TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF A SIXTH GRADE ACADEMY: IMPLICATIONS FOR

THE TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

by

Rebecca Hood Davis

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine and evaluate teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of a sixth grade academy program, at a rural middle school in North Georgia, in helping students transition into sixth grade. The transition from fifth grade to sixth grade is a critical year in a student's educational career. Over the past two decades, transitioning programs have grown as an effort to meet students' distinct needs. There is very little research documenting teachers' voices on this matter. The research conducted in this study sought to add the teacher's perception in identifying the significant features of an effective sixth grade academy program that provide an easier transition into middle school. Sources of data included ten teachers who were interviewed about their work at a sixth grade academy. These teachers also responded to an open-ended questionnaire, as well as participated in a focus group interview, describing their experiences with the program. Transcriptions of the interviews and responses to the survey questions were analyzed using coding. A snapshot of the participant's voices and lived experiences are included as a contribution to the findings of the study. Themes derived from the data uncovered during the study were organized to provide insight on the research questions. The themes identified during data analysis included structural design (academy versus conglomerate), isolation (teachers and students), intentional transitioning programming, elements related to middle school transition (parental involvement, lockers, other), and teacher's perceptions of the student's experience. Each theme is discussed in detail in the results section of chapter four.

Keywords: Transition, Sixth Grade Academies, Small Learning Communities, Middle Grades

Dedication

The continuous pursuit of God's ordained plan for my life is what kept me going throughout this journey. It is with modest grace that I am able to attain this degree. I owe this accomplishment to the strength He provides. To Him goes all the recognition and credit.

Acknowledgements

The tribute for the completion of this dissertation goes to a higher power, a loving God who has blessed me beyond comprehension.

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Finally, Chris Davis, I would like to thank you for your constant lie when telling me "You can do this because you're the smartest person I know". Your words of reassurance go a long way!

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List of Abbreviations

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

American Psychological Association (APA)

Georgia Department of Education (GDOE)

Georgia Performance Standards (GPS)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Race to the Top (RT3)

Sixth Grade Academy (SGA)

Small Learning Community (SLC)

Socio Economic Status (SES)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The focus of phenomenological research is to describe the essence of humans lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2001; van Manen, 2007). The purpose of this chapter is to provide a framework for the related research on the phenomenon in this study. This chapter provides a background of the problem that necessitated the research of this study, an overview of the context of literature in which the research of this study is founded, the significance of this study for all stakeholders, and the research questions used in this study. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to gather teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of a sixth grade academy program in helping students' transition into sixth grade at a rural middle school in North Georgia. By identifying the factors that teachers feel affect the success of the program, educational leaders can have better information to guide them as they attempt to create more appropriate transition environments for their students.

Background

Research shows student stress is historically associated with transitioning from elementary school to middle school, as well as with middle school to high school (Kerr, 2002). "The stress that young adolescents face is compounded by the physical, emotional, psychological, and social changes that they are also going through" (Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1982, p. 279). Added to this pressure is the readjustment that comes from transitioning to a new environment. Student success relies on a smooth transition between the elementary and middle school years. Despite the knowledge of the importance of a smooth transition, little research is available on the topic in the move from elementary to middle school.

Smith-Mumford (2004) states that most of the current research about student transitions examines hard data, including information such as student performance on standardized tests, drop out rates, size of the school, and demographics of students and the community. What appears to be missing from the research is a qualitative perspective that examines perceptions of the sixth grade academy and the supports it provides.

Some schools have tried to combat the anxiety students experience by implementing transitional academies, commonly referred to as a sixth grade academy or ninth grade academy. For the purpose of this study, a ninth grade academy is defined as a year long program, often taking place in a separate setting from other grade levels, created to provide support to freshmen. Comparable to the ninth grade academy model is the lesser known and studied sixth grade academy model. For the purpose of this study, a sixth grade academy is defined as a year long program, often taking place in a separate facility from the other middle school grade levels, created to support rising sixth graders with their transition from fifth to sixth grade. While there is a strong foundation of research conducted examining the success of ninth grade academies as an instrument for transition, there is limited current research that examines the success of sixth grade academies in general; specifically, there is limited research that has studied teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of sixth grade academy programs (Gunter & Bakken, 2010). Educators are critical change agents within the classroom. Those perceptions, once identified, can help shape the future of the transition programs by identifying areas of strength and areas for improvement.

Small learning communities (SLCs) have been proven to foster a sense of personalization and belonging among students and teachers. SLC, also referred to as a School-Within-A-School, is defined in this study as a school that has been implemented to subdivide a large school

population into smaller, autonomous groups of students and teachers. SLCs are part of current innovative school reform efforts currently being implemented in schools across the country (Cotton, 2004). In the conversion to SLCs from large comprehensive secondary schools, changes in leadership structures are taking place. There is a need for teachers to step into leadership roles in order to successfully implement new instructional strategies that enhance and support personalization (Astin, 2008). In addition to redefining the role of the teacher, new responsibilities exist for the teacher in order to increase personalization.

The conversion to SLCs, as well as any research on SLCs conversion, has largely taken place at the high school level. Most research found on SLCs is quantitative, showing significant cognitive, social, emotional, conceptual, and moral developments that accompany this age period (Astin, 2008). Meanwhile, middle schools continue to grow in population with little being done to accommodate the lack of personalization. Those school systems and middle school administrators attempting to personalize the educational experience for their students should consider the benefits and challenges of converting to a small learning community, such as a sixth grade academy, to target personalization and transition during one of the most stressful years in a student's career (Akos, 2002). Astin (2008) is a proponent of utilizing SLC's for the purpose of assisting students with the transition from one school to another and encourages educational leaders to consider this in reform efforts. His study observes the process of a sixth grade academy used as a transition program to increase personalization between students and teachers. In particular, he focuses on the perceptions of teachers who have taught in the SLC.

The premise of this study is, when housed in a smaller school setting that is purposefully designed for sixth grade students, teachers and students can form stronger relationships to help

facilitate a strong transition year. A strong transition year sets the stage for a positive middle school experience (Lee & Friedrich, 2007).

The use of transition programs in schools is an effort to try to bridge the gap in the shift from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school. Many sixth and ninth grade students struggle through this transition year due to the drastic changes in scheduling format and academic and social expectations (Gottfried, 2009). During the middle school years, students are given more independence, move between classes for each individual subject, and are often given the freedom to choose their elective classes. Due to these rigorous changes and demands, middle school students are subject to suffer academic losses that were not present in their elementary school years (Kerr, 2002).

Alexander (1968), the "father of the American middle school," defined the middle school model as "a school having at least three grades and not more than five grades, and including at least grades six and seven" (p. 1). The junior high concept, introduced in 1909, included seventh, eighth, and ninth grade (Alexander, 1968). It was not until the 1960's that the more familiar model of the middle school emerged, which includes sixth, seventh and eighth grade (Pate, Thompson, & Homestead, 2004). Charles Eliot, who was once president of Harvard University, is credited for the concept of the junior high model, designed for the purpose of bridging the gap from elementary to high school years (Serber, 2008).

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1988) simply states that success initiates further success. Students tend to improve their memory through routinely modeling the behaviors of those who influence them. Persuasive influences that empower students to use their already formulated abilities contribute to staying power in the learning environment. Bandura advocated the importance of the teacher's role in constructing self-efficacy in the classroom.

Successful efficacy builders do more than convey positive appraisals. In addition to raising people's beliefs in their capabilities, they structure mastery tasks for them in ways that bring success and avoid placing them prematurely in situations where they are likely to fail. (Bandura, 1988, p. 37)

Bandura also founded Social Cognitive Theory, which stemmed out of the work of Social Learning Theory proposed by Neal Miller and John Dollardin in 1941. Bandura later expanded upon social learning theory in 1962 and continues to make contributions to his work on social learning theory to this day (Bandura & Bussey, 2004).

Bandura's (1989) Social Cognitive Theory of Gender emphasizes that boys and girls learn about gender roles by observing others and imitating their behavior. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory of gender development is relevant to this study because the theory states that children desire to figure out the way society wants them to act. Without gender reinforcement, children may stray away from social norms. As a result, they may be ostracized or bullied for being different. Lee and Friedrich (2007) state that other researchers have found poor academic performance of students is developed from poor quality social ties. Weakened social ties, often found in large schools, leave many students experiencing a lack of consistent social support. Large schools also lack the presence of family and community social ties to support students. Researchers investigating the problem of large schools failing to support students socially, posit that it is critical for US schools to take action in finding solutions, specifically solutions to strengthen these weakened social ties that are a main cause of declining school performance (Lee & Friedrich, 2007).

Smaller learning communities create a solid system of social support that middle school-aged students need. The gap in the research is the lack of study on sixth grade academies being

used as a transitioning program. The research in the study of teachers' perceptions of a sixth grade academy will not only target that gap but will also look specifically at one rural middle school located in a small mountain town in the foothills of Northeast Georgia. Available research on the dynamics of ninth grade academies shows that the successes of small learning communities across the country are highly debatable in general (Lee & Friedrich, 2007). Some high schools have experienced great success in effectively helping students' transition from middle school to high school, while other schools have not had the same results. What are not found in the literature is the studied effects a sixth grade academy has as effective transitioning program. The literature has a gap in regards to the effectiveness of sixth grade academies and their transitioning programs.

School structure may have a profound effect on students. Are our schools structured in a way to meet the needs of adolescents? This is of particular interest due to the current movement throughout the nation in converting large schools into small learning communities. Eccles (2004) dispels the myth that schools do not meet the needs of adolescents because of the many academic and behavioral crisis youth go through but instead, indicates that it is the way our schools are structured that plays a large part in creating and sustaining the issues that contribute to our school system's inability to meet the needs of the individual student. "In numerous studies conducted over the past 15 years, researchers have found that smaller schools lead students to perform better academically" (Cotton, 2004, p. 38).

Astin (2008) notes that the research that has been done to investigate or address easing the transition between grade levels for students has to date been largely focused at the high school level. When completing a basic search related to the topic in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database covering the years 1998-2008, Astin found the database

"revealed 4,270 articles with the indexing term 'high school students' compared with only 1,350 articles containing the indexing terms 'middle school students' or 'junior high school students'" (Astin, 2008, p. 4). A further search of the 1,350 articles on middle school students revealed that less than 1% of the articles contained The ERIC indexing term "teacher student relationship" (Astin, 2008).

The purpose of this study is to extend or refine the existing knowledge of using the sixth grade academy as a transition program, so that the concerns facing our middle school students, as well as the challenges facing educational reformers, are brought to light with the possibility of positive outcomes. According to Astin (2008), students will reap the benefit from the proposed research since students in smaller schools benefit from personalization. Smaller Learning Communities embody an "atmosphere of trust in which students grant teachers the moral authority to make greater demands on them as learners" (Astin, 2008, p. 8).

Situation to Self

The motivation behind conducting this study is driven by the philosophical assumption that a positive transition year from fifth to sixth grade sets the stage for a successful middle school experience. I teach 8th grade math in a county that has one middle school and one high school; these schools have a sixth grade and ninth grade academy, respectively. I have been teaching in this county, in one capacity or another, for five years. There are three elementary schools spread throughout the county that feed into the one middle school. The success of the ninth grade academy in our county is highly debatable, while the success of our sixth grade academy is considered a strong point in our district's school system.

Problem Statement

While there has been research conducted examining ninth grade academies, the dilemma at hand is the lack of research confirming or repudiating the benefits of sixth grade academies as successful transition programs (Smith-Mumford, 2004). Further research needs to be conducted in order for administrators to formulate knowledgeable decisions regarding grade configuration during the middle school years. Middle school students face many social issues such as anxiety, depression and stress; as well as matters that affect their education, for example, attendance and discipline issues (Kerr, 2002). Scholars studying the transitioning process between elementary school and middle school note some of the pressures associated with the traditional middle school layout, such as: Increased peer pressure, bullying, fighting, and accessibility to drugs and alcohol (Gunter & Bakken, 2010). In addition to the concern over such pressure is the concern that has also been expressed dealing with stress caused by being in the youngest class in a school. Students who are younger than their peers, mentally, physically, and emotionally, often have lower self-esteem and feel more strained. "There is also a rapid increase in truancy rates just after transitioning to a new school" (Gunter & Bakken, 2010, p. 896).

In order to address issues such as these head-on, transition programs, such as small learning communities, are being implemented, as opposed to the traditional middle school configuration (Astin, 2008). In an effort to foster a sense of personalization in education, small learning communities (SLCs) are part of the most innovative school reform currently taking place. SLCs are a form of school structure used to divide large school populations into smaller, autonomous groups of students and teachers (Astin, 2008). Most of these transition programs have begun to take place at the high school level in Georgia; however, some middle schools have begun implementing these programs to combat the issues associated with transition and in hopes

of providing more personalization. Lee and Friedrich (2007) recommend further research should be conducted to study the microanalysis of teaching and learning practices in small learning communities. This study serves as additional research as well as contributes to the limited body of knowledge available about sixth grade academies in Georgia. The issue being addressed is the stress and anxiety students experience that leads to an unsuccessful transition year from elementary school to middle school, as well as from middle school to high school. While many high schools have implemented ninth grade academies as a way to combat the issue of unsuccessful transitions, many middle schools have not followed this trend. One possibility for the hesitation on the middle schools' part could be the lack of research showing the benefits for implementing transitioning programs into the middle school setting. This transcendental phenomenological study focuses on one rural middle school that implemented a sixth grade academy for the purpose of easing students through the social, emotional, intellectual, and physical challenges that exist when transitioning from elementary to middle school.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to understand teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of a sixth grade academy program in helping students' transition into sixth grade at a rural middle school in North Georgia. In this research study, the sixth grade academy program being studied was designed to develop a small learning community by placing sixth grade students in a separate building, with its own administrator, front office, classrooms, media center, computer lab, and gymnasium.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that it will contribute better insight into the transition between elementary and middle school that can help school districts determine best practices

based on feedback from practitioners. Students benefit when school administrators and teachers know how to best ease the transition. Teachers' benefit from a transition made easier on the student. Parents' benefit when they see their child experience success. The community benefits when resources are maximized in the best possible way, backed by research. The educational community as a whole benefits when more information is added to the existing body of knowledge on the topic.

This study contributes to the limited body of knowledge of sixth grade academy programs used as transition tools for students moving from fifth to sixth grade. A distinct perspective will be gained by examining a sixth grade academy's effectiveness from the teacher's point of view. The perceptions of teachers working in a sixth grade academy will be carefully studied and better understood. Stakeholders who might benefit from the findings of this study include teachers, students, administration, parents, and the community. The research contributed through this study is important due to the unique location and general population being studied in a small rural community in northeast Georgia. The study has the ability to improve the conditions and environment in which student learning takes place on a daily basis and can be used as a reference for other school administrations and communities on how to successfully restructure their school organization to promote student learning (Gunter, 2010). The implications of this study could also call for an examination of the transitional program design to fulfill the complex needs of sixth graders in a school setting.

Research Questions

Transitions between schools typically are stressful times for students. Comprehensive information is needed as to the benefits of sixth grade academies when used to help transition students from elementary to middle school. This study will add to the current literature on sixth

grade academies by addressing the following questions:

Central Research Question: What are teachers' lived experiences as educators in a sixth grade academy?

While current research provides mixed results on the success of implementing ninth grade academies as transitioning programs for freshmen, little research has been conducted to show the benefits of employing sixth grade academies as transition programs (Lee & Friedrich, 2007). Most research provided has studied quantitative variables to support any evidence of student growth (Kerr, 2002). This phenomenological study seeks to qualitatively examine the effectiveness of sixth grade transition programs from a teacher's perception. This question stems from the theoretical framework for understanding to what extent teachers' behavior and attitude play a role in transition.

Research Subquestion One

How do teachers' perceived experiences in a sixth grade academy influence their professional behaviors and teaching practices?

Part of the objective of this study is to determine the prominent features of a sixth grade transition program. The teachers who will be interviewed in this study will be asked to identify the most salient features of sixth grade academies that contribute to their success. Teachers are, in theory, ideal candidates to offer their professional opinions and assess the impact of school configuration on student/teacher relationships (Astin, 2008). This question provides the opportunity for descriptions on the nature of the environment of sixth grade academies so as to better understand how a smaller environment may help ease this difficult transition times for the students they serve.

Research Subquestion Two

What are teachers' perceived advantages and disadvantages to a career in a sixth grade academy?

This research question seeks to understand the components that promote or hinder increased personalization between teacher and student in a sixth grade academy. When middle school students feel disconnected from their school, they are exposed to the risk of problematic behaviors and low motivation (Astin, 2008). An emotional connection between student and teacher has been discovered to be associated with healthy physical and emotional behavior and positive academic outcomes (Cotton, 1996). "Small Learning Communities (SLCs), which have been shown to foster significantly greater sense of belonging and 'personalization' among students and staff, are among the most innovative school reform efforts to be undertaken on a wide-scale" (Astin, 2008, p. 1). In order to recreate the achievements of successful SLCs, such as the sixth grade academy, research needs to define the components of an effective model for promoting and establishing personalization in these environments. This question targets the personal factors that either promote or hinder increased personalization for teachers in sixth grade SLCs.

Research Subquestion Three

What are teachers' perceptions of students' experiences in the sixth grade academy?

This research question targets the institutional and personal factors that are identified as part of the nature of a smooth transition environment. This study seeks to describe the environment of a sixth grade academy program so as to better understand how the setting affects personalization between teacher and student. Academic failure and engagement in risky behavior can be attributed to the failure to meet developmental needs during an important time of transition (Cotton, 1996).

Research Subquestion Four

How do teachers describe their experiences regarding the intentions of academies in education?

The personalization that occurs between student and teacher is a large contribution to the success of small schools. However, smallness itself is not a guarantee for success in education. By allowing teachers to describe their experiences regarding working in a small academy, the researcher will be able to determine whether the teachers' experiences match the intended purpose of academies. "The simple question of how teachers are feeling about their efforts to get to know students better seems to have received limited attention to date" (Astin, 2008, p. 11).

Research Plan

Qualitative research is the process of inquiry that explores a social or human problem (Moustakas, 1994). A qualitative researcher builds a picture for the reader through studying participants in their natural setting and reporting their views (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research seeks to more fully understand the meanings of human experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The main purpose of this study is to understand the teachers' perception of the effectiveness of a sixth grade academy, used as a transition program. Purposefully chosen sixth grade teachers, who have agreed to be interviewed and who worked in a sixth grade academy or are currently working in a sixth grade academy, will give their point of view on the successfulness of the setting. The qualitative research method used in this study is a transcendental phenomenological study method. Data will be triangulated through interviews between researcher and teacher, focus group interviews, and questionnaires. The detailed examination of each interview will be used to understand the effectiveness of the sixth grade academy as a transition program. Van Manen (2007) writes that phenomenology of practice

creates formative relations that have pedagogical consequences for professional and everyday practical life. A transcendental phenomenological study is typically used to describe the meaning of an event shared by several individuals (Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental phenomenological study approach was the most appropriate method of choice for this study based on the review of related literature, aligned with similar research purpose.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the choices the researcher makes to establish or define the boundaries of a study. The purpose of this study is to understand teachers' perceptions of a sixth grade academy, used as a transition program. The delimitations of this study include the choice of school and teacher participants. A group of teachers from a sixth grade campus in a rural community located in the northeast Georgia Mountains will be the participants in the study. To be considered for the study, the participant must have worked in the regular classroom for at least three years at the sixth grade academy chosen in this study. Preference was shown to teachers with more experience teaching sixth grade. For this study, a regular classroom is one where the four main academic areas (mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies) are taught. With this criterion, the pool of participants that will meet the requirements of this study included 12 teachers that currently teach at the academy and 23 teachers who previously taught at the academy. A sample of ten teachers will be selected. All ten teachers selected said they would be available and agreed to be interviewed in the future, which is a standard number of participants for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2002). This parameter of ten participants will allow the researcher to manage the amount of data collected while still providing rich descriptions of these teachers' perceptions.

Definitions

1. *Comprehensive Traditional High School*- A high school comprised of grades nine through twelve housed in one facility (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2004).

2. *Comprehensive Traditional Middle School*- A middle school that houses sixth through eighth grades in one facility (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2004).

3. *Georgia Performance Standards*- The content educators are expected to teach and students are expected to master within a specific grade level and discipline (Georgia Department of Education, 2011).

4. *Ninth Grade Academy*- A transition program designed to develop a small learning community. Typically a ninth grade academy will house the ninth grade population in a separate environmental setting (Oxley & Kassissieh, 2008).

5. *Self-Efficacy*- The theory that success initiates further success. If students can initially experience success, they are more likely to be successful in the future (Bandura, 1989).

6. *Sixth Grade Academy*- A transition program designed to develop a small learning community.

7. *Small Learning Community*- Designed to subdivide large schools into smaller populations to create personalized learning environments for students. SLCs are known as a school within a school (Weathers, 2006).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Relevant research is presented in this chapter pertaining to the transition from elementary to middle school, more specifically, when a sixth grade academy program is involved. In this chapter, the researcher provides background information about the history of middle schools and then expands on the concept of small learning communities. The research in this study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Bandura's work on the Theory of Self-Efficacy. The chapter concludes with a discussion of current research on transitioning programs.

Theoretical Framework

Bandura's 1986 Social Cognitive Theory and 1989 Theory of Self-efficacy are the underlying guidance for this study. Using a framework built on these two theories, the themes in this study are organized into meaningful relationships. Both theories are the structure behind the importance of teacher's perceptions in creating small, personalized, learning environments that support social and academic growth. Teachers have the power to create a positive environment conducive to learning.

Social Cognitive Theory

The development of the Social Cognitive Theory was proposed by Neal Miller and John Dollardin in 1941 and states that learning takes place through observation. Albert Bandura introduced Social Learning Theory in the 1960s (Bandura & Bussey, 2004). Albert Bandura later expanded upon Social Cognitive Theory in 1962. He continues to make contributions to his work on Social Cognitive Theory to this day. The main notion of Social Cognitive Theory is that an individual's actions and reactions, including social and cognitive processes, are influenced by the actions that individual has observed from others (Bandura, 1977). One theory as to why it is

imperative that students entering 6th grade have a successful transition is that of Social Cognitive Theory. Bandura postulates that a student can demonstrate a new behavior by watching the actions of other individuals, which can be either positive or negative. The teachers involved in this study are able to interpret and share their perceptions of student's behavior in a sixth grade academy. Bandura's theory is important to this study in that teachers are able to witness students who do or do not experience successful models of behavior in a small, personal setting. These students may or may not witness the success or failures of other students based on their surrounding environment. Witnessing these behaviors, and then processing them in a healthy, meaningful setting, is imperative towards adolescent development. The teachers in this sixth grade academy are the main influences on a student's perception of what they are capable of doing in the classroom setting. "The beliefs that students hold about their abilities to perform academic tasks or succeed in academic activities powerfully influence their academic performances" (Usher & Pajares, 2005, p. 126).

Similar to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is reciprocal determinism, which is the notion that the environment influences an individual's behavior (Bandura, 1989). One theory as to why transition programs are successful is credited to Social Cognitive Theory, which describes how children function cognitively through their social experiences. The personal environment, established by teachers in these small school settings, is one of the main influences on student's beliefs and behaviors (Bandura & Bussey, 2004). A program that is designed to accommodate students at a specific age is essential during such an influential period of growth as during adolescent years. Social Cognitive Theory studies how specific cognitions influence student behavior and development (Bandura & Bussey, 2004).

Theory of Self-efficacy

The underlying premise of Bandura's 1989 Theory of Self-Efficacy is that a student's success initiates further success. Student success hinders on the teacher's ability to create an environment that is conducive to student learning and personalization. "Self-beliefs of efficacy can enhance or impair performance through their effects on cognitive, affective, or motivational intervening processes" (Bandura, 1989, p. 729). The Theory of Self-Efficacy is grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes the role of observational learning and social experience in development of personality (Bandura, 1989). According to Bandura (1989), self-efficacy is developed from external experiences, which influence the outcome of events. Failure is defined as the inability to learn (Bandura, 1989). Bandura postulates that people with high self-efficacy, those who believe they can perform well, are more likely to view difficult tasks as something to be mastered rather than something to be avoided. Educators who have established a teaching philosophy built around Bandura's Theory of Self-Efficacy; create teaching environments that encourage healthy development of social experiences. "More recently, research conducted within this conceptual framework has sought to clarify how perceived self-efficacy affects thinking processes, either as events of interest in their own right or as intervening influences of other aspects of psychosocial functioning" (Bandura, 1989, p. 729). Bandura's (1989) research studied ways to delineate the methods self-percepts of efficacy have which enhance or impair the level of cognitive functioning. Because of the environment that is created by teachers in a small learning community, a sixth grade academy could potentially increase the opportunities for student success and therefore nurture a student's perceived self-efficacy.

The influences of self-efficacy can be used to explain how teachers have improved their student's memory by repeating the habits of the influences by which they are surrounded.

Teacher's persuasive influences, as simple as words of affirmation, instill self-beliefs within students at the middle school level and thereby contribute to their long-term memory (Bandura, 1989). Bandura's theory of self-efficacy has been linked to multiple transition eras in the life of adolescents (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Gerbino, & Pastorelli, 2003). Due to the nature of personalization within small learning communities as they contribute to student success, teachers within these programs are likely to contribute to students' self-efficacy. The desire to strengthen and create personal expectations for personal effectiveness is developed through psychological procedures carefully planned out by the educator (Bandura & Adams, 1997). **"Perceived self-efficacy affects people's choice of activities and behavioral settings, how much effort they expend, and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences"** (Bandura & Adams, 1997, p. 288). Therefore, it is imperative that teacher's are creating positive environments conducive to successful student learning. Conversely, Bandura (1997) found threatening tasks led to reduced self-efficacy. "Unless people believe that they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act" (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Gerbino, & Pastorelli, 2003, p. 1206). If students are to learn from observing their surroundings, it is important that teachers create an environment that is conducive to education.

Related Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a synthesis of the existing knowledge related to sixth grade academy programs. This chapter provides an overview of the relevant bodies of literature that influence the overall design of the study. The venture of this research is to understand one middle school's experience in using a sixth grade academy as a transitioning program. The research in this study evaluated the practices one middle school used in the transition process of students exiting elementary school and entering middle school. The school

is a public middle school with three feeder elementary schools. The middle school is located in a small rural community located in the foothills of Northeast Georgia. The research presented is a transcendental phenomenological study that examines the effectiveness of the program currently being utilized. Interviews, focus groups and questionnaires will be used to collect data over the period of a month.

Nature of the Problem

Entering middle school can be one of the most challenging experiences in a student's academic career. Students can face a number of issues ranging from emotional problems, developmental changes, self-esteem struggles, and academic challenges. Unique to the transition to middle school is also the newfound independence that students long for and acquire (Gottfried, 2009). Middle school can be the starting point for many students' academic achievement gaps without the proper support in place. Educators have the ability to support students during this time of transition. As students experience the transition into middle school, they can feel overwhelmed in a larger, more impersonal setting, which focuses on grade achievement. Teachers give their students more freedoms in middle school, such as having to make choices in how they spend their time academically and with extracurricular activities. In the new environment, if a student's grades drop, or if they experience social pressure, he can develop a negative view of himself (Bandura, 2004).

Students and parents feel a mixture of apprehension and anticipation as students enter their middle school experience (Akos, 2002). Coordination between elementary and middle schools takes place as schools partner to share information and prepare schedules. Schools typically implement open house and visitation in an attempt to help ease parent and student anxiety. Teachers, counselors, and administrators are present to offer support to parents to

discuss rational fears of their students entering into the middle school. Unfortunately, most of the time the transition from elementary school to middle school is not a gradual one. Elementary students who are accustomed to being with one or two teachers for the entire day are now placed on instructional teams. Students have a new set of expectations to meet, as well as manage social and emotional growth. Alongside of these typical concerns, adolescents also face the fear of interactions with older students (Gottfried, 2009). The mental and physical development that takes place between ten to fourteen years old, the years of the typical middle school student, is a wide range (Akos, 2002). With the freedom that comes with entering middle school, decision-making skills have greater consequences for poor choices.

The problem is that even though much is known about the stress and anxiety, as well as the importance, of having a successful transition year from elementary school to middle school, there is a lack of research on effectiveness of implementing a sixth grade academy as a transitional tool for helping students to cope with these issues. "The literature surrounding schools-within-schools and ninth grade academies is limited in both magnitude and scope, despite academies and small learning communities appearing throughout the educational environment of American schools" (Maynor, 2008, p.16).

The goal of the research provided in this study is to understand the strengths and weaknesses of a particular sixth grade academy in a rural town in Northeast Georgia in order for administrators to make fully informed decisions about transitioning opportunities. It is imperative for student success that administrators fully utilize resources in order to make transitions for students as successful as possible during this stage.

Historical Background

Public education has evolved since its origination, when one-room buildings once served

as a schoolhouse for all ages, meetinghouse for town assembly, and church on Sunday. Growing

from its roots where one school would house all ages, two separate schools were gradually

developed and are now known as elementary and high schools. It was not until the early 20th

century that junior high schools were established as a transitional bridge from elementary school

to high school (McEwin & Greene, 2010). Fundamental theorist, Frederich Taylor, paved the

way for conversations on educational theory to take place amongst school districts. Changes in

educational theory and school structure have transformed classroom teaching (Serber, 2008). In

the beginning of the twentieth century, the theories of Frederich Taylor dominated the structural

design of large education systems. "Concepts such as specialization, centralized control, and top

down supervision were considered the keys to educational improvement" (Serber, 2008, p. 1).

Eichorn's *The Middle School,* published in 1966, challenges the notion of the 6-3-3 grade

level configuration. Eichorn advocates a 5-3-4 configuration, which moves ninth graders to the

high school, and justifies restructuring the organization due to the rapid maturation that takes

place in adolescents from the eighth to ninth grade year. Alexander (1968), the "father of the

American middle school," defined the middle school model as "a school having at least three

grades and not more than five grades, and including at least grades six and seven" (p. 1). The

"junior high" concept, introduced in 1909, included seventh, eighth, and ninth grade (Alexander,

1968). It was not until the 1960s that the more familiar model of the middle school emerged,

which includes sixth, seventh, and eighth grade (Pate, Thompson, & Homestead, 2004). Charles

Eliot, president of Harvard University at the time, is credited for the concept of the junior high

model, designed for the purpose of bridging the gap from elementary to high school years.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the middle school movement began to spread as schools

established teaching teams (Serber, 2008). Prior to the shift, schools were departmentalized,

where there were 12 teachers in a grade level. Now teachers are divided into teams of four, one

teacher for each of the four academic contents. "The presence of teaming in middle schools has

increased significantly across the years. By 1988, 30% of middle schools had organized teachers

and students into interdisciplinary teams with 52% doing so by 1993" (McEwin, Greene, 2010,

p. 49). While dramatic changes were quickly evolving on the educational front, some questioned

the rationale behind the changes. Some claimed that school funding, instead of research

supporting successful student development, was what drove the changes occurring in educational

reform. In the decades after the 1960s, the number of students in American schools kept getting

larger (Irmsher, 1997), while research at the time continued to show that larger schools provided

more negative than positive consequences, especially for minority and low-income students

(Howley, 1999).

The number of middle schools in school systems has almost tripled since the 1970s

(McEwin & Greene, 2010). Alexander (1968), Alexander and McEwin (1989), McEwin,

Dickinson, and Jenkins (1996; 2003) are connected studies containing national surveys. These

surveys provide a longitudinal perspective for the degree of implementation that middle grades

programs and practices have undergone over time. The results from the surveys were used to

create two groups: Schools considered highly successful middle schools (HSMS) and schools

that were not. The survey then identified the characteristics of each type of school in order to

learn from the differences. Two of the major findings from Alexander and McEwin (1989)

longitudinal surveys include:

> All stakeholders should intensify their efforts to overcome the complex challenges
>
> associated with authentic middle level school reform and work persistently and
>
> collaboratively to implement key middle level programs and practices.

To establish and maintain HSMS, middle level leaders must avoid a recurring mistake;

blindly following tradition and staying with what is comfortable and noncontroversial

rather than pushing forward with courage and purpose to ensure that all schools serve

young adolescents effectively. (p. 58)

For more than 40 years schools-within-schools have been discussed in literature, however

implementation of these schools did not really surge until the 1990s. "Barker

and Gump (1964) advocated for breaking schools into smaller units, while Goodlad

(1984) publicized the ideas that have become known as schools-within-schools" (Maynor, 2008,

p. 34). The most current trending practice is the desire to personalize large schools (Maynor,

2008).

Moving on to the 1990s, three broad themes emerged from educational research; one of

which was the importance of creating a small school setting. "Early learning is crucial, good

teachers make a difference, and small schools counter many of the crippling effects of poverty"

(Vander Ark, 2002, p. 10). Over time trends have emerged and evolved to create the educational

setting that we now have today. While many characteristics of schools have changed in America

over the face of history, some underlying realities have remained the same. Fredrick Hess

(2004) stated that he believes what was taught centuries ago is still relevant in schools today and

emphatically points out that the duty of public schools is to teach children the essential skills and

knowledge that make productive citizens. Schools should be required to teach students to

respect the constitutional mandates, as well as instruct students in the framework of rights and

obligations that secure the nation's democracy and protect the nation's liberty (Hess, 2004).

Hess believes schools that take it upon themselves to serve their students in this way should be

regarded as serving public purposes. Education should serve the public purpose of teaching

children to grow in knowledge and develop students into productive young citizens. Scholars in the educational realm debate whether or not the educational reform fulfills this purpose versus if it is truly run by funding. In a recent study conducted by Pilar (2007) on school configurations, it was determined that the educational reform's primary purpose is the personalizing of school environments for all of America's students.

Which model of school reform is best for creating environments that encourage student learning is an unsettled topic amongst stakeholders. "Concern about the quality of education has been expressed by philosophers, politicians, and parents for centuries" (Noll, 2011, p. xvii). The most recent modifications in education that have taken place over the last decade are due to a new federal mandate regarding the *No Child Left Behind Act.* Schools in Georgia have exhausted resources in an effort to attain Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

For the past decade, Georgia high schools have worked to redesign and reform the traditional comprehensive high school model to include ninth grade academies. The goal of the reform was to reduce the number of students dropping out of high school by creating a successful ninth grade year through successful transition. This gradual reform has only now begun to make its way to the middle school model. Middle school administrators want to know if the same model of reform used in high schools will create a successful transition, and therefore increase student success, if used in the shift from elementary school to middle school.

Structure of Traditional Middle Schools

Research shows that the level of student attendance can heavily influence student performance and achievement (Gottfried & Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness, 2009). In Gunter's 2010 study of students who are in the sixth grade transition to middle school, results indicated significant differences in suicidal thoughts or actions based on the grade

configuration of the school they attended. Gunter (2010) also noted future research should be done to identify comprehensive explanations for the phenomena, such as identifying variables through which grade configuration affects student behaviors or through triangulating findings qualitatively.

As students move into their middle school years, they begin to experience a decline in their academic motivation. The research in this study will investigate why this decline takes place. One suggestion is the structures of environment in traditional middle-grade schools are not meeting the needs of students. Other factors, such as classroom environment, teacher-student relationships, discipline practices, student's self-efficacy, and student motivation, are examined in this study as well.

For some students, middle school marks the beginning of a downward spiral in motivation and behavior (Anderman & Midgley, 1997). Eccles' (2004) study involved 2005 students attending traditional middle schools who completed questionnaires in their sixth grade year and then again in their seventh grade year of middle school. Self-concepts of ability, valuing of sports, social activities, and academic activities were all measured in the questionnaire. Using Harter's 1982 self-worth scale, Eccles' study found many transition-related effects on students' motivation. For example, students' motivation was at its lowest as students entered their seventh grade year. This was attributed to the effects of an unsuccessful sixth grade transition year. Students' ability beliefs decreased in the categories of English and math. Eccles also found that students who had previously ranked social activities as their highest interest when entering sixth grade, later reported a decrease in interest in both categories. "Children's ratings of the importance of these activities also decreased between sixth and seventh grades, with the

largest differences for English and social activities occurring across the transition to middle grade schools" (Eccles, 2004, p. 555).

Transition Programs

A transition is a change from one condition to another. Transitions can produce psychological and social emotional stress. Researchers Holmes and Rahe (1976) found that to experience a transition, whether good or bad, produces stress. They created a ranking of life transitions based on the amount of stress experienced by students. Having to change schools, as well as the beginning of the school year, were both ranked among the top of stress producers amongst middle school aged students. "Although orientation programming attempts to minimize these concerns, these data indicate that it is important to address a variety of worries involved in the transition. In fact, the spread and frequency of reported worries suggest that there is a general or overall persistent level of worry for most students in transition" (Akos, 2002, p. 343).

Transitions are not easy to deal with due to the amount of stress related to change. While some middle schools are beginning to see the need for transition support, high school administrators nationwide have moved towards implementing ninth grade academies in order to support students. "Throughout the nation, high schools have tried to respond to the issue of transition, particularly when they are within large urban centers with at-risk adolescents. The number of separate buildings or facilities for ninth graders has continued to rise over the last decade" (Smith-Mumford, 2004, p. 50). In order to understand if similar transition academies would prove successful in the middle school arena, administrators must look at the issues that caused the need for small learning communities in the first place.

Most of these facilities were created in response to a few issues: A population surge in school districts at the middle or high school level, a long-standing concern about the

transition process, and/or as an opportunity for restructuring and/or the renovation of large buildings. (Smith-Mumford, 2004, p. 50)

Over the last decade, as schools have begun the movement towards creating smaller learning communities to help combat some of the negative issues associated with transition, research has begun to shed light on the components of successful and failing schools that have implemented the small school model. "Schumacher (1998) identified social, organizational, and motivational factors as successful interventions. Suggested strategies designed to create a school context appropriate to developmental levels of preadolescents include building smaller communities within the school" (Akos, p. 341, 2002). While the small school community has been recommended time and time again, without proper implementation, even the best intentions can fail.

In Smith's (1996) research findings, he reported that the approach with the greatest impact in regards to transitional programs falls into three categories, the main category being programs targeting staff, students and parents. Structured transitional programs, which coordinate the efforts of staff and students within schools and between schools, are what prepare students and parents best for transition (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998). While demographics are necessary to take into consideration when implementing a transition program, the essence of all transition programs remains the same regardless of demographics (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998). How school size plays a role as a factor in school effectiveness was studied by Harp (1994). "The sense of ownership that students experience in small schools contributes to student success. In schools too large, a sense of anonymity prevails" (Smith-Mumford, 2004, p. 28). Queen conducted one of the most inclusive studies offered on the topic of transition (2002). Queen found that families served as a strong additional resource of support during a time of transition

and also states in his findings that effective and comprehensive transition programs help: Build a sense of community; respond to the needs and concerns of students; and provide appropriate, multifaceted approaches in order to facilitate the transition process. He further postulates that there are many factors that contribute to either the success or failure of students in transition. He found students identified four primary categories that contributed to the challenges of transition to high school: Relationships with teachers, academic difficulties, adjusting to the school environment, and peer or social pressure (Smith-Mumford, 2004). Each of these categories can in some way be attributed to personal relationships. One way of personalizing schools is through implementing a small learning community. The state of Georgia has begun to implement ninth grade academies as transition programs in response to the need for more personalized education. For the most part, these students are in a separate facility from the rest of the high school. There are a few cases where the program remains in the same building but the ninth grade academy has its own designated hallway. By implementing these programs, high schools have created opportunities for their freshman to succeed on their path to graduating. A study conducted on eight new small schools in the Chicago public school system found that "these schools had better student attendance, fewer students dropping out, more courses completed by students, and better scores on standardized tests" (Potter, 2004, p. 15). The study of the eight Chicago public small schools also recognized parents, administrators, and community leaders as feeling more content with the small schools than were a similar group associated with large schools.

For all of the reasons listed above, as mentioned by Smith (2006) and Schwerdt and West (2011), it is imperative that schools provide students with quality transition programs at the middle school and high school levels. Queen (2002) focused on the transition from middle school to high school and finds most students pass through five major transitions. The book is

founded on Queen's Twelve Factors for Successful Student Transition, a research-based analysis of large studies. Queen's list of characteristics of successful transition programs is as follows:

- Provide core courses (English, math, social studies, and science) just for ninth graders along with academic, social-emotional, and physical growth the support services geared solely for ninth graders, particularly at risk students;

- Create a separate facility/wing or floor to isolate ninth graders, particularly in large urban high schools with hundreds of students entering as ninth graders;

- Collaboration between sending school staff and receiving school staff to organize information sharing and visits for students and parents during the spring, summer and first days of school;

- Teachers are assigned ninth graders only and receive training and professional development to be sure there is an understanding of the needs of ninth graders

- Teachers work as an interdisciplinary team that moves on with the students as they enter the next grades;

- Teachers have common planning time to standardize expectations, plan interdisciplinary assignments, plan team conferences with students and parents which includes support staff such as counselors and special educators; each team establishes, a common system of procedures and practices and work to problem solve issues not limited to the classroom or academic concerns;

- Provide opportunities for ninth graders to work with junior/senior students in mentoring type program s before and after the school year has started; and

- Provide extra curricular opportunities for ninth graders only. (Smith-Mumford, 2004, p. 59)

Each of these components is a small piece of the puzzle that contributes to a successful

transition. Creating the environment for a successful transition to take place allows for more

personalized relationships between teacher and student. These positive relationships have shown

to ameliorate many negative emotional and academic impacts associated with the transition to

middle school.

School Size as it Affects Academic Climate and Outcomes

A growing number of districts have broken up large low-preforming high schools into

small learning communities due to the added incentive of substantial funding from the Bill and

Melinda Gates Foundation (Georgia Department of Education, 2012).

> Throughout the nation, high schools have tried to respond to the issue of transition,
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> particularly, when they are within large urban centers and with at risk adolescents. The
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> numbers of separate buildings or separate facilities for ninth graders have grown over the
>
> last decade. (Oxley & Kassissieh, 2008, p. 202)

While high schools have been quick to jump on board the SLC movement, middle

schools seem to be more hesitant due to the lack of research regarding the benefits in a middle

school setting. Available research that pertains to the configuration of middle schools states that

modern day middle schools are failing our students (Cotton, 1996). "Most large public middle

schools are, by all accounts, consistently failing early adolescents. Suicides, homicides,

depression, unintended pregnancies, academic failure, drug abuse, and a host of other problems

are endemic among middle school students" (Astin, 2008, p. 12). The advantages of a small

school setting are vast. One of the benefits is meeting the needs of individual adolescents.

Students' needs are met due to the atmosphere created in a small school, which is a warmer,

safer setting where students are more likely to learn. Researchers, as well as school staff, feel as

though small class size contributes to improved teacher/student relationships. "The research suggests that culture is changed for the betterment of all involved in small schools. For example, people are more likely to feel a sense of community in small institutions. The scale is important to members' feelings of belonging, visibility, and effectiveness. It is more difficult to identify and easier to ignore the issues of culture in a large organization" (Maynor, 2008, p. 23). A small setting for learning makes it impossible to ignore issues that would otherwise be lost in a large organization. Small learning communities are known for their positive school climate. "Many of the findings suggested that small schools and smaller learning communities could provide a more positive school climate and greater opportunities for nurturing than could larger schools" (Potter, 2004, p. 9). The bottom line is that when looking for documents that discuss transitioning programs, or schools within schools, the research is there to support these Smaller Learning Communities. A majority of the articles concerning schools-within-schools have devoted a section specific to the study of small schools (Maynor, 2008). Research related to schools-within-schools adds credence to the implication of small school ideas used in large schools, as well as to the individual study of schools-within-schools (Maynor, 2008). It is not only a relevant topic, but it is also the job of all stakeholders involved in the education process to question if the model their school using is still viable for today's learners.

Walberg's (1992) research statistics state that the United States ranks first among industrialized nations in the world in school expenditures, while it ranks close to the bottom in student achievement. Walberg also notes that over a 50-year span, the enrollment in American public schools increased by roughly an average of 530 students. The statistic used in Walberg's research show the effect school size has had on student achievement. With the growth of schools, and increase in expenditures on behalf of the school district, student achievement

continues to fall. Walberg (1992) analyzed data found in the National Assessment of Educational Progress for 28 states and found that average school size and percentage of educational funding paid by the state was negatively correlated to 8th grade math proficiency (Walberg, 1992).

Research substantiates there are benefits to implementing Smaller Learning Communities. "The research supports four main reasons why small schools research is foundational to small learning units in large schools: Relationship indifference, small schools can alleviate high drop out rates, poor attendance, and excessive discipline issues" (Maynor, 2008, p. 18). Maynor found that students are more likely to be engaged in a smaller setting because they feel as though the teacher notices their work and efforts. "Smaller school settings have a better sense of their students and are therefore better able to meet their needs" (Smith-Mumford, 2004, p. 29). Barker and Gump (1964) see this as the single most important benefit to smaller school settings. Students who feel connected to their school exhibit more school spirit, participate in school activities, and report feeling good about being a student at their school (Smith-Mumford, 2004). Potter (2004) studied positive behaviors demonstrated on behalf of the student in a regular school day and acknowledged that other "research done on school attendance and participation in school activities has suggested that these positive behaviors were not as high in large schools as they were in small schools" (p. 9).

Maynor (2008) found one of the recurring themes presented from the interviews conducted was attendance. Researchers often report that ninth grade students have the worst attendance and tardy rates of all grade levels in the entire school (Maynor, 2008). Once small schools are implemented, lack of attendance is no longer consistently attributed to ninth grade. Attendance is closely related to every aspect of learning, and higher rates often result in disaster

for ninth grade students. "It is logical to assume that if students are absent from school, academics will suffer, promotion will suffer, and graduation will suffer" (Maynor, 2008, p. 29).

Not only is attendance important in order for the student to have "desk time," but also socially, so that they form lasting relationships. "Students who form lasting relationships, both academically and socially, within the school setting are more likely to graduate from high school than students who are not so successful during the transition" (Potter, 2004, p. 9). Post-graduate students who are asked to recount their high school experience will oftentimes refer back to a relationship, as opposed to something learned in the classroom. Another way research has examined the effectiveness of small school settings is through identifying the participation of students within their setting. This type of examination studies student participation, both during and after school hours, by looking at the student activities within and around school. Measurements are based on the participation of students in extra-curricular activities. "Student participation in small schools has a rate double that of students in large schools" (Maynor, 2008, p. 18). Small sized schools address the needs of students across a large range of socioeconomic levels. The small school setting allows teachers to create innovated lesson plans that motivate student participation. Higher test scores and grades are a direct result of this participation.

In order for learning to take place, students must not only be present during the school day, but parents must also be involved at home. Because of the unique perspective parents have on their child's education, partnership between school and home is ideal. Parents are experts on the effect school has on their child. "In research done on restructuring efforts in urban high schools, Christman, Cohen, and Macpherson (1997) found more parental involvement and more respect between teachers and students reported to greater degrees in smaller schools' (Potter, 2004, p. 11). In order to overcome systemic challenges, parents need to partner with schools to

encourage a structure that is best for their child's learning. Constraints on time and resources often prevent large schools from regularly communicating with parents to encourage their active involvement. In small schools, the foundation for parent involvement is part of the personalized environment.

In a large undertaking of research, Queen (2002) noted twelve factors for successful transitions, specifically focusing on school size and student/teacher relationships. The first five factors, which are relevant to the research in this paper, are as follows:

- The larger the high school, the greater the negative impact of transition on ninth grade students.

- Ninth grade students' adjustments to high school are complicated by their perceptions of a bigger school, different environment, changed class schedule and smaller classes.

- Fear of getting lost in the high school building is by far the number one fear of ninth grade students.

- Ninth grade students view high school teachers as less helpful than middle school teachers.

- Ninth grade students must have at least one adult in their lives for genuine support in order to become academically and socially successful. (cited in Smith-Mumford, 2004, p. 34).

Indeed, the large number of students in our schools may be one of the factors contributing to declines in test scores. In small schools, a low student to teacher ratio is more likely to emphasize individualized and small group instruction.

How small does a school have to be in order to be categorized as a small school?

Researchers are currently debating amongst themselves as to what the numbers should be for a school to be considered "large" or "small." However, Sommers (1997) felt, "Even if we can not agree on the optimum size, largeness is considered socially and psychologically detrimental" (p. 11). Potter (2004) cites that both the Carnegie Foundation and the National Association of Secondary School Principals had recommended that the number of students within a high school should be no greater than 600 for maximum learning to take place. Raywid and Schmerler's (2003) research based recommendation was to have no higher than 400 as a population for elementary schools and 800 or less for middle schools. These numbers are the student population size that Raywid and Schmerler deemed as a small school environment that would produce maximum performance. The Education Research Service (Research Action Brief, 1982) studied 119 publications printed between 1924 and 1974 regarding school size. The differences for optimum size varied by as much as 1700 students for senior high schools, 50 students for middle schools, and 370 students for elementary schools. Smith-Mumford (2004) cite in their research seven reasons why small schools of 300 to 400 work best:

- Governance. Easier communications happen when all staff can meet around a common table.

- Respect. Students and teachers form positive relationships as they get to know each other well.

- Simplicity. Individualized instruction and care is easier with less bureaucracy.

- Safety. Teachers can respond quickly to behavior that violates the community standards and strangers are easily identified for security purposes.

- Parent Involvement. Alliances are more easily formed with parents when they believe teachers know and care about their child's progress.

- Accountability. Bureaucratic data is not needed to determine how a student, teacher or school is doing. Everyone knows.

- Belonging. Every student is part of a community or social group that contains an adult, not just the academic and athletic stars (p. 31).

Even though ideal school size is not certain, most parents and teachers do agree that class size radically affects the quality of instruction and achievement for students (Queen, 2002). As for the location of small schools, although there are small public schools located in large cities, the vast majority of them are located in rural areas. "Another reason why small schools research is used to support the ideas of schools-within-schools is that student attendance appears to be better in smaller school settings" (Maynor, 2008, p. 19). Researchers, when studying the statistics of small schools, must also compare these findings to what has been found true of large schools. "Large schools tend to have lower grade averages and standardized test scores coupled with higher drop out rates and more problems with violence, security and drugs. Large schools also need more layers of support and administrative staff to handle increased bureaucratic demands" (Smith-Mumford, 2004, p. 29).

The positive and negative effects of small learning communities have been acknowledged in research (Gunter and Bakken, 2010). Some critics do not believe a true comparison between the two types of schools can be made.

It is difficult to completely use the small school comparison in a large school environment because large schools are inherently different, however they are organized. Therefore, it is important that research be conducted regarding the effects of small school reform efforts such as academies. (Maynor, 2008, p. 17)

With the positive characteristics of small schools heavily outweighing the negative, there is not much research to recommend large school settings. The restructuring of schools to smaller entities may ameliorate some of the problems facing education today.

Sixth Grade Academies

Sixth grade academies are the lesser known transitioning program, when compared to research provided on ninth grade academies. Research supports the move of high schools away from large school settings towards smaller, more intimate environments. Statistics behind why the move is supported in ninth grade can be found in research.

> 25% of all K-12 students who drop out do so in the ninth grade and 40% of ninth graders had multiple course failures. Even among students who dropped out in grades 10 through 12, at least 50% had substandard performance their ninth grade year (failing multiple classes and had a disproportionate number of absences). Over 60% of students who eventually dropped out of high school failed at least 25% of their credits in the ninth grade, while only 8% of their peers who eventually graduated had similar difficulty.
>
> (Roderick, 1993, p. 44)

These types of statistics are not available for the middle school demographics simply because of the lack of research yet to be completed in the middle school setting, which is cyclical due to the lack of the number of middle schools that have attempted the SLC model.

Components of Successful Small Learning Communities

Drawing on the history of schools within schools, as well as alternative schools, the notion of breaking up larger schools (particularly high schools) into smaller schools has become increasingly popular (Weathers, 2006). These small school environments create a nurturing setting for students and their teachers. These schools increase personalization between students

and teacher, and as a by-product, increase relevance in student learning. Converting a school into a small learning community is a mammoth undertaking and therefore requires lengthy preparations through the study of research. Research has studied a range of schools varying in size to determine whether size is a component of student achievement. On one hand, Rumberger and Palardy (2005) found in their study of school size that larger schools had slightly higher academic achievement gains then smaller schools. These schools did, however, have higher dropout and transfer rates. On the other side of research, Lee and Smith's (1997) research analyzed data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study and found slightly higher gains in academic achievement in smaller schools. Lee and Smith did caution small schools to avoid limiting curricular options in classrooms.

According to Meier (1996), seven reasons why smaller schools experience greater success and are more effective are: Governance, respect, simplicity, safety, parental involvement, accountability, and belonging. He finds in his research that smaller schools are in the position to foster the development of personal relationships between teacher and student (Meier, 1996). The small school movement is an area of school change that allows for personalization to take place. The movement towards SLCs is taking place, across the nation, in widely known large schools. As more schools adopt the conversion to SLCs, research is beginning to grow and produce promising outcomes. As Meier (1996) points out, instruction changes, relationships blossom, governance is restructured, the role of the teacher changes, which all contribute to a small personal institution. When comparing larger high schools located in Chicago to a study of 90 smaller high schools, "students in schools-within-schools attended up to five days more of school per semester, dropped out at one-third to one-half the rate, had up to .22 higher grade-point averages" (Wasley & Lear, 2001, p. 23).

Every school has a different approach for implementing a small learning community. There are many types of models of small learning communities. The most basic model is when a school designates a hallway, or separate part of the building, for the transitioning program. This kind of structure is often referred to in research as a school-within-a-school. Some schools will use an already existing structure to subdivide students into separate groups based on grade level. This type of learning community is often referred to as academy. Academies specific to one grade level can denote a separate building used only for academic subjects, while the rest of the school's facilities are shared; or, an academy can be a building that includes classrooms for the academic subjects, as well as other facilities such as a cafeteria, library and gymnasium, used specifically for the chosen grade level. Another approach to structuring a small learning community is if a school built a new space to subdivide a large student population. This structure is often referred to as a 'small school' approach. Research by Potter (2004) promotes a completely segregated space for the use of one grade level. The concept of Smaller Learning Communities is focused on separateness and autonomy as playing an important role (Potter, 2004). Potter (2004) believes that in order to truly be considered a small learning community, there needs to be separate space in the smaller school for administrators (principals, counselors, and other staff). "Other areas, such as cafeterias, auditoriums, and a separate space for large-group instruction may be harder to come by, but still preferred" (Potter, 2004, p. 13).

The seven components, listed in the research of Owen et al. (2002) as supporting the schools-within-schools structure, are as follows: Focusing on career transitions, inspiring academic excellence, organizing small personalized settings, strong students support, supporting life-long learning, stakeholder alliances, and community responsibility (Maynor, 2008, p. 29). A national study commissioned by the Gates Foundation (Evan et al., 2006) gathered 50 schools for

the purpose of studying how school size affects the learning climate in classrooms. New schools, conversion schools, and redesigned schools were included in the study. The outcome of the study was researchers found more positive climates in new smaller schools. One positive aspect of a smaller school included personalized relationships between teacher and students and students and students. The study also concluded that successful small learning communities are not typically products of breaking up large schools, but instead created from new structures (Evan et al., 2006). Research has shown for new small learning communities to be successful, budget, staffing, and governance, must all be considered.

Challenges for Schools with Small Learning Communities

Under pressure from No Child Left Behind to restructure low-performing schools, a growing number of high schools are breaking up large low-performing schools into small learning communities (Millsap & Schimmenti, 2008). Schools have encountered an added incentive of substantial funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundations. Converting these large high schools to small learning communities is an enormous undertaking. Added pressure from schools districts to move quickly in implementation tends to undermine the effort. While research has looked across a range of high schools of different size to determine if size is a factor with achievement and dropout rates, similar studies have yet to be replicated or studied amongst middle schools. Ironically, middle school is the developmental period in which adolescents seem most at risk, but receives less scholarly attention than other educational time periods. The main challenge facing the middle school environment is the lack of research to support the decision to move sixth grade towards small learning communities. This lack of research will make it difficult to find any trends in the data. Without enough information, it can be difficult to implement a successful small learning community. Potter (2004) points out that some small

schools have tried to initiate the Smaller Learning Communities concept and have failed or have experienced less success than what was hoped. One of the most common reasons for this is the lack of fidelity to the small-school concept. Key elements that should have been in place in order to create a true, separate smaller learning communities program were not implemented. Another reason some smaller schools fail early on is due to not giving the school enough autonomy and separateness. "Failing to make physical changes in the school to pair with the cultural changes being made is also a reason for less-than-successful results" (Potter, 2004, p. 17). To implement a small learning community model calls for substantial changes in how schools run their institution. A district's reluctance to implement these changes can undermine the school's effort. Within the school, problems can arise from shared space, such as scheduling conflicts. Increases in budget, staff and planning time are associated in some cases of implementation (Millsap & Schimmenti, 2008). Some of the costs associated with opening a small school can include such things as the purchase of land, new curriculum, building and equipment costs, and teacher training and program implementation. There is also the problem of what to do with the old larger school buildings, which in many cases there may not be many viable uses for in the community. One solution that some schools are taking advantage of that reduces some of the concerns from parents and the community is to create Smaller Learning Communities within an existing larger school. "These smaller entities can vary from units having only slight independence from the larger school to learning communities with almost full autonomy in their operations" (Potter, 2004, p. 13).

Realistically, with these smaller schools, come smaller budgets. Potter is not the only researcher to find that budgets become an issue in smaller school settings. "Benefits such as cost efficiency and a more varied curriculum were argued to be more attainable in large schools than

in small ones. This is regrettable, because research on school size has repeatedly found more advantages for students attending small schools than large ones" (Cotton, 1996, p. 4). An often-stated argument against small learning communities, besides the small budget, is also the lack in curriculum opportunities. "These advocates point out that students in these educational environments are not given the same curriculum opportunities as those located in consolidated settings, largely due to the fact that economically, small schools receive less money per student (Maynor, 2008, p. 24). While the small learning community model is successful to varying degrees, implementing their vision calls for substantial changes in how schools are structured.

The Role Teachers Play in Small Learning Communities

Small learning communities take time and planning to implement. Often, in the creation of new, smaller schools, teachers are asked to take on many new roles, which can leave them with less time for professional learning and planning. Without a strong plan in place for implementing a Transitioning Program, the structural changes can inhibit teachers' motivation and ability to improve instruction.

Creating an environment for successful implementation of small learning communities includes creating a shared vision amongst administration and staff. There are several components that contribute to fostering an environment conducive to learning. "The five dimensions of successful professional learning communities are: Supportive and shared leadership, supportive conditions, shared values and vision, shared practice, and collective learning and application of learning" (Hord, 2004, p. 7). Each of these components supports the others. Hord (2004) also states, "Professional learning communities involve the work of life-long learners: Administrators, along with teachers, must be learners: questioning, investigating,

and seeking solutions for school improvement and increased student achievement" (p. 8).

Teachers must be willing to accept change if it is for the betterment of students and the school.

One benefit of teaching in a small learning community is the ability to work with a particular group of students to meet their needs, monitor their learning, and provide academic support. "Collegiality among teachers, personalized teacher-student relationships, and less differentiation of instruction by ability is simply easier to implement in small schools" (Cotton, 2001, p. 6). Research by Cotton (2004) advocated for the many benefits of small learning communities, such as, improved achievement, a greater sense of belonging, increased feeling of safety on behalf of the student, increased attendance, and more attention focused on the student by the teacher. Cotton found when the size of the learning environment is reduced, students experienced a greater sense of belonging. Research consistently reports high levels of social support in SLCs because of the more attentive environment. Maynor (2008) stated the second bonus of small schools is the teachers; communication is shared at every level, between teachers, students, parents, committees, and administration. Maynor believes smaller settings make it possible to provide leadership with quick results when implementing programs and initiatives. Cotton (1996) found that teachers thrive and grow professionally, personally, and communally in smaller school settings, due to the network of support established. "Teachers are more likely to seek help from their peers and administrators when there is a concern regarding their teaching" (Maynor, 2008, p. 21).

No matter how much the face of education has changed over the decades, the philosophy behind the importance a teacher's role in student learning has remained the same. Erickson (1982) felt that teachers' implicit and explicit beliefs about learning were a part of students' learning environment. Children learn very early the feel of their classrooms. They develop

beliefs and attitudes about learning just as they do other factual information. A student may or may not remember the content of the material they were taught, but they will always remember the way they were made to feel in a classroom or grade. When the memory of factual information may fail them, the memory of emotional feelings will remain. Smith-Mumford (2004) found teachers' perceptions on the structure of school and the impact of positive relationships with students is most related to class size, advocacy, and subject matter. They also add that students in classes with teachers where there is a sense of care and trust are more willing to take intellectual risks. When Smith-Mumford (2004) sought to identify the structural obstacles in schools that impede student success during the transition process, multiple factors arose in which schools must be held accountable for a response: "They include smaller class sizes to promote more positive student/teacher relationships; identification of at-risk students, active support from parents, more adult support within the school and among and between teachers from the middle school grades" (Smith-Mumford, 2004, p. 37). Teachers play a crucial role in the implementation of a small learning community. There are several benefits experienced on the teacher's behalf, when teaching in smaller environments.

When students enter into middle school at the age of eleven or twelve, they are at a critical developmental stage. Entering into adolescence, students first experiencing middle school are navigating significant physical, hormonal, emotional and cognitive changes (Bandura & Bussey, 2004). Teachers are the first responders during this difficult time of transition. Unlike elementary school where students can spend their entire day with the same teacher who has created a bond of trust, middle school students may see as many as seven teachers in a day. The majority of middle school teachers see more than 100 kids in a day. Teachers have the ability to create a connectedness between student and school.

An interesting paradox exists in American education. When educators... consider how to improve students' performance...the focus is usually on changing the curriculum, teaching methods, or assessment strategies...Yet when successful adults are asked what aspect of their education most influenced their later accomplishments, they often cite a special relationship with a teacher. (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 121)

This study will examine the teacher's perception of what factors account for their successes and failures in personalization within a sixth grade academy, how they can be most successful in this environment, and how they can be supported in their efforts.

Adolescent Development

One must first understand adolescent development, particularly pertaining to the elementary to middle school transition stage, in order to implement programs suitable for combating the issues students face. Some of these issues include disengagement, below level literacy, low academic performance, peer-pressure, physical development, and emotional issues. In doing so, programs can meet the needs of students socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually.

In Anderman & Midgley's (1997) study, they surveyed 341 students during both their fifth grade and sixth grade year. The researchers used goal orientation theory to examine if student's motivation changed in the transition from elementary to middle school. During their fifth grade year, students were more oriented on task goals during instruction. For these students, fifth grade was a year where they felt a greater sense of academic confidence, which then declined in sixth grade. By the time they entered sixth grade, the researchers found that the students were more focused on performance goals than the following year (Anderman & Midgley, 1997). The importance of understanding the changes that take place during adolescent

development must be stressed, especially pertaining to the fifth grade and sixth grade year for the purposes of this study.

Intellectual. Learning is a lifetime process. The process of learning, known as cognitive development, takes place through mental processes, as well as sensory perceptions. Maximum cognitive development takes place when all five sensory modes (hearing, touching, tasking, smelling, and seeing) are in use. The theories of Jean Piaget (1923) and Lev Vygotsky (1962) have had the most influence on our knowledge of how adolescents learn. Piaget and Vygotsky had different perspectives on how children's cognitive development takes place. Piaget studied children's actions as constructs for the way the world works around them; whereas Vygotsky studied the way a child acquires knowledge by observing interaction of people that surround them. In their research, Piaget studied adolescents' physical environment and Vygotsky studied their social environment.

Many of the characteristics involved in the learning process of adolescents can be generalized, even though no two adolescents develop at the same rate intellectually. Students move out of a passive and concrete learning stage into a more abstract and active learner stage (Bandura, 1989). Vygotsky (1962) believed that children would begin to use what they learn in social contexts as they develop independently. Vygotsky also believed that students would make sense of their world through shared experiences with the other adolescents and teachers around them. Teachers giving students the opportunity to discover by learning from their surroundings is an important phase of life. If students are to learn from observing their surroundings, it is important that teachers create an environment that is conducive to education. Administrators and educators should be sensitive to the circumstances that may have a negative impact on student behavior.

Social and behavioral development. "Research has highlighted the developmental and academic difficulties often associated with the transition from elementary to middle school. Both boys and girls show a significant increasing psychological distress across the transition to middle school" (Akos, 2002, p. 341). As social relationships begin to change, emotional distance begins to emerge and become more pronounced during the middle school phase of adolescence. More emphasis is placed on social interactions with peers and increased independence. The majority of the waking hours for a middle school student is spent in school. Due to this quantity of time spent with peers, students develop their social and behavioral traits from what they see in the classroom, hallways, lunchroom and extracurricular events. "The size of the school seems to be very important to a student's experience of 'belonging'. Research indicates that students need to feel that they are important and fit in" (Potter, 2004, p. 9). Realization of these social and behavioral changes taking place during students' adolescent years is important to take into consideration.

Physical. Adolescents become extremely aware of the physical changes their body undergoes, related to height and weight, during their middle school years. From nutrition and exercise to hygiene, the issues that adolescence face can often be uncomfortable for teacher and student. During a time when most middle school students have questions about physical growth and changes, finding someone to ask and who will give an answer can be difficult. Middle school students need accurate information on physical development. Because of varying growth rates, excess energy may accompany these periods of rapid growth. Movement stimulates the learning process. Students need to be able to release energy at multiple points throughout the school day in order to reduce misbehavior (Greenberg, Lippold, Powers, Syvertsen, & Feinberg, 2012).

On average, girls gain about 3.5 inches and boys 4.1 inches in height. Girls typically experience growth before boys (Huebner, 2000). Girls' weight gain can be attributed to fat and that of boys to muscle development. Physical changes experienced by boys or girls or both can include pubic hair, menstrual cycle, voice changes, underarm hair, facial hair, increases in oil production, and acne (Huebner, 2000). Boys and girls begin to experience a stronger sexual drive that will drive their thoughts and behaviors. Many times an increase in appetite takes place due to increased metabolism. Adolescents need more sleep but oftentimes end up getting less due to their busy schedules (Greenberg, Lippold, Powers, Syvertsen, & Feinberg, 2012).

Emotional. Middle school-aged children are in a developmental stage that is referred to as early adolescence, during which many emotional changes take place. Emotional functioning in early adolescence includes emotions of stress and worry. Children will become more aware of their bodies and may experience changes in self-esteem. Erikson (1956) coined the stage of emotional development as the fidelity phase, which takes place between years 13 – 19. "Adolescents often display increased decision making in a classroom or other structured setting but show poorer judgment in more emotional or arousing contexts, especially involving peers" (McDaniel, 2008, p. 36). According to Erikson (1956), the emotional experiences of an adolescent during their school years build on Freud's latency stage. Students become more independent with their own personality and interests. This heightened emphasis on independence often leads students to push for more privacy. At this age, students begin making their own choices about friends, appearance, extracurricular activities and school. "Along with psychological and academic outcomes, studies have shown that student motivation and attitudes toward school tend to decline during the transition to middle school" (Akos, 2002, p. 341). The emotional brain, the limbic system, has the power to open or close access to the brain for

learning and making connections. Creating positive emotional learning environments is necessary if students are to meet challenges in learning with optimism and openness.

During adolescence emotion can take the place of learning. Faced with frustration, worry, sadness, or other types of these emotions, students lose access to their reasoning and memory, and therefore their ability to make connections. For example, some students when asked to read aloud in class will freeze. The emotion of fear lessens their ability to think. For some kids, having to perform well on a math assessment produces anxiety. Anxiety, being an enemy of learning, inhibits a student from their memory and using reasoning. Students need to be in an environment where their intellectual energies and capacities are not being drained by negative emotional stress.

Summary

The dramatic changes implemented in schools over the last century can be attributed to the change in goals set forth by the government. The most recent modifications in education have stemmed over the last decade from federal mandates regarding the *No Child Left Behind Act.* Schools in Georgia have exhausted resources in an effort to attain Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). One trend utilized in trying to accomplish this task is the implementation of small learning communities in schools as a way to create successful transition. It has been well documented that small learning environments foster student learning (Lee & Friedrich, 2007).

Feeling the pressure to increase student performance, administrators have begun to study the impact of adopting small learning community programs as a means to enhance student performance. The problem is a lack of research studying the benefits of sixth grade academies as transitioning programs (Gunter & Bakken, 2010). "While literature is overwhelmingly devoted to schools practicing one or two units of schools-within schools, rather than full model examples,

there is limited research regarding this total school reform effort; its change process, leadership, culture, success, and weakness need further study" (Maynor, 2008, p. 34). The limited amount of research that is available is studied quantitatively, looking at the relationship between variables such as attendance, discipline records, dropout rates, and socioeconomic status as it relates to student success in small learning communities. Research needs to be directed towards a qualitative route to recognize how teachers, students, parents, and administrators perceive the effects of sixth grade academies as transitioning programs. The literature in this review supports implementing small learning communities, such as a sixth grade academy, in a large school setting (Kerr, 2002).

CHAPER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This chapter presents the procedures, research design, and analysis for the present research study. As discussed in preceding chapters, large public middle schools are by most accounts failing our young people (Cotton, 1996; Eccles, 2004; Gunter & Bakken, 2010; Lee & Friedrich, 2007; Usher & Pajares, 2005). Depression, academic failure, and drug use are examples of the multitude of problems that plague middle school students during the transition year into 6th grade. One contributing factor could be the teacher to student ratio within the school and classroom. Students thrive on caring relationships, which feed into their developmental needs (Bandura & Bussey, 2004).

The transition into sixth grade is a critical phase in students' lives and academic careers. The stress incurred from the move to a larger environment: different academic structure; surrounded by unfamiliar facilities, teachers, administration, and students; reduction of parental involvement; greater academic challenges; and more responsibilities; is too often an inhibitor of success for rising sixth grade students. Over the past 10 to 15 years a variety of efforts have been made to transform the configuration of American school (Oxley & Kassissieh, 2008). Significant among these efforts is the initiative to implement Small Learning Communities. The restructuring of larger schools is an effort designed to address a variety of issues and accomplish several goals.

A pivotal time in any student's career takes place during transition. The transition from elementary to middle school is especially difficult due to some of the drastic changes a student faces for the first time in their academic career, such as, a schedule that goes from a student being in one class the entire day to switching classes for each academic area (Gunter & Bakken,

2010). In recognition of this difficult transition period for students, literature shows the surge in creation of small learning communities in schools over the last ten years (Stevenson, 2002). The mission of these small learning communities is to create an environment that meets the needs of a group that demands special attention. This could include individual support from the teacher, special academic preparation, directed communication between staff and parents, and activities that support healthy social growth opportunities (Anderman & Midgley, 1997). This study is designed to look at a smaller school setting, designed specifically for sixth grade students, through the perception of the teacher.

Design

A principal goal of this qualitative study was to examine teachers' perceptions of a sixth grade academy, in order to understand the implications for the transition to middle school. This transcendental phenomenological study followed Moustakas's (1994) approach to research. The first step of design is to determine if the problem being investigated would be best examined using a phenomenological approach versus the other qualitative approaches to inquiry. The problem best suited for a phenomenological approach is one where several individuals' shared experiences are to be understood (Moustakas, 1994). Once a phenomenological approach has been selected as the best method for studying the problem being investigated, it must then be decided which approach of phenomenology should be used. Two common types of approach to a phenomenological study are: Hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) and transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). "Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology is focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants" (Creswell, 2004, p. 59). By understanding these common experiences, a deeper understanding of the phenomenon will occur (Creswell, 2002). The next

step of design is to recognize and specify broad philosophical assumptions of the phenomenology (Creswell, 2002). To fully describe how participants view the phenomenon, the researcher must understand the philosophical basis behind the experience. Moustakas (1994) stated that oftentimes the researcher has previously experienced a similar phenomenon to that on which data is being collected. It is important that the researcher set aside previous notions in regard to the study in order to view the phenomenon from a fresh perspective. The idea of studying the phenomenon without bias is known as epoche, Husserl's concept that means perceived freshly for the first time (Moustakas, 1994). Consequently, this is where the term "transcendental" originates (Creswell, 2004). Moustakas acknowledged the difficulty in achieving such a task. An initial open-ended questionnaire was given to teachers who had taught, or who do teach, in the sixth grade academy, along with the consent form. The questionnaire gathered information on faculty beliefs about adolescent development and needs. The questionnaire was followed by individual interviews of ten teachers. Finally two focus group interviews were held to gather information from the teachers as a collective group. The focus group interviews were used to initiate a meaningful discussion, bringing out ideas that were not discussed in the individual interviews.

There are two general questions often asked in a phenomenological research design (Moustakas, 1994). In terms of the phenomenon, what have you experienced? What situations have influenced your experience of the phenomenon? Beyond these two questions, other questions may be asked in order to obtain a better understanding of the common experiences of the participants. I used Moustakas's (1994) approach because "it has systematic steps in the data analysis procedure, and guidelines for assembling the textual and structural descriptions" (Creswell, 2004, p. 60).

Data analysis steps were then taken to highlight significant statements that provided insight to the phenomenon, referred to as horizonalization by Moustakas (1994). Data formed from the answers to research questions were highlighted based on significant statements. From the taken statements, clusters of meaning were grouped into themes. Textural descriptions of what participants experienced were then assigned based on the significant statements and themes (Moustakas, 1994). The primary focus of the study is the themes that will emerge from transcriptions of teacher interviews. Moustakas (1994) then added that the researcher should reflect and write from their experiences. These sentiments were added into the role of the researcher section in this paper. Finally the essence of the phenomenon was written into a descriptive passage. In order for the researcher to develop an understanding of the phenomenon, it was imperative to the study that all the participants involved are carefully chosen based on the certainty they have all experienced the phenomenon in question. A potential contribution of the study is the discovery of the extent to which personal connections between teacher and student has been made while in a sixth grade academy, as compared to working in a mainstream middle school. This study will employ a phenomenological approach in order to collect information.

This study presents an evaluation of teachers' perceptions of personalization at a stand-alone sixth grade academy, formed within the only middle school in a rural mountain community. In particular, it describes the results of interviews with 10 teachers, many whose experience of personalization with students changed significantly since working in a SLC. This study was informed by a phenomenological approach in order to understand teachers' experience of personalization within the SLC. A phenomenological approach focuses on the essence or structure of an experience (Creswell, 2002). According to Merriam (1998), phenomenological research is,

the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience. These characteristics are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of phenomenon, for example, the essence of loneliness, the essence of being a mother, the essence of being a participant in a particular program. (p. 15)

In order to understand the essence of their common experience in working at a SLC, an initial open-ended questionnaire was given to teachers who are staff of Lovett Middle School sixth grade academy, as well as to a few teachers who are no longer employed by the middle school, but did previously work there. Information was collected in regards to each faculty member's background, for example, how long they have been employed at the sixth grade academy. The open-ended questionnaire was followed by individual interviews with 10 teachers who were employed or are currently employed at the sixth grade academy. The questionnaire used is found in Appendix D. The interviews focused on the teachers' experiences while working in the sixth grade academy. The interview used is shown in Appendix E. Two focus group interviews were assembled with seven of the ten participants who took part in the individual interviews. The focus group interview questions can be found in Appendix F.

Research Questions

Central Research Question: What are teachers' lived experiences as educators in a sixth grade academy?

Research Subquestion One: How do teacher's perceived experiences in a sixth grade academy influence their professional behaviors and teaching practices?

Research Subquestion Two: What are teachers' perceived advantages and disadvantages to a career in a sixth grade academy?

Research Subquestion Three: What are teachers' perceptions of students' experiences in the sixth grade academy?

Research Subquestion Four: How do teachers describe their experiences regarding the intentions of academies in education?

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Site

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Lovett Middle School is located in a county that is about sixty miles north of Atlanta, Georgia, and has an approximate population of 30,918 (United States Census Bureau, 2013). Over the past three years, the county has grown by approximately 1000 residents. This rural school district is composed of a community of a racially, religiously, ethnically, economically, and linguistically homogenous population. The county's race composition is 95% White, less than 2% African American, less than 1% Asian, Indian and other (United States Census Bureau, 2013). In the community and school, the residents are predominately Caucasian. Most of the families who live in the community are located there because their family has resided in the county for generations. The percentage of people in the county who have graduated high school is 84.8%, and 22.8% hold a Bachelor's degree or higher. The homeownership rate in the county is 70.1% with a total of 10,782 households in the county. The per capita money income in 2012 was $20,970. The percentage of families living below poverty level is 16.8%. The land area of the county, in square miles, is 282.93, which is less than 1% of the land in Georgia. The average number of people per square mile in the county is 105.9 (United State Census Bureau, 2014).

Lovett Middle School was selected for the site of this study due to the unique facility characteristics of the sixth grade academy, such as its own building, gymnasium, media center,

computer lab, and administrator. The Lovett County School system, with its five schools and

nearly 4,000 students, is located in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in North Georgia.

There are approximately 850 students who attend this middle school. In the sixth grade

academy, there are three separate buildings, one to house each academic team of students. The

teams/buildings are referred to as 200 Building, 300 Building, and 400 Building. The 200

Building houses 89 students. The 300 Building houses 95 students. The 400 Building houses 93

students. All of the students who attend 7th and 8th grade at the school were filtered through the

sixth grade academy. Of these 850 students, approximately 60% are considered economically

disadvantaged because they receive free or reduced-price lunch. The percentage of male

students from sixth to eighth grade is approximately 55% and the percentage of females is

approximately 45%. Roughly 11% of the school population is labeled as having a disability.

The ethnicity of the school is limited in that nearly 93% of the school is categorized as white.

Demographics of the faculty are reflective of the student population; all teachers employed by

the middle school are Caucasian, except one. The middle school has 28 female full-time

teachers and 17 male full-time teachers. There are two female half-time teachers and one male

half-time teacher. There are six male teachers who are full-time employees but split their time

between the middle school and high school in the county. There is one female teacher who

works only one-fourth of the school day. The total enrollment at the middle school in 1997 was

635 students. The total enrollment in 2004 was 924 students. The total enrollment in 2014 was

884 students at the beginning of the school year. The number of instructional staff in the whole

school is 55 teachers. In addition to those teachers are another six teachers that the middle

school shares with the elementary and high school. The number of instructional staff in the sixth

grade, in 2014, is 15 teachers.

Prior to 2001, the sixth grade was housed in what used to be the middle school for the entire county. Then in 2001, when the school was reconfigured into what it is now, what was the middle school was adapted into a night school facility for students who wanted to get a GED. In 2001, sixth grade took over the left side of the campus, moving into 3 separate buildings. Then in 2012, an addition was added to the current sixth grade building, which included a cafeteria and gymnasium for the sixth grade use only.

The county in this study has only one middle school with three feeder elementary schools. Because three elementary schools feed into the middle school, students have varied experiences coming into the middle school setting. At the middle school, they are scheduled in a manner that heterogeneously combines students from all three elementary schools. The rural middle school in the study is the only middle school in a small district that also only includes one high school. This middle school has a sixth grade academy for all their students to attend. This academy has its own building, administrator, media center, computer lab and gymnasium. The sixth grade holds three academic teams of teachers. There are four teachers per team, one for each academic content area: Language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. In the sixth grade academy, there are a total of 12 teachers, which does not include special education teachers. Each teacher teaches one subject for four academic class periods each day. One team of educators teaches two gifted classes and two regular education classes, while the other two teams of educators teach four regular education classes each day. Most special needs students are assimilated into the regular education classes with an additional teacher providing support for them. The middle school used for this study was chosen due to the direct access the researcher had to data that meet the requirements of the study.

Participants

The type of sample utilized in this study is a purposeful sample. Purposeful sampling selects non-random cases for an in-depth study (Creswell, 2002). Information rich cases are ones that contribute to an individual's understanding of a topic by adding a new dimension or perspective. The sampling procedures that were the most fitting for the design of this study are criterion-based. Criterion-based sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 2001). The importance in establishing a criterion when selecting the participants for this study is so that lessons may be learned about unusual conditions that are relevant to improving the program being studied: Sixth grade academies. Participants in this study were selected from a pool of teachers who had to of taught at the specified sixth grade academy for at least three years. The appropriate sample size for this study included 10 teachers.

Procedures

Before beginning data collection, Liberty's Institutional Review Board first approved the study (Appendix A). After gaining IRB approval, teachers who were selected and who agree to participate in the study were contacted. Teachers were selected based on their experience in working for a traditional middle school model as well as the sixth grade academy in the study. It was determined that there were 35 teachers who qualified to participate in the study based on the number of years they worked at the sixth grade academy, with twelve of them still be current employees of the school. Selective sampling was used to determine the ten teachers selected to participate in the study based factors such as on number of years of experience working in the academy, timeline for working in the academy, and gender. Teachers were mailed, through the interoffice mail system, a consent form to participate in the study and open-ended questionnaire

to gather mostly demographic data for the study. Data was collected through the use of interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and a focus group interview. An initial open-ended questionnaire was given to the entire staff of Lovett Middle School Sixth Grade Academy, as well as to a few teachers who are no longer employed by the middle school, but did previously work there. The questionnaire was given in order to understand the essence of the teachers' common experiences from working at a SLC. Information was collected in regards to each faculty member's background, for example, how long they have been employed at the sixth grade academy. On their returned open-ended questionnaire, all ten teachers agreed to participate in the individual interviews and focus group interview. The open-ended questionnaire was followed by individual interviews. The questionnaire used is found in Appendix D. The interviews focused on the teachers' experiences while working in the sixth grade academy. The interview used is shown in Appendix E. A focus group interview was assembled with seven of the ten participants who took part in the individual interviews, one group of five and one group of two. The focus group interview can be found in Appendix F.

Information from the interviews and focus group interview were transcribed. All three sources of data collection were then highlighted for significant statements and coded for emergent themes. The results of the data are interpreted in Chapter Four.

The Researcher's Role

I currently am employed in a county that has one middle school and one high school; these schools have a sixth grade and ninth grade academy, respectively. I am employed as a full-time educator, teaching 8th grade Mathematics. My duties include educating close to one hundred students each day. I have formed the relationship of coworker with the educators who are employed by the sixth grade academy. I have never worked within the building or in the

grade level that is being studied. The campus in the study is considered its own entity and therefore I am quite distant from the school and educators in the study, even though they are part of the same middle school where I am employed. The only bias, or assumption, that I might bring to the study which would influence how I view the data and conduct my analysis, is the partiality towards having a sixth grade academy in place to help students transition into the middle school environment. In an attempt to enhance credibility and suspend personal judgments, I plan to utilize the advice and counsel of my mentor, who has kept me grounded throughout the dissertation process.

The success of the ninth grade academy in our county is highly debatable, while the success of our sixth grade academy is considered a strong point in our education system. Upon further research, I discovered the success of ninth grade academies across the country is in general highly debatable. Some high schools have experienced great success in effectively helping students' transition from middle school to high school, while other schools have not had the same results. What I have not found in literature is the study of sixth grade academies as effective transitioning programs from the teachers' perception of the program. I recognize the daunting task of trying to gather teachers, who are already overworked, to participate in the study. As a researcher working in the school system where I teach, I am also aware of the possibility that participants may not be forthcoming with their answers during interviews.

Data Collection

Phenomenology study research is the use of multiple data sources, a strategy that strengthens data credibility (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (2002) defines a qualitative approach as "one in which the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives" (p. 18) using strategies such as phenomenology. This study utilized three methods

of data collection. Some examples of data sources used in a qualitative study are documentation, archival records, interviews, physical artifacts, direct observations, and participant-observation (Creswell, 2002). In this study, data was collected and triangulated in order to understand the teacher's perception of the effectiveness in the implementation of a sixth grade academy as a transitioning program at a rural middle school in Northeast Georgia. In a phenomenological study, information gathering is focused on how a phenomenon is perceived by the individuals (Patton, 2001). The phenomenon of this study is the teacher's perception of this sixth grade academy as a transition program: A unique and rare sixth grade transition program, located in a rural community, that has three separate facilities for each sixth grade academic team. Therefore, data collection methods that align with the selected research, and that were used in this study, include: Open-ended questionnaires to obtain basic information in regards to the study; recorded, individual interviews with each participant; and, two recorded focus group interviews of participants who were involved in the interviews in which all will join together in a session to communicate with one another. Each of these methods of data collection was specifically selected for collecting data in a manner relevant to the study. The number of data collection methods selected, totaling three, was used in order to triangulate data. The theoretical framework for this study is Bandura's (1988) social learning theory.

Open-ended Questionnaires

An open-ended questionnaire was used as one of the data collection methods in this study. An open-ended questionnaire was necessary to the study for the purpose of providing additional information that teachers may not be comfortable verbalizing, as well as looking to verify accuracy of ideas across multiple data sources. In addition, contradictory statements in the interviews and questionnaire were areas that required further exploration. This type of data

collection enabled the researcher to shorten the interviews to a length that was manageable for both the interviewer and interviewee. Open-ended questionnaires are used to foster analytical and critical thinking. Open-ended questions allow the respondent to answer without implied responses. The questionnaire was researcher generated and is located in Appendix D. When generating the questionnaire, facts and content validity were addressed, as well as piloting procedures described. Initially, a recruitment and interest email or letter was sent to potential participants, letting them know they will be personally contacted. Each potential participant was then contacted personally, either face-to-face or over the phone. An open-ended questionnaire and consent form was then sent to each participant through the interoffice delivery system. The questionnaire was composed of questions that were used to obtain teacher demographic and to determine teacher outlooks toward the degree of change they perceive in their behavior and attitudes, and the role of personalization from working in a sixth grade academy. The questionnaire was also used to recognize the existence of instructional practices that have been shown to support personalization. The questionnaire provided an opportunity for teachers to respond to questions in a more honest manner than they may have in the interview setting, by allowing them more time to provide constructive feedback and less pressure to answer, than in a face-to-face setting.

The open-ended questionnaire is composed of 14 questions. Questions 1 – 8 focus on teacher demographics and contribute to the knowledge needed to fully comprehend research question one. Questions 9 – 14 are related to the stressors and positive aspects of middle school transition. Questions 9 – 11 specifically address research question three by asking teachers to identify what they believe to be top student stressors related to transition from elementary to middle school. Questions 12 and 13 serve the purpose of gathering information for research

question four by asking teachers to identify positive and negative aspects of transition. Question 14 of the questionnaire helped to identify the effect personal relationships have on teaching in the classroom and therefore contributed to research questions one and two.

Individual Interviews

The goal of phenomenological research is to understand the participants' experience of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). One way to obtain their perception is through the use of semi-structured interviews, allowing the participants to talk about their experiences. Interviews are face-to-face conversations with the purpose of exploring issues or topics in detail (Pope & Mays, 1995). A structured interview has an exact set of questions that does not allow the interviewer to divert. There is no diversion from the script during the interview. The format of a semi-structured interview, which will be used for all of the interviews, is open and allows new ideas to evolve. The interviewer typically has a general framework of themes to be explored (Moustakas, 1994). In a semi-structured interview, questions are already formulated that will be used during the interview, but the researcher does not have to strictly adhere to the script. A semi-structured interview was chosen in order to allow new ideas to be brought up during the interview, based on information the interviewee provides. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) suggested semi-structured interviews for first time researchers. True open-ended interviews have the tendency to get off track, and an inexperienced researcher could have difficulty getting the participants to focus and finish the interview. An open-ended and semi-structured interview will be used in order to gain deep insight into the teachers' experiences inside the classroom in a sixth grade academy. This type of interview will be used "so that the participants can best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the research or past research findings" (Creswell, 2002, p. 204). Interviews are vital in this research study for identifying the

perceptions of participants related to the research questions regarding the sixth grade academy as a transition program. Vygotsky (1987) stated, "every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness" (p. 236).

Once the 10 participants indicated they were willing to participate, via the returned open-ended questionnaires, interviews were scheduled to take place. The researcher decided 10 interviews would suffice for data collection, as the study is not looking for data saturation, but for lived experiences. Interview questions were developed from and grounded in literature on the topic of the study. After the questions were developed, an administrator and teacher who has experience in the field of small learning communities, and experience in the doctoral research data collection process, reviewed the material and participated in the piloted study. Their expertise contributed to the quality of the questions in the study and the researchers interviewing skill. A piloted questionnaire and interview was conducted with a teacher and administrator outside of the study sample to ensure clarity of questions and wording. After the participants were selected and agreed to participate filled out consent forms and questionnaires, personal interviews were scheduled and conducted in a setting that was comfortable for the participants. The length of the interviews all last around one hour. Interviews were recorded using an audio program, called Garage Band, which is installed on the researcher's computer.

Interview questions can be found in Appendix E. Questions 1 and 2 address background knowledge of the person being interviewed. Questions 3 through 7 helped answer research question one, which states: How do teacher's perceived experiences in a sixth grade academy influence their professional behaviors and teaching practices? These questions were asked to get the teacher participants to reflect on their teaching experiences, how the process influenced their behaviors and teaching practices, and if the sixth grade academy was beneficial to them now that

they are older and are looking back at this experience. Question 8 through 11 address the advantages and disadvantages involved in a sixth grade academy, from the teacher's perspective, which helped to answer research question two. Research question two states: What are teachers' perceived advantages and disadvantages to a career in a sixth grade academy? Questions 12 through 14 of the interview address sixth grade academies through the students' experiences, as perceived by the teacher. These questions helped to answer research question three, which states: What are teachers' perceptions of students' experiences in the sixth grade academy? Finally, questions 15 through 20 reveal the intention behind small learning communities, specifically sixth grade academies. These five interview questions contributed to research question four that states: How do teachers describe their experiences regarding the intentions of academies in education?

Focus Group Interview

Focus group data collection involves a moderator facilitating a small group discussion; in this case, the discussion took place between the participants involved in the study. All the participants of the individual interviews were invited to have a guided discussion with the researcher on the topic of sixth grade academies. The determination was made to invite all the participants to participate in the focus group interviews. Two focus group sessions took place. The first group involved five of the participants of the study who could meet at the agreed upon time. The second focus group included two participants. The focus group conversations were recorded in garageband. The focus group interviews were used to probe deeply into teachers' experiences inside the classroom of a sixth grade academy. The participants of the focus group interview were composed of most of the individuals who participated in the individual interviews. The hope was that a more fruitful discussion would be initiated by gathering all of

the interview participants together, and in both cases it was. The purpose of the focus group interview was to obtain ideas that may not have initially come to mind in the individual interview. Moustakas (1994) cited organization and analysis of data begins with regarding every statement relevant to the topic as having equal value.

Questions 1 through 6 of the focus group interview helped to answer research question one which states: How do teacher's perceived experiences in a sixth grade academy influence their professional behaviors and teaching practices? Questions 7 through 10 of the focus group interview helped to answer research question two, which address the pros and cons of sixth grade academies, from the teacher's point of view.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of methodically examining, classifying, and categorizing data collected into understandable findings to be expressed to others (Creswell, 2002). The following section provides a description of data analysis procedures were used to conduct this study. An initial open-ended questionnaire was given to teachers who are currently, or were previously, employed in the sixth grade academy. The data collected from these questionnaires was then used to study faculty's beliefs on adolescent development and personalization of the program. Responses from each individual questionnaire was reviewed and coded for specific themes, and specific quotes that were profound were identified. "A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldana, 2012, p. 3). The data can consist of interview transcripts, according to Saldana. The collective group of coded questionnaires was then analyzed for any common themes and areas that might have still be unclear at that point and needed to be addressed in the individual interviews and focus group

discussions. "In qualitative data analysis, a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for the later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes" (Saldana, 2012, p. 4). Transcripts from individual interviews were reviewed in the same manner, first examined and coded individually and then reviewed collectively to identify common themes. Finally, themes and researcher notes from all data sources (questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus group discussions) were scrutinized and combined to create a rich description of these teachers' perceptions of the sixth grade academy used as a transition program.

A logical chain of evidence was built in order to make conceptual and theoretical coherence (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). The meanings developed were listed and clustered into common themes and used to develop a textural description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). From these meanings, the phenomenon was constructed, and the entire study was summarized using the identified themes and participants' own descriptions and ideas (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

It is important to establish trustworthiness in the research study in order to obtain credibility (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) refers to trustworthiness of a study as validation. Creswell defines validity as the strategies that researchers use to make sure their study is accurate. Trustworthiness speaks to the credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the study. Trustworthiness was achieved in my study by providing direct quotes to authenticate the study, the use of member checking, and triangulation to ensure credibility. Member checking is a method of validation where the researcher gives the "data,

analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants" (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). Participants were able to check their interviews and contributions to the findings of the study and validate the accuracy of interpretation on the researcher's behalf. The use of detailed descriptions was used to achieve transferability, for the use of future studies. The intent of using detailed descriptions is to achieve giving the reader a sense of emotions and perceptions of understanding the research participant's experience.

As a basic foundation for ensuring credibility and validity for the study, the researcher took every step to ensure that three specific phases were met to increase the trustworthiness of the findings in this study, which included: Triangulation, which eliminates researcher bias by collecting data in multiple ways; member checking, in which participants of the study read their interview to confirm the transcription or point out any errors; and peer reviews allowing the writings to be evaluated by multiple people (chair, committee, and research consultant) to validate there is no voice of bias in the writing. The common themes that emerged from the three different methods of data collection lent credibility to the study.

<center>**Ethical Considerations**</center>

Ethical considerations were made to ensure the interests and rights of everyone affected by the study stay safeguarded. Measures were taken to be sure human rights and data protection legislation was obeyed. All of the participants who were involved in the study were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). There were no identifiable risks for participating in the study.

The ethical considerations specific to this study and design that are important to discuss include the following: My personal influence and interest in validating the efficacy of small learning communities used as a middle school reform measure tainting data collection and

reporting; seeking to not adversely impact the school through careless data storage or reporting; using pseudonyms for participants so that no participant's identity will be shared in this study; ensuring participant and site confidentiality in order that the information discussed in interviews and shared in questionnaires in this study will not be shared using the participant's identity or the actual name of the school site in which the research is being conducted; protecting against research influence since the researcher will know each of the participants in the study and must stay emotionally uninvolved when collecting data; and guaranteeing data will be stored on both a password-protected electronic device and locked filing cabinet for hard copies. All of these considerations were incorporated into the research design stage. Every precaution was taken to ensure the participants felt comfortable and had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason.

These ethical issues were addressed through the following measures: The use of the Institutional Review Board procedures, careful research design, and conversations with dissertation committee members regarding questions involving ethical considerations.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of rural middle school teachers working in a sixth grade academy and the implications of their experiences on the transition to middle school (Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2012). This study sought to provide a rich and descriptive voice of middle school teachers who shared the phenomenon of teaching in a sixth grade academy, and identified their views, feelings, and experiences on the implications for the transition to middle school. Patton (2001) identified that the commonality that all phenomenological research shares is the exploration of how human beings make sense of their experiences. "How they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with each other" (Patton, 2001, p. 104). Moustakas (1994) asserted that phenomenology commits itself to descriptions of lived experiences, not explanations or analysis. Van Manen (2007), another noted name, elaborated on phenomenology as a response to how someone familiarizes to a lived experience. Van Manen postulated that phenomenology is a reflection on the lived experience of human existence; and, reflection must be thoughtful and free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional influences. This study was guided by one main research question, what are teachers' lived experiences as educators in a sixth grade academy, and four sub-questions: 1) How do teacher's perceived experiences in a sixth grade academy influence their professional behaviors and teaching practices? 2) What are teachers' perceived advantages and disadvantages to a career in a sixth grade academy? 3) What are teachers' perceptions of students' experiences in the sixth grade academy? 4) How do teachers describe their experiences regarding the intentions of academies in education?

Chapter 1 presents the research problem, which is the lack of sufficient research that clearly identifies and analyzes the experiences of teachers working in a sixth grade academy and the implications it has on the transition to middle school. Most encountered research relates to ninth grade academies being used as transition facilities. Middle school transitional facility research is almost nonexistent. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to this study. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and data collection process utilized to conduct this phenomenological study. Chapter 4 presents the findings from analyzing the data collected from 10 participants. Data was collected in the form of open-ended questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. In Chapters 1 thru 3, this study followed clearly outlined research and data collection processes, step-by-step. Interpretation of the data in Chapters 4 and 5, however, was much more flexible, by design. This study used a transcendental phenomenological approach. According to Moustakas (1994), "It is considered 'transcendental' because it adheres to what can be discovered through reflection on subjective acts and their objective correlates" (p.45). A transcendental phenomenological study is typically used to describe the meaning of an event shared by several individuals (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology advocates for the suspension of personal opinion. "Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology is focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants" (Creswell, 2004, p. 59). To discover and describe a lived world is the basis of any phenomenological study. Transcendental means to look at the phenomenon with fresh eyes and an open mind, resulting in acquiring new knowledge derived from the essence of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). By understanding these common experiences, a deeper understanding of the phenomenon will occur (Creswell, 2002). As such, I used the ideals of transcendental phenomenology to construct observations of the lived

experience being addressed (van Manen, 2007). Initially, epoche allowed me to disclose my own experiences in order to avoid judgment and biases later during the course of research (Moustakas, 1994). I set aside any preconceived thoughts surrounding small learning communities in order to view the experience through the eyes of the participant.

Participants

The participants of this study were chosen from a rural public middle school (grades 6-8) according to the qualifications of having experiences within the phenomenon. In the history of the sixth grade academy's existence 35 teachers have taught within the program. A prerequisite for participating in the study was to have taught a minimum of three years in the sixth grade. Every participant from the study was certified and licensed to teach through the Georgia Professional Standards Commission. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 6 to 40 years. Participants in the study ranged from ages 20s to 60s. Eight females and two males were represented in the sample. All of the participants were Caucasian, as was every employed teacher currently at the school, which limited any differentiation within race. Participants' completed degree levels ranged from bachelors to specialist. A total of ten teachers agreed to participate in the research study. All ten completed the open-ended questionnaire and individual interview. Two focus groups were conducted. One focus group included five participants and the other focus group included two participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant in the study. Below is a table of participants, their age, gender, total years of teaching experience, and the number of years they were employed at the academy in the study.

Table 1

Participant Overview

Participant	Age	Race	Gender	Total Years of Teaching Experience	Number of Years in Sixth Grade Academy
Megan	30s	White	Female	6	5
Molly	40s	White	Female	27	10
Madison	30s	White	Female	10	4
Matthew	30s	White	Male	10	7
Max	30s	White	Male	13	3
Maria	20s	White	Female	8	3
Maggie	40s	White	Female	10	7
Melissa	60s	White	Female	10	3
Martha	60s	White	Female	40	33
Mary	30s	White	Female	9	5

Description of Participants

Below is an individual descriptive synopsis of each participant involved in the study. Each summation entails the participant's history of teaching experience, their philosophy of teaching, and their experiences from working with students housed in the sixth grade academy.

Megan

Megan, a six-year middle school teacher, spent five of those years in the sixth grade academy. She became interested in teaching later in life. Megan was a stay at home mom until her three children reached middle school and high school, and at that time, she decided to apply for a teaching position. She graduated from college with a teaching degree but decided to go

back for her masters and specialist. She was hired to teach seventh grade her first year. Megan then moved to the sixth grade academy her second year and has been there for the past five years.

Megan's teaching philosophy is to encourage thinking in rational ways that apply in other areas of life. Megan encourages asking questions in her classroom. She believes in setting the example within her classroom, and that students are perceptive in recognizing when a teacher practices what he or she preaches. Key principals she reflects in her classroom include: the importance of organization, preparation, and homework; respecting other students; the importance of asking questions and communication; key life skills such as eye contact, greeting a person, and clearly communicating feelings.

Megan says there are pros and cons for teachers and students housed in a sixth grade academy. Megan views students, who are overwhelmed with the transitions between classes and who have trouble staying organized, getting more individual help from teachers who are able to identify students who are struggling, due to their intimate setting. She believes that sixth grade students have a hard time adjusting to the amount of homework they have in their sixth grade year, versus any prior year. She believes one of the hardest transitions for students, that she witnesses, is their struggle with new vocabulary and math concepts. She perceives the top three stressors most of the students experience in relation to the middle school transition as being the increased amount of homework, wanting to fit in, and more difficult courses. Megan believes the hardest element of transition, with three elementary schools coming to one middle school, is the difficulty kids have with fitting in amongst a new social pool of students. She identifies females struggling with fitting in and males having difficulty with the increased amount of homework, a byproduct of having more courses. A positive aspect Megan has witnessed students

experiencing, in regards to their transition into middle school, is the ability to make friends with students from another elementary schools who previously struggled with having friends within the elementary school they attended.

Molly

Molly has been an educator for 27 consecutive years. She taught 15 of her years in the sixth grade academy. She is currently still an educator in the sixth grade academy. She has a bachelor's degree in education. Her entire career has been spent in the same school system. The education of Molly's children's was provided by this same school system. She is very sentimental about her school and community.

Molly's teaching philosophy is to present her subject in a way that keeps students interested and challenges them to think through complex ideas. Molly believes in putting her content into context that is relevant to the learner. When planning her curriculum, Molly is deliberate with differentiating in order to meet the needs of different learning styles and speeds. A typical class for Molly includes telling her students what they are going to learn, presenting the content to be learned, and then telling them what they just learned.

Molly believes the negatives outweigh the positives when it comes to the sixth grade academy. She feels there is a lack of communication between sixth grade teachers and the administrators and a disconnect between the sixth grade and the rest of the middle school. In her opinion, the top three stressors most of the students experience in relation to the middle school transition are fitting in, having lockers, and exceptional academic pressure cliques. Because the school system has three elementary schools, Molly believes the students are not able to rely on the past social structures that were formed while they were in elementary school, which causes them a lot of stress. She believes the sixth grade academy keeps students isolated to a fault. The

three student teams are divided amongst three buildings. Due to this design, Molly believes the students and faculty label the buildings as the exceptional students, the dumb students, and the normal students. She thinks females struggle with fitting in and males struggle with organization in their adjustment to sixth grade. She enjoys getting to witness her students, who struggled making friends in elementary, meet new peers and make friends in middle school. Molly says she oftentimes witnesses students stress out, to the point of crying, over the amount of homework assigned that they are not used to having. She feels it is very important to establish a relationship with students so they feel at ease.

Madison

Madison is in her thirties and began teaching right out of college. Since graduation, she has continued on to get her master's degree. She spent 4 years teaching in the sixth grade academy. She has taught 10 years overall and currently teaches eighth grade for the same school system. She says she always knew she wanted to be a teacher. Madison says what she thought it would be like to be a teacher, and what her experience has been since being a teacher, are not the same. She says this realization is not good or bad, rather it is just an observation.

Madison's philosophy for teaching includes: Creating a positive atmosphere, ensuring a fair playing field, encouraging and caring for her students, empowering learners in the classroom, and teaching principles such as manners and respect. Madison reflects back to the teachers who made the greatest impact on her and the characteristics they all had in common. She felt as though it was the teachers who she had a relationship with and who genuinely cared for her success. She reiterated a well-known saying in regards to educators: "You may not remember the subject that was taught, but you will always remember the way they made you feel".

Madison likes working in a school that has a sixth grade academy. She is happy her son will be in the sixth grade academy versus a traditional 6th thru 8th setting. She feels as though the most difficult element of transition for students coming into 6th grade is organization. Madison says a positive aspect of transition is that students get to start fresh in a new school with new students and teachers. In Madison's opinion, the top three stressors most of the students experience in relation to middle school transition are the increased amount of homework, the increased difficultly of course work, and increased responsibility of having lockers. She sees students coming into sixth grade struggling with responsibility and keeping up with classwork and homework assignments. The pace of lessons is faster. Students are expected to have a foundation of knowledge coming into sixth grade that many do not have. With the content being more abstract than it was in elementary school, Madison believes students begin to lose interest and excitement in school. She says she feels silly saying it, but lockers are a great stress to students. Figuring out locker combinations and getting everything they need for their classes in a short amount of time worries students. She sees females struggling with making friends and males struggling with an increased amount of homework and organization. Madison believes a positive experience students have, coming into middle school, is the ability to become involved in a sports team. Being on a team gives students a sense of belonging and has a positive social impact. She likes that in the sixth grade academy she feels more connected with her students, which she relates to as being like a family, because her kids know she cares about them and in turn work hard in her class.

Matthew

Matthew is a tenth year teacher who has always taught the subject science. He first worked in the business world before coming a teacher. He describes his decision to move into

teaching as a lifestyle choice. His job before his move was not conducive to his family life. He

likes the schedule and benefits that teaching offers. He feels as though his experience in the

business world has made him a better educator. Matthew no longer teaches in the sixth grade

academy but still remains employed by the school.

Matthew brings a lot of energy into the classroom. Although he has taught science every

year since becoming a teacher, he believes in never teaching something the same way twice.

Matthew believes in bringing excitement for learning into the classroom, beginning with his own

excitement for teaching. He creates a positive learning atmosphere where students can discuss

questions without the fear of failure. Mistakes and unknown answers are treated as opportunities

for learning and not as reflections of a student's abilities. Matthew has a passion for

incorporating technology into the classroom because it is essential in today's world.

Matthew feels that the difficulties students experience, in regards to the transition to

middle school, is universal. While he enjoyed his time working in the sixth grade academy, he

did not view it as an intentional, well communicated, transitioning program. He was glad that

the sixth grade academy was implemented before his daughter came to middle school, so that she

could attend school there. Matthew does not view the sixth grade academy as a positive or

negative, but feels very strongly that the school system should work on programming from the

top, down. He feels that the top stressors students experience in relation to the middle school

transition are the increased amount of homework, fitting in, and peer pressure. He believes

students do not know how to properly study and do not have accountability at home when it

comes to studying. He believes females struggle most with fitting in with their peers, while

males struggle with falling victim to peer pressure. A positive element of transition that

Matthew witnesses is the increased opportunity students have to challenge themselves.

Max

Max says the last thing he ever thought he would become, growing up, was a teacher. He said he was the student that was every teacher's worst nightmare. He dropped out of school in ninth grade. After getting into some trouble with the law he had to go back to school. He went on to play basketball in college, which he attributes to his major 'turn-around' in life. He has now been teaching for 13 years. Three of those years were spent in the sixth grade academy. He currently teaches eighth grade social studies. He has a bachelor's degree in education. He has taught at other school systems besides the one that houses the sixth grade academy.

Max believes in the ways of the 'good ole days'. He believes in letting students earn respect and he believes in rewarding hard work. Max believes that a child's education begins in the home, with parents. He supports accepting responsibility for one's actions and he believes in 'tough love'. Max believes for every action there is a consequence, good or bad.

Max sees pros and cons to housing students in a sixth grade academy. For his own child's education, he is not so much worried about the transition as he is about who will be teaching his child. He believes the top stressors students experience in regards to the middle school transition are fitting in, peer pressure, having lockers, and for the first time in their education, dealing with multiple teachers. He feels the top stressor for females and males is the same, fitting in socially.

Maria

Maria has taught for a total of eight years. She taught in the sixth grade academy for three years. She is now the media specialist. She just recently finished her Doctorate degree. She works in the school's media center and hopes to move into administration. Everyone in

Maria's family is in the service industry, either as educators or in the medical field. She said she always thought she would follow in her family's footsteps.

Maria's teaching philosophy has always been that every child is an unique individual who needs a caring and stimulating atmosphere in which to grow and mature emotionally, physically, socially, and intellectually. She believes that every child brings a unique perspective into the classroom. She desires for every student to recognize and work at their greatest potential. Maria deliberately develops a curriculum that is relevant to one's life and interests. Because every classroom is a unique community, Maria feels it is her job as facilitator to create a culture of family, because every child desires a sense of belonging and 'family'. By creating this environment in her classroom, she gains students' trust and respect.

Maria believes that being housed in a sixth grade academy has advantages and disadvantages for both teachers and students. She feels as though teachers are isolated from the school body but have a closer relationship within their team of teachers. She perceives the top three stressors most students' experience, in regard to the middle school transition, are having lockers, getting along with peers, and developing organizational skills. She says that even though lockers are minor, they seem to be a burden to sixth graders for a large portion of the year. Students struggle with getting lockers opened and organized. Maria notices the mix of three elementary schools, new peers, changing friend groups, and middle school cliques are all emotionally difficult for some, if not all, middle school students. She thinks because they have four classes to organize to the standards of four different teaching styles this skill is very difficult for them and even overwhelming if they did not already arrive with some organizational methods. She says females struggle with getting along with peers and males struggle with organization. A situation where she witnessed a student experience a positive aspect of

transition was a homeschooled student whose parents were very worried about the transition. She believes the parents had a much easier time maintaining their expectations for him in the isolated environment of the the sixth grade academy. Maria moved up to teach seventh grade the next year and witnessed his parents and him struggle more with 'losing him to the masses'. Maria feels as though the close, personal connections she made with her students in the sixth grade academy made her students want to try hard to succeed because they did not want to let her down.

Maggie

Maggie has a sporadic teaching history. She began teaching right out of college, took a break when she had kids, began teaching when they were older, took a break due to her husband's health issues, and then went back to teaching. She has taught a total of ten years in two different school systems. She taught seven of her ten years in the sixth grade academy. She has worked as the county's Food and Health Coordinator for the past three years.

It is Maggie's desire to help students meet their full potential within her classroom. She creates an environment that is safe for taking risks. Maggie believes in letting students explore information and formulate answers rather than acting as a deliverer of facts. As a teacher, she believes it is her job to stimulate and encourage, rather than to provide solutions. She considers, for the age she teaches, it critical to teach skills such as organization, developing good homework habits, making good decisions, and choosing good friends. Allowing students to become stakeholders, through developing a respect for themselves and others, gives students a greater sense of ownership.

Maggie does not reflect on fond memories about her experience in the sixth grade academy. She previously worked in an inner city school where the student body was very large,

compared to this one, and all grades were meshed together. Because of Maggie's experience in a larger setting, she says from her point of view students in the sixth grade academy are much too coddled. She says the top negative factors for transitioning into sixth are peer pressure, organization, and parental coddling. She believes the transition program in place at the sixth grade academy allows parents to be overly protective to the point of stifling students' growth both emotionally and socially. Parents want to hang around and hover over every detail, often embarrassing the student in front of peers. While Maggie does recognize that there is stress involved in transitioning to a new school with new peers, she believes there is a lot to be said for the concept of "sink or swim." She believes in the importance of letting students figure things out on their own at this stage in their education. Maggie feels as though females struggle in sixth grade with peer pressure and self-image and males have a hard time with lockers and following rules. She reflects on a particular situation where she taught a gifted young man whose mother wanted to do everything for and with him in sixth grade because that is what the mother was used to in elementary school. Maggie opinion is that the parent prevented him from adapting socially. When teaching in a large conglomerate school setting Maggie said teachers did not witness this kind of behavior because it was not a social norm; the sixth grade parents followed the lead of the seventh and eighth grade parents, the kids followed by example as well.

Melissa

Melissa is over sixty years old and worked as an educator for 10 years. She served as a stay at home mom until her kids were older and then began her first job as a social worker. She went back to school at the age of 45 to get her degree in teaching. She taught for ten years before 'retiring' but still volunteers to help out in many ways in the school system. She worked for three years in the sixth grade academy. During those three years, she was present for the

'transition' year, when the school expanded its buildings and converted to what is now the sixth grade academy. In her interview she discussed many of the changes that took place during the transition time to a sixth grade academy being housed in a separate facility.

Melissa's teaching philosophy was fluid, always changing over the years she taught. To her, teaching was a lifelong process of learning about new strategies and evolving to meet the needs of the students. Every year was different because it provided a unique group of students. Learning from the students, parents, fellow colleagues, and administrators was important to her growth as a teacher. She believes she learned as much from the students as they did from her. It brought her heart joy to be able to watch them learn and grow. She reminded herself at the beginning and end of every day, it is all about the students.

Melissa was present at the time the school transitioned from a traditional sixth thru eighth setting to a middle school with a sixth grade academy. She says she witnessed first hand the positive impacts it had on teachers, administrators, students and parents. She believes the most important impact was the smaller class size and more personalization between teacher and student. She felt that both before and after the change of school model, sixth grade students struggled with organization, having lockers, and having multiple teachers. She did not feel as though this changed when the school instituted the sixth grade academy. She believes that organization is difficult for students at every grade but even more some in sixth grade because the teacher no longer holds on to their assignments to make a weekly packet, as they do in elementary school. She remembers an inordinate amount of time was spent on lockers the first week of school. The stressor of changing between multiple teachers, by her recollection, disappeared after the first few weeks of school. She says that before the sixth grade academy was in place, the biggest struggle for females was with dealing with older students, and after the

academy was in place it was more about self-image. She says males struggled with "who was the biggest hen in the hen house".

Martha

After forty years Martha continues to be involved as an educator. She is also the longest serving employee in the school system's history. She is a wealth of knowledge to this study, as her entire career was spent in the middle school. She taught for 33 years in the same classroom, teaching the same subject, in the sixth grade. She then taught another seven years in various roles. She currently teaches part time at the county's night school program for students seeking high school accreditation. She too was present at the time of transition from a sixth thru eighth to a sixth grade academy.

Martha has witnessed the ways education has greatly changed over the past forty years, and also the ways education has not changed at all. Martha believes the two most important elements of being a successful teacher are to love the students and to be passionate about the subject you are teaching.

Martha's perception of the sixth grade academy is that it is beneficial towards creating small learning environments, but almost to a fault. She remembers feeling isolated from other teachers and students being isolated from other students. She feels as though the greatest struggles for students adapting to sixth grade are the increased amount of homework, difficulty of courses, and having to deal with multiple teachers. Martha says adjusting from one teacher to four or more is difficult for students. She says it would take time for students to adjust and learn what each of their teacher's expectations were and how they wanted work completed. The amount of homework was more than in elementary, and took longer to complete, in her opinion. Students had to learn how to manage time, and teachers had to make time to help students with

time management. She remembers math being the most difficult and language arts in a close second because of the workload and abstract concepts. Martha believes females struggle most with making friends and getting along with other girls, mostly due to gossip and boys. She remembers males struggling with the amount of homework. She felt as though it was easier in the sixth grade academy to make students feel welcomed, valued, and respected.

Mary

Mary is an experienced nine-year teacher who taught for five years in the sixth grade academy. Mary has a Master's degree in education. The day I met with Mary to conduct her interview, she was one hour late because she forgot about the meeting when she found out earlier that day she had been awarded a $10,000 grant towards technology in her classroom. This exemplifies Mary's commitment to her role as an educator.

Mary feels that as an educator, it is her responsibility to communicate exactly what her expectations are in order to create a successful learning environment. She believes research and preparation is a cornerstone of effective teaching. Mary believes that successful teachers are committed and dedicated to improving their education. She views education as a two-way proposition. The students have a role in coming to class prepared to learn and the teacher has a role in creating the learning environment.

Mary believes that the sixth grade academy fosters a sense of isolation amongst teachers. She feels as the communication between academy teachers and the middle school body is lacking. Both of Mary's daughters experienced sixth grade at the sixth grade academy. Mary states that it was a good experience for her daughters and she liked the fact they were isolated from the general middle school student population. Mary believes the top stressors affecting middle school students, in regard to transition, are making friends, getting lost, and opening a

locker. She has witnessed students in a panic about being able to get their locker open and then arrive to class on time. Due to the layout of the facility, Mary says there is a lot of worry about getting lost. Even though students take multiple tours of the facility prior to their first day, the tension does not ease. With three elementary schools being feeder schools to the middle school, Mary sees renegotiating the hierarchy of pecking order as a difficulty for students during the transition. Mary believes it is beneficial for students to experience transition because of the newness of students, teachers, and facilities, students have the ability to start over.

Results

This study looked at the perceptions of ten individuals who work(ed) in a sixth grade academy and the implications their experiences have on the transition to middle school. The following is a collection of data from all of the open-ended questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. Data saturation was believed to have been reached in the sense that new material from data collection was not adding anything new to the overall story, theory or framework. Through the participants' experiences of the same phenomenon, teaching in a sixth grade academy, the researcher identified common themes, keywords, and answers. The researcher used horizonalization and developed themes to construct textural descriptions. The process that contributed to the development of all five themes included highlighting significant statements by reading through all field notes, questionnaires, and interview transcripts, while making comments in the margins about the key patterns in the data. The researcher developed individual textural and structural descriptions, composite textural and composite structural descriptions, and a synthesis of textural and structural meanings that describe the essence of the shared experience (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Through these steps, the phenomenon and meanings of the research questions were analyzed. Knowledge was then constructed to

make meanings through commentary. The first data collection tool analyzed and categorized were the open-ended questionnaires.

Open-Ended Questionnaires

The participants completed open-ended questionnaires during the data collection phase of the study. All potential participants were sent a recruitment letter, giving a brief summary about the study, and told they would be contacted soon to participate in the study. Potential participants were then sent a consent form and open-ended questionnaire. For the purpose of conservation of time, these letters were hand delivered to the school's front office and were sent to participants through the school's interoffice mail. Two teachers had retired but still volunteer with the school system and were able to still receive their letters through the school's interoffice delivery system. Ten teachers returned their completed consent form and open-ended questionnaire. All ten teachers acknowledged on their open-ended questionnaire that they would be willing to participate in two interviews, individual and focus, if their schedules allowed for it. A follow-up recruitment script was used to verbally contact selected participants for an interview. Open-ended questionnaires and consent forms were returned within a time span of three weeks.

The purpose of the open-ended questionnaires was twofold. The first purpose was to gather information on faculty beliefs about adolescent development and needs within a sixth grade academy, in order to understand the essence of their common experience in working at a sixth grade academy. The second purpose was to collect information in regards to each participant's history of working in education. The use of open-ended questions allowed the respondents to answer without presented or implied choices. The contents of the open-ended questionnaire are found in Appendix E.

Of the five themes that were developed in this study, two of the themes emerged from the open-ended questionnaires: Elements Related to Middle School Transition (parents, lockers, other) and Teacher's Perceptions of the Student's Experience. Codes were developed from the significant statements and used to organize data in terms of its subject matter. The codes that developed from the questionnaires were then organized into categories based on how many times they appeared. From these categories two main themes appeared. Overall these themes contributed to the total of the five themes that emerged from the study. Below is a table that shows the codes that occurred, in the order they occurred in each open-ended questionnaire, and the themes that developed from the codes. At the bottom is the total number of codes, the number of times each code occurred, and the theme that developed from the code.

Table 2

Open-ended Questionnaire Codes

Name	Total Number of Codes	Codes (Organized in the order they occurred)	Contributed to Theme
Megan	7	Homework	Theme 4
		Organization	Theme 4
		Fitting-In	Theme 5
		Lockers	Theme 4
		Responsibilities	Theme 4
		Social Structure	Theme 5
		Blending/New Peers	Theme 5
Molly	8	Social Structure	Theme 5
		Buildings	Theme 6
		Lockers	Theme 4
		Fitting-in	Theme 5
		Organization	Theme 4
		Scheduling	Theme 4
		Personal Connection	Theme 1
		Blending/New Peers	Theme 5
Madison	5	Organization	Theme 4
		Responsibilities	Theme 4
		Lockers	Theme 4
		Homework	Theme 4
		Social Structure	Theme 5

Matthew	6	Work load	Theme 4
		Blending/New Peers	Theme 5
		Peer Pressure	Theme 5
		Fitting-In	Theme 5
		New Challenges	Theme 4
		Organization	Theme 4
Max	6	Social Stress	Theme 5
		Lockers	Theme 4
		Multiple Teachers	Theme 4
		Decision-making skills	Theme 4
		Following Directions	Theme 4
		Organization	Theme 4
Maria	8	Organization	Theme 4
		Lockers	Theme 4
		Blending/New Peers	Theme 5
		Multiple Teachers	Theme 4
		Social Stress	Theme 5
		Fitting-In	Theme 5
		Coursework	Theme 4
		Bullying	Theme 5
Maggie	7	Parental Coddling	Theme 4
		Organization	Theme 4
		Peer Pressure	Theme 5
		Lockers	Theme 4
		Following Rules	Theme 4
		Fitting-in	Theme 5
		Multiple Teachers	Theme 4
Melissa	5	Organization	Theme 4
		Lockers	Theme 4
		Multiple Teachers	Theme 4
		Bullying	Theme 5
		Social Stress	Theme 5
Martha	6	Homework	Theme 4
		Coursework	Theme 4
		Multiple Teachers	Theme 4
		Fitting-in	Theme 5
		Expectations	Theme 5
		Social Stress	Theme 5
Mary	5	Lockers	Theme 4
		Getting Lost	Theme 4
		Fitting-In	Theme 5
		Blending/New Peers	Theme 5
		Lockers	Theme 4
Totals/ Occurrences	Total number of codes:	Number of times each code occurred:	Total number of times each theme occurred from a

	63 Codes	9 occurrences: Lockers 8 occurrences: Organization 7 occurrences: Fitting-In 5 occurrences: Blending/New Peers, multiple teachers 4 occurrences: Social Stress 3 occurrences: Homework, Social Structure 2 occurrences: Bullying, Responsibilities, Coursework, Peer Pressure 1 occurrence: Getting Lost, Following Rules, Expectations, Following Directions, New Challenges, Parent Coddling, Buildings, Decision-making skills, Personal Connections	developed code: Theme 4: 38 occurrences Theme 5: 25 occurrences

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews were utilized as the principal means of data collection. Interviews were

conducted in a location of the participant's choosing. All interviews were conducted on the

school's campus. Times at which the interviews took place varied from 8:30am to 6:30pm. All

participants were asked a set of 20 questions, which were rooted in the literature review.

Participant responses were recorded with their permission. The last question of the interview

encouraged participants to elaborate on anything they felt was relevant to the study but may have

not been asked during the interview process. A pilot interview was conducted with an expert in the field who was ineligible to participate in the study. Piloting the interview questions allowed for practice of timing, precision, clarity, confidence, and comfort with asking the questions and using the recording device. A transcription service was used. Transcripts were received back individually based on their completion. Transcriptions were reviewed, in adjunct to recordings, to verify quality of recordings. This also allowed for me to analyze interviews using auditory and visual senses. A copy of the transcript was emailed to each participant for member checking. Member checking allowed the participants to make any necessary changes, clarify any response, or agree with the transcript. There were no changes that needed to be made to any of the transcripts. Data from the interviews were then analyzed using the Moustakas (1994) approach. Individual interview questions can be found in Appendix F.

The table below presents the total number of codes developed from the individual interviews, the codes that emerged, and the theme that transpired from those codes. At the bottom of the table there are totals for the number of codes, how many times each code occurred, and how many contributions were made to each theme, as well as a few codes that were ultimately not used. All five of the themes discovered from this study were discussed at some point throughout the individual interview, theme four being the most prevalent with 41 code occurrences. Theme one was the second most mentioned with 20 code occurrences, then theme three with 16 code occurrences. Theme two came from 11 codes and finally, theme five which was referenced through nine codes. There were six codes not used at all because they did not fit into any main theme. While the information from these six codes was beneficial in a general matter, it was not relevant to the study. Some of the most common codes that were developed from the individual interviews were: isolation, mentioned ten times; transition, mentioned nine

times; organization, mentioned nine times; parental involvement, mentioned eight times; the

sixth grade academy, mentioned six times; and responsibility, mentioned six times.   All other

codes, and the number of times they occurred, are mentioned in the bottom of table 3.

Table 3

Individual Interview Codes

Name	Total Number of Codes	Codes (Presented in the order they occurred)	Contributed to Theme
Megan	11	Transition	Theme 3
		Isolation	Theme 2
		Parental Involvement	Theme 4
		Academy versus Traditional	Theme 1
		Social Pressures	Theme 5
		Organization	Theme 4
		Homework	Theme 4
		Schedule	Theme 4
		Study Skills	Theme 4
		Communication Elementary to Middle	Theme 3
		Training	Theme 3
Molly	14	Isolation	Theme 2
		Expectations	Theme 4
		SGA	Theme 1
		Structural Design	Theme 1
		Parental Involvement	Theme 4
		Responsibility	Theme 4
		Collaboration	Not Used
		Separation	Theme 2
		Transition	Theme 3
		Social Structure	Theme 5
		Elementary	Theme 3
		Lockers	Theme 4
		Responsibility	Theme 4
		Organization	Theme 4
Madison	8	Parental Involvement	Theme 4
		SGA	Theme 1
		Isolation	Theme 2
		Transition	Theme 3
		Social Issues	Theme 5
		Lockers	Theme 4
		Organization	Theme 4
		Personal Connection	Theme 1
Matthew	12	Parental Involvement	Theme 4

		Isolation	Theme 2
		Academy versus Traditional	Theme 1
		Transition	Theme 3
		Study Habits	Theme 4
		Organization	Theme 4
		Personal Connection	Theme 1
		Communication	Theme 3
		Lockers	Theme 4
		Physical Changes	Theme 5
		Social Status	Theme 5
		Three-to-One	Theme 4
Max	10	SGA	Theme 1
		Structural Design	Theme 1
		Isolation	Theme 2
		Transition	Theme 3
		Organization	Theme 4
		Freedom	Theme 4
		Responsibility	Theme 4
		Workload	Theme 4
		New Environment	Theme 4
		Social Issues	Theme 5
Maria	11	Parental Involvement	Theme 4
		SGA	Theme 1
		Isolation	Theme 2
		Transition	Theme 3
		Elementary	Theme 3
		Organization	Theme 4
		Personal Connection	Theme 1
		Responsibility	Theme 4
		Competition	Theme 1
		Purposeful Programming	Theme 3
		Social Issues	Theme 5
Maggie	12	Isolation	Theme 2
		Urban Setting	Not Used
		Parental Involvement	Theme 4
		Academy versus Traditional	Theme 1
		Location	Not Used
		Teacher Freedom	Theme 1
		Responsibilities	Theme 4
		Lockers	Theme 4
		Organization	Theme 4
		Social Issues	Theme 5
		Transition	Theme 3
		Diversity	Not Used
Melissa	9	SGA	Theme 1
		Resource Groups	Not Used

		Isolation	Theme 2
		Parental Involvement	Theme 4
		Transition	Theme 3
		Personal Connection	Theme 1
		Responsibility	Theme 4
		Freedom	Theme 4
		Organization	Theme 4
Martha	10	Isolation	Theme 2
		Structural Design	Theme 1
		SGA	Theme 1
		Allocation of Resources	Not Used
		Parental Involvement	Theme 4
		Elementary	Theme 3
		Transition	Theme 3
		Personal Connection	Theme 1
		Task Oriented	Theme 4
		Lockers	Theme 4
Mary	6	Isolation	Theme 2
		Organization	Theme 4
		Bullying	Theme 4
		Social Structure	Theme 5
		Freedom	Theme 4
		Structural Design	Theme 1
Total	Total number of codes: 103	Number of times each code occurred: 10 occurrences: Isolation 9 occurrences: Transition, Organization 8 occurrences: Parental Involvement 6 occurrences: SGA, Responsibility 5 occurrences: Structural Design, Personal Connection, Lockers 3 occurrences: Academy versus Traditional, Elementary, Social Issues	Total number of times each theme occurred from a developed interview code: Theme 1: 20 occurrences Theme 2: 11 occurrences Theme 3: 16 occurrences Theme 4: 41 occurrences Theme 5: 9 occurrences Not Used:

		2 occurrences: Freedom, Social Structure 1 occurrence: Social Pressures, Homework, Schedule, Study Skills, Communication Elementary to Middle, Communication, Training, Urban Setting, Resource Groups, Collaboration, Allocation of Resources, Expectations, Physical Changes, Social Status, Three-to-One, Study Habits, Bullying, Workload, New Environment, Social Issues, Competition, Task Oriented, Purposeful Programming, Teacher Freedom, Diversity	6 Codes

Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews were used in this study as a data collection method. Data was collected through two focus group interviews, through a semi-structured group interview process. The intention of the focus group interview was to initiate a meaningful discussion, bringing out ideas that were not discussed in the individual interviews. Ideas that may not have initially come to mind in the individual interview were brought about from a group discussion. Two focus group interview sessions took place. For the first focus group interview five participants were invited to participate. The participants were asked for a convenient time in which to conduct the interview. All five participants, plus the researcher acting as moderator, attended the first focus group session. In the second focus group interview another five participants were invited to participate and asked for a time convenient to them. Three participants responded that they would attend. A time was chosen based upon their requests. Two participants attended the second focus group interview. The data collected from the interviews were then analyzed using an approach described by Moustakas in 1994.

The table below shows the codes that developed from the significant statements made during the focus group interviews. The table also shows the themes that emerged from the codes. The codes developed from the focus group interviews were significantly different from the codes developed in the open-ended questionnaire and individual interviews. The codes were different, not so much in context, but in the wording of the codes. The reason I attribute to this is that the focus group discussions were much more solution focused. Meaning, how can we offer solutions to creating a more meaningful transitioning program and transition year for students? Theme three, intentional transitioning programs, was by far the most prevalent theme that emerged from the focus group interviews.

Table 4

Focus Group Interview Codes

Name	Total Number of Codes	Codes (Presented in the order they occurred)	Contributed to Theme
Focus Group 1	13	Strategy	Theme 3
		Planning	Theme 3
		Implementation	Theme 3
		Communication	Theme 3
		Vertical School Alignment	Theme 3
		Vision	Theme 3
		Communication with all stakeholders	Theme 3
		Consistency	Theme 3
		Top-Down	Theme 3
		Isolation to Teachers	Theme 2
		Beneficial to Student	Theme 5
		Connections with Students	Theme 1
		Programming	Theme 3
Focus Group 2	7	Shared Vision with Elementary	Theme 3
		Cohesive Elementary Vision	Theme 3
		Connections with Students	Theme 1
		Communication	Theme 3
		Social Maturity	Theme 5
		Lack of Community	Theme 2
		Isolation	Theme 2
Total	Total	Number of times each code occurred:	Total number of

	number of codes: 20	All codes occurred 1 time except for the following, which occurred 2 times: Communication Connections with Students	times each theme occurred from a developed code: Theme 1: 2 Occurrences Theme 2: 3 Occurrences Theme 3: 13 Occurrences Theme 5: 2 Occurrences

Themes

Five themes emerged from the research process. These themes provide the shared essence of the participants. The themes were developed from significant statements cited by the majority of the participants in the study. The themes are listed in an order that effectively addresses each topic while also tying together connections between themes that have slight overlaps. The following themes emerged throughout the research and data collection process:

1. Structural Design (academy versus conglomerate)

2. Isolation (teachers and students)

3. Intentional Transitioning Programming

4. Elements Related to Middle School Transition (parental involvement, lockers, other)

5. Teacher's Perceptions of the Student's Experience

These themes identify the shared experiences of the participants. Participant quotes are used to support the extracted themes.

Structural design: Academy versus conglomerate. The first theme was warranted as codes related to physical structure continued to emerge throughout the data collection process. The aspect of the structural design of a sixth grade academy versus the traditional middle school model makes an important contribution towards understanding teachers' perceptions from working within the same sixth grade academy. The research in this study compared the sixth thru eighth middle school structure to a middle school with a sixth grade academy. The participants of this study discussed the benefits and pitfalls of both designs. Teachers did not have an overwhelming preference of one design over the other. There were advantages and disadvantages mentioned for both configurations. Below are some of the meaningful narratives given in regards to the structural design of the sixth grade academy.

Megan:

> I think the parents like the sixth grade academy much better, they feel like their students are safer, and I think the kids feel safer. I think it also has helped issues like drama and bullying, we see less of those. So being in sixth grade building helps keep them close-knit as a grade level, which is nice but also too isolated within a grade level.

Molly:

> It was wonderful to be in a school all together because there was more teacher interaction between grades. The teachers were much closer between grades and there was much more vertical alignment because we knew each other and it just wasn't hard. In the sixth grade building it was much more isolated between teachers in other grades.

Matthew:

> I don't see how having the older students in seventh and eighth grade makes any difference or makes it easier to make personal connections with my kids. I think kids are

happy to be separated and it makes it easier on them. I think it keeps them a little more sheltered being away from kids that have a little more mature thoughts. You know if I was to build a middle school you know I probably wouldn't say you know what lets go build this grade separate or away from the other grades. I think that most schools try to keep their sixth, seventh and eighth grade separate even if they are in the same building. I think sometimes schools use the team mentality to segregate kids by ability and I think the kids notice that. The kids notice certain teams have certain kids on them and certain teams don't so I think that if you use housing teams in kids in a different area solely for a management purpose and not for ability purpose then that can be successful. A pro is the smaller environment, there is less students. You know you don't have a larger number of students. You have your own resources. You have an age appropriate focus for the group. Cons? I really cannot see any cons in having the kids in a separate facility as having cons.

Max:

I think the academy is a good thing. Kids probably feel a little more at ease. Sixth graders being in the same building as eighth graders I'm sure is probably a little bit more intimidating. Eighth graders can be tough sometimes. So I think that element of having them separated probably helps the transition.

Maria:

When I was there, sixth grade had everything to their selves. They had their own gym, library, administrator, classrooms, and that kind of thing. So they were completely separated. I was very connected to the kids during those years, just because, I know this sounds a little hoaxie, but because we were all that each other had. We were so isolated

away from everyone else. The kids really didn't see anybody else other than the kids on that team and us a teachers, we really didn't see anybody else. So yeah I would say all of us developed really close connections with our kids. And they did really well I feel like, honestly, in that environment. Most of them did well in their classes and on their standardized tests. And I have kept in touch with a lot of those kids from the years I was in the sixth grade. I could honestly say I just haven't gotten that close to kids when I was teaching other grades.

Maggie:

In the sixth grade academy setting we did have more one on one interaction with the student because there was more time to focus on the kids and not having to worry about some of the things I had to worry about in the urban setting. The schedule and the way it is set up does allow for more interaction.

In the sixth grade academy I did get to know my students better because we were able to develop a more one-on-one relationship because we did interact outside of the classroom. And in the sixth through eighth grade setting we just had no down time because everything was so academic driven. Students in the sixth grade academy were able to see in me in a less academic setting and that's where the connections were made.

It was very freeing because as a team we could turn our kids schedules around to meet the needs of the student. You do become a more cohesive group in the sense that you know your kids and you know their needs, their weaknesses, their strengths because you are right there with them. You have more interaction. And even when you are separate like that all you see are the kids that are in the sixth grade.

You have more one-on-one interaction; the thought is always behind the learning; scheduling is more flexible. There are less discipline issues, less bullying from the larger kids… I will say that the sixth grade academy did allow me to be more interactive with the students and have more of a one-on-one relationship with the students than in the urban setting.

Melissa:

I cannot think of any cons to having a sixth grade academy. I mean I was there before it was an academy and it was very crowded. I just loved when we made the switch to the academy.

Martha:

I think it is better to have students housed together in the sixth grade academy because the transition is very stressful for some of them and also for their parents. It takes them a longer adjustment time to get them used to the routines, changing classes, having lockers, the different teaching styles and different ways teachers test and getting used to that, so being in the sixth grade academy has it's benefits because you can address these issues on your own time. There is a huge difference in the worldly knowledge of a sixth grader and eighth grader, so having them separate is a good thing. And I think having them in those smaller groups allows teachers to make a better connection with their student. I like the idea of having the students in their own center. My daughter went through the sixth grade program here and I felt like she was able to get closer to the teachers.

Mary:

I think the physical separation of being in the sixth grade side made me feel more isolated as a teacher from what was going on in the school. The team teaching aspect made us

feel small and protected though. I think the academy builds more confidence in the students because they cannot see they are physically the smallest, the littlest, the newest. I think there was a decrease in bullying because the opportunity for them to be around older kids was not there. The flipside of that is that the sixth graders stay immature because they do not have the older peers to model behaviors after. But still I like having my sixth graders separated out and I tell them this is a safe year to fail, there is no repercussion for failing the sixth grade. If you learn how to fail and recover in sixth grade it is okay and we will learn great things from that.

Some of the structural components cited by the participants include: team aspect of teachers and students, administration leadership involvement, personal connection with students, professional freedom/not being micro-managed, students are separated from older kids, students feel safer, and a sense of family with other teachers and students in the same building. To summarize the voice of the participants, in regards to the structural design, there was not an unanimous yay or nay given to the academy, but more so a list of pros and cons, the top pro being the personal connection teachers were able to make with students and the top con being the negative connotation associated with there being a 'smart building', 'dumb building' and 'regular students' building. This, however, could be avoided and will be addressed in chapter five recommendations. The other con, which is immanent, is the isolation from being separated physically from the rest of the middle school, which brings me to the next theme.

Isolation (teachers and students). Below are the narratives of participants who unanimously agreed that some level of isolation was experienced from being housed in the sixth grade academy, mostly by teachers, and occasionally by students. Isolation was mentioned in all three of the data collection methods and therefore is considered to be a significant theme.

Although structurally, the teachers in the sixth grade academy are isolated from the rest of the

school, the isolation felt was more so on a social level. Participants in the study mention feelings

of isolation from having to work in a facility separated from the rest of the school. Teachers felt

as though important information was oftentimes not communicated with them. On a few

occasions some of the participants would mention the student's isolation. But in these cases they

mention it from the teacher perspective and do not feel as though the student noticed the

isolation. There are some potential solutions offered in Chapter Five on how to combat the

isolation.

Megan:

> We have a reputation in the sixth grade as the smart building, the dumb building and the
>
> regular kids. Parents will come to us in open house and want their child moved to the
>
> smart building. As a parent I hate the middle school model because it's too clique and it
>
> seems like once your child is in a track they stay in that track. Like for instance my
>
> daughter did not make it in gifted and then she is stuck in that track until high school. So
>
> there is a sense of elitism.

Molly:

> In a building all together students knew what to expect grade to grade and they at least
>
> knew what the teachers in other grades looked like. The students were less apprehensive
>
> about changing grades. The kids feel much more isolated. They feel like one building is
>
> the dumb building, one is the gifted building and one is the main building. The parents
>
> and community perceive it this way as well. We've actually have students cry when they
>
> find out they are in the 300 building because they believe they are in the dumb building.

Madison:

In the sixth grade academy I think kids are better watched because they are in a smaller environment. But for a teacher you are kind of separated from the other grades. It was good because we kind of did our own thing in the sixth grade but then in a lot of ways we felt, or I did, isolated, because we never saw anybody else than sixth grade teachers.

Max:

There's really not a big difference as a teacher being in the sixth grade academy. Probably the biggest difference is over there every team is in their own building so it's like everyone is their own administrator. I mean if there was an issue on your team, you and your team would just take care of it. We would only send the biggest issues to the administrators. So from that aspect I would say it alleviated some discipline issues for admin.

Maria:

Yeah we were definitely isolated but in a good way. We did our own thing. We painted our own walls and did what we wanted with our own space. I think the kids noticed that kind of thing and really took leadership over their little space they were isolated to. A lot of teachers complain about that, they hated it being so isolated, but honestly I liked it. I think the main con is you just don't feel as much like you are a part of the school. I know as a teacher I felt that way and the students felt that way. I don't even think my kids felt like they were part of their own grade just because they were isolated to their own little team. I think our team was like their own mini-school. We handle the discipline and the lessons. I don't think the kids ever felt what it was like to be a part of the student body and I would say that can be seen as a pro or con. I think the pro was that it made our kids very competitive with the other teams and really drove them to work

hard. I also feel like the sixth grade, our team, very much so felt like a community. I know when you get too large you just don't get that personal connection. I guess I am being my own devil's advocate but I guess it just depends on your own personal preference.

Maggie:

As a teacher it is nice to be able to work with other teachers and so you have when you are isolated like that you have less time to do vertical planning. So that is important. You feel isolated from your colleagues that are in other grades, but you do feel like you have your own little school.

Through repeated analysis and organization of data collected, the theme that emerged from the respondent's comments above is that every participant experienced isolation. Teachers made references to the level of their isolation at the sixth grade academy in both general terms, and compared to the way the felt when teaching in other grades, and in some cases, to teaching at another middle school entirely.

Intentional transitioning programming. The frequency of comments that were coded and identified as theme three, comments made in regards to an intentional transitioning program can be found in tables two, three, and four. An intentional transitioning program is designed to intentionally help students as they transition from one major educational milestone to another. It is important to note there is an absence of specific interview questions about the level of success the participants felt in regards to transitioning success, but instead the questions were directed more so from a logistical standpoint. Meaning, all of the comments and references below were volunteered by the participants as noteworthy of making, in the process of answering the interview questions. There is not a set transitioning program in place at the sixth grade academy

in the study. There are several steps taken to help students and parents with transition, however, this is not a program with an intentional strategy. Teachers' in the sixth grade academy would like to see a more intentional program in place that involves training teachers with how to help students and parents through the transition.

Megan:

> I compare the first day of sixth grade to the first day of kindergarten. The parents are so worried. In the past we have done like study skills groups where the counselor works with small groups of kids and teaches them skills like getting organized and how to keep a folder or locker.
>
> I feel like I have a pretty good relationship with the fifth grade teachers, not all of them, but at least one of them at each of the three elementary schools.
>
> I've not received any formal training in helping students with the transition to middle school. I know we try to provide a lot of information to the parents with our class syllabus and on the website and that kind of thing and we have several nights for parents to come and tour the facility.

Molly:

> From fifth to sixth, the sixth grade teachers often go and talk to the fifth grade. The counselor goes and discusses children that are going to need extra support. The sixth grade teachers sometimes go and talk to the individual classes and parents depending on how stressed the parents are. They have the fifth grade come to visit at the end of the year. Often they have a couple of fifth graders shadow and come back and report what it is like. And they have an open house at the end of the year for the upcoming fifth grade parents. And then at the beginning of the year they have parents come with the sixth

graders to the first day. It makes some of the parents feel better but I don't think it's beneficial. It's like kindergarten and the parents just need to make a clean break.

Matthew:

There is a transition plan in place. I think the counselor leads a lot of that up, that's just the person I saw was in the forefront, whether there is more people involved that I don't know, I just know he was the figurehead. I mean the counselor sets up visit days. Each school comes over and they would practice going to classrooms. I think we had like an open house where the kids came over and visited. And I think we had a thing where they could come over and watch you teach. I think the school did some transition stuff and the counselor did some transition stuff. I don't think we have ever had any formal, in school training, professional development, on transition.

Max:

The counselor does a lot of stuff. I think he goes over to the elementary schools to visit fifth grade and then towards the end of their fifth grade year they come over to tour the middle school. There is a parent night where the parents can come visit the campus. I know we have a brainstorming session together as teachers in the fall to discuss what we need to do to be prepared. I never had any formal training from the school in how to deal with the kids transitioning into middle school. It is more so just adapt and learn.

Maria:

When I was in sixth grade I was a new teacher as well so you know what was new to them was kind of new to me. So I don't know that I personally prepared differently than if I had exposure to other environments first. I did not have any formal training so sixth grade I prepared a lot of procedural training, lockers, lunchtimes, how to organize folders

and classwork, because for a lot of them it was the first time they had more than one class so they had multiple folders. I don't think we had any official transition program. I think the counselor was in charge of it but I'm not even sure it was an official program. For the purposes of transition, I don't think what we do is effective at all. I don't think we do transition as well as we could. I would say we need an intentional program in place to make it more successful. I think in theory the sixth grade academy model is a good idea but as a long as it's done intentionally with intentional programming.

Maggie:

At the end of the fifth grade they tour the sixth grade and they also have an open house where the parents can come and meet the sixth grade teachers. They have a program where the counselor can come over to fifth grade and talk to them about sixth grade expectations and what they can do to prepare for the next year.

I think in theory the sixth grade academy sounded really good to administration but I think it is not really achieving what it had hope to.

When asked, "Who assumes the primary responsibility for coordinating and carrying out transitioning programming in your school", Maggie answered, "The counselors and administrators. The teachers are involved but they are peripheral. They are not involved in the planning".

Melissa:

Since the kids come from three different schools, they really have grown up with the same kids up until middle school. So I think it would be beneficial to do more get to

know one another activities to help ease the stress but at the time we didn't do anything

like that, we just needed to get on the same page.

Martha:

When I taught 30 years ago it was basically up to the teachers to come up with a regular

routine. It was left up to the teacher to choose how to handle the beginning of school.

We took three to four weeks to go over procedural routines, bus procedures, what was

expected academically and socially, and at one point we gave two ten-minute breaks and

it was wonderful. I liked to put the student's names on the desks. I liked letting them

know about me and spend time getting to know them. But over time we just moved away

from a lot of that when the focus moved to testing.

Mary:

We do a whole transition thing as a sixth grade and have a thing for parents but I don't

think I've ever had any training specific to transition. The first day of school is probably

the most beneficial option to the parent. It may not be the best thing for the kids, but I

definitely think it's the best think for the parents. I would say the kid's brief tour of our

school while they are in the fifth grade is the most beneficial to them.

Elements related to middle school transition. The fourth theme is comprised of all the

elements related to transition, mentioned by the participants of the study. The teachers in the

sixth grade academy were confident they could pinpoint the general difficulties most students in

the sixth grade academy experience in regards to transition. This theme relates to the difficulties

experienced by all stakeholders involved in the transition from elementary to middle school. The

fourth theme was divided further into three subthemes: parental involvement, lockers, and other.

Parental involvement and lockers were made into subthemes because they were mentioned by

every participant involved in the study, but were not made into their own theme because they both fall under the category of an element related to the middle school transition. The third subtheme, 'other', became a subtheme because there were miscellaneous issues mentioned by participants related to middle school transition but none of them are mentioned often enough to categorize into their own subtheme. Below are some of the participant's narratives in regards to each subtheme.

Parental involvement.

Megan:

> I do wish we had more parent participation and parent involvement. We just have so much information to give to parents but have difficult communicating with them.

Matthew:

> Parents just see middle school as being less communication with parents. They don't see it as now a teacher has a hundred plus kids versus twenty something.

Maggie:

> In the sixth grade academy students were much more coddled by their parents. Parents were, um, much more overreaching in their guidance and their expectations of um just the basic um housekeeping from so worried about going from elementary to a middle school setting. It was such a hindrance because parents were always right there in the doorway or in the way. Parents in the sixth grade academy were much more overbearing and possessive whereas parents in the urban setting were much less restrictive. They felt that this just part of growing older and they wanted their kids to experience the world. Parents seem to embrace the change better. It's kind of a community mentality.

Parents are the main stressor students experience in their transition. Parents put more stress on them than necessary. Either they are there trying to coddle them or they embarrass them in front of their peers.

I would say the most difficult thing was dealing with those parents that wanted to coddle. It was like taking the kid out of the parent's hands and walking away with them. And I know that seems so minute but that is so significant to how that child and how that parents responds to that initial middle school setting. That is very embarrassing and you really stand out in front of your peers.

Lockers.

Molly:

Kids love their lockers although they do not use them, which amazes me. There is so much apprehension over the lockers and having a locker. Being able to open a locker is something we spend a lot of time on at the beginning of the year. Teachers stay in the hall at the beginning of the year and make sure kids can get the lockers open.

Matthew:

Honestly, lockers is a huge stressor. I know that sounds funny, but they have a very difficult time with using their own locker or organizing they own locker, but they get better with that over the year.

Max:

There is just a lot of handholding that goes on. Having to walk them to class and make sure they could get into lockers. Lockers were a big concern for the majority of students so a lot of time was spent focusing on that.

Maria:

I know this is super specific but I would say the number one stressor kids have coming into sixth grade is lockers. And it was a major stressor for me because it was like a constant battle with teaching them how to open them and remembering the codes, not to leave stuff that they needed. I hated them, I wish they just used their book bags.

Other.

Megan:

I think kids like middle school better than elementary because if they don't like a teacher they only have them for an hour each day.

Madison:

In sixth grade that is when you see a lot those social issues start, boyfriend girlfriend issues and hormones. And that's just something you have to deal with. Combining three schools into one is hard for them to deal with because they lose friends, are separated from friends and things like that so I think that's hard. Being able to participate in sports is a big thing and they are excited about that.

Matthew:

Organization and how well students can keep materials from day-to-day and can they keep materials unit-to-unit is key. Part of organization is, well you can see it, study skills is, you can tell the less organized students don't do generally as well as the more organized students. The organization and study habits a student had in elementary school really starts to show itself in middle school. Students start getting further behind, the content starts getting harder, so any area of their student life that isn't ready will show itself in middle school.

Changing classes and being accountable for what goes on with each class seems to be

tough. You know they are used to having someone organize their stuff for them. I know

they come in and they have a very hard time collecting their materials from one class to

the next.

Going from three elementary schools to one school is tough. They meet new kids. They

are no longer around some friends. They have to meet new friends. It's a new group of

friends and teachers. And the way the school is set up they may not see some friends at

all.

Max:

Kids get more freedom but they have more responsibility; keeping up with their own stuff

and making sure assignments are done. I know a lot of kids stress about the new

environment and missing mama and daddy a little bit more. I would say the workload;

more is put on their plate. They start to get into the social aspects. It's interesting

because some of them are still elementary age-minded and some are middle school-

minded, so as a teacher that is a social dimension you are dealing with specific to that

grade. Really some of them are not mature at all for their age and some of them are too

mature for their age. And then of course a lot of them weren't around each other before

because they were in different elementary schools so they are dealing with a whole new

pecking order. The social part is just such a huge part but in sixth grade the girls are so

much more mature than the boys.

Maria:

I would say organization. That was always the number one reason a student did well in

sixth grade. It was funny because I got to the point that I would know, I guess by my

third year teaching, I got to know my kids styles so well that I knew which elementary school they came from. But I would say kids who had a good grasp and knew what it took to be a good student and was well prepared and organized. You know just little things like kids who knew to put their first and last name on an assignment- who are purposefully prepared to come to middle school to be a good student and not just a student who was helped along and coddled.

Maggie:

Students who transition well are flexible. They are knowledgeable but it's their work ethic. If they have a strong work ethic, you can teach them. They may have limited ability but at the same time if they come in with a strong work ethic and the right attitude those are the ones that are more successful.

Students in a sixth grade academy lose that sense of middle school perspective. They lose that sense of they are part of the larger group. And there is something to be said for being low man on the totem pole and to learn those adapting skills. You know separate is not always good. You really become a big fish in a small pond and there is an importance for being the small fish in a big pond, especially at that age.

Martha:

Students coming into sixth grade have difficulty with the amount of homework. Also having to make friends from other schools. And then also just the routines of school as far as changing classes and getting used to the new schedule.

Mary:

Students who handle the transition well are organized. They also have a sense of ownership. Students who are an advocate for themselves, if they have a question they ask

it and don't have their mamas email me the question. Kids like the transition because of

the freedom of choice and lockers. But they have difficulty resetting their social network.

They worry about getting lost and not being able to open their locker.

As can be seen from the participant's accounts, transitioning students often experience

significant academic, social, emotional, physical or developmental changes. Students transition

into the unfamiliar of new teachers, peers, academic expectations, social pressure, class

schedules, school configuration and emotional changes. For this reason, teachers involved in this

study would like to develop school improvement strategies designed to help student transition

more successfully.

Teacher's perceptions of the student's experience.

The fifth, and final theme, is the teacher's perception of the student's experience at a

sixth grade academy. Teachers add an articulate voice to the student experience, on behalf of the

student. Teachers have the ability to process and vocalize what the perceived students are going

through emotionally, physically, and socially during the transition year, more so than a student

may at their age. Teacher's rich, descriptive voice adds a critical voice on behalf of the student

experience. The following are narratives from the participants in the study regarding this final

theme.

Megan:

I think the girls would say the peer pressure and drama aspect is a difficult transition for

them coming into middle school. I guess the rigor of the content material is also tough.

You know if they are missing then they have a hard time getting caught up because they

are used to having work, a folder, handed to them in elementary school. I don't know

that boys are concerned about their homework but I would say they have a difficult time prioritizing it and that is always a main concern I have for them through the school year.

Molly:

Students who are confident and can handle responsibility handle transition the best. I would say some of the positive aspects of moving into middle school for students are getting lockers, having more freedom, to make ethical and moral decisions. Students who transition well are ones whose parents are not helicopters.

When asked, "What is the most difficult aspect of moving from elementary to middle school for 5th graders?", Molly answered:

The kids in our county have always been with the same kids and because we are putting three elementary schools together they have to reestablish pecking order. And they are trying to, like all middle school kids, find their social group, and if they get on the wrong team it really upsets them. This is an issue specific to our county. In the other county I taught in there was no perception of one team being better than another team. As a teacher the model I think is best for the school depends on the community and the school. I think having the 6th grade separate from 7th and 8th is good but not separated three ways like we have here.

Matthew:

I think sixth graders still enjoy teachers and for the most part they still want to come to school. They want to connect with the teacher, whether it's you or a different teacher. They still enjoy the environment as a whole so I think it's easy to connect with a large group of them if you create an environment that is fun for learning. I think kids are excited to come out of elementary school. I think kids are ready to be treated you know

as if they are older. They are able to change classes, etc., so I think they are excited about being able to be perceived as older. Males. Males, whatever your position or status was at the elementary school you now have to establish a new position or status at the middle school because you are throwing other elementary schools into the mix. So you kind of have to find you know where you are in the hierarchy of males. Females, I don't know, I guess maybe during that time period they grow a lot, physically, emotionally, you know so that's a big transition for them. They start to outgrow their peers. They start to see the world differently from their male counterpart.

Maria:

I feel like the kids kind of maintained their innocence a little bit longer in the sixth grade academy. I feel like when kids are exposed to older ages they tend to want to rise to their level or sink to their level basically. And I remember when I was in school I learned a lot from the older kids in middle school. I feel like in an ideal world kids are better off being mixed in with older kids because they can learn by observing but I would say in the real world I would want my child separated in their own facility. I would say the way our school is, I like that the sixth grade is isolated.

Maggie:

The top three stressors students experience in their transition to middle school are parents, lockers and the unknown. The girls are so worried about what all the other girls are thinking. The girls' issues are all emotional and social. The boys worry about when they are going to eat. The boys struggled getting organized.

A majority of teachers interviewed noted the difficulty students experience in regards to transition and how these difficulties are combated by being in a sixth grade academy. As

aforementioned, a student's sense of belonging is significantly correlated with positive academic and socio-emotional surroundings (Bandura, 1989). The majority of teachers interviewed felt that there was a closer bond or connection experienced while housed in a sixth grade academy.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Central research question. *What are teachers' lived experiences as educators in a sixth grade academy?*

Teachers described their experiences as educators in a sixth grade academy as being isolated. The second theme discussed in chapter four, which directly answers the central research question, is isolation, felt by teachers and students. Every teacher participant elaborated on their feeling of isolation, either in the individual interview, questionnaire, or both, which is why isolation was one of the five themes that was developed from the data collection. Teachers acknowledge a preference for working in a school that is a conglomerate of grade levels so that they can feel more connected to what is going on within the school. Teachers feel isolated from their coworkers in other grades. Even though the sixth grade academy has its own administrator, teachers feel as though they do not have administrative support. Several teachers make reference to having to make their own administrative decisions within their classroom. Max stated:

> We did have our own administrator in the sixth grade, one of the two assistant principals, but I was in a different building and a lot of times I just had to make the decisions myself, or with my teammates. We would try to be on the same page with how we handled discipline. There were some teams that did a lot of write ups, and the team that was in the same building as the administrator would just send their kids to her office, but we kind of just handled things ourselves and our kids knew that.

Maria and Max were both located in one of the sixth grade buildings that did not have an administrator physically in the building. However, neither Maria nor Max seemed to act as though it was a problem being isolated from administration. Maria expressed the same sentiment as Max.

> I remember feeling isolated away from everything, not just the other grades, but I liked it. We were like our own little family, and I think the kids felt that way too. If something came up, we just handled it. We would help each other out as a team. It just wasn't convenient to get administration involved. Most of the time we would just deal with it as a team and only on the really major issues did I get administration involved.

Teachers prefer sixth grade academies for their own children, but not for themselves as educators. The majority of participants only referred to the isolation they experienced as teachers, however, some participants mentioned they felt as though their students experienced a level of isolation from being in the sixth grade academy. Molly said, "I believe that some students miss out on feeling as though they are part of the middle school experience." However, one teacher made the point that even though she felt her students were missing out on the middle school experience, the sixth grade academy is the only experience her students had, so she did not feel as though her students realized they were missing out on a middle school experience. Maria commented, "I mean looking back at my experience and comparing it to theirs, I think they are missing out on feeling like they are part of something bigger than them. I think about walking around the halls of my middle school and being in awe of the bigger kids. But you know the academy is the only thing they know, so I don't think they realize they are missing out on anything."

The positive effect of isolation on the teachers within the sixth grade academy is it has fostered a deeper feeling of connection with one another amongst their own grade level. Teachers feel as though they are able to relate with one another in their feeling of isolation from the school. Megan stated:

When I first started teaching there I really did not know who to go to. But it is nice feeling like you are in the trenches with the other sixth grade teachers. When new teachers came in I would take them under my wing to help them with the things I struggled with my first year there.

Teachers perceive their experience in the academy to be useful and beneficial to the student, which creates investment and in turn makes them want to contribute more. Teachers felt as though working in a sixth grade academy allowed them to form a stronger bond and personal connection with their students.

Research subquestion one: *How do teacher's perceived experiences in a sixth grade academy influence their professional behaviors and teaching practices?*

In response to the first sub-question, teacher's perceived experiences in a sixth grade academy has influenced their professional behaviors and teaching practices in a positive way. Despite describing feelings of isolation, teachers said they gained insight and valuable teaching practices from working in a sixth grade academy. All five themes contributed in some way towards drawing the conclusion to this question. Theme one, the structural designs of the sixth grade academy, made teachers realize throughout their time teaching there, the importance of creating a small learning environment. Theme two, isolation, helped influence professional behaviors and teaching practices through making teachers more mindful of creating opportunities for students to feel as though they were part of the entire middle school. Theme three,

intentional transitioning programming, was the number one recommendation, moving forward, by the participants. Teachers agreed they feel as though they have a lot of valuable insight towards working in a sixth grade academy that would benefit other teachers, students, parents, and administrators, when working with students in a critical transition year. The fourth theme, elements related to middle school transition, were some of the attributes teachers noted as standing out the most from their experiences. Theme four was comprised of teachers feedback as to some of the most critical elements related to the sixth grade transition year. Some of these characteristics of transition include: parental involvement, lockers, and other issues such as organization and homework. Finally, the fifth theme, teacher's perceptions of the student's experience, has been a contributing factor and influence of professional behaviors and teaching practices because teachers have learned from their time in the sixth grade academy, adapted, and grown in their own opinion. Each teacher described his or her time in the sixth grade academy as being unique and as a learning experience. Each teacher took away something from their time as educators in the sixth grade academy that contributed to their personal teaching philosophy.

Teachers have adapted their own set of practices that help students adjust to the transition. Megan describes her beginning of school year procedures:

When I moved to sixth grade, I had taught seventh grade the year before, and I didn't imagine it would be that different. But it was so different. In sixth grade you are helping the parents, more than anything, with the adjustment from communication they were used to from elementary teachers, to dealing with middle school teachers. Parents do not know how to enable their kids to become more independent. Most of the time they just end up coddling their child or blaming the teacher for not communicating with them enough. When we have parent meetings, parents will say, "Why didn't you tell me my

child was failing your class" and the teacher's response is always, "Why didn't you get online and check their grades"? Parents are accustomed to having Friday packets sent home to them and then in middle school it is up to them to get online and check their child's grades. So at the beginning of the year I have to work with kids on communicating with their parents and teachers. We work on lockers, changing classes, organization, turning in homework and getting to know each other since they are meeting kids from two different schools for the first time.

Teachers feel as though they are able to form a closer bond with students due to the sixth grade academy setting. Madison describes a student in particular she formed a special bond with:

When I first met Kathy she was having a really hard time because she did have any friends when she was in elementary school. I mean she really did not have a single one. But then she moved into sixth grade and there were two other elementary schools worth of kids. Immediately I realized she did not have any friends and I would walk with her to lunch and try to get her to sit with some of the other girls she did not know that also looked kind of intimidated by everyone. After a few days she found some other girls that ended up being her best friends all through middle school. I think that is the great thing about really knowing your students and feeling like you know what they are going through because you see it happen year after year.

The majority of participants reported their experiences from working in a sixth grade academy influenced their professional behaviors by creating a tighter community amongst other sixth grade teachers.   In his individual interview Max stated:

We would cover each other a lot. If a teacher was running a little late because they were dropping their kid off at school, or whatever reason, we would call one another and make sure to cover their classroom. Or if someone had to help a kid who was having a hard time because of something going on at home, we would watch their classroom, if students were doing deskwork, so they could try to help that kid out. I never did that kind of thing when I was at my first school, first of all because it was too big and secondly because it was every man for himself mentality.

Their experiences influenced their teaching practices through a 'learn and adapt' mentality. When Maggie moved to teach at the sixth grade academy, she had been teaching in an urban conglomerate configuration middle school. She reflected:

When I first came to the sixth grade academy I was shocked how young the kids seemed compared to the sixth graders at my old school. They just seemed very shielded since they weren't around the older kid's influences. They held onto their elementary school mentality a lot longer, which was good in some ways but also bad. I had to deal with them totally different from how I dealt with the sixth graders at my other school, but you know you learn and grow with each situation you teach in.

Teachers who have worked in the sixth grade academy feel equipped to better handle students in transition to middle school because of their unique experiences.

Research subquestion two: *What are teachers' perceived advantages and disadvantages to a career in a sixth grade academy?*

In answer to research subquestion two, teachers' perceived advantages and disadvantages to a career in a sixth grade academy are balanced. While there is complete agreement amongst participants that working in a sixth grade academy fosters isolation, participants also

unanimously point out the fact that teachers are 'left alone to do their own thing'. The

participants of the study also agree that the smaller environment does contribute to a closer

personal connection between teacher and students. Molly stated, "I would say I have a close

relationship with the majority of the students I teach. I feel like I am their second mom".

Melissa said, "I think I had a close connection with all of my kids. Some connections were

stronger than others but at the end of the day we were a family". Martha shared:

> I felt like I had more time to connect with my students because we had time to talk about
>
> their personal interest. If a kid said, "I'm stupid. I don't get this" I would remind them
>
> that everyone had strengths and weakness and I would tell him to tell me about
>
> something he was good at. I remember one kid went on this long explanation about all he
>
> knew about fishing. I just listened and when he was finished I told him he just taught all
>
> of us in the classroom a lot about what he knew. The next day he brought me in an
>
> artwork of a fish he had made me using matchsticks. Those are the kind of connections
>
> we were able to make in the sixth grade academy.

Teachers feel as though these close connections allow them to have a better working

relationship with their students. The answers to this research question were informed by the first

and second theme. By gaining a better understanding of teachers' perceptions of the structural

design and how isolation has affected their practices, a conclusion was drawn of the advantages

and disadvantages to working in a sixth grade academy.

Research subquestion three: *What are teachers' perceptions of students' experiences*

in the sixth grade academy?

My third research sub-question considered teachers' perceptions of students' experiences

from being in the sixth grade academy. The fifth theme that emerged from the data, teacher's

perceptions of the student's experience, directly answers the third research question. The third subquestion asks, what are teachers' perceptions of students' experiences in the sixth grade academy? The answers to this question are varied amongst participants. In regards to environment and structural design, some of the participants felt students benefited from not being infused with the other grade levels. Other participants felt as though students needed the opportunity to 'sink or swim'. These teachers are the ones who feel like there is much to be said for social hierarchy and not being placed in a 'social bubble'. Maggie said, "You really become a big fish in a small pond and there is an importance for being the small fish in a big pond, especially at that age." Matthew shared his sentiments, "I think it is important for the sixth grade kids to see how the older kids conduct themselves in the hallways."

In regards to education, all of the participants agreed that there is a stigma attached with the sixth grade academy buildings, with one being labeled as the "smart" building, the "dumb" building, and the "regular students" building. Participants are in complete agreement that students adapted in behavior and with their learning to the stigma attached to each building.

Mary, whose daughter was in the 'smart building', was one of several participants to discuss the stigma, "Of course as a teacher and parent I am aware of the stigma attached to each building. So as a parent I wanted my kids in the 400 building." Molly, whose son was not in the 'smart building', but her daughter was, also discussed the stigma:

> For my daughter, it was very important that she'd be in the 'smart building' because
> that's where all her friends were, and as a student you don't want to be in the 'dumb
> building'. My son was not it the 'smart building' but it didn't matter because he could
> make friends no matter where he was, thankfully. But as a mom, you feel for all these

parents whose kids don't get in the 'smart building' because everyone knows the stigma

attached to each building".

Participants' answers also pinpointed the difficulties of transition experienced by males

and females. Max said, "the guys struggle with hierarchy and figuring out who is the new top

dog". Maria said, "the girls struggle with image and gossip". Most of the participants discussed

something along the same lines as this when it came to the struggles male and females

experienced at this particular age, as it relates to the transition.

While the participant's perceptions of the student's experience in the sixth grade academy

are insightful, it is important to distinguish between students' experiences of being in sixth grade

in contrast with experiences specific to the sixth grade academy. There are other answers that

were given by the participants that were good descriptors of students' experiences in sixth grade,

but they were not included because they were not specific to being in a sixth grade academy,

they were ultimately just related to being in the sixth grade in general.

Research subquestion four: *How do teachers describe their experiences regarding the intentions of academies in education?*

To answer the fourth research sub-question, teachers described their experiences

regarding the intentions of the sixth grade academy in education, specific to their school, as

lacking vision, communication and implementation. The answer to this final research question

was informed specifically by the third stated theme: intentional transitioning programming. This

theme came from the discovery that most teachers in the study were not aware of the intention of

the sixth grade academy acting as a transitional program; they just viewed it as a different

physical layout. While the discovery of lack of vision, communication and implementation of a

transition program came from the individual interviews, the discussion of solutions to this

problem came about in both focus group interviews. The third theme of intentional transitioning programming materialized mostly from the focus group interview discussion. While in theory participants agreed it sounds like an ideal environment for helping students coming into sixth grade, the lack of communication and implementation of the vision for the academy has contributed to a failed effort. The participants felt as though the struggles students go through, specific to transition, would be the same whether they are housed in a sixth grade academy or in a traditional middle school model. Madison commented, "I think kids at this stage all struggle with the same thing. I don't know that having them in a sixth grade academy would fix it." Matthew said, "I can see in theory how it could help with transition but at the same time I don't think we have accomplished that. I think our kids struggle with the same things kids at other schools struggle with."

The majority of the participants noted in their interviews that if the communication and vision was better executed from the top-down, they believe the sixth grade academy would be a more effective resource for transition. For instance Maria delineates:

Absolutely we could be doing more to utilize our academy as a transitioning resource. But what would that look like? Who would be the one to take that on? I don't know. I think teachers just kind of do what they can to help the students with transition. I mean I think we have a great thing going in theory but we could be doing a lot more as a program.

The communication of the intention of the sixth grade academy in this study has not been made clear to the stakeholders involved. Teachers have not received formal training on transition. Parents are not aware of the academy being used as a transitioning tool. Students

could potentially be alleviated of some of the stress still experienced in regards to transition.

Possible solutions to these issues are discussed in chapter five's recommendations section.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the lived experience of ten middle school

teachers who either currently work or previously worked in a sixth grade academy. Data

gathered through open-ended questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus group interviews

revealed the participant's perspective. Data collection placed significance on the participant's

distinct viewpoint. The themes that were developed addressed the questions derived from related

literature. These themes are intended to clarify teachers' perceptions from a sixth grade academy

and implications for the transition to middle school.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to extend or refine the existing knowledge of using the sixth grade academy as a transition program, so that the concerns facing our middle school students, as well as the challenges facing educational reformers, are brought to light with the possibility of positive outcomes. For the purpose of this study, a sixth grade academy is defined as a year long program, often taking place in a separate facility from the other middle school grade levels, created to support rising sixth graders with their transition from fifth to sixth grade. While there is a strong foundation of research conducted examining the success of ninth grade academies as an instrument for transition, there is limited current research that examines the success of sixth grade academies in general; specifically, there is limited research that has studied teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of sixth grade academy programs (Gunter & Bakken, 2010). Educators are critical change agents within the classroom. Those perceptions, once identified, can help shape the future of the transition programs by identifying areas of strength and areas for improvement.

This chapter includes a summary of the findings reviewed in chapter four, a discussion of those findings in relationship to the theoretical framework and literature review, and the implications and recommendations the results of the study have on multiple stakeholders.

Summary of Findings

Participants in this study provided numerous thoughts and feelings, along the same spectrum, in regard to their experiences from working in a sixth grade academy. While some themes, such as isolation, organization, and personal connections, stood out because they were mentioned in every interview, other themes and thoughts were anomalies but worthy of mention.

These commonalities and variances will be discussed in the following section. Structurally, participants thought that overall it was a good decision to have sixth graders separated from the rest of the general population, being the seventh and eighth graders. This separation was seen as positive because participants felt as though it cut down on unwanted behaviors such as bullying and being exposed to issues too mature for their age. With the vast spectrum of emotional maturity students have coming into sixth grade, teachers felt that the sixth grade academy helped with combating the wide range of socio-emotional issues. The majority of participants noted they were glad their child(ren) were able to experience their sixth grade year in the sixth grade academy, however, they felt as though working in a sixth grade academy was isolating to them as a teacher. Participants in this study indicated varied thoughts and feelings in regard to which practices for facilitating transition were effective, which may be why this particular school struggled with implementing a universally agreed upon transitioning program. Teachers in the study identified major components of transition that students entering into sixth grade experience. Each of these components, such as lockers and parental involvement, were discussed by each of participants in the study, even though they were not prompted in the questionnaire or interviews. Participants who had taught for three to thirty years in the sixth grade academy, individually recognized each of these factors of transition. Meaning, these factors remained constant for the time worked by the participants. Participants in this study also enlightened the researcher as to their perceptions of the student's experience in a sixth grade academy.

For this study, I utilized transcendental phenomenological processes, which lead me to discovering five themes during my investigation of lived experiences. These five themes are:

1. Structural Design (academy versus conglomerate)

2. Isolation (teachers and students)

3. Intentional Transitioning Programming

4. Elements Related to Middle School Transition (parental involvement, lockers, other)

5. Teacher's Perceptions of the Student's Experience

The themes developed were used to answer the research questions investigated in this study. The five research questions developed from related literature, and which framed the investigation, are answered below.

Central Research Question

What are teachers' lived experiences as educators in a sixth grade academy? Teachers describe their experiences as educators in the sixth grade academy as memorable and isolated. Teachers who are no longer educators in the sixth grade academy reminisce on the personal connections they were able to form with one another and with students. They remember the freedoms they had within their own classroom with fondness. Teachers who are still invested in educating student in the transition year focused on the isolation they feel from the rest of the middle school. Likewise, every participant in the study discussed the feeling of isolation from the rest of the middle school.

Research Subquestion One

How do teacher's perceived experiences in a sixth grade academy influence their professional behaviors and teaching practices? Teachers have used their experiences within the sixth grade academy to build upon their existing knowledge and teaching practices. Fluidity of teaching philosophy is a necessity when teaching within the sixth grade academy. Teachers use prior knowledge to adapt and grow within their profession. Over time issues that may have come about during their first year of teaching within the academy are eliminated through

experience. The benefits of personal connections made with students have lasting impacts that initiate the desire to create similar environments.

Research Subquestion Two

What are teachers' perceived advantages and disadvantages to a career in a sixth grade academy? The perceived advantages of working in a sixth grade academy include forming close bonds with students and freedom within the classroom. Teachers describe many meaningful relationships made during their time as educators in the sixth grade academy. Verbiage, such as family, bonds, close relationships, and time for bonding, is used to describe the connections made while teaching in the sixth grade academy. The disadvantage is unanimously agreed upon as being the isolation felt from physically being separated from the rest of the middle school. While is it advantageous to have your own media center, administrator, gymnasium, computer lab, science lab, and outdoor space, the disadvantage of having your own space is being isolated to that space. Teachers feel disconnected from the rest of the middle school. Teachers also feel as though students miss out on some of the middle school experience when housed in the sixth grade academy. There is some concern about sixth graders not having the older grade levels to look up to as role models, but it is quickly contradicted by the fact that the sixth graders also do not replicate the negative behaviors of older kids either.

Research Subquestion Three

What are teachers' perceptions of students' experiences in the sixth grade academy? Teachers discuss the many struggles that a student faces when transitioning from the fifth to sixth grade. Throughout their elementary school experience, parents and students are trained to expect a weekly packet that contains the child's work from the entire week and a weekly newsletter. A teacher in elementary school is accountable for roughly 25 kids. In elementary

school a child is used to having one, maybe two, teachers. Once the transition into middle school occurs, parents no longer receive the work completed by their child unless it brought home on the student's own initiative. There is no weekly newsletter, but instead a monthly newsletter that must be delivered to the parent by the student. Each teacher is responsible for roughly 100 students. Instead of having only one or two teachers, a middle school student has at least six or more teachers. These delineations from elementary to middle school are important because the participants of the study believe they contribute to ineffective communication between parents and teachers. Another student experience that teachers unanimously discussed was dealing with lockers. While the struggle is only present for about the first month of school, it is such a large source of stress for students that every participant felt it was worth of making note. Other student experiences that teachers discussed include learning to deal with multiple teachers, remembering to do homework, organizing a folder, communicating with parents, taking on responsibility, and handling social pressures.

Research Subquestion Four

How do teachers describe their experiences regarding the intentions of academies in education? The teachers involved in this study are aware of the growing movement of small learning communities, and are current on research's recommendations to move towards learning academies, specifically in ninth grade. The teachers in this study, however, do not feel as though their school is accomplishing the intention behind the academy design. This is mostly due to lack of communication of vision and programming design. While teachers of the sixth grade academy do believe in the transition provided by the academy, they do not believe it currently accomplishes that mission. Structurally, the school has the design of a small academy, but internally the school does not act as a transitioning program. Teachers were excited to offer

solutions as to how to accomplish the task of transforming the academy into a fully functioning transitioning program. These solutions are discussed in the recommendations section of chapter five.

A phenomenological design was chosen to interpret the lived experiences of teachers in a sixth grade academy.

Discussion

The problem addressed in this study is a lack of research in regards to sixth grade academies used as transitioning programs (Gunter & Bakken, 2010). The limited amount of research available on small learning communities is studied quantitatively, looking at the relationship between variables such as attendance, discipline records, dropout rates, and socioeconomic status as it relates to student success in small learning communities (Maynor, 2008). This study used a qualitative route to recognize how teachers, students, parents, and administrators perceive the effects of sixth grade academies as transitioning programs, through the perceptions of teachers. "While literature is overwhelmingly devoted to schools practicing one or two units of schools-within schools, rather than full model examples, there is limited research regarding this total school reform effort; its change process, leadership, culture, success, and weakness need further study" (Maynor, 2008, p. 34). The summary of the literature review in this study supported implementing small learning communities, such as a sixth grade academy, in a large school setting (Kerr, 2002).

In some cases, this study's findings served as a confirmation and extension to previous theoretical and empirical research. In other cases, the study strays away from known research, particularly in the fact that this was a qualitative study. The findings from this study agree with previous research from the perspective that there should be emphasis placed on implementing an

intentional transition program that focuses on parents, students and teachers. In Smith's (1996)

research findings, he reported that the approach with the greatest impact in regards to transitional

programs falls into three categories, the main category being programs targeting staff, students

and parents. Structured transitional programs, which coordinate the efforts of staff and students

within schools and between schools, are what prepare students and parents best for transition

(Hertzog & Morgan, 1998). The research in this study also supports the literature when

discussing personal connections made in a small school setting. "The sense of ownership that

students experience in small schools contributes to student success. In schools too large, a sense

of anonymity prevails" (Smith-Mumford, 2004, p. 28). This study corroborates previous

research findings discussing the challenges students face when dealing with transition. Previous

research found students identified four primary categories that contributed to the challenges of

transition to high school: Relationships with teachers, academic difficulties, adjusting to the

school environment, and peer or social pressure (Smith-Mumford, 2004). Each of these

categories is addressed in the findings of this study.

Another topic that the research in this study and previous research are in agreement over

is the aspects that contribute to a failed smaller learning community. Potter (2004) points out

that some small schools have tried to initiate the Smaller Learning Communities concept and

have failed or have experienced less success than what was hoped. Key elements that should

have been in place in order to create a true, separate Smaller Learning Communities program

were not implemented. These key elements include budget, personnel, implementation, and

vision. To implement a small learning community model calls for substantial changes in how

schools run their institution. District wide implementation should take place for success to

occur.

The only manner in which this study diverged from previous research is due to the uniqueness of the school presented in this study. The sixth grade academy in this study is unlike others in that it is physically broken down into three mini academies. Each of the three sixth grade teams are located in their own facility, but share resources with one another such as gym, cafeteria, office, administrator, and library. The degree to which these schools are condensed down to mini units impacted the way students categorized their academic ability, labeling first building the smart building, the second as the dumb building, and the third being the regular student building. The findings in previous research indicate the smaller you get, the more successful the personalization, and therefore the more interactive the learning. Previous research also supports the smaller the better because teachers are able to address more issues that arise. The findings from this study disagree. There is a point at which the smaller schools create social stigmas that hinder the student's self-efficacy.

This study contributes to the field of existing knowledge by adding findings from the teacher's perspective. This study also found that the personalization experienced by students in a small learning community had the opposite effect on teacher relationships. This study found that teachers unanimously agreed they felt isolated from the rest of the school. I have yet to come across a study that contributed findings from the teacher's perspective and discovered the feeling of isolation that exists for teachers working in a small learning community.

The Theoretical Framework that guided this study is the Theory of Self-Efficacy (1989) and Social Cognitive Theory (1977), developed by Albert Bandura. The main notion of Social Cognitive Theory is that an individual's actions and reactions, including social and cognitive processes, are influenced by the actions that individual has observed from others (Bandura, 1977). Students will learn by observing others and interacting within their 'world', being either

the sixth grade academy or within a traditional 6 - 8 middle school. Bandura postulated that a student could demonstrate a new behavior by watching the actions of other individuals, which can be either a positive or negative experience. Bandura's theory is important to this study in that teachers are able to witness students who do or do not experience successful models of behavior in a small, personal setting. Teachers who were involved in this study shared their perceptions of student's behavior in a sixth grade academy. The majority of teachers involved in this study felt as though it was beneficial to have students isolated from the older ages, so that they did not mimic the unwelcomed behaviors of older peers. A minority of teachers in the study felt as though it was an important part of the process for maturing to witness older students' behaviors. Educators are important facilitators of resilience and self-determination, both of which play a vital role in a successful academic career. The teachers in this sixth grade academy are the main influences on a student's perception of what they are capable of doing in the classroom setting. As noted, "The beliefs that students hold about their abilities to perform academic tasks or succeed in academic activities powerfully influence their academic performances" (Usher & Pajares, 2005, p. 126). Every participant in the study agreed the relationship and connections made with their students played an important role in being able to influence a child's education. Teachers also agreed they are able to make connections more easily in the sixth grade academy, due to the personalization that is fostered amongst teacher and student.

The underlying premise of Bandura's 1989 Theory of Self-Efficacy is that a student's success initiates further success. Student success hinges on the teacher's ability to create an environment that is conducive to student learning and personalization. As explained, "Self-beliefs of efficacy can enhance or impair performance through their effects on cognitive,

affective, or motivational intervening processes" (Bandura, 1989, p. 729). The Theory of Self-Efficacy is grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes the role of observational learning and social experience in development of personality (Bandura, 1989). Teachers involved in this study reflected on the sixth grade academy as an environment that was conducive to creating small learning communities where personal connections were easily built. Because of this environment created by teachers, the participants felt as though they had a persuasive influence on their students, which instilled self-beliefs within students (Bandura, 1989). Due to the nature of personalization within small learning communities as they contribute to student success, teachers within these programs were likely to contribute to students' self-efficacy. Educators in the sixth grade academy felt as though their desire to strengthen and create personal expectations with their students helped them communicate with students more effectively (Bandura & Adams, 1997).

There was little difference among the responses from each participant when it came to discussing the elements related to middle school transition. When comparing the themes that came out of the responses from the open-ended questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus group interviews, parents and communication was the prevailing theme. Another element related to middle school transition that was unanimously mentioned was stress related to lockers. Other elements were mentioned and will be discussed, but it is important to note that the first two mentioned (parent communication and lockers) were the only two unanimously identified by participants as elements related to transition.

The roles between home and school have dramatically changed throughout the history of education, as have the roles of communication between parents and teachers (Astin, 2008). In this research, teachers unanimously agreed that communication with parents needed to improve.

The difficulty in offering a working solution is the hindrance in resolving this problem. While teachers offered many views as to where communication was lacking from parents along with what they felt parents thought was lacking in communication from teachers, it is my belief that communication's deficit is from having a clear purpose statement of the intention of the sixth grade academy. Whether parents and teachers agree with that statement, the consensus is that more communication between the two is necessary. A top-down implementation with a clearly stated vision for the program is my recommendation on which I elaborate on in the recommendation section.

For fear of being too redundant I will not elaborate on the issue of lockers as being an element of transition that was unanimously mentioned but will only once again state that lockers are a sure source of initial stress to students entering the sixth grade. Some of the other elements that were most commonly mentioned include the following: fitting in, increased amount of homework, more difficult courses, more responsibilities, getting to class on time, making friends, getting lost, peer pressure, having multiple teachers, organization, dealing with bullies, academic pressure, and meeting new peers. While I feel as though these are self explanatory, and therefore will not elaborate on each on individually, I will point out that these are only the most mentioned concerns. It may be difficult to go back to your sixth grade year and remember what it was that scared you about that school year, but having these listed out is a reminder to some of the many true struggles students deal with daily. It is imperative that we seek to find solutions that combat these stresses so that students can focus on their fullest academic potential.

There was a certain degree of disagreement among the participants when it came to their perceptions of the students' experience. In some cases, participants contradicted themselves, offering two different perspectives to the students' experience. Some teachers felt as though

their students experienced isolation from being in the sixth grade academy. Other teachers felt as

though students had no other middle school experience to compare it to so they did not feel as

though their students experienced any isolation. Every participant felt as though the sixth grade

year was the toughest transition year for parents and students, with kindergarten and ninth grade

coming in a close second.

Another barrier that was briefly mentioned and should not be overlooked is the feeling

teachers experienced of being an after-thought. Some of the participants mentioned that they felt

as though they were "out-of-sight, out-of-mind". Instead of the sixth grade being a very

intentionally executed program, it is the exact opposite. Teachers who have taught in the sixth

grade unanimously agree it is the foundational year to a good middle school experience. It is the

hope of every participant involved in the study that more effort be made to implement a fulltime

transition program.

I will concede I am surprised, and somewhat discouraged, by the results of this study.

The reason for this is twofold. This school has a wonderful facility, that research has shown

when properly implemented, can be advantageous to student learning. However, due to lack of

programming, vision, and leadership, the facility is not being used to its optimal potential.

Secondly, the degree to which the facilities of the school are separated has created a stigma that,

depending on which building you are located in, could hinder student learning. Kathleen Cotton

(2004) concluded in her book that small school size is not enough to improve the quality of

school. What small school size does is provide an optional setting for high-quality schooling to

take place. Cotton states that while small schools can facilitate the use of organizational

arrangements and instructional methods that lead to a more positive school climate and higher

student achievement, structure alone does not guarantee it. It is recommended that further study

been done on how to successfully implement a small school model, upon the discovery that one

does not currently exist at the school. It is further recommended upon completion of this study

that a small school model be implemented from the top-down with buy in from all stakeholders.

A well-stated opinion by a leading researcher in the field of small school learning environments,

Kathleen Cotton, summarizes the importance of structuring:

> Since not all small school restructuring outcomes are equal, care must be taken to insure
>
> that these resources and efforts will be truly productive. The last thing small school
>
> proponents want to see is a future in which school downsizing ends up on the dead fad
>
> pile, with students reaping few benefits from it, funding agencies declaring it a bust, and
>
> school personnel across the country remarking wistfully, "Oh, we tried small schools, but
>
> they didn't work." Since they do, in fact, work very well under the right conditions, it is
>
> important to specify what those conditions are (Cotton, 2004, p. 8).

Implications

The purpose of this section is to address the theoretical, empirical, and practical

implications of the study. The goal of the research provided in this study is to understand the

strengths and weaknesses of a particular sixth grade academy in a rural town in Northeast

Georgia in order for administrators to make fully informed decisions about transitioning

opportunities. It is imperative for student success that administrators fully utilize resources in

order to make transitions for students as successful as possible during this stage. The findings

from this study indicate that board-level planners and administrators might discover the

recognition of sixth grade teachers' perceptions as beneficial when considering their transitional

model. Consideration of teacher comments concerning the implementation and intentions of the

sixth grade academy could lead to a more effective program, less stressed students and parents,

easier planning and programming for teachers, and therefore an easier transition. As shown, there are implications for a variety of players.

Schools Housing a Sixth Grade Academy

The practical implications of this study necessitate the adoption and implementation of an intentional program within the existing sixth grade academy. This program should intentionally address the purpose of the academy being used as a transitioning program. The empirical implications the findings from this study has on schools in general is, whether housed in a sixth grade academy or a traditional middle school model, that schools need to specifically address the difficulties that come with transition, with all the stakeholders involved. More communication from the start will eliminate confusion later on down the road. Schools need to continue individual efforts to make personal connections between teacher and students and evaluate their current plan and program for helping students transition from elementary to middle school. A few options that schools have to accomplish these efforts include: early warning systems, summer bridge programs, enhanced orientation program, and advisory/mentor programs.

Teacher

The theoretical foundations for this study relied on the works of Bandura's (1977, 1988, 1989, 2003, & 2004) constructs of social cognitive theory and social learning theory. Students tend to improve their memory through routinely modeling the behaviors of those who influence them. Persuasive influences that empower students to use their already formulated abilities contribute to staying power in the learning environment. Bandura advocated the importance of the teacher's role in constructing self-efficacy in the classroom.

As identified through this study, one theoretical implication of working in a sixth grade academy is the phenomenon of inherently feeling isolated due to structure of facilities. Teachers

compensate for this lack of connection from teacher-to-teacher by forming close-knit bonds between teacher-and-student. Based on the findings, elementary and middle school educators would do well to communicate amongst one another regularly regarding transition best practices. Teachers would benefit tremendously from an attempt to gain a more personalized understanding of effective communication between parent and student prior to students entering their sixth grade year. I would recommend teachers send home an open-ended survey for parents and students to complete. I would recommend that the survey address ways to improve the transition period for all parties involved. The results of the survey should be used to inform strategies when planning the school's transitioning program.

One empirical implication of this study indicates that students undergo a great deal of stress in regards to their transition into middle school. Students inevitably experience these stressors whether in a sixth grade academy or in a traditional middle school. I encourage teachers to make students more active participants in finding a solution for implementing a successful sixth grade academy transition program. One way teachers could accomplish this task is by creating a student board that would help strategize ways to implement solutions for reducing stress on students in regard to transition. I would recommend and encourage students to embrace the opportunity to provide feedback that could produce a change.

Parent

Based on the data from my study, the compiled empirical data implies that parents have difficulty in dealing with their student transitioning from elementary to middle school. Parents are not made aware of the commonalities teachers see in students' transitioning that makes or breaks the student during the transitional period. Parents do not realize the research and time professionals put into each individual student's transition year. Parents do not view the

necessary digression of communication in the transition to middle school, as compared to the elementary years, as an intentional opportunity for the student to develop into a more responsible citizen. I would recommend that parents become active participants in programs planned by the school to help with transition and that parents do some research in the ways they can use research-based strategies to help support their child's education. I would recommend that the school seek ways to involve the parents. One of the most important solutions needed at this time is to find the best means of communication between parents and the school as a whole. Parents and teachers must also establish communication expectations from both sides.

Recommendations

The implications of the study were significant in the following ways:

1. It addressed the essence of middle school sixth grade teachers teaching, currently or formerly, in a sixth grade academy and captured their lived experiences.

2. It provided an additional resource for understanding teacher experiences with an emphasis on building and implementing an intentional transitioning program.

3. It studied existing gaps in the literature related to the growing trend of using small learning communities to foster community and ease transition, specific to the sixth grade.

4. It provided a voice for sixth grade academy educators, which brought to light the isolation teachers feel from their experiences teaching in a small learning community.

5. It provided evidence for the need to support future studies regarding how to successfully implement a transitioning program with limited resources.

Possible solutions, or recommendations, in regards to these implications are discussed in the recommendations section below.

There have been several studies that focus on ninth grade academies as a transitioning program. However, there is limited research in regards to sixth grade academies used as a transition program, specifically teacher's perceptions of these academies. The purpose of my study was to gain an understanding of student's experiences within the sixth grade academy, through the teacher's perspective. I feel as though I have a strong understanding of the culture of the program. While my study focused on the teacher and student, my recommendations are for the program. The majority of comments made, positive and negative, all funnel back to the sixth grade academy as a program. In consideration of the findings from this study, and the limitations and delimitations placed on the study, there are several practical recommendations for stakeholders, as well as recommendations for future research.

From the findings in this study, I recommended the following four steps:

1) Reinforcement of the vision

2) Progress monitoring

3) Fostering community through communication

4) Programming

A reinforced vision from district leadership, as well as clarification of expectations to the level of implementation of the program is needed to ensure success. Teachers are invested in seeing students' successfully transition from elementary to middle school. The desire for students to succeed is present but a unified clarification of the program's intention is not. A large plan for developing an agenda for getting all stakeholders on board would be beneficial. A professional development plan would be important for building confidence and buy-in. It would also serve to build morale amongst teachers who have been present since the implementation of the sixth grade academy, who feel as though the implementation created isolation amongst

teachers and school. Teachers made the following recommendations during their interviews: Have parents take on more responsibility, for instance getting online and checking their child's grades; help students come into sixth grade with more of the foundational skills that are needed to succeed, for instance the skill of always having a pencil or always doing your homework; have a plan in place from kindergarten to middle school; set goals for middle school and then work backwards towards kindergarten to make sure you are building upon these goals each year; and have a consistent vision for organizational and soft skills within the school system.

Progress monitoring at the school and team level would help teachers who request more guidance and understanding for what it means to intentionally help students in transition. Opportunities for teacher feedback should be given. Progress monitoring should take place to ensure the school staff has sufficient knowledge and resources to understand and implement the vision for the academy.

Fostering community through communication is necessary to the ideals of small learning communities. Isolation was a main theme in the discovery of this study and therefore should be addressed as a necessary means for building community. Districts should implement strategies for reaching out to and informing parents about the design and focus of the sixth grade academy. Clear communication will help ease parents' anxiety towards the unknowns of middle school. Clear communication will help reduce reiterated answers given by teachers who are asked the same questions multiple times due to lack of whole group communication. Students will feel united by contributing to a sense of community. Teachers will feel as though they are foundational, necessary, and an important cornerstone to the middle school years, and therefore feel like they are contributing to the community of teachers.

Programming is an essential, multi-component key in creating a successful small learning community. Design and implementation efforts must engage the school district and community. Programming should target the vision of creating community and helping all stakeholders with transition. A vision for what would change should also be communicated. Helping teachers with building relationships with parents should specifically be targeted.

Overall, teachers' perceptions are that students' experiences within a sixth grade academy are somewhat successful, but students have also encountered some of the typical challenges that schools face while implementing a small learning community. In particular, intentional implementation from the beginning of the program was not executed deliberately as needed for full buy-in from all stakeholders. Established goals and methods of implementation were not communicated. Reinforcing the vision for the sixth grade academy and district's commitment for implementing the vision is essential to the sixth grade academy's success. Likewise, ensuring that schools staff members are sufficiently trained with the knowledge and resources to implement is essential. I recommend further research take place that includes the examination of intentional implementation of transition programs for the sixth grade year.

The hope is that the completion of this research shed light on the stress placed on parents, students, teachers, and administrators, in regards to the transition into sixth grade and ways to alleviate these stressors. Further, the hope is that the research will create a dialogue between policy makers and stakeholders to create intentional transitioning programs.

Limitations

This study was limited in a variety of ways. A limitation, or potential weakness, of the study that could not be controlled was any bias the participants have towards the topic being discussed in the data collection process. The teachers who participated in the interview have

strong bonds formed with each other from working closely together and therefore could skew the result in favor of, or against, the academy. Another limitation is the reality of researcher bias that is portrayed during interviews. Although there are no known biases, the researcher's personal and professional preference, values, and philosophies of the research could have indirectly influenced the responses of the teachers interviewed through self-reporting of the data.

Additionally, while research reports the results of the smaller learning communities in high schools, more frequently known as ninth grade academies, little is known about the restructuring efforts of middle schools in creating sixth grade academies. Lack of research within middle schools is partly due to the smaller number of sixth grade academy conversions, as compared to their predecessor, the ninth grade academy. The gap in the literature is the lack of research conducted to study the effectiveness of sixth grade academies as transitioning programs, specifically from the teacher's perspective. While much of the current research on converting to SLCs focuses on instructional responsibilities of teachers, there is little attention being paid to teachers' experiences in these transition environments. Teachers' perceptions are a critical area of study "especially if the key impetus for the establishment of SLCs is increased personalization between teacher and students. Teachers' ability to adjust and adapt to this new role must be carefully studied and adequately supported" (Astin, 2008, p. 4). Astin (2008) writes, "While the benefits of small schools in engendering personalized relationships have been well documented, the efficacy of more recent efforts to convert large secondary schools to small learning communities (SLCs) is less well understood" (p.13). This study contributes new information to a growing body of research; it was however, limited in its scope because it only focused on one set of teachers within one specific school. The school itself is not diverse racially, participants were all Caucasian, as was the entire pool of potential candidates. Lack of racial diversity limits this

study with regards to generalizability to other schools in other communities that are more ethnically or racially diverse.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was formed and designed to show insight into teachers' experiences from working in a sixth grade academy. Five research questions guided the study, however several more questions formed based on the results. Therefore a variety of possible topics for future research surfaced throughout the study. One being, a quantitative study as an area for future research, looking at absences, discipline issues, and school involvement, at a sixth grade academy configuration versus a conglomerate figure of sixth thru eighth.

A future researcher might consider a more diverse set of participants. A longitudinal study that includes students' perspectives of their personal connections with teachers would be a worthwhile endeavor. Another recommendation would be to replicate this study from the high school student perspective and compare their relationships with other grade level teachers, with their sixth grade experience.

Another option for future research might include a study that schools located in other areas, with sixth grade academies, in order to contribute to the generalizability of the study. The opportunity for future research exists for studying different demographics and sample sizes.

Summary

The goal of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of rural middle school teachers who work in sixth grade academies. This study sought to illuminate a rich, descriptive voice for participants by sharing their insights in relationship to the phenomenon. This study found that teachers feel connected with their students due to the 'smallness' of the environment. This study also found that teachers working in the sixth grade

academy feel disconnected from the rest of the middle school. The preponderance of research suggests that sixth grade academies can be used a successful transitioning tool, when intentional implementation is in place. For successful implementation, it is necessary for future research to contribute to the results of this study as well the existing knowledge of the topic. It is the recommendation of this study that future research specifically target the study of successful, intentional transitioning programs, specifically within the middle school.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 8, 2015

Rebecca H. Davis
IRB Approval 2179.050815: Teachers' Perceptions of a Sixth Grade Academy: Implications for the Transition to Middle School

Dear Rebecca,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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APPENDIX B

Recruitment Letter

Date: 05/12/2015

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the education program at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand a phenomenon. The purpose of my research is to understand teacher's perceptions of the effectiveness of a separate facility housing sixth grade students in helping students' transition into middle school. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

The only criterion for participating in this study is that you must have worked in the Sixth Grade Academy at Lumpkin County Middle School for at least three years. If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire, participate in an individual interview, and participate in a focus group interview with other teachers who are involved in this study. A consent document will be included with the questionnaire.   The consent document, which you will need to sign and return, contains additional information about my research. The questionnaire should take about 10 minutes. The interview will take approximately 1 – 2 hours. The focus group interview will take approximately 1 – 2 hours. Participant identities will not be disclosed in the research.

I will contact you by mail or face-to-face shortly to see if you are interested in participating in the study. Please consider participating in this study. Your involvement will contribute to the growth of the existing body of knowledge in the field of education as well as possibly provide a framework for future studies that involve transition programs. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Davis
8th Grade Math Teacher
Lumpkin County Middle School

APPENDIX C

Follow-up Recruitment Script

Script for verbally contacting selected participants for interview, based on questionnaire responses.

Researcher:

I am contacting you because you indicated on your recent open-ended questionnaire that you would be willing to participate in both individual and focus group interviews. You were identified as a strong candidate for the study based on your answers to the questionnaire. For this reason, I would like for you to participate in a study that examines teacher's perceptions of working in a sixth grade academy.

If you choose to continue, you will be asked to participate in two recorded interviews, one individual and one group. Both interviews will take around one hour each. Your participation will be kept strictly confidential.

Your participation in all aspects of the study is completely voluntary. You can choose not to continue at any time.

Do you have any questions about the study?

APPENDIX D

Letter of Consent

CONSENT FORM
Teachers' Perceptions of a Sixth Grade Academy: Implications for the Transition to Middle School
Rebecca Davis
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of a separate facility housing sixth grade students in helping students' transition into middle school. You were selected as a possible participant because you have worked in the Sixth Grade Academy at Lumpkin County Middle School for at least three years. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Rebecca Davis, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education Program at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand teacher's perceptions of the effectiveness of a separate facility housing sixth grade students, in helping students' transition into middle school.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
Sign this consent form and send it back along with a questionnaire. The questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes. Participate in an individual interview and in a focus group interview with other teachers who are involved in this study. It should take approximately 1-2 hours to complete the individual interview and another 1-2 hours for the focus group interview. Your participation will be completely confidential in the study, except to the researcher and the other participants involved in the study. Your interviews will be audio recorded so that the researcher may go back and listen to the interview at a later date, as well as have them transcribed.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The risks are minimal and are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life.

There is no direct benefit from participating in the study. The indirect benefit of your involvement is your contribution to the growth of the existing body of knowledge in the field of education as well as possibly provides a framework for future studies that involve transition programs.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, on a password-protected laptop, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data will be completely disposed of at the end of three years after the completion of the study. Only the researcher will have access to audio recordings. Because focus groups are used in the study, the researcher cannot assure that other participants will maintain the subject's confidentiality and privacy.

The use of pseudonyms for participants will be implemented in the study so that the participant's identity will not be shared. Participant and site confidentiality will be ensured through pseudonyms in order to protect information shared and discussed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Lumpkin County Middle School. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. To be removed from the study, send the researcher an email requesting to be removed , and I will destroy all documents pertaining to you and erase any recordings.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Rebecca Davis. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at rdavis@lumpkin.k12.ga.us or by cell (706) 296-3291. Liberty Advisor: James Swezey Email: jaswezey@liberty.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email James Swezey at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature:_____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX E

Open-Ended Questionnaire

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information regarding teachers' perceptions of various aspects of the middle school transition year.

Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Teacher Demographics

Instructions: Please complete the following items pertaining to your teaching experience and current setting.

Name:

Age: ____ 18 to 30 ____ 30 to 40 ____ 40 to 50 ____ 50 to 60 ____ over 60

Race: ___ Hispanic ___African American ___Asian ___American Indian ___White ___Other

Gender: ____Female ____Male

1. Have you ever taught in the sixth grade academy at Lumpkin County Middle School?

2. If so, how many years did you teach there? Please include the dates (i.e., 14 years, 1990 – 2004).

3. When you attended middle school, which grade levels were included in your middle school program?

4. What is the total number of years you have been employed as a teacher? ____ Years

5. What grade level do you currently teach? ____ Grade

6. How many years have you been teaching at this level? ____ Years

7. What is the highest degree you hold?
    ____ Bachelor's ____ Master's ____ Specialist ____ Doctorate

8. In which of the following areas are you certified? (Check all that apply.)
    ____ General education ____ K-6 General education ____ 7-12 Special education

9. About how many students do you teach in a day? ____ Students

10. What is the largest number of students you have taught at one time (largest number of students on roster)? ____ Students

Stressors and Positive Aspects Related to Middle School Transition

Instructions: Please complete the following items pertaining to stressors and positive aspects associated with transition.

11. In your opinion, what have you perceived as being the top three stressors most of the students you teach experience in relation to the middle school transition? Please rank order the top three stressors and then describe them in detail below.
_____ Increased amount of homework
_____ Knowing/following school rules
_____ More difficult courses
_____ Fitting in
_____ Getting to class on time
_____ Making friends
_____ Getting lost
_____ Peer pressure
_____ Having lockers
_____ Getting along with peers
_____ Having multiple teachers
_____ Dealing with bullies or older students
_____ Exceptional academic pressure cliques
_____ Violence Gangs
_____ Economic disadvantage
_____Little parental support
_____ Other, describe:
Please use detail to describe each of the stressors you have chosen:
1.)

2.)

3.)

12. Of all of the stressors listed, in your opinion, please list the top stressor related to middle school transition for each student group:

Female students:

Male students:

Students in general education:

Students in special education:

Racially/ Ethnically diverse students:

13. Please use detail to describe a situation where you have witnessed a student experience a positive aspect associated with the transition to middle school.

14. Please use detail to describe a situation where you have witnessed a student experience a negative aspect associated with the transition to middle school.

15. Do you feel as though teachers who have personal relationships with their students can make more demands on them as learners? If so, in what ways?

16. Are you willing to participate in an individual interview and focus group interview as a follow-up to this questionnaire?
____ Yes
____ No

APPENDIX F

Individual Interview Questions

Please answer the following questions, to the best of your knowledge, pertaining to your perception of working in a sixth grade academy.

1. How many years did you work in the sixth grade academy versus a traditional middle school?

2. Have you worked in a middle school environment where 6th grade had to share facilities with other grades? If so, describe that experience as compared to environment you work in now.

3. What type of preparations do you make to work with students in transition from elementary to middle school?

4. What are the most outstanding characteristics of a 5th grader who appeared to be well prepared to attend middle school as compared to those who did not?

5. Among the 6th grade students you regularly come into contact with, how many do you feel connected to, meaning you have gone out of your way to make connections?

6. What are the aspects that have contributed to these connections?

7. How would you describe the level of your connection to students in the Sixth Grade Academy?

8. What are some of the noticeable differences between housing students in a sixth grade academy versus a conglomerate of grade levels?

9. From your perception, what are some of the pros and cons of housing students in a sixth grade academy?

10. What do you anticipate is the most positive aspect of moving from elementary to middle school for 5th graders?

11. What do you anticipate is the most difficult aspect of moving from elementary to middle school for 5th graders?

12. In your opinion, what do you view as the top three stressors *most* of the students you teach experience in relation to the middle school transition?

13. What do you think students would identify as the top three stressors in relation to transitioning into middle school?

14. Do you believe females and males experience different stressors, in regards to transition, at this age? If so, what are the differences?

15. Describe the set of procedures your school has in place to support middle school transition practices.

16. Who assumes primary responsibility for coordinating and carrying out transitioning programming in your school?

17. What training or other preparation, if any, have you received at your school to help students in their transition into 6th grade?

18. From your experience, which practices/activities do you consider as the most effective in facilitating transition (e.g., visits to middle school, buddy-system for new students, smaller learning environments)?

19. What would you like to see done differently with regard to middle school transition practices and procedures in your school district?

20. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience working at sixth grade academy?

APPENDIX G

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. If you were to design a program that would help students in their transition into 6th grade, as well as to help students and teachers connect, what would that program look like?

2. What type of activities/services/programs should be provided in middle school to rising 6th graders and their families to help make the transition year a smooth one?

3. Who should offer these activities/services/programs?

4. When should they be offered?

5. Which practice/activity do you consider is the most effective in facilitating transition (e.g., visits to middle school, buddy-system for new students, smaller learning environments)?

6. What would you like to see done differently with regard to middle school transition practices and procedures in your school district?

7. Do you perceive housing sixth graders in their own facility as a help or hindrance to the middle school transitioning process for 5th graders?

8. How influential do you feel the implementation of the Sixth Grade Academy has been in student achievement?

9. How influential do you feel the implementation of the Sixth Grade Academy has been in student's transition into 6th grade?

10. What is your perception of the pros and cons for 6th grade to be separated from 7th and 8th grade?