score calculated in the process. A correlation score is generated to ascertain a numerical measure of the degree of agreement between Q sorts of participants and the model factor array that represents a factor (Hodgkins, 2017). In Table 5, the way each participant loaded on the factors is shown.

On Factor One, there were 15 participants that loaded significantly. On Factor Two, 13 participants loaded at a level of statistical significance. The 13 participants who loaded in Factor Two did so in a manner presenting two viewpoints within the same factor. With half of the sorts displaying a negative z-score and half of the sorts with a positive z-score, two different viewpoints emerged within the common perspective represented statistically within Factor Two; Factor Two A and Factor Two B. Comparisons are made across clusters of participants with corresponding views. The data analysis of the 44 statements and 37 participants using a two-factor solution resulted into two perspectives with an additional viewpoint emerging within Factor Two. Essentially, Factor Two A and Factor Two B can be described “mirror images” of one another; both showing to be statistically related to a similar perspective, however, one negatively associated with the perspective and the other positively associated with the perspective.

A composite statement array, or model Q-sort, was created to summarize the viewpoint of all participants loading on a particular factor (Valenta & Wigger, 1997). The composite statement array allows for comparisons between factors by changing factor composite scores back to the whole numbers participants used during the initial sorting process. Using a composite

Table 5

Factor Matrix Using Participants' Q-Sorts (Loadings)

Participant	Factor One	Factor Two
1	0.6703	0.2114
2	0.2801	-0.6384
3	0.5947	0.188
4	-0.1774	0.3584
5	0.4033	0.5799
6	0.5299	0.4501
7	0.6985	-0.3602
8	0.6984	0.3527
9	0.367	0.4262
10	0.5288	0.002
11	0.5025	-0.6073
12	0.6457	-0.0393
13	0.0175	0.3008
14	0.1941	0.0195
15	0.5062	-0.1739
16	0.2068	-0.0775
17	-0.1528	0.4686
18	-0.0435	-0.2985
19	-0.0198	0.4479
20	0.1727	0.2824

Table 5 (continued)

Participant	Factor One	Factor Two
21	0.6571	0.0595
22	-0.2606	0.2991
23	0.2243	-0.0224
24	0.1479	-0.1732
25	-0.2646	0.1168
26	0.6996	0.1733
27	0.0302	-0.3541
28	-0.0022	0.2044
29	-0.374	0.1168
30	-0.0044	0.1614
31	-0.0654	-0.2136
32	0.2018	0.305
33	0.3083	0.1898
34	0.0302	0.1288
35	0.5709	0.0108
36	0.5139	-0.0196
37	0.5208	0.4278

statement array, data was interpreted through examination and comparison. Table 6 presents the placement of each statement across all factors on the continuum of most preferred (+4) to least preferred (-4) in the model factor array.

Humphreys Rule was applied to further validate using a two-factor solution for the study. The rule determines whether the cross product of the two highest loadings exceeds twice the standard error (Watts & Stenner, 2012). After applying the rule, Factor One showed a difference of .556 and Factor Two showed a difference of .103 meaning both factors were significant. Table 7 illustrates the process used in completed Humphrey's Rule for the study.

Factor One- The Captains

In Factor One, 15 participants, 13 females and 2 males, loaded significantly. There were three African American females, three Hispanic females, thirteen white females and three white males in the factor. These 15 participants accounted for 16% of the variance and 52% of participants. Table 8 provides the basic demographics and loadings of the participants who loaded significantly on Factor One. The three highest loading participants were all white females. The loadings for these participants were .6996, .6985, and .6984. Similarly, the three lowest loading participants were also females, including one African American female and two White females. The loadings for these participants were -.374, .3083, and .5062. The lowest loading participant value of -.374 was significantly different than all other participants in Factor One.

The lowest ranking statement was Statement 20. This statement, "My parents picking my classes," had a z-score of -2.339 and was placed in the -4 position in the model factor array in Factor One.

Table 6

Statements and Factor Placements

Card	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by . . .	Factor 1	Factor 2
1	my effort to do my school work.	2	-2
2	me having my parents to help me with homework.	-2	-1
3	me knowing study skills.	2	1
4	being allowed to choose my own classes.	4	-1
5	my relationship with my coach.	0	-3
6	me playing in the school band.	-3	-4
7	me making new friends.	3	-3
8	having friends in some of my classes.	1	1
9	having friends in some of my classes.	3	-1
10	my self-esteem.	3	-3
11	my family helping with school activities (ex. band, boosters, etc.).	-2	-4
12	knowing my teachers expected me to do well.	1	0
13	how much my family believed in me.	1	-2
14	how much my teachers believed in me.	2	2
15	me going to social events at my school	-1	-3
16	having time to talk to my counselor each week.	-4	2
17	being in classes that I liked.	4	3
18	my school having clear rules.	-1	2
19	having an advisor.	0	1
20	my parents picking my classes.	-4	-2

Table 6 (continued)

Card	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by . . .	Factor 1	Factor 2
21	having friends in some of my classes.	4	0
22	my relationship with my parents.	0	-2
23	my relationship with my peers.	2	-1
24	feeling like I belonged at my high school.	-1	1
25	my school work being easy.	-2	0
26	feeling respected by my teachers.	1	-1
27	my school work being challenging.	0	3
28	what I learned about my high school on social media.	-3	0
29	kids at my school having good behavior in the classrooms.	0	0
30	me having help if I struggled with my class work.	3	3
31	my middle school teachers preparing me for high school.	0	1
32	being in classes with only other freshmen.	-2	0
33	my high school being safe.	-1	0
34	me meeting with a high school counselor when I was in the 8 th grade.	-3	1
35	my relationship with my counselor.	-3	3
36	my teachers telling me clear academic expectations.	1	2
37	playing a sport at the high school.	0	-4
38	me belonging to a club.	-1	-2
39	my high school teachers before school started.	-2	4
40	me avoiding negative influences.	1	4

Table 6 (continued)

Card	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by . . .	Factor 1	Factor 2
41	me going to class every day.	0	-1
42	me liking my school work.	-1	0
43	getting individualized tutoring.	-4	2
44	getting to tour my high school before I started there.	3	4

Table 7

Humphrey's Rule

Solution	Factor 1	Factor 2
Cross Product of Two Highest Loadings	0.3586	0.3133
Standard Error	0.1515	0.1515
Standard Error x2	0.303	0.303
Difference	0.556	0.103

Table 8

Factor One Demographics

Participant	Loading	Ethnicity	Gender
1	0.6703	White	M
3	0.5947	Hispanic/Latino	M
6	0.5299	White	F
7	0.6985	White	F
8	0.6984	White	F
10	0.5288	Black	F
12	0.6457	White	F
15	0.5062	White	F
21	0.6571	Hispanic/Latino	F
26	0.6996	White	F
29	-0.374	Black	F
33	0.3083	White	F
35	0.5709	Hispanic/Latino	F
36	0.5139	Black	F
37	0.5208	White	M

Table 9

Factor One Normalized Factor Scores

Card	Statement	Z-score	Grid Placement
4	Being allowed to choose my own classes.	1.925	+4
17	Being in classes I liked.	1.863	+4
21	Having friends in some of my classes.	1.648	+4
9	Knowing my parents expected me to do well.	1.568	+3
7	Making new friends.	1.059	+3
30	Having help when I struggled in class.	0.996	+3
44	Getting to tour my high school before I started there.	0.901	+3
1	My effort to do my school work.	0.865	+2
23	My relationship with my peers.	0.706	+2
3	Knowing study skills.	0.667	+2
10	My self-esteem.	0.624	+2
14	How much my teachers believed in me.	0.624	+2
12	Knowing my teachers expected me to do well.	0.561	+1
13	How much my family believed in me.	0.495	+1
8	My relationship with teachers.	0.483	+1
40	Avoiding negative influences.	0.388	+1
26	Feeling respected by my teachers.	0.359	+1
36	My teachers telling me clear academic expectations.	0.32	+1
37	Playing a sport at high school.	0.282	0
19	My school having clear rules.	0.269	0

Table 9 (continued)

Card	Statement	Z-score	Grid Placement
5	My relationship with my coach.	0.157	0
22	My relationship with my parents.	0.144	0
29	My school having good behavior in the classrooms.	0.076	0
31	My middle school teachers preparing me for high school.	0.047	0
27	My school work being challenging.	-0.026	0
41	Me going to class every day.	-0.05	0
42	Me liking my school work.	-0.051	-1
24	Feeling like I belonged at my high school.	-0.085	-1
33	My high school being safe.	-0.211	-1
15	Going to social events at my school.	-0.247	-1
38	Me belonging to a club.	-0.32	-1
19	Having an advisor.	-0.372	-1
25	My school work being easy.	-0.406	-2
11	My family helping with school activities.	-0.646	-2
39	Meeting my high school teachers before school started.	-0.999	-2
2	Having my parents to help me with my homework.	-1.125	-2
32	Being in classes with only other freshman.	-1.173	-2
6	Playing in the band at school.	-1.187	-3
28	What I learned about my high school on social media.	-1.271	-3
34	Meeting with high school counselor in 8 th grade.	-1.31	-3
35	My relationship with my counselor.	-1.584	-3

Table 9 (continued)

Card	Statement	Z-score	Grid Placement
16	Having time to talk with my counselor each week.	-1.743	-4
43	Getting individualized tutoring.	-1.881	-4
20	My parents picking my classes.	-2.339	-4

Figure 5 shows the model factor array for Factor One. In this model factor array, the transition experiences the participants found most impactful to their success in 9th grade is displayed. The purpose of studying the model sort is to identify items that make the most insightful impact with the factor (Watts & Stenner, 2012). In Table 10, statements shown are the highest and lowest ranking among Factor One. These statements display the experiences participants viewed as most impactful and least impactful to their successful transition to 9th grade.

In Factor One, statements 4, 17, and 21 were loaded by participants on the +4 distribution grid on the model factor array. Statements 9, 7, 30, and 44 were located on the +3 distribution grid. Language in the statements displayed themes of choice, autonomy, and the importance of peers in what contributed most to their success during the transition to 9th grade. These highest ranking statements included language such as “being allowed to choose my own classes,” “being in classes I like,” and “having friends in some of my classes.”

Participants who loaded significantly on Factor One appeared to identify with transition experiences providing student choice and those taking student preference into account. A theme of the importance of peer relationships was also evident. Language in Statement 44, “getting to tour my high school before I started there,” may indicate participants in Factor One valued knowing the new school campus prior to the first day so they could be independent. Statement 9, “knowing my parents expected to do well,” seemed to indicate the perceived importance of their own awareness of their parents’ expectations. Personal choice, preferences, and friends are observed as a theme of what is perceived to be most important to a successful transition to high school with Factor One.

Least Prefer		No Preference					Most Prefer	
-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4
16	6	2	15	5	8	1	7	4
20	28	11	18	19	12	3	9	17
43-	34	25	24	22	13	10	30	21
	35	32	33	27	26	14	44	
		39	38	29	36	23		
			42	31	40			
				37				

Figure 5. Factor 1 Model Sort.

Table 8

Factor One: High-Positive and High-Negative Statements

Score	Card	Statement
+4	4	Being allowed to choose my own classes.
+4	17	Being in classes I like.
+4	21	Having friends in some of my classes.
+3	9	Knowing my parents expected me to do well.
+3	7	Making new friends.
+3	30	Having help when I struggled with my class work.
+3	44	Getting to tour my high school before I started there.
-3	6	Playing in the band at my school.
-3	28	What I learned about my high school on social media.
-3	34	Meeting my high school counselor when I was in 8 th grade.
-3	3	My relationship with my counselor.
-4	16	Having time to talk to my counselor each week.
-4	3	Getting individualized tutoring.
-4	0	My parents picking my classes.

While participants indicated the importance of peers contributed to their successful transition, the participants' perception about specific school sponsored activities was not as significant. For example, statements referring to going to social events (Statement 15, -1,) belonging to a club (Statement 38, -1) and feeling a sense of belonging at the high school (Statement 24, -1) ranked lower. This could imply the students found peer relationships impactful when the peers were considered their friends but did not perceive attendance of school sponsored activities as significant.

For the participants in Factor One, the act of being a part of an activity with peers appeared to have less impact in their belief than being with peers who were already considered to be their friends. Participant 7 stated, "...it was nice having people from my middle school there at the beginning that I felt comfortable with" (written communication, May 2020). Participant 3 echoed, "Having friends in my classes made me feel more at home and comfortable in my classes" (written communication, May 2020).

In Table 10, Statement 30, "me having help when I struggled with my class," was placed in the +3 column in the model factor array sort in both Factor One. When considering the participant written communication regarding getting academic help, the theme found in Factor One of personal choice and preference are consistent. Participant 15 stated, "Knowing I can go to my teachers if I need help with anything makes me appreciate them..." (written communication, May 2020). These students may have preferred academic assistance be accessible when they perceived the help was needed, or when they "struggled," rather than when determined by a teacher. Participant 21's affirmed this by stating, "...if you were struggling knowing this (academic help) made me feel relieved in case I needed help" (written communication, May 2020).

Participants in Factor One seemed to think their success was much less dependent on adults in their lives. Statements with language such as “my relationship with my coach,” (Statement 5) and “having an advisor,” (Statement 18) in Factor One located at 0 and -1 on the distribution grid and is consistent with the value participants’ place on their independence as it relates to their success. Similarly, statements describing family help with school activities (Statement 11, -2,) family belief in the student (Statement 1, 1) parents help with homework (Statement 2, -2) and parent/student relationships (Statement 22, 0) would indicate less importance placed on the role adults in their lives play in their success during their transition to high school.

The pattern was observed with Factor One in the statements related to teachers as well. The statements with language such as “my middle school teachers preparing me for high school (Statement 31, 0)”, “feeling respected by my teachers (Statement 26, 1)”, “knowing my teachers expected me to do well (Statement 12, 1)” displayed locations on the distribution grid that are consistent with the other statements related to adults’ in their lives impact on their transition.

Autonomy was a recurring theme with Factor One. Participant 12 stated, “homework is a more personal thing that I do whenever I find the time” (written communication, May 2020). Participant 35 added, “I learn(ed) to do my work on my own and didn't have a doubt about it”(written communication, May 2020). Participant 12 added, “I knew I had to work hard and do well” (written communication, May 2020) while Participant 35 stated, “I know they want us to succeed in their class and in life” (written communication, May 2020).

Additionally, personal choice was highlighted as a reoccurring view with Factor One through various student written comments related to choosing their own classes. Participant 1 stated, “Being able to pursue my interests and choose more challenging classes kept me engaged

in my schoolwork and let me be more content” (written communication, May 2020). Participant 12 shared, “I have found an even bigger love for what I want to do and by getting the classes I wanted to help pursue the career I want” adding “By being in classes that I picked and enjoy I was more focused and ready to learn about the material” in response to feelings of having the preferred classes (written communication, May 2020). The importance of choice was echoed by Participant 26, “I liked being able to choose my own classes and the classes I want and not being forced to take a certain class I’m not ready to do” (written communication, May 2020) and further indicated, “Freshman year I had classes I really enjoyed with great teachers and that helped me with starting out high school” (written communication, May 2020).

Participants in Factor One perceived the importance of their autonomy in the successful transition to high school compared to participants in Factor Two A or Factor Two B. In Table 10, the high positive statements all indicated the importance of autonomy. Participants felt choosing their own classes (Statement 4, +4), taking classes they enjoy (Statement 17, +4), and having their friends in their classes (Statement 21, +4) were the most impactful on their success in 9th grade. Choice, preferences and control, all characteristics of autonomy, were viewed as most vital to the participants in Factor One. The rankings would suggest an acknowledgment of other influences in their success, however, the value of autonomy to the participants appears as a prevailing perspective with Factor One.

Factor Two: A Tale of Two Transitions

In Factor Two, 13 participants, 7 females and 6 males, loaded significantly. There was one African American female, one Hispanic female, one female designated by Other, four White females, one Hispanic male and five White males in the factor. These 13 participants accounted for 10% of the variance and 48% of participants. While participants in Factor Two presented a

statistically similar perspective, the data analysis of the 44 statements and 37 participants using a two-factor solution resulted into two perspectives with an additional viewpoint emerging within Factor Two. Essentially, Factor Two A and Factor Two B can be described “mirror images” of one another; both showing to be statistically related to a similar perspective, however, one negatively associated with the perspective and the other positively associated with the perspective. Statement 6, “me playing in the band”, Statement 11, “my family helping with school activities”, Statement 37 “me playing a sport at the high school”, the high negative statements for Factor Two provide an indication of separate viewpoints regarding the themes found with the overall factor. As a result, Factor Two will be presented as two different perspectives, identified as Factor Two A and Factor Two B.

Factor Two A - The Passengers

A total of eight participants are represented on Factor Two A. Three of these participants are female, one is white, one is African-American and one is represented as Other. Of the five males on Factor Two A, four are white males and one is a Hispanic male. In Table 11, the loading, gender and ethnicity of the five participants represented in Factor Two A is shown.

Z scores were generated for each Q sort statement in each factor group. A z-score represents a measure of the amount and direction of deviation from the distribution mean. In Table 12, the z score is presented with the corresponding ranking of each statement for Factor Two A. Statements are shown in descending rank order in the table. Statement 44, “Getting to tour my high school before I started there, had the highest rank among the statements in Factor Two A. The statement was placed in the +4 column in the model factor array with a z-score of 1.988. This statement had the highest agreement in Factor Two A.

Table 9

Factor Two A Demographics

Participant	Loading	Ethnicity	Gender
4	0.3584	Hispanic/Latino	M
5	0.5799	Hispanic/Latino	F
9	0.4262	White	F
13	0.3008	White	M
17	0.4686	White	M

Table 10

Factor Two A Normalized Factor Scores

Card	Statement	Z-score	Grid Placement
44	Getting to tour my high school before I started there.	1.988	+4
40	Avoiding negative influences.	1.576	+4
30	Meeting my high school teachers before school started.	1.532	+4
35	My relationship with my counselor.	1.48	+3
27	My school work being challenging.	1.305	+3
30	Having help when I struggled with my class work.	1.099	+3
17	Being in classes I liked	1.086	+3
16	Having time to talk to my counselor each week.	0.93	+2
14	How much my teachers believed in me.	0.911	+2
36	My teachers telling me clear academic expectations.	0.879	+2
43	Getting individualized tutoring.	0.75	+2
18	Having an advisor.	0.72	+2
34	Meeting with high school counselor in 8 th grade.	0.704	+1
3	Knowing study skills.	0.671	+1
31	My middle school teachers preparing me for high school.	0.585	+1
8	My relationship with my teachers.	0.292	+1
19	My school having clear rules.	0.21	+1
24	Feeling like I belonged at my high school.	0.2	+1
32	Being in classes with only other freshman.	0.144	0
28	What I learned about my high school on social media.	0.138	0

Table 11 (continued)

Card	Statement	Z-score	Grid Placement
12	Knowing my teachers expected me to do well.	0.112	0
21	Having friends in some of my classes.	-0.043	0
29	My school having good behavior in the classrooms.	-0.074	0
42	Me liking school.	-0.079	0
33	My high school being safe.	-0.115	0
25	My school work being easy.	-0.148	-1
9	Knowing my parents expected me to do well.	-0.21	-1
41	Going to class every day.	-0.281	-1
4	Being allowed to choose my own classes.	-0.289	-1
26	Feeling respected by my teachers.	-0.309	-1
2	Having my parents to help me with my homework.	-0.335	-1
23	My relationship with my peers.	-0.392	-2
1	My effort to do my school work.	-0.448	-2
22	My relationship with my parents.	-0.746	-2
13	How much my family believed in me.	-0.991	-2
38	Me belonging to a club.	-1.027	-2
20	My parents picking my classes.	-1.037	-2
7	Making new friends.	-1.061	-3
15	Going to social events at my school.	-1.115	-3
10	My self-esteem.	-1.154	-3
5	My relationship with my coach.	-1.3	-3

Table 11 (continued)

Card	Statement	Z-score	Grid Placement
6	Playing in a band at school.	-1.553	-4
11	My family helping with school activities.	-2.25	-4
37	Playing a sport at the high school.	-2.352	-4

The lowest ranking statement was Statement 37. This statement, “Playing a sport at the high school,” had a z-score of -2.352 and was placed in the -4 position in the model factor array in Factor Two A.

Figure 6 shows the model factor array for Factor Two A. In this model factor array, the transition experiences the participants found most impactful to their success in 9th grade is displayed. The model factor array is a representation of how a theoretical respondent with 100% loading in the factor would have ordered all statement of the Q-set. The purpose of studying the model sort is to identify items that make the most insightful impact with the factor (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Statements shown are the highest and lowest ranking among Factor Two A are shown in Table 13. These statements display the experiences participants viewed as most impactful and least impactful to their successful transition to 9th grade.

In Factor Two A, statements 39, 40, and 44 were loaded by participants on the +4 distribution grid on the model factor array. Statements 17, 27, 30, and 35 were located on the +3 distribution grid. Language in the statements displayed a theme of support structures in school being what contributed most to their success during the transition to high school. These highest ranking statements included language such as “meeting my high school teachers before school started,” “me avoiding negative influences,” and “getting to tour my high school before I started there.”

Participants who loaded significantly on Factor Two A appeared to identify with experiences providing support structures in the high school to be contributing factors to their successful transition. A theme of having accessible school personnel such as counselors, advisors, and teachers who offer supports was evident. Language in Statement 44, “getting to

Least Prefer

No Preference

Most Prefer

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4
6	5	1	2	12	3	14	17	39
11	7	13	4	21	8	16	27	40
37	10	20	9	25	19	18	30	44
	15	22	23	28	24	36	35	
		38	26	29	31	43		
			41	32	34			
				33				
				42				

Figure 6. Factor Two A Model Sort.

Table 11

Factor Two A High-Positive and High-Negative Statements

Score	Card	Statement
+4	39	Meeting my high school teachers before school started.
+4	40	Avoiding negative influences.
+4	44	Getting to tour my high school before I started there.
+3	17	Being in classes I liked.
+3	27	My school work being challenging.
+3	30	Having help when I struggled with my class work.
+3	35	My relationship with my counselor.
-3	5	My relationship with my coach.
-3	7	Making new friends.
-3	10	My self-esteem.
-3	15	Going to social events at my school.
-4	6	Playing in the band at the school.
-4	11	My family helping with school activities.
-4	37	Playing a sport at my school.

tour my high school before I started there,” may indicate participants in Factor Two A valued the middle school and high school coordinating a way for them to know their campus prior to their arrival. Statement 39, “meeting my high school teachers before school started,” echoed the perception that the schools’ efforts to organize ways for rising 9th grade students to become familiar with teachers, like the campus, were impactful. The value the participants placed on the middle school role in assisting with transition support was communicated by Participant 5 who stated, “I got to visit the school, and that gave me confidence that I was actually going to be happy at my high school without any questions” (written communication, May 2020).

While participants in Factor One indicated the importance of relationships with their peers, participants in Factor Two A expressed less peer relationships were of less significance in their transition. For example, statements referring to making new friends (Statement 7, -3 column,) going to social events (Statement 15, -3 column), and having relationships with peers (Statement 23, -1 column) ranked lower. Conversely, the participants in Factor Two A conveyed the relationships with adults in the school of higher value to them as a transition support than peers. This is evidenced by higher ranking statements referring to relationships with counselors (Statement 35, +2 column) and the accessibility of advisors (Statement 18, +2 column).

For the participants in Factor Two A, the act of being a part of a school sponsored activity or support is viewed as beneficial. Participant 5, when referring to belonging to a school club, stated “Getting to know them before school started was great, I got to meet them and know some things about them” and also adding, “My middle school teachers really helped me prepare for my high school years, and on the first day of high school I was ready” (written communication, May 2020).

Participants in Factor Two A seemed to think their success was much more dependent on school structures than those in Factor One. Statements with language such as “my teachers telling me clear academic expectations,” (Statement 2), “my school having clear rules,” (Statement 19) located at +2 and +1 on the distribution grid is consistent with the value participants’ place on practices in the school structure. Both statements relate to set, clearly communicated expectations for students. Similarly, Statement 30 (+3 column), “me having help when I struggled in with my class work” indicates merit placed by participants in Factor Two A on school provided supports. Furthermore, the perspective presented in Factor Two A would suggest these students depended much more on school personnel for support (Statement 35, +3 column), school sponsored activities (Statement 44, +4 column), and school structures (Statement 36, +2 column) in place than those in Factor One.

The participants in Factor Two A showed a pattern of less reliance on parent help, personal effort, and peer relationships. Statements with language such as “my effort to do my school work,” (Statement 1), “my parents to help me with my homework” (Statement 2), and “by making new friends” (Statement 7), were consistently ranked of lower value in individual Q sorts across these participants. However, after the Q sorts of participants and the weights of each sort were considered for each statement the role of teachers’ importance in their successful transition associated positively to the perspective shown in Factor Two A.

On every statement related to teacher support (Statements 8, 12, 14, 26, 30, 31, and 36,) the Factor Two A participants expressed value of the support. Additionally, the statements referring to making new friends (Statement 7, -3 column,) going to social events (Statement 15, -3 column), and having relationships with peers (Statement 23, -1 column) ranked lower. This

further suggested a greater significance placed on school supports, school structures, and school personnel than on peer relationships.

The following were high negative statements in Factor Two A: Statement 6, “me playing in the band”, Statement 11, “my family helping with school activities”, and Statement 37 “me playing a sport at the high school.” The Factor Two A students’ agreement with these statements may suggest they either did not participate in the activities or they did not place value on their participation in the activities toward a successful transition.

Factor Two B - The Crew

A total of five participants are represented on Factor Two B. Four of these participants are female, three are white and one is African-American. One white male is in Factor Two B. In Table 14, the loading, gender and ethnicity of the five participants represented in Factor Two B is shown. The three highest loading participants were one white male and two white females. The loadings for these participants were -0.2985, -0.3541, and -0.3715. Conversely, the two lowest loading participants were both females including one African American female and one white female. The loadings for these participants were -.6384 and -.6073.

Figure 7 shows the model factor array for Factor Two B. Factor Two B participants were found to have a noticeable negative association with statements most aligned with those presented in Factor Two which essentially represented the overall perspective of Factor Two A. Figure 7 shows the model array representative of Factor Two B, illustrating the “mirror image” of Factor Two A.

Z scores were generated for each Q sort statement in each factor group. A z-score represents a measure of the amount and direction of deviation from the distribution mean. In Table 15, the z score is presented with the corresponding ranking of each statement for Factor

Table 12

Factor Two B Demographics

Participant	Loading	Ethnicity	Gender
2	-0.6384	African-American	F
11	-0.6073	White	F
18	-0.2985	White	M
27	-0.3541	White	F
31	-0.3715	White	F

Least Prefer			No Preference			Most Prefer		
-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4
39	17	14	3	12	2	1	5	6
40	27	16	8	21	4	13	7	11
44	30	18	19	25	9	20	10	37
	17	36	24	28	23	22	15	
		43	31	29	26	38		
			34	32	41			
				33				
				42				

Figure 7. Factor Two B Model Sort.

Table 13

Factor Two B Normalized Factor Scores

Card	Statements	Z-score	Grid Placement
37	Playing a sport at the high school.	-2.352	+4
11	My family helping me with school activities.	-2.25	+4
6	Playing in the band.	-1.553	+4
5	My relationship with my coach.	-1.3	+3
10	My self-esteem.	-1.154	+3
15	Going to social events at my school.	-1.115	+3
7	Making new friends.	-1.061	+3
20	My parents picking my classes.	-1.037	+2
38	Me belonging to a club.	-1.027	+2
13	How much my family believed in me.	-0.991	+2
22	My relationship with my parents.	-0.746	+2
1	My effort to do my school work.	-0.448	+2
23	My relationship with my peers.	-0.392	+1
2	Having my parents to help me with my homework.	-0.335	+1
26	Feeling respected by my teachers.	-0.309	+1
4	Being allowed to choose my own classes.	-0.289	+1
41	Going to class every day.	-0.281	+1
9	Knowing my parents expected me to do well.	-0.21	+1
25	My school work being easy.	-0.281	0
33	My high school being safe.	-0.115	0

Table 14 (continued)

Card	Statements	Z-score	Grid Placement
42	Me liking school.	-0.079	0
29	My school having good behavior in classrooms.	-0.074	0
21	Having friends in some of my classes.	-0.043	0
12	Knowing my teachers expected me to do well.	0.112	0
28	What I learned about my high school on social media.	0.138	0
32	Being in classes with only other freshmen.	0.144	0
24	Feeling like I belonged.	0.2	-1
19	My school having clear rules.	0.21	-1
8	My relationship with my teachers.	0.292	-1
31	My middle school teachers preparing me for high school.	0.585	-1
3	Knowing study skills.	0.671	-1
34	Meeting with high school counselor in 8 th grade.	0.704	-1
18	Having an advisor.	0.72	-2
43	Getting individualized tutoring.	0.75	-2
36	My teachers telling me clear academic expectations.	0.879	-2
14	How much my teachers believed in me.	0.911	-2
16	Having time to talk to my counselor each week.	0.93	-2
17	Being in classes I liked.	1.086	-3
30	Having help when I struggled with my class.	1.099	-3
27	My school work being challenging.	1.305	-3

Table 14 (continued)

Card	Statements	Z-score	Grid Placement
35	My relationship with my counselor.	1.48	-3
39	Meeting my high school teachers before school started.	1.532	-4
40	Avoiding negative influences.	1.576	-4
44	Getting to tour my high school before I started there.	1.988	-4

Two B. Statements are shown in ascending rank order in the table to reflect the perspective which emerged as Factor Two B. This illustrates the other viewpoint which emerged within Factor Two. Statement 37, “Playing a sport at the high school,” had the highest rank among the statements in Factor Two B. The statement was placed in the +4 column in the Factor Two B model factor array with a z-score of -2.352. This statement had the highest agreement in Factor Two B. The lowest ranking statement was Statement 44. This statement, “Getting to tour my high school before I started there,” had a z-score of 1.988 and was placed in the -4 position in the model factor array in Factor Two B.

In Table 16, statements are shown to indicate the highest and the lowest ranking among Factor Two B. The statements are representative of what are perceived a most impactful and least impactful to the successful transition to 9th grade by these students. In Factor Two B, statements 6, 11 and 37 were loaded by participants on the +4 distribution grid on the model factor array. Statements 5, 10, 15, and 7 were located on the +3 distribution grid. Language in the statements displayed a theme of the importance of relationships with peers, school staff and their families. These highest ranking statements included language such as “playing a sport in school,” “my family helping with school activities,” and “playing in the band at school.” Factor Two B presents as negatively associated with the perspective in Factor Two A.

Looking at Factor Two B as a distinct perspective, participants who loaded significantly on Factor Two B appeared to identify with experiences providing opportunities to form relationships with others in the high school to be contributing factors to their successful transition. The participants in Factor Two B showed a pattern of more reliance on parent help, extracurricular events, and peer relationships. Statements with language such as “my effort to do my school work,” (Statement 1) “my parents to help me with my homework” (Statement 2), and

Table 14

Factor Two B High-Positive and High-Negative Statements

Score	Card	Statement
+4	6	Playing in the band at the school.
+4	11	My family helping with school activities.
+4	37	Playing a sport at my school.
+3	5	My relationship with my coach.
+3	7	Making new friends.
+3	10	My self-esteem.
+3	15	Going to social events at my school.
-3	17	Being in classes I liked.
-3	27	My school work being challenging.
-3	30	Having help when I struggled with my class work.
-3	35	My relationship with my counselor.
-4	39	Meeting my high school teachers before school started.
-4	40	Avoiding negative influences.
-4	44	Getting to tour my high school before I started there.

“by making new friends” (Statement 7) were consistently ranked of higher value in individual Q sorts across these participants. After the consideration of Q sorts of participants and the weights of each sort by each statement the role of school extracurricular activities including “playing in the band” (Statement 6), “playing a sport” (Statement 37), “and “belonging to a club” (Statement 38) showed to be of value to the Factor Two B participant group.

Every statement related to family and parent involvement, including Statements 2, 9, 13, and 22, were conveyed to be impactful to the Factor Two B participants. Additionally, the statements referring to making new friends (Statement 7) going to social events (Statement 15), and having relationships with peers (Statement 23) show evidence of being valued by participants of Factor Two B. This suggests further the group of participants aligned with the supports provided through the forming of relationships. This differs from both Factor One and Factor Two A. Factor One indicated an importance of supports which provided autonomy which was illustrated by the highest ranking statements in the factor which included: choosing their own classes (Statement 4, +4), taking classes they enjoy (Statement 17, +4), and having their friends in their classes (Statement 21, +4). Also differing from Factor Two B, Factor Two A conveyed students perceived greater impact of school personnel for support (Statement 35, +3 column), school sponsored activities (Statement 44, +4 column), and school structures (Statement 36, +2 column) on their success in the 9th grade. While participants in Factor Two A indicated less importance of school events and extracurricular activities, participants in Factor Two B expressed participation in activities such as band and sports being significant in their transition. For example, statements referring to playing a sport (Statement 37, +4 column,) playing in the band (Statement 6, +4 column), and having a relationship with a coach (Statement 5, +3 column) ranked higher in Factor Two B. Participant 11 stated, “In band I found that it was

easy to have fun and meet friends” (written communication, May 2020). On the contrary, the participants in Factor Two A conveyed these statements of lowest importance.

Consensus Statements

Statements that do not distinguish one factor’s view from another at a statistically significant level are considered consensus statements (Ramlo, 2008). A consensus statement is a statement is one that is placed in a similar location on the grid in each of the model factor arrays. Consensus statements may show what the commonality is between perspectives but could also indicate the statements are too unclear. The consensus statements are shown in Table 17.

Summary

In Chapter 4, the analysis of the data was presented. Data were collected from 37 10th grade students who had successfully completed 9th grade in an effort to identify and examine the factors impacting the transition of students to the 9th grade. The study was designed to get the perceptions of what students who completed 9th grade believed positively impacted their transition to high school. Both quantitative and qualitative data was sought to gain an understanding of student perceptions.

Quantitative data were collected to determine student perceptions about what impacted them during the transition to 9th grade. The software was used to compute variance, identify factors, and determine relationships between and among the participants using data from 37 Q sorts. Qualitative data was sought through participant interviews. Five of the 37 participants indicated a willingness to be interviewed. Written responses were obtained through the on line format of the post-sort questionnaire. Written responses included in the post sort questionnaire were utilized for the purpose of determining some level of deeper understanding. Focus group interviews were not obtained because to a limited number of participants agreed to be

Table 15

Consensus Statements

Card	Statement	Grid Placement by Factor
30	Having help if I when I struggled with my class work.	+3 +3
8	My relationship with my teachers.	+1 +1
29	My school having good behavior in classrooms.	0 0
14	How much my teachers believed in me.	+2 +2

interviewed. These participants were all represented in Factor One. As a result, qualitative data gained through interviews to determine a greater understanding of the numerical results were not obtained. Written responses were utilized to add some level of deeper understanding of the quantitative results.

First, participants completed Q-sorts using a computer instead of in person because of school closings due to the coronavirus. A factor analysis was used to compute the statistical data. The data analysis using a two-factor solution resulted into two perspectives with an additional viewpoint emerging within Factor Two. Essentially, Factor Two A and Factor Two B can be described “mirror images” of one another; both showing to be statistically related to a similar perspective, however, one negatively associated with the perspective and the other positively associated with the perspective. The factors were presented and discussed in this chapter. Each factor was named to provide a conceptual representation of each viewpoint presented in the factors.

With the concept of roles on a ship, including the captains, the passengers, and the crew, each factor was named to represent which transition supports were perceived as most impactful. Factor One, represented as captains, indicated autonomy was principal to a successful transition to high school. Factor Two A was identified as passengers to represent the viewpoint that school supports, school structures, and school personnel led to greater outcomes during transition. The crew was used to denote Factor Two B to show the perception that reliance on having relationships and being part of school activities where relationships are formed resulted in a more successful transition to 9th grade.

Chapter 5 examines the implications of the study’s findings while providing a summary of findings. Connections to the literature are identified in the chapter. Discussion of potential

implications of the student for policy, educational practice and future research is also included in the chapter.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Research exists regarding the importance of 9th grade transition in the success of students in high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004b; Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014; McLeod, 2016; Ravenelle & Roche, 2016). Similarly, extensive research exists indicating there is a need for improvements in student transition from middle school to high school (Camera, 2015). Districts continually seek ways to improve transition supports using the research readily found regarding parent perceptions, principal perceptions, and teacher perceptions related to student success in high school. This study focused on student perceptions as a guide to understand which elements the student stakeholders feel create the successful transitions to high school.

Using InQuiry, Q methodology was applied to glean the viewpoints of a heterogeneous group of high school students who had successfully completed the 9th grade. Participant perceptions of transition supports were quantified providing a visual representation of three distinct viewpoints. In a rural district of North Carolina, the three perspectives emerged after using Q methodology to listen to the voices of 37 10th grade students who successfully completed their 9th grade year at one high school in the district. These three distinct viewpoints each told a unique story about the group of students' transition journey to the comprehensive high school in the district.

The following three research questions of this study have been answered through the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data.

1. What are the effective elements of transition supports for students entering the 9th grade from the middle school level?
2. What do current high school students in the LEA perceive as effective elements of their transition to high school from 8th to 9th grade?

3. Why do current high school students hold these perceptions?

The 44 statements found in Appendix B that indicate essential elements of transition supports, the factors names created from the analysis of data, and the direct statements provided by the participants answer the three research questions of the study. Table 18 provides a review of the research questions with an explanation of how each question was answered.

This chapter provides a summary of the findings of the study as the results relate to existing research literature. Additionally, differences and similarities will be made between the perceptions of student who successfully transitioned to high school and current initiatives, practices, and policies in the district. The findings will also be considered in the framework of current and future research, practices, and policies. Conclusions will be shared to inform the district on how transition supports are perceived by the students in the study. The stories of their transition journeys will provide some insight into what transition supports may be most impactful to ensure 9th grade success.

Summary of Emerging Factors

The three emerging factors were named for roles people may hold on a ship as a conceptual representation of each viewpoint regarding what transition supports were most impactful. The accompanying theme for each factor is represented by the factor name. A story was told about how students who loaded on each factor valued certain kinds of supports in their transition to 9th grade. The conceptual framework representing these ideas is depicted in Figure 8. This framework helps in the discussion of the major factors that emerged from this study.

Table 16

Research Questions with Findings

Number	Question	Findings
One	What are the effective elements of transition supports for students entering the 9 th grade from the middle school level?	44 Statements
Two	What do current high school students in the LEA perceive as effective elements of their transition to high school from 8 th to 9 th grade?	Factors
Three	Why do current high school students hold these perceptions?	Participant quotes

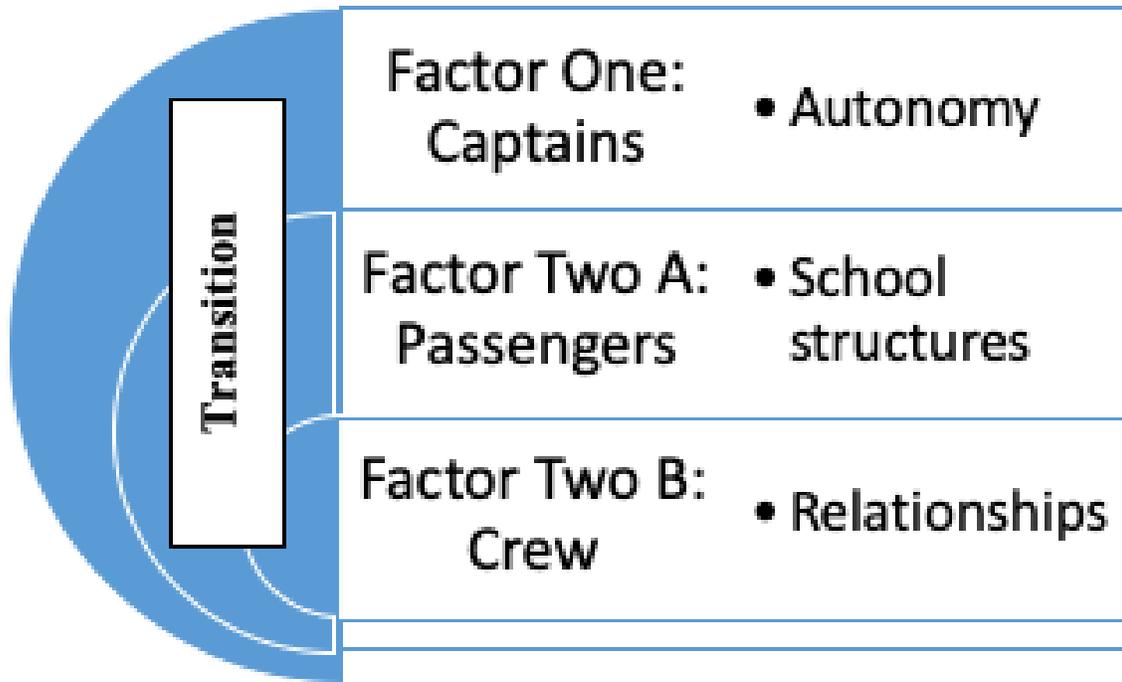


Figure 8. Conceptual Framework.

Factor One: Captains

As a captain sets a ship's course, these students loading on Factor One relied heavily on the supports allowing them to set their own transition course to high school. A sense of autonomy and self-reliance appeared to be highly valued by these students when considering their transition. These students viewed their own preferences, choices, and control critical to their success. While acknowledgment of other influences in their success were observed, the value of autonomy was a prevailing perspective. The importance of teacher assistance if the students believed they needed help was an example of how these students recognized the importance of others' guidance, but on their own terms. Similarly, peer relationships were seen as important by these students, however, they appeared to put more focus on friends they already knew rather than forming new peer relationships. Predictably, these students found participation in school activities less impactful than other students who may value forming new friendships. The students made clear being allowed to choose their own classes and liking the classes they were enrolled in during their 9th grade year was important to their success. These students wanted to tour their high school ahead of time suggesting the value of knowing what to expect would lead to greater self-reliance on the first day. Their own effort, self-esteem, and study skills were seen as beneficial by them.

Factor Two A: Passengers

Students who loaded significantly on Factor Two A were identified as passengers to represent the viewpoint that school supports, school structures, and school personnel led them to greater outcomes during transition to high school. These students indicated less dependence on parent help, personal effort, and peer relationships. A theme of having accessible school personnel such as counselors, advisors, and teachers who offer supports was evident. Clear rules

and expectations at high school mattered to these students. For the participants in Factor Two A, the act of being a part of a school sponsored activity or support is viewed as beneficial. In the view communicated by these students, the school structure and supports set the stage for their success.

Factor Two B: Crew

A crew is defined as an organized group of people who cooperate to keep a ship moving smoothly (IXL Learning, June 2, 2021). Students who loaded significantly on Factor Two B valued relationships. Like a ship's crew works together, the students represented on Factor Two B expressed a preference towards supports which involve relationships with others. Relationships with peers, families and school personnel were all valued. The students valued being part of school activities where relationships are formed like participation in the band and sports. Similarly, they indicated the importance of their relationships with coaches and teachers during their transition to high school. Like a ship's crew, the students in Factor Two B expressed a reliance on mentors and leaders, such as teachers, peers and coaches, to guide them in their transitions to high school. Social experiences were valued by the students represented in Factor Two B further highlighting the importance of cooperation and collaboration for the students.

Findings in Context of the Literature

Findings were consistent with the literature review with few exceptions. While the findings were mostly consistent with the literature, the results of the study potentially provide a look into the importance of the context of transition supports for students. Most notably, the findings indicated a diversity in the needs of students beyond what the literature indicated. The findings which varied from the literature review, while few, are important in understanding the potential impact of the study results. This section will examine the similarities and differences of

the study findings. Potential new findings will be discussed as well. The components of the literature review are depicted in Figure 9.

Similarities with Literature

Some findings of this study were consistent with the literature review. A summary of the findings found to be consistent with the literature review is shown in Table 19. Transition supports which took into the account the developmental needs of adolescent learners were identified as more highly valued by participants aligning with the literature. The study findings seemed to align significantly with the literature in regards to how the development of an adolescent impacts their perceptions, needs, and growth (Cassino & Rogers, 2016). For instance, the importance of peers was a theme presented across the participants. Participant 3, part of the captain factor group, shared “Having friends in my classes made me feel more at home and comfortable in my classes” (written communication, May 2020). This was echoed by Participant 11, part of the Crew factor group who stated, “In band I found that it was easy to have fun and meet friends” (written communication, May 2020). While the Passengers showed a preference to adult relationships for support, they too expressed the importance of peer relationships evidenced by ranking participation in school activities like clubs as impactful. Even when the types of peer relationships valued by participants varied, peer relationships were regarded. This aligns with research which found positive peer relationships influence student academic achievement in 9th grade (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Pearson & Banerji, 1993). The importance of teachers was also valued among all participants, but in distinct ways. Across factors, how the relationships with peers and teachers impacted their success was unique within the factor groups showing alignment with literature related to developmental needs of adolescents.

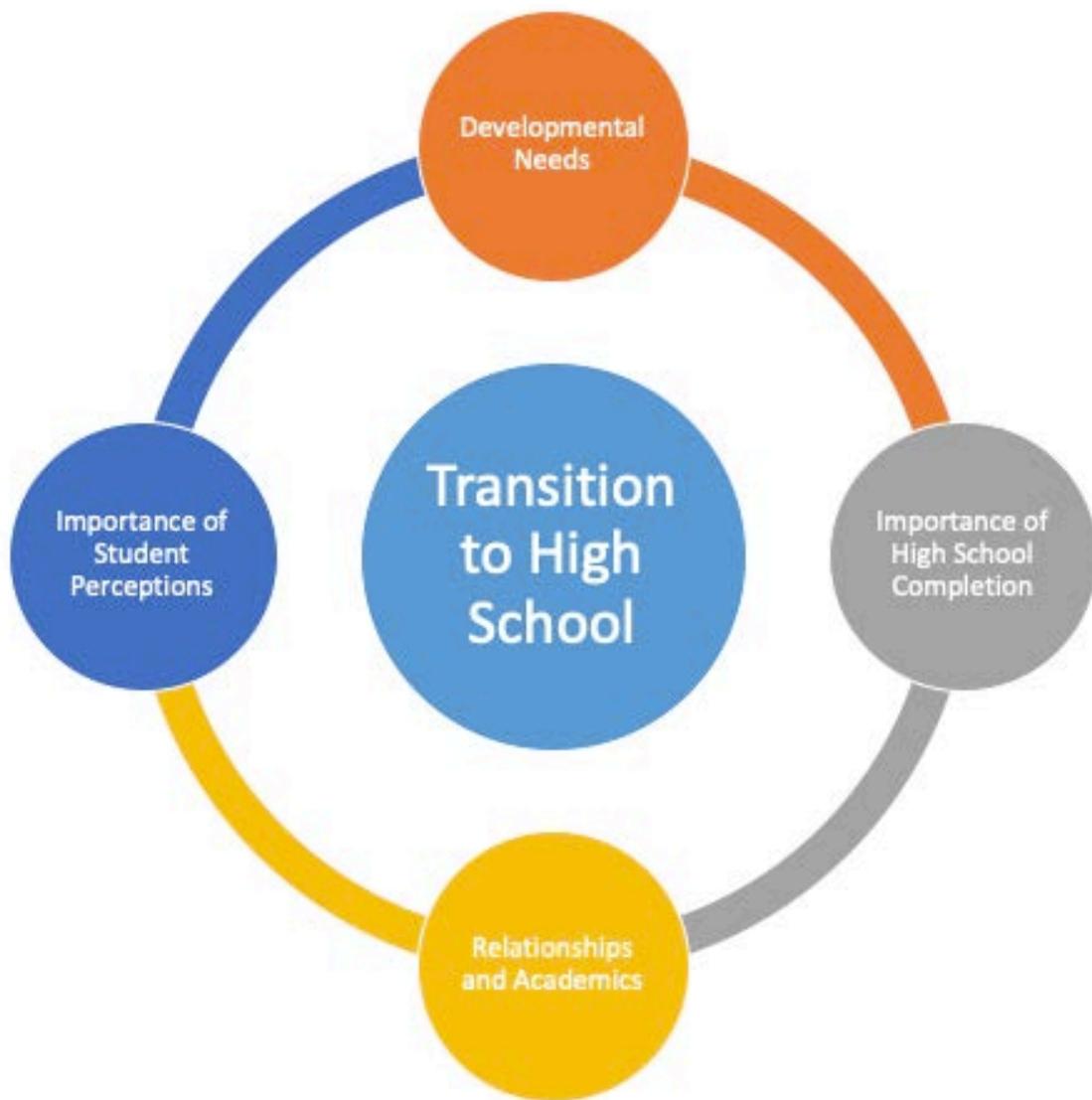


Figure 9. Components of literature review.

Table 17

Statements from Literature Accepted by Participants

Statement	Literature Source(s)	Placement in the two model factor arrays	Participant Comments
3 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me knowing study skills	Bridgeland et al., 2006; Butts & Cruzerio, 2005; Healey, 2014	+2+2	P6 “It helped me to know studying skills which made it easier when in classes.” P35 “I learn(ed) to do my work on my own and didn’t have any doubt about it.”
97 8 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me having some friends in my class.	Ellerbrock, 2012; Lan & Lanthier, 2003	+1+1	P7 “...it was nice having people from my middle school there at the beginning that I felt comfortable with.” P3 “Having friends in my classes made me feel more at home and comfortable in classes.”
14 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by how much my family believed in me.	Ellerbrock, 2012; Lan & Lanthier, 2003	+2+2	P8 “My parents are strict and I have to do well to make them proud.” P6 “My parents have always expected me to do well...”

Table 19 (continued)

Statement	Literature Source(s)	Placement in the two model factor arrays	Participant Comments
17 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by being in classes that I liked.	Bridgeland et al., 2006; Interviewee A	+4+3	P1 “Being able to pursue my interests and choose more challenging classes kept me engaged in my school work and let me be more content.” P12 “By being in classes that I picked and enjoy, I was more focused and ready to learn about the material.” P26 “I liked being able to choose my own classes and the classes I want and not being forced to take a certain class I’m not ready to do.”
30 – My transition to 9 th was impacted by me having help if I struggled with my class work.	Bridgeland et al., 2006	+3+3	P15 “Knowing I can go to my teachers if I need help with anything makes me appreciate them...” P21 “...if you were struggling knowing this (academic help) made me feel relieved in case I needed help.”
36 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my teachers telling me clear academic expectations.	Bridgeland et al., 2006; Healey, 2014	+1+2	P35 “I know they want us to succeed in their class and in life.” P6 “Knowing the clear academic expectations made it easier.”

Table 19 (continued)

Statement	Literature Source(s)	Placement in the two model factor arrays	Participant Comments
40 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me avoiding negative influences.	Butts & Cruzerio, 2005	+1+4	P12 “For me personally a lot of me and my middle school friends separated and I watched a lot of them get into bad habits with other people and I continued a lot of the same middle school habits and distanced myself from their activities. When we talk about the differences in grades and classes, I can now see how much just distancing myself from some people and staying on track has already affected my future.”
44 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by getting to tour my high school before I started there.	Ellerbrock, 2012; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Healey, 2014	+3+4	P5 “I got to visit the school, and that gave me confidence that I was actually going to be happy at my high school without any questions.”

Successful transition did not happen for the participants in a random fashion, but rather through the availability of supports discussed across the literature. As referenced by Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014), the supports participants found impactful aligned with the developmental needs presented by adolescents. For example, all participants viewed their relationships with their peers as beneficial, however, the ways they accessed and interpreted the impact of their peer relationships varied. This reflects the unique social demands placed on adolescents who are transitioning as well as how the roles of both parents and teachers change in the comprehensive setting (Ellerbrock, 2012). Similarly, the literature references the effect of peer populations becoming more diverse on adolescents (Lan & Lanthier, 2003).

Furthermore, the complexity of developmental changes of the adolescent referenced in the literature can be seen in how all the participants accepted the impact of peers and teachers. To illustrate the acceptance of the statements related to effects of development levels on transition supports, the Captains, Factor One, exhibited a sense of confidence in their existing parent, teacher and peer relationships. Participant 7 stated, "...it was nice having people from my middle school there in the beginning that I was comfortable with..." (written communication, May 2020), while the Passengers, Factor Two A, showed high acceptance (+4) of statement 40, "avoiding negative influences," indicating the perceived importance of positive peers to their success. Ranked +3 by the Crew, Statement 7, "making new friends," showed how much value peer relationships held in Factor Two B. The complexity of developmental changes of the adolescent can be seen in the diverse ways all the participants accepted the impact of peers and teachers.

Differences from Literature

Some of the study findings were inconsistent with the literature review. Belonging and parental direct involvement were not universally valued by participants across factor groups. The study findings seemed to be misaligned significantly with the literature in regards to how important a sense of connectedness, or belonging, to school structures impact a student's success in transitioning to 9th grade (Healey, 2014; Roybal et al., 2014). For instance, while the importance of peers was a theme presented across the participants, the need to participate in school sponsored activities specifically appeared to be less important. Findings differed from the literature in terms of how much changing social networks that happen naturally in the transition year to high school (Barone et al., 1991). School sponsored activities were not recognized across factors as necessary to address any change in social relationships. Even when the relationships with teachers and peers were valued by participants the need to attend school social activities or to “belong” to school clubs was not emphasized.

Similarly, the findings of this study were contrary to the literature that suggested parental involvement with school has a significant influence on student achievement (Akos & Galessi, 2004a; Jeynes, 2007; Wampler et al., 2002). Successful transition did not, according to participants across factors, depend greatly on parents' attendance at school sponsored events nor on parents' assistance academic help. Wang and Sheikh-Khalil (2014) found parents' involvement provided students transitioning with a sense of belonging and caring. Further discrepancy between the findings and the literature was notable in reference to the impact direct parent involvement had on building the confidence in their children necessary for school success (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). The findings would not suggest this was true for these participants. For example, all participants across factors viewed their relationships with their

parents as beneficial, however, the direct involvement was indicated as unnecessary. A summary of the findings found to be consistent with the literature is presented in Table 20.

Implications

The findings of this study do have implications in suggestions related to policy and educational practice for supporting students' transition to high school. In this section, educational practices related to transition of students to high school will be presented. Areas of further research will also be suggested as it relates to 9th grade students and their success. Lastly, the section will give attention to the implications of the findings for the work of educators, including district and school-based leaders.

Policy

Districts should develop a comprehensive and equitable policy related to access to diversified course offerings for 9th grade students (Fullen, 2007). Successful transition did not happen for the participants in a random fashion, but rather through the availability of supports including varied course options and opportunities to explore course options. Participants across factors, whether they relied on parents or teachers to assist them in choosing 9th grade courses, indicated access to courses they were interested in contributed to their academic success during their first year in high school.

The findings would suggest a need to have policy which does not hinder, but rather ensures equity of access to information regarding registration and courses. Communication policies with the school community about course offerings should be required in policy and methods of communication refined in practice. District policy should be in place to provide courses across high schools or have in place ways for students to access courses in different

Table 20

Statements from Literature Rejected by Participants

Statement	Literature Source(s)	Placement in the two factor model array	Participants Comments
2 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me having my parents to help me with homework.	Bridgeland et al., 2006; Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Healey, 2014	-2-1	P12 “Homework is more of a personal thing that I do whenever I find the time.”
6 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me playing in the band.	Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Healey, 2014; Kayler & Sherman, 2009	-3-4	P3 “I am not in a high school band.” P10 “I didn’t do it much.”
103 11 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my family helping with school activities (ex. band, boosters, etc.)	Ma, 2003	-2-4	P12 “(I) did lots of clubs and activities and at the same time, I have a big and hectic family with siblings that also do all of this stuff. My parents were never a really big school work helper for me because they were busy working...”
15 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me going to social events at my school.	Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Healey, 2014	-1-3	P37 “During my 9 th grade year I did not attend any social events except for the football and wrestling matches I played in. Other than this I was fine without going to any social events.”

Table 20 (continued)

Statement	Literature Source(s)	Placement in the two factor model array	Participants Comments
20 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my parents picking my classes.	Healey, 2014; Interviewee D	-4-2	P1 “I picked my own classes, my parents trusted me to be responsible and pick courses I was interested in.” P12 “My parents did not help in picking my classes whatsoever, their advice to me was pick honors and that’s about as much help and the impact they provided...they’re used to me being overly independent though.”
38 – My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me belonging to a club.	Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Healey, 2014; Kayler & Sherman, 2009	-1-2	P1 “...the best way for a student to transition to 9 th grade is to sit down, do your work, and behave, if you chose good classes that are your level you’ll be fine.”

schools. The importance of diversity indicated in the findings would suggest limiting courses and/or activities to one high school and not providing the same opportunities at another may be limiting the success of groups of 9th grade students during their transition year.

Research

Findings from this study suggest some areas for potential research in the future to assist educators by increasing understanding of how current policy, supports, and practices impact the successful transition of students to high school from middle school. While participants expressed a pattern of supports being impactful, the context of these supports seemed to differ across factor groups. For instance, all participants across factors viewed teacher and peer relationships as impactful, however, the ways they assessed and interpreted the impact of their peer relationships varied. Furthermore, the complexity of how participants accepted the impact of peers and teachers presented an opportunity for future research.

A comparison between how the conceptual representations of each viewpoint accepted the same transition supports differently illustrates the need for further study. For instance, the Captains, Factor One, exhibited a sense of confidence in their existing parent, teacher, and peer relationships. Participant 7 stated, "...it was nice having people from my middle school there in the beginning that I was comfortable with..." (written communication, May 2020), while the Passengers, Factor Two A, showed high acceptance (+4) of statement 40, "avoiding negative influences," indicating the perceived importance of positive peers to their success. Ranked +3 by the Crew, Statement 7, "making new friends," showed how much value peer relationships held in Factor Two B. The literature suggested the complexity of developmental changes of the adolescent could account for the diverse ways all the participants accepted the impact of peers and teachers, however, adolescent development may not provide the entire explanation.

Researchers may find delving deeper to understand how gender, ethnicity, and culture impact the effectiveness of specific transition supports in different ways for students.

Because this study was focused on participants in one high school, the findings would likely be most meaningful to the district in which the study was conducted. Research including a larger sample size of participants across high schools may provide similar data or may indicate patterns of perceptions varying from this study's findings.

Additionally, the study may be adjusted to be conducted in person rather than through the use of technology. While the use of technology was necessary due to an international pandemic, the data in this study is limited by being unable to interact directly with participants during the protocol. This may have impacted the participants' hesitancy to be interviewed and their greater willingness to provide written communication.

Questions that may be addressed by further research include:

1. Would the perspectives of students at different high schools correlate with the findings of this study?
2. Would more insight have been ascertained if the protocols were conducted in person?
3. How does gender, race, and/or cultural background impact perspectives of students?
4. Would educators, district and school-based leaders, perspectives correlate with the findings of this study?

Practice

The perceptions shared by the three factors offered important insight on how to provide transition supports to 9th grade students. Not only can educators better understand how the clear perspectives found in the three factors might assist in planning transition support, but the findings may also present an indication of how supports are utilized in different ways by all

students. It is important for educators to consider there is no definitive way to determine if any of the factors perspectives will be aligned with all high school students. However, the insights provided do outline the need for a comprehensive transition support plan for districts.

In Table 19, the aspects of high school transition that the participants were in agreement with in the literature about are outlined. These findings highlight the need for a comprehensive transition support structure to include elements providing peer, parent and teacher relationships, but with the understanding how these are utilized may differ among students. For example, a strong communication plan developed by high schools in collaboration with feeder middle schools would allow for students and families to understand the opportunities in 9th grade. Communication between high school teachers, students, and families before 9th grade would increase the impact of those supports such as tours of the school and clear academic expectations which were indicated as important across factors. Similarly, the intentional planning of early communication could potentially strengthen these relationships which are shared as important across factors.

Participants' written statements regarding elements of transition supports provide further areas of potential practices to increase the successful transition to high school. Participant 12 expressed, "In my 9th grade year I didn't really know my counselor until it came time to sign up for this year's classes so they didn't have an impact whatsoever...what do they actually do for the younger classmen anyway?" The participant's statement corresponds with the ranking of statements related to the impact of counselors on success in 9th grade. This was shared about the counselors both at the middle school and the high school level by the participants. While students did not indicate counselor support to be important, it is possible the students in the study did not access the counselors for some reason. Strategies are needed to increase the role of counselors,

both at the middle school and high school level, such as pre-transition meetings between students, parents, and counselors. This transition support for rising 9th grade students could be designed with student preference in mind. School based leaders should provide multiple ways to introduce and access counselors. For example, for those students who see school structures as essential, formal student and family counselor meetings may be helpful, while students who value autonomy may prefer meetings without their parents to get information about courses and activities. Middle school counselors must find systemic ways to engage students with high school counselors as well as provide clear information to students and families about high school courses, activities, and academic expectations.

The lack of any participants acknowledging any ways middle school prepared them for high school may indicate another area of transition support to be established by district leadership. Having the expectation of middle schools and high schools to work collaboratively and intentionally to prepare rising ninth grade students could enhance the areas valued across factors. Participant 1 shared, "I would like to succinctly state that most middle school teachers will attempt to scare students with threats of impossible classwork and unyieldingly cruel teachers before they go to high school, I find this practice wholly unnecessary and ineffective." While this is one statement from a single participant, the statements related to the positive impact middle school programs can have on rising ninth grade students in the literature were not seen as impactful across factor groups. Teachers and principals at the middle school level should seek to understand the disconnect that may exist between the two secondary levels.

While participants valued peers in a variety of ways, they did express the importance of peer relationships during their first year of high school. Specific planning and implementation involving high school peers may be useful for districts to consider in their transition planning. To

provide acknowledgement for those who value peer relationships highly, like the Crew, school leaders could have planned events with high school students to visit middle schools to share about the high school experience. For those who are more formal minded, like the Passengers, the same transition support may be designed to include follow up with teachers or counselors for added structure and support. A series of family events aimed at high school topics of interest could be offered to address the needs of the Passengers. For the Captains, the opportunity to choose what format to learn about high school would offer the independence they value.

Finally, as Factor Two B emerged, the idea of ensuring access to niche activities, like the arts, sports, band, and clubs, seemed apparent. The mirror image of Factor Two A seemed to convey a greater reliance on activities in the high school that provide additional focus on relationships. Factor Two B, the Crew, reminds districts to provide equity in access to extracurricular programs for certain students who may rely on these activities for making connections in ninth grade. There is no way to know if participants at a high school without band or sports would have indicated the need for a stronger emphasis on activities like these, however, the findings do provide school based leaders with the insight that activities with a focus on relationships with peers and mentors like coaches are essential to successfully transitioning to high school for some students.

Leadership Development

Completing this research has been transformative in terms of my leadership as a school-based administrator. Having started my teaching career as a special education teacher, I have always been keenly aware of the importance of listening to students' voices. Students find ways to communicate whether their voices are heard or not. In my experience, the educators who give room for students to express themselves in terms of their educational environment find more

success. My decision to study transition supports to high school through the lens of student voice arose from being both a middle school and a high school principal experiencing students struggle in the transition. Many years of participating and implementing transition supports for rising 9th grade students designed by district and school-based leaders without a way for students to provide input was professionally and personally frustrating.

The study allowed me to look deeply at some of my own assumptions about how adolescents view transitions in an educational environment. By using the InQuiry research method, I was able to delve into the subjective opinions of students. Many of the assumptions I had made over my time as a high school administrator were challenged by what I heard from the students. While I intuitively understood “one size does not fit all” in transition supports, I underestimated the ways students value the same supports in vastly different ways. For example, the participants all valued peer relationships, but the context of the peer relationships were richly diverse leading me to see the ways to create opportunities for 9th grade students to have relationships at school more broadly.

Similarly, I found more questions than answers from the findings. Working with the most vulnerable students in my district who have struggled in a comprehensive high school setting, I recognize the positive impact of ensuring access to equitable educational practices. As I completed this research study, I was struck by a need to seek more voices varied by gender, ethnicity, culture, and economic status. Even in a small participant sample at one high school, the diversity of ideas was apparent.

From these participants, I discovered educators might make strides supporting the transition of students by recognizing their own assumptions about student experience may not be entirely accurate. I was struck by what some educators often believe is foundational in practice,

such as making sure students feel safe, was not viewed as impactful for the student factor groups. When I began the process of titling my research project, I initially included “Ensuring a Sense of Belonging,” however, the statements related to a belonging were uniformly indicated as less impactful by factor groups. Similar assumptions were made in the literature about the need for belonging and the dramatic shift a new social structure has on rising 9th grade students. The participants in this study did not align with these assumptions.

While working on this research study, I transitioned personally from being the principal of a large comprehensive high school to a district director of exceptional children as well as my current position as the principal of a secondary alternative school. As I reflect on the transitions in my own professional life during the years of this study, I understand more deeply than before the unique needs individuals have during transitions. My last transition was across two school districts. The transition could be an analogy for moving from the perceived comfort of a middle school to the unknown of a new high school. I was challenged to balance the demands of these changes as well as the demands of an international pandemic during the completion of the study. Ultimately, I would suggest the uniqueness of my own experiences through life transitions, including those as an adult learner, provided to me the critical reminder to recognize the diverse lens through which students view their own transition to high school without making assumptions about what supports are most impactful. As an educator, I am driven to further my understanding about how to create access for all students, particularly those in my current alternative education setting, to the most impactful educational practices. Through this study, I recognize diversity in educational practices may be what is most impactful as it reflects the diversity found in the students we are serving in our high schools.

Summary

In reflecting on my findings, I developed a metaphor of people on a ship to describe how students experience belonging during the transition from middle to high school. The metaphor compares the diverse ways students perceive the transition with the roles of people aboard a ship. The descriptive factor names illustrate how the student groups define belonging. The three factors are: Captains, Passengers, and Crew. Captains expressed value in experiences which allowed autonomy, while Passengers appreciated school structures had a greater impact on their success during their 9th grade year. The Crew presented a view that relationships were most important during their transition to high school.

The students all attended the same high school and received similar transition supports, but valued these in vastly different ways. Educational leaders can better understand the effectiveness of transition supports by recognizing the diverse ways how students perceive them in the context of one high school. All students found value in transition supports involving teachers, peers, and parents; however, how the supports impacted them varied according to their own perceptions and experiences. This variation (similar to the different perspectives of people on a ship) indicates a need for diversity in supports to create better outcomes for students transitioning to high school rather than a one-size fits all program.

My own commonly held assumptions about what was important to students were challenged by listening to student voices through the process of conducting this study. In addition to discovering that students value and use the same supports in vastly different ways, I found belonging does not look the same for all students and does not always correspond with what the literature describes as belonging. The study shows the need for school based and district educators to seek student input when developing and evaluating supports for students as they

move from middle to high school. The study revealed that how a student defines belonging plays a pivotal role in how they utilize existing supports to facilitate their move to high school.

The study shows the importance of intentionality when planning activities meant to support students in ninth grade. School leaders can take what was learned in this study to create a holistic system of transition supports to address needs across students. For example, a transition activity typically observed in many districts is an orientation day where rising 9th grade students visit the high school they are expected to attend for the upcoming school year. Keeping the needs expressed by students in mind, a high school could plan an orientation day in ways that address the needs of all student groups. To meet the needs of the Captains, structured choices should be included in the orientation day activities providing the autonomy important to this group of students. The Crew's need for relationship building could be addressed if upperclassmen were included in the orientation activities. Ensuring a way for families to be part of the orientation would meet the needs of the Passengers who shared a theme of perceiving parent approval and involvement as important to their success in high school.

In this example of an orientation activity, educators recognize the diverse ways students value and use a transition support activity. The orientation day becomes more impactful when multiple ways of student belonging are intentionally incorporated in the activity. For instance, if parents were not allowed at the orientation, the high school would be missing an aspect of what makes the Passengers feel most supported. By intentionally applying the lens of students when planning supports, the potential for improving the impact of the supports becomes apparent.

In this study, student perceptions of how and why different transition supports were impactful to their success in the 9th grade resulted in clarity of what belonging meant to them. Listening to the voices of students revealed how unique life experiences play a pivotal role in

how they utilize existing supports to facilitate their move to high school. By acknowledging student perceptions on belonging, school-based and district educators can improve the transition of students from middle to high school.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284 · rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Kenna Wilson](#)
CC: [Matthew Militello](#)
Date: 12/6/2019
Re: [UMCIRB 19-000870](#)
ENSURING BELONGING

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) occurred on 12/6/2019. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a Final Report application to the UMCIRB prior to the Expected End Date provided in the IRB application. If the study is not completed by this date, an Amendment will need to be submitted to extend the Expected End Date. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
ENSURING BELONGING BY LISTENING TO STUDENT VOICES: IMPROVING THE TRANSITION OF STUDENTS TO HIGH SCHOOL	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Minor Assent Form	Consent Forms
Parental Permission Form	Consent Forms
Q Sort Protocol and Post-Sort Focus Group Protocol	Surveys and Questionnaires
Q Sort Protocol and Post-Sort Focus Group Protocol	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions

For research studies where a waiver of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(2)(ii) has been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-
2284 · rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Amendment Approval

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Kenna Wilson](#)
CC: [Matthew Militello](#)
Date: 11/18/2020
Re: [Ame1_UMCIRB 19-000870](#)
[UMCIRB 19-000870](#)
ENSURING BELONGING

Your Amendment has been reviewed and approved using expedited review on 11/18/2020. It was the determination of the UMCIRB Chairperson (or designee) that this revision does not impact the overall risk/benefit ratio of the study and is appropriate for the population and procedures proposed.

Please note that any further changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a Final Report application to the UMCIRB prior to the Expected End Date provided in the IRB application. If the study is not completed by this date, an Amendment will need to be submitted to extend the Expected End Date. The investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Description

Expected end date extended to 12/30/2021

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: ELEMENTS OF TRANSITION SUPPORTS Q-SAMPLE STATEMENTS

No.	Statement	Source	Category
1	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my effort to do my school work.	Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005 Lan & Lanthier, 2003	Internal
2	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me having my parents to help me with my homework.	Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006 Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005 Healey, 2014	Family
3	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me knowing study skills.	Kayler, Holly, & Sherman, 2009	Internal School
4	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by being allowed to choose my own classes.	High Schools That Work, Interviewee A	School
5	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my relationship with my coach.	Kayler, Holly, & Sherman, 2009 Lan & Lanthier, 2003	School Internal
6	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me playing in the band at the school.	Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005 Healey, 2014 Kayler, Holly, & Sherman, 2009	School Internal
7	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me making new friends.	Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005	Internal
8	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my relationship with my teachers.	Ellerbrock, 2012 Lan & Lanthier, 2003	Internal
9	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by knowing my parents expected me to do well.	Ma, 2003	Family
10	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my self-esteem.	Kayler, Holly, & Sherman, 2009 Lan & Lanthier, 2003	Internal

11	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my family helping with school activities (ex. band, boosters, etc).	Ma, 2003	Family
12	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by knowing my teachers expected me to do well.	Ellerbrock, 2012 Ma, 2003	Internal School
13	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by how much my family believed in me.	Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005 Lan & Lanthier, 2003	Family
14	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by how much my teachers believed in me.	Ellerbrock, 2012 Lan & Lanthier, 2003	School Internal
15	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me going to social events at my school.	Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005 Healey, 2014	School
16	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by having time to talk to my counselor each week.	Interviewee B	School
17	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by being in classes that I liked.	Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006 Interviewee A	School
18	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted having an advisor.	Healey, 2014	School
19	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my school having clear rules.	Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005 Healey, 2014	School
20	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my parents picking my classes.	Healey, 2014 Interviewee D	Family
21	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by having friends in some of my classes.	Ellerbrock, 2012 Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005 Healey, 2014	Internal
22	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my relationship with my parents.	Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005 Lan & Lanthier, 2003	Family

23	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my relationship with my peers.	Ellerbrock, 2012 Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005 Lan & Lanthier, 2003	Internal
24	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by feeling like I belonged at my high school.	Lan & Lanthier, 2003 Ma, 2003	Internal School
25	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my school work being easy.	Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006 Ma, 2003	Internal School
26	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by feeling respected by my teachers.	Interviewee E Ma, 2003	Internal School
27	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my school work being challenging.	Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006 Kayler, Holly, & Sherman, 2009 Ma, 2003	Internal School
28	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by what I learned about my high school on social media.	Interviewee E	School
29	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by kids at my school having good behavior in the classrooms.	Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005	School
30	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me having help if I when I struggled with my class work.	Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006	School
31	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my middle school teachers preparing me for high school.	Ellerbrock & Keifer, 2013 Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005	School
32	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by being in classes with only other freshman.	Montgomery & Hirth, 2011	School Internal

33	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my high school being safe.	Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006 Ma, 2003	School
34	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me meeting with high school counselor when I was in eighth grade.	Ellerbrock & Keifer, 2013 Healey, 2014	School
35	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my relationship with my counselor.	Lan & Lanthier, 2003	School Internal
36	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by my teachers telling me clear academic expectations.	Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006 Healey, 2014	School
37	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me playing a sport at the high school.	Butts & Cruzerio, 2005 Healey, 2014 Kayler, Holly, & Sherman, 2009	School Internal
38	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me belonging to a club.	Butts & Cruzerio, 2005 Healey, 2014 Kayler, Holly, & Sherman, 2009	School Internal
39	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by meeting my high school teachers before school started.	Ellerbrock & Keifer, 2013 Healey, 2014	School
40	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me avoiding negative influences.	Butts & Cruzerio, 2005	Internal
41	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me going to class every day.	Butts & Cruzerio, 2005	Internal
42	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by me liking my school work.	Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006 Healey, 2014 Ma, 2003	Internal
43	My transition to 9 th grade was impacted by getting individualized tutoring.	Butts & Cruzerio, 2005 Horwitz & Snipes, 2008	School

44 My transition to 9th grade was impacted by getting to tour my high school before I started there. Ellerbrock & Keifer, 2013 Healey, 2014 School

APPENDIX C: Q SORT PROTOCOL



Title of Research Study: Ensuring Belonging by Listening to Student Voices: Improving the Transition of Students to High School

Principal Investigator: Kenna Wilson, under the guidance of Dr. Matthew Militello and Dr. Karen Jones

Please provide a unique identifier that you will remember: _____

Condition for Sorting the Statements—keep this statement in mind as you sort the statements:

What elements of your transition from middle school to high school helped you be most successful?

Q Sort Instructions:

1. Lay out the number cards from left to right with the negative (-) numbers on your left (see picture below):
2. Read through all **45** cards to become familiar with the statements.
3. As you read through the statements for a second time, organize them into three piles:
 - On the right, place the cards that you feel are **most representative of what you believe are the elements of the teaching profession that are the most influential on your decision to remain in education.**
 - On the left, place the cards that are least representative.
 - In the middle, place the cards that you feel less certain about.
4. Beginning with the pile on the right, place the **three** cards that you **agree** with the most under the **+4** marker.
5. Now, turning to your left side, place the **three** cards that you **disagree** with the most under the **-4** marker.
6. Continue this process until all the cards are placed. You are free to change your mind during the sorting process and switch items around.

Post Q Sort Interview Questions:

1) Please list a few of the cards in the +4 column and your reasons for placing them there. Card

#: _____

Card #: _____

2) Please list a few of the cards in the -4 column and your reasons for placing them there.

Card #: _____

Card #: _____

3) Were there specific statements that you had difficulty placing? *Choose one and please list the number of the statement and describe your dilemma.*

Card #: _____

5) Is there a statement that you would have like to see in the sort? If so, what would the card have said and where would you have placed it?

6) In order, what are the three most important elements of your transition from middle school to high school? Why are they important, and how could school and district administrators ensure these elements are in place?

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORMS



Consent to Take Part in Research that has Potentially Greater than Minimal Risk

Information You Should Think About Before Agreeing to Take Part in This Research

Title of Research Study: Ensuring Belonging by Listening to Student Voices: Improving the Transition of Students to High School

Principal Investigator: Kenna Wilson, under the guidance of Dr. Matthew Militello and Dr. Karen Jones

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this study is to seek to understand what elements of 8th and 9th grade experiences first semester 9th grade students perceive to have the most impact on being successful in the transition from middle school to high school. As a current 9th grade student, you are being invited to take part in this research to seek your perceptions, viewpoints, and insights about what had the most impact on your successful transition to high school. You are being asked to take part in the study by participating in a Card Sort Exercise. Your participation in this study is voluntary. The decision to take part in the research is yours to make. You have the right to participate, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. By conducting this research, we hope to obtain findings to the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the factors that most impact their decision to either stay in or leave the teaching profession?
2. How do teachers perceive the relative importance of the factors identified in question 1?
3. Why did the participants perceive the elements in a particular manner? What factors and/or knowledge influenced their decisions?

If you volunteer to participate in this research, you will be one of about 40 people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research? There are no known reasons for why you should not participate in this research study. In addition, there are no known risks to participating in the card sorting exercise.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at North Moore, Robbins, NC 27325. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is approximately one hour.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to sort 45 cards. These cards have statements about elements of the teaching profession printed on them and your task will be to sort them according to your own beliefs and viewpoints. This process should take approximately one hour. After sorting the cards, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire about the statements and why you placed specific statements in certain areas on the distribution grid. In addition, you will be asked some general demographic data. Your card sort and your responses to the questionnaire will remain confidential.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We do not know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We do not know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the North Carolina Department of Health, and the Office for Human Research Protections.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UNCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

The information in the study will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely on a computer and in a location of which only the researcher has access. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study.

What if I decide I do not want to continue in this research?

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at phone number 919-744-7444 (weekdays, 8:00 am – 4:00 pm) or email wilsonkel6@students.ecu.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at phone number 252-744-2941 (weekdays, 8:00 am – 5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of the ORIC at 252-744-1971.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Informed Consent to Participate in Research That Has No More Than Minimal Risk Information to Consider Before Taking Part in Research

East Carolina

University



Title of Research Study: Teachers' Perceptions on the Elements That Most Impact Teacher Retention

Principal Investigator: Kenna Wilson, under the guidance of Dr. Matthew Militello and Dr. Karen Jones

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this study is to seek to understand what elements of 8th and 9th grade experiences successful first semester 9th grade students perceive to have the most impact on being successful in the transition from middle school to high school. As a current teacher, you are being invited to take part in this research to seek your perceptions, viewpoints, and insights about how you decide to remain in the teaching profession. As a current 9th grade student, you are being invited to take part in this research to seek your perceptions, viewpoints, and insights about what had the most impact on your successful transition to high school. You are being asked to take part in the study by participating in a Card Sort Exercise. Your participation in this study is voluntary. The decision to take part in the research is yours to make. You have the right to participate, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. By conducting this research, we hope to obtain findings to the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the factors that most impact their decision to either stay in or leave the teaching profession?
2. How do teachers perceive the relative importance of the factors identified in question 1?
3. Why did the participants perceive the elements in a particular manner? What factors and/or knowledge influenced their decisions?

If you volunteer to participate in this research, you will be one of about 40 people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

There are no known reasons for why you should not participate in this research study. In addition, there are no known risks to participating in the post-sort interview.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at North Moore High School, Robbins, NC 27325. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is approximately one hour.

What will I be asked to do?

After performing factor analysis on all of the responses, your responses are statistically similar to those shown in the model sort and to those participating in this focus group interview with you. You will be asked to answer and discuss with others your answers to the following questions based on how you sorted the statements for the Q sort: (1) Who is in your group? Describe any similarities and/or differences? (2) Which statements best represent your shared perspective? (3) What has had the greatest impact on how you sorted your cards the way you did? (Examples- past experience, courses, current knowledge, etc.). Please explain your answers. (4) What name would you assign that represents the perspective illustrated by this model sort? Explain why and the meaning associated with that name—use card statements to provide justification for your name.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We do not know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We do not know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the North Carolina Department of Health, and the Office for Human Research Protections.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UNCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

The information in the study will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the data collection and data analysis process. Information gathered from the interview will be maintained in a secure, locked location and will be destroyed upon successful completion of the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study.

What if I decide I do not want to continue in this research?

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at phone number 919-744-5744 (days, 8:00 am – 4:00 pm) or email wilsonkel16@ecu.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at phone number 252-744-2941 (days, 8:00 am – 5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of the ORIC at 252-744-1971.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

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- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant’s Name (PRINT)	Signature	Date
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Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person’s questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)	Signature	Date
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